

A WHOLE GOSPEL FOR A WHOLE NATION

**The Cultures of Tradition and Change in The United Church of Canada and
its Antecedents**

1900-1950

by

David W.R. Plaxton

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in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

That The United Church of Canada was constructed on non- or post-evangelical foundations has become the accepted interpretation of its history. Recent studies of mainstream Protestantism in Canada at the turn of the century have demonstrated, however, that the traditional evangelicalism of Canadian Protestantism in the nineteenth century remained a powerful and coherent theology into the twentieth. This study builds on this scholarship and argues that when the Methodist, Congregational and about two-thirds of the Presbyterian Churches joined to form the United Church in 1925, the nineteenth-century evangelical impulse continued to inform the new denomination's theological, institutional and national identity.

By analyzing the thought and action of three influential United Church leaders, George Pidgeon, Hugh Dobson and Gordon Sisco, it becomes clear that from 1925 until after the end of the Second World War the traditional evangelical concern with individual conversion and social and moral reform remained the intellectual and practical basis of the United Church's work in Canada. These dual priorities of the denomination's "whole gospel" theology, which insisted that Canada and its diverse peoples would be redeemed through combined evangelistic and social reform work, dictated both the message and the methods of this national mission.

During these years the United Church's national mission was predicated on the assumption that proper national development should follow the standards of an evangelical, Anglo-Saxon and middle-class moral and national vision. In the decades after church union, as the nation began increasingly to look and act very unlike this vision, the United Church's whole gospel theology was able to adapt to these changes, while maintaining the evangelical essentials; in this way The United Church of Canada continued to influence the course of national development. After the Second World War, however, the cultural assumptions of the original national vision, and therefore of the denomination's self-perception as the "national church," came increasingly into question. By the 1950s, this questioning was just beginning to move the denomination in some novel theological and practical directions. Contrary to the dominant interpretations, these changes were not complete, or even presaged, at the time of union in 1925.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation was born as Professor George Rawlyk drew with chalk an impossible graphical interpretation of the course of twentieth-century Protestantism. During this early morning description of mainstream faith in Canada, Dr. Rawlyk mentioned casually that The United Church of Canada had supported and led revivals after 1945. I decided then that I would investigate the place of evangelicalism in the United Church, and during the first three years of that investigation, George Rawlyk was an inspiring, enthusiastic and compassionate mentor. Though he did not see the completion of this project, it would never have been started or finished without his friendship and example, some of which, I hope, is reflected in my work.

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Introduction

The churches between 1900 and 1960 were challenged, but not threatened; their agenda were crowded but not trivialized. These large denominations saw the nation's destiny, the community's welfare, as peculiarly and inescapably *their* concern. Public schools were still *their* institutions, war (either its purposes or its abolition) still a matter of *their* decision. And the quality of life in general, morals and manners, depended chiefly on *their* leadership. Or so they earnestly believed and regularly assumed.¹

Edwin Gaustad's understanding of the presumed and actual influence of the mainstream churches in the United States is indicative, also, of the Canadian circumstance. The role of the mainline Protestant churches in the dramas played out on the national stage in the years between 1900 and 1960 was a primary concern of many who believed that Protestant Christianity was an essential cornerstone of national development; this was also a belief which powerfully shaped the identity of The United Church of Canada, which was formed in 1925. For its leaders, many of whom "earnestly believed and regularly assumed" that theirs was a "national church," the place of the denomination in the development of national culture and institutions, has been, and remains, a preoccupation. This presumption of "national influence" was worthy of comment in 1992, when the American theologian William Willimon told an interviewer that "the United Church of Canada made the disastrous assumption that somebody had asked it to run Canada. We don't have to make this country work, we don't even have to make it turn out right. God might not even care if it turns out right."² For many

¹ Edwin S. Gaustad, "The Pulpit and the Pews," in William R. Hutchison, (ed.), *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 21.

² William Willimon as quoted in Reginald W. Bibby, *Unknown Gods: The Ongoing Story of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993) 245.

United Church people, and particularly for those who were around at the time of church union in 1925, Willimon's understanding of the United Church would have made little sense.

His critical sentiments about the United Church, and particularly about its role in the development of the nation, were almost precisely the opposite of those expressed by the Canadian theologians and preachers who helped to establish the denomination almost 70 years earlier. For almost every churchman who struggled for over 30 years before 1925 to build a United Church, the dream of a "national" church which would unite the various races, regions and faiths of the land for the purpose of "Christianizing the nation" was a central motivation. Ecumenism, the desire to unite Christians and fulfill the biblical hope that "all may be one," was certainly a powerful reason behind the creation of The United Church of Canada. So too was the desire to create a distinctly Canadian church, with institutions and priorities suited for the young country. But these were means to the more ambitious end of creating a national church designed, through its various agencies, to make Canada a Christian country, to establish God's Dominion from sea to sea.³ Its churchmen were convinced not only that God was concerned about whether Canada "turned out right," but, more importantly for them, that its members were particularly called to ensure that it did.

I

Very few of the 700 000 Canadians who left their denominational identities behind and became part of the new United Church would have accepted the notion that God was uninterested in Canada. The idea that the nation's major

³ Mary Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada," in Mark McGowan and David Marshall, (eds.), *Prophets, Priests and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History, 1608 to Present* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992) 167-169.

Protestant denominations should play a role in its development had a long history before the union of June, 1925. Many English-Canadian Protestants were convinced that Canada was destined to be a signal nation, a beacon of progress, opportunity and Christian society that would be an example for others to follow. After Confederation in 1867, Canadian Protestants assumed that progress and opportunity in the new nation depended on their concerted efforts to make Protestant Christian morality and culture the Canadian standard. This drive to establish "His Dominion" was so powerful that one historian has suggested that it provided "the inner dynamic of Protestantism in Canada during the first two-thirds of the century following Confederation."⁴ The thought, effort and resources the churches devoted to this drive to create a whole nation dedicated to extending and maintaining God's Dominion demonstrated the power and popularity of the belief that evangelical Protestantism had a central role to play in national progress.

Given the obvious denominational differences in Canada's Protestant mainstream in the late nineteenth century, it is perhaps surprising that the bases of this shared "inner dynamic" were particularly uncomplicated. For a number of decades in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the English-Canadian majority generally assumed that their evangelical, Protestant Anglo-Saxon faith, morality and social presuppositions were the solid foundations upon which a Christian nation should be established. Their national vision was, therefore, rather limited. Because they defined the parameters of national development so rigidly, the majority who accepted and defended the superiority of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant standards

⁴ N. Keith Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Studies in Religion*, II:4 (1973): 315. Phyllis Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914," in George A. Rawlyk, (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Burlington: The Welch Publishing Company, 1990) 98-101.

understood changes to the country's racial, social and religious character as threats, not opportunities.⁵ Much of the energy expended by these Canadians in establishing the "Kingdom of God" in Canada was directed, accordingly, at "bulldozing immigrants into conformity with mainline Protestant values," and thereby protecting the *status quo*.⁶ The massive immigration to Canada between 1880 and World War II was seen as a particular threat to the national aspirations of those Protestants whose "vision of Canada as 'His Dominion' implied a homogenous population which shared a heritage of political democracy and evangelical Protestant Christianity."⁷ For many, this heritage also included a compelling moral vision based on evangelical, middle-class values, which inspired them to pursue "His Dominion" through temperance societies, campaigns against prostitution and gambling, and defensive organizations like the Lord's Day Alliance.⁸ The widespread belief that immigrants from eastern Europe and elsewhere needed to be taught the evangelical moral and social standards of the "British" majority was expressed through these campaigns and societies. The idea, of course, was to Canadianize the new immigrants by making their thinking and habits as Anglo-Saxon and Protestant as possible, and to ensure, therefore, the proper Christian development of the new country. This was a national aspiration that was part of a broad theological and practical consensus shared by Canada's evangelical Protestants.

⁵ There were, of course, exceptional people who argued that racial and social mixing was the key to Canada's distinctive development. See Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness," 171-173.

⁶ John Webster Grant, "What's Past is Prologue" in Peter Gordon White (ed.), *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) 130.

⁷ Clifford, "His Dominion," 315.

⁸ Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism," 101.

The desire to "Canadianize" those elements of society which fell outside the rigid standards of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant vision went well beyond social, moral and educational campaigns. Indeed, it was generally accepted that "Canadianization" was dependent first and foremost upon "Christianization." The majority of those Canadian Christians who were concerned about the increasing numbers and influence of "the steaming, swaying, roaring" immigrants from eastern and southern Europe before 1914, believed that the only way to ensure the vitality of the "noblest conceptions of Anglo-Saxondom" was to convert "the foreigner." Assimilation into the narrow, but "noble" parameters of "Anglo-Saxondom" began, then, by encouraging new Canadians to accept the theological, moral and practical assumptions of evangelical Christianity.⁹ Before long, the "Home Missions" of the largest Protestant denominations, and particularly of the Presbyterians and Methodists, became the most important agencies of both Canadianization and Christianization.

The methods of evangelism employed by home missionaries varied, and were by no means limited to traditional revivalistic efforts. Whatever the technique, however, whether school-homes for immigrant children or direct, personal evangelism, the goal was to bring about a "personal decision for Christ."¹⁰ The impetus behind proselytizing this *evangelical* faith to immigrants who were, for the most part, already Christian was simple;

⁹ Clifford, "His Dominion," 317-319; Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness," 170.

¹⁰ On the nativism and the efforts at socialization of Canadian Protestants before 1914, see Marilyn Barber, "Nationalism, Nativism and the Social Gospel: The Protestant Church Response to Foreign Immigrants in Western Canada, 1897-1914," in Richard Allen, (ed.), *The Social Gospel in Canada: Papers of the Inter-Disciplinary Conference on the Social Gospel in Canada* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975); Michael Owen, "'Keeping Canada God's Country': Presbyterian school-homes for Ruthenian children," in Dennis L. Butcher *et al.*, (eds.), *Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1985).

evangelical Protestantism was the faith of the majority of English Canadians. At the turn of the century, almost 60% of English Canadians belonged to denominations whose theological and practical bases were evangelical.¹¹ This majority of Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists tended to believe that the development of a Christian Canada, of "His Dominion", rested on widespread assent to the essentials of Anglo-American evangelicalism -- a biblically based faith which emphasized the necessity of a personal experience of conversion, and that was expressed through "consecrated" living and devoted Christian service.¹² Canadian Protestants who were concerned about the character and influence of the "foreigners" who were filling the country believed that the most effective way of extending and defending the new nation's Anglo-Saxon inheritance was to convert these immigrants to the dominant Anglo-Saxon faith. They were convinced that by so doing they could communicate efficiently their British loyalties and middle-class morality to their recently arrived countrymen. Successful Home Missions, and the commitment to spread evangelical Protestantism were, therefore, central components of the churches' drive to create a homogenous, loyal and Christian culture, and to establish "His Dominion in Canada."

II

The United Church of Canada was a product of this effort to create "His Dominion." The vision of a Christian country was powerful enough "to provide the basis for the formation of a broad Protestant consensus and

¹¹ See Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914," 103-105. Using a different statistical method, Michael Gauvreau has argued that by 1861, the portion of Protestants who were evangelical was closer to 66%. See Michael Gauvreau, "Protestantism Transformed: Personal Piety and the Evangelical Social Vision," in *ibid.*, 96-97.

¹² Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 9. These ideas are explored in greater detail in Chapter One.

coalition," which encouraged the major denominations in English Canada to recognize the theological and national assumptions they shared.¹³ This recognition did not take long. In the 1880s influential church leaders in many denominations were considering the various consequences, both positive and negative, of joining organically to create one united Protestant church. When discussions for union became more serious in the early twentieth-century, the continuing desire among Canadian Protestants to forge a homogenous, national Christian culture remained strong. Methodists and Presbyterians were particularly attached to the idea that the "Kingdom of God" could be built on Canadian soil, through Canadian souls. When the United Church was born officially, therefore, the Methodists, Congregationalists and the two-thirds Presbyterian majority who entered union, maintained this peculiarly strong Canadian evangelical concern for the nation. Not surprisingly, then, most of the leaders of the new church were convinced that the United Church had a significant role to play in the development of Canadian society. Though by 1925 the demographic and social threats to the creation of a homogenous evangelical Christian culture were obvious, United Church people remained convinced of the national duty of the denomination. The continuing and widespread belief at union that "Nation building and Christian progress go hand in hand in this fair Dominion," encouraged the notion that The United Church of Canada was a national church, whose fortunes were coupled closely with those of the nation it served.¹⁴

This study is an attempt to understand the dominant theological and practical assumptions that motivated the leaders of this large church in their efforts to make Canada Christian. Though there was general agreement that

¹³ Clifford, "His Dominion," 315.

¹⁴ Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness," 172.

this self-declared national church had a mission to the nation, what this mission was, and how it was to be carried out were conceived less clearly. The important and often pioneering work of some Canadian historians has exposed much about the social emphases of this mission in the decades before church union, and, therefore, about the social gospel that became a popular Christian interpretation in the early twentieth-century. By concentrating on those aspects of the Protestant gospel that were relatively novel, however, historians have tended to neglect the continuing traditional evangelical concerns that directed this practical United Church work. As a result, many interpretations of the United Church and its immediate ecclesiastical precedents have under-estimated the importance of tradition in the history of the denomination. By concentrating on the obvious social manifestations of the church's gospel, these historians have tended to neglect its equally important, but sometimes less conspicuous, individual imperatives.¹⁵

Through an analysis of the various priorities that defined the thought and practice of three significant United churchmen active between 1900 and 1960, this study endeavors to correct this imbalance. It concentrates on the church careers of George Pidgeon, the first Moderator of the Church, Hugh Dobson, an influential leader in the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, and Gordon Sisco, the long-serving second General Secretary. This analysis of these powerful church leaders, and of their national and denominational surroundings, indicates that for over a quarter of a century after 1925, a widely accepted "whole gospel" of both personal evangelism and social service was the foundation of the national work of the United Church. Much of this study focuses on the traditional evangelistic emphases of the church and its

¹⁵ These works will be examined at some length in Chapter One.

leadership after 1925, both of which have often been disregarded. It does not neglect, however, the practical implications of the United Church's national vision. Indeed, a significant part of the argument forwarded here is that for these men, the whole gospel was composed of inseparable, though discrete evangelistic and social service parts, both of which were deemed essential to the Christianization of Canada. The national mission of the United Church was, therefore, necessarily and obviously practical, and included work that ranged from evangelistic missions, to campaigns for temperance, to English language training for immigrants.

Given the breadth of this work, leaders like George Pidgeon, Hugh Dobson and Gordon Sisco clearly believed that the denomination's goals and its plans for the nation required its active direction in all parts of Canadian society and culture. The church's self-understanding was tied intimately to its self-assumed role as "the conscience of the nation." Its work was motivated by the belief that the nation should reflect the church's social and moral priorities. Around 1925, and for several decades afterward, these priorities, like the leaders of United Church, were distinctly "white ... of British stock and ... middle or upper class."¹⁶ The church's formation and early activity were predicated on these assumptions about the way Canadians should look, think and act. As the nation matured, however, and as these assumptions became increasingly disconnected from the social reality, the church's self-perception, and its place in that society, necessarily changed. These social and denominational shifts, and the often disruptive intersections of the cultures

¹⁶ David Lochhead, "The United Church of Canada and the Conscience of the Nation," in R.E. Vandervennen, (ed.), *Church and Canadian Culture* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1991) 27-29.

of tradition and change that accompanied them, are, therefore, an important part of the story told here.

III

The church discussed in this study must be understood as a large institution that was very much a product of its time. For the men studied below, work for the church was more than a calling; it was also a profession, a career that they chose to pursue. Because they devoted themselves to their careers with at least as much passion as their contemporaries who worked in business or education or government, many of the values of these churchmen were very similar to those of men in the secular professions. Like others who pursued success at work, for Pidgeon, Dobson and Sisco work was life; personal health and family were usually deemed less important than the massive workload they assumed. Because personal matters rarely entered their professional thought, personal details may seem strangely absent from this analysis; the reality that confronts the interpreter of their work, however, is that these churchmen usually kept their family lives separate from their often all-consuming professional work.

This is primarily, then, a story about the public work and thought of three men. But it is also the story of the fortunes of the church they worked so hard to lead. Their thoughts and actions tell us about them, but they also indicate much about the nature of mainstream Protestant faith in Canada in the first half of the twentieth-century. Therefore, though this study is based loosely on biography, the men discussed here are not analyzed simply as individuals; their pulpit and social work is interpreted as part of larger, institutional and social changes which they usually understood, often challenged and sometimes encouraged. Their story, their thought and their action is seen as representative, then, of the variety and homogeneity, the

continuity and discontinuity, the tradition and change that the church for which they worked embodied. The priorities, fears and hopes exposed in the thought and action of George Pidgeon, Hugh Dobson, and Gordon Sisco reflect many of the hopes, fears and priorities of The United Church of Canada. All of these are parts of the story told in this study of the successes and failures of a Protestant denomination, and some of its leaders who “earnestly believed and regularly assumed” that they were working for both a church and a nation.

Chapter One

An Innovative Tradition: Liberalism, Evangelicalism and the Context of Uniting

Each generation necessarily interprets a Church's doctrinal standards from its own point of view. When knowledge widens and experience deepens, the creed drawn up by men of former times must be accepted with qualifications and reservations, if accepted at all.

-- George Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada*¹

Some might speak of a gradual retreat before the advance of secularization, others of an honest attempt to meet changing needs.

-- John Webster Grant²

In his 1965 autobiography, James Mutchmor, the then recently retired Moderator of The United Church of Canada, noted that "Change has been the mark of all individual and social life. Even the most static person or group or nation does not resist the flow of events, no matter how sluggish the stream of experiences may be."³ At the age of 73, and after 45 years with the Presbyterian and then the United Churches, Mutchmor was making more than a general observation about the passage of time. For Mutchmor, and for many of the first generation of United Church leadership who with him had guided the denomination's development, change was a constant and exciting reality. In the "momentous years" of the early 1960s, during which the controversial and biblically critical "New Curriculum" was introduced for the education of the membership, and the denomination embarked on

¹ George C. Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada: The Story of the Union* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1950) 40.

² John Webster Grant, "Unauthoritative Reflections on the United Church's Story," *Touchstone* 12:2 (January, 1994): 7.

³ James R. Mutchmor, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965) 95.

innovative social and educational programs, Mutchmor contended that “the old, including much of the traditional must give way to the new. The new will come not from the old, nor as part of the old, but rather from the death of the old.” Paradoxically, in summing up this rather radical openness to innovation, Mutchmor also exposed his traditional theological roots. “The Church of the new birth in Christ alone,” he said “can bring creative power to the kind of new world needed today.”⁴

James Mutchmor was considered by many of his contemporaries, both in and out of the United Church, to be an outspoken, sometimes radical exponent of socially involved Christianity. And, indeed, in his positions as Secretary of the United Church Board of Evangelism and Social Service and then Moderator, he was.⁵ Between 1936 and 1965, he was a powerful and public exponent of church-based social and moral reform, and, because he often conducted his campaigns against vice and for the disadvantaged in the newspapers, he was generally known, and often dismissed, as a social radical.⁶ What was not so obvious, or so public, was Mutchmor’s foundational belief in the centrality of an individual experience of conversion, or new birth. His encouragement of nation-wide evangelistic campaigns in the 1940s and 1950, and his practical support of the Canadian work of evangelists like Charles Templeton and the American Billy Graham, demonstrate that, for Mutchmor, “individual transformation was a prerequisite to social regeneration, and that concern for society was integral to an individual’s faith.”⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁵ Mutchmor, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor*, 120-162.

⁶ Ian Manson, “The Oft-Quoted, Frequently Embattled Reverend James R. Mutchmor,” *Touchstone* 8:1 (January, 1990): 44-53

⁷ Manson, “The Oft-Quoted,” 45-49 and Mutchmor, 95-119.

These twin emphases of his “whole gospel” -- of individual conversion and social and moral reformism -- were the theological and practical assumptions that guided the “national mission” of The United Church of Canada well into the second half of the twentieth-century. This was not a rigid theological basis, but rather an ecclesiastical approach that required constant attention to the demands of tradition and of change. For leaders like Mutchmor, and for those who preceded him, the challenge of the United Church was the challenge of maintaining the whole gospel of evangelism and social service when confronted by a changing nation. The ways in which the United Church maintained its evangelical inheritance, while simultaneously accommodating its message and actions to the changing social and cultural exigencies of the twentieth century -- the way it negotiated between the cultures of tradition and change -- are the central concerns of this study.

I

Probing the importance of evangelicalism in The United Church of Canada is more than an antiquarian concern. The impact of the evangelicalism of the nineteenth century on the theology and work of the United Church in the twentieth has not been recognized by a majority of Canadian historians. Rather, the assumption in much of the historiography about Canadian Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been that traditional evangelical orthodoxy declined in the mainstream, as did its cultural and social influence. Though not the first, the sociologist S.D. Clark's *Church and Sect in Canada* was probably the most scholarly early analysis to argue that Protestantism, already before church union, was losing cultural

and social ground.⁸ Clark used church/sect theory to contend that the groups which ultimately formed The United Church of Canada had, since the middle of the nineteenth century, become progressively more worldly, less evangelical and, therefore, more secular. Church union was, in Clark's analysis, the ultimate symbol of the secularization of the Protestant churches; union marked the loss of a religious constituency in Canada large enough to maintain a once thriving and competitive denominational system.⁹

Much of the later historiography that expanded on Clark's assumption of theological decline has analyzed the character and impact of the social and moral reform emphases that became primary mainstream Protestant concerns after 1870. This body of work contends that the process of secularization in Canadian society was spurred on by the activities of Protestant leaders who, in the years between Confederation and the middle of the twentieth century, moved from a concern with the salvation of individuals to an obsession with redeeming the society. The assumptions of those who have argued for secularization are not new and were stated early by the Queen's University historian and prominent United Church layperson, A.R.M. Lower. In 1954, Lower suggested that Canadian Methodism was characterized by a "new Protestantism" which was concerned "not so much with the salvation of the individual soul as with the society in which the individual lived."¹⁰ This significant argument about the social emphases

⁸ S.D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948).

⁹ David Marshall has argued that Clark's book was the introduction of "the declension thesis into Canadian historiography." See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 310.

¹⁰ Arthur R. M. Lower, *This Most Famous Stream* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1954) 126. It is surprising that most historians of Canadian religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tend to ignore this significant contribution of one of Canada's most famous domestic historians. The theme which Lower established with this analysis of English Canadian Protestantism became a central argument of a generation of Canadian

of Canadian Methodism in the late nineteenth century has become a major preoccupation of a number of subsequent historical studies.

This concern for social over individual redemption was expanded to include a limited cross-section of Canadian Protestants in Ramsay Cook's 1985 book, *The Regenerators*. In this very influential work, Cook developed a complete argument for the "decline of Protestant Christianity as a pervasive influence in English Canadian life" by concentrating on the thought of some socially active "Christians."¹¹ By proposing "that the religious crisis provoked by Darwinian science and historical criticism of the Bible led religious people to attempt to salvage Christianity by transforming it into an essentially social religion," Cook's analysis of religion and social thought in late-Victorian English Canada established firmly the now widely-held historical truism that by the turn of the century the "orthodox Christian preoccupation with man's salvation was gradually replaced by a concern with social salvation."¹² It was this turn, from individual to social concerns in the face of insurmountable intellectual challenge, that led inevitably, Cook argued, to a theologically lifeless, sociologically based Christianity that neglected the relationship between individual humans and God and concentrated on the relationship of human to human. According to Cook, this very earth-bound interpretation of Christianity soon made the Almighty, and more tangibly, God's earthly representatives, increasingly irrelevant to the development of English Canadian society.

historians who followed Lower. Lower's early contribution to Canadian religious historiography is described in depth in Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society," 517-518.

¹¹ Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) 228.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

The most comprehensive argument for secularization between 1850 and 1940 originally appeared as a doctoral dissertation a year after Cook's pioneering investigation,¹³ and continued and developed many of the paths he had opened. David Marshall's *Secularizing the Faith*, which appeared revised in book form in 1993, put the blame for what he described as a "crisis of belief" squarely on the Canadian Protestant clergy, and maintained Cook's proposal that "the dominant trend in Canadian Protestant history from some time during the Victorian era has been the accommodation of the clergy and the churches to a society growing more secular, not a march of progress towards the Kingdom of God."¹⁴ Marshall's analysis of the gradual secularization of Canadian Christianity, and his introduction of several and varied religious actors into this complicated story of the decline of Christian influence in Canada was certainly more nuanced than previous arguments. Nevertheless, its essential thesis was very similar to what had been proposed earlier by Cook. "Responding to the 'crisis of plausibility' confronting Christianity," Marshall stated, "ministers strained to find a 'preachable gospel.'" And this search for a Christian message acceptable to the fickle ears of late-Victorian Canadians led these ministers to speak "of the Christian mission in the world with growing reference to morality and the obligation to create social justice." This stress on earthly concerns, Marshall suggested, led to a Christian message devoid of "the essential supernatural context" and, therefore, "the evangelical imperative to show the way to personal salvation was neglected."¹⁵

¹³ D.B. Marshall, "The Clerical Response to Secularization: Canadian Methodists and Presbyterians, 1860-1940," (Ph. D. Thesis, The University of Toronto, 1986).

¹⁴ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Marshall indicated in the Introduction of his book that his concern was to unravel the complex kaleidoscope of forces leading to secularization.¹⁶ Nevertheless, like Cook before him, in the end, his argument was simple, namely that the marginalization of the churches in Canada was the ironic result of the attempts of religious people to keep their faith relevant in an increasingly enlightened culture. Marshall contended that the effect ultimately of the struggle by Protestants to maintain their influential place in Canadian culture between 1850 and 1940 was to make Christianity an “essentially social religion.” Clarke, Cook and Marshall all argued, therefore, from a similar set of assumptions about the course of Protestantism in Canada after Confederation. These authors have suggested that the mainstream faith that emerged from the nineteenth century was disconnected from orthodox evangelicalism, fundamentally social in its outlook and, therefore, shallow in its theology.

II

The story of declining theological integrity and increasing secularization is not, of course, the only interpretation of English Canadian Protestantism at the turn-of-the-century. Since the 1930s, a number of authors have written histories of English Canadian religion that do not follow the inevitabilities and polarities of what more recently Michael Gauvreau has described aptly as the historiographical “journey from religious ‘orthodoxy’ through theological

¹⁶ In the Introduction, Marshall stated that he would consider the “social and political pressures as well as cultural and intellectual challenges that were undermining the evangelical consensus and the churches’ dominant role in society.” (*Secularizing the Faith*, 19.) Several reviewers have commented, however, that the promises made in the introduction are not fulfilled in the rest of the book, and that his analysis deals almost exclusively with the internal and not external factors. See, for example, William Katerberg, *Left History* 1:1 (Spring, 1993): 143-144; Phyllis Airhart, *Canadian Historical Review* 74 (December, 1993): 609-611. This critique of Marshall’s book is most obvious in George Rawlyk, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 11:1 (Spring, 1995) 108-109.

'liberalism' to the eventual 'irrelevance' of Protestantism."¹⁷ One of the earliest of these scholarly histories that did not assume religious decline before church union was E.H. Oliver's *Winning the Frontier*. This first attempt to "provide a theoretical base for Canadian church history" argued that Christianity in Canada had grown and progressed with the nation.¹⁸ Oliver, who was a professor at the United Church's St. Andrew's College in Saskatoon, wrote his history from a clear denominational perspective. As such, he argued that Christianity in Canada had been a progressive movement, and, therefore, he interpreted the formation of The United Church of Canada as both the natural result of this religious development and a signal Protestant achievement.¹⁹ Oliver's work, though a scholarly study grounded theoretically in the "frontier thesis," was a triumphal story about the power of Christian civilization to tame the wild, primitive west.²⁰ Works that followed tended to drop both his "frontier analysis" and his triumphant progressive assumptions. Nonetheless, H.H. Walsh's *The Christian Church in Canada* (1956) and John Webster Grant's eminently scholarly and influential *The Church in the Canadian Era* (1972), both written after S.D. Clark's negative interpretation, followed Oliver's general thrust, and gave little support for the idea that mainstream Protestantism entered union in a state of theological decline.

¹⁷ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 5.

¹⁸ Edmund H. Oliver, *The Winning of the Frontier* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1930); John W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (updated and expanded) (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 248.

¹⁹ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 13-14. N. Keith Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society: An Historiographical Analysis," *Church History* 38 (1969): 507-510.

²⁰ Clifford, "Religion and the Development of Canadian Society," 508.

Notwithstanding the work of Oliver, Walsh and Grant, the argument for declension has become a widely accepted interpretation of the nature of Canadian religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, the argument that "the outcome of the quest to stem the tide of secularization and to redeem and transform the secular world into the Kingdom of God, ironically, has been the triumph of the forces of secularization" has become normative to the extent that it has recently been called a "new orthodoxy."²¹ This has not gone unchallenged, however, and especially over the last decade, a number of authors have probed deeply into the connections between evangelical theology and the activism of social Christians in the years before church union. In the process, these historians have offered more nuanced insights into the complex nature of religious change at the turn-of-the-century.

In a 1971 study of the social gospel, Richard Allen has demonstrated that, although it "was, of course, impossible to portray a single line of successive victories," Christianity managed to exercise a powerful influence in Canadian life during the first three decades of the twentieth century.²² Allen's pioneering work of religious history, *The Social Passion*, was a landmark study that did much to legitimize historical consideration of religious motivations and actions. His wide-ranging work examined what he believed were the religious, intellectual and cultural priorities of the Protestant churches generally, and the nuances of some religious innovators in particular. Though Allen hinted in his work that ultimately the efforts of

²¹ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 17.

²² Richard Allen, "Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada: The 1880's to the 1930's." In Marguerite Van Die, (ed.), *From Heaven on Down to Earth: A Century of Chancellor's Lectures at Queen's Theological College* (Kingston: Queen's Theological College, 1992) 133-134.

the social gossellers he studied “encouraged the development of a secular society,” one of the primary assertions of his important work was that the social gospel movement he described was an extension of, and not a break from, nineteenth-century evangelicalism.²³ Moreover, his work demonstrated that well into the 1920s, the Protestant churches were involved intimately with the nature and direction of social and political change.

Allen was able to contend that this social emphasis did not lead to the marginalization of Protestantism in the early twentieth century, because, unlike some of the historians that would write after him, he did not disconnect unnaturally the social from the conversionist imperative.²⁴ As he stated in a later work, “the slow process of transition from older forms of Christian social outlook into the new was a slow one and the steps not always easy to discern.”²⁵ The transition that he described was the intellectual and practical journey from an individually-centred social Christianity to the social gospel, which “addressed the whole problem, not just of individuals, not just of informal social groups, but of institutions and institutional relationships.”²⁶ Though it is certainly debatable whether that journey to a social gospel perspective was ever fully actualized in the Protestant mainstream, the journey itself is arguably more interesting than the destination. And, as this study demonstrates, this was a journey that was ongoing in the decades that preceded and followed church union.

²³ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 354-356.

²⁴ David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, and Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators*, both assumed that the rise of social Christianity was the result of the passing of the individual conversionism of evangelicalism.

²⁵ Richard Allen, “The Background of the Social Gospel in Canada,” in Richard Allen, (ed.), *The Social Gospel in Canada: Papers of the Inter-Disciplinary Conference on the Social Gospel in Canada* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975) 2-3.

²⁶ Allen, “Background to the Social Gospel,” 3-4.

Yet, for all of its important contributions, Allen's *Social Passion* may have encouraged unintentionally some careless historical categorization. While he was careful to distinguish between three groups of social gospellers, ranging from the more evangelistic conservatives, through progressives to the socially radical, the label "social gospel" can be applied, as Allen has noted, "rather broadly and vaguely to any and all efforts of Christians to express their faith in the social context."²⁷ Over the last twenty-five years, it has become almost paradigmatic to paint all mainstream Protestants involved in moral or social activism with the social gospel brush, and thereby to link them with a radical, heterodox form of Christianity.²⁸ Because Allen's book popularized the work of social gospel leaders like the "radical" Salem Bland, it helped to establish the idea that radical preachers like Bland and the Labour church leader William Ivens were somehow normative. Until very recently, the much larger mainstream, however, has not been the subject of much study.²⁹ As William Hutchison has argued for the United States, the accepted understanding of the religious past in Canada too is based overly on the actions and words of "dissenters and other outsiders" and not enough on "the more massive mainline religion they rejected, or from which they were excluded."³⁰

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ The most obvious, and perhaps the most influential of these works is Ramsay Cook's, *The Regenerators*.

²⁹ This redress of the historiographical oversight has been furthered most recently by the publication of G.A. Rawlyk, (ed.), *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). Many of the articles in this collection deal directly with the denominational experience of the mainline churches.

³⁰ William R. Hutchison (ed.), *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) viii. Though Hutchison's observation here concerns the writing of American religious history, his point is perhaps more true of the relatively younger and much less extensive Canadian religious historiography. Ramsay Cook's influential and often cited analysis of religion in the late-Victorian era is based on the thought and action a small group of

The mainstream of Canadian Protestantism seems indeed to have been far from radical, and John Grant has argued that the faith of the majority of those who entered the United Church was an uncomplicated mix of traditional evangelicalism and more contemporary social concern. It was, he has argued, "at once liberal, evangelical and moralistic."³¹ This understanding of the religion of the mainstream has been substantiated by a number of more recent studies which indicate that the Protestant majority did not lose its evangelical faith when confronted by the intellectual "disruptions" of evolutionary science and biblical criticism. Moreover, this more recent scholarship, which has emphasized the theological and practical assumptions of those in the mainstream, indicates that the faith in the middle was more nuanced, and more complex, than that on the margins.

Michael Gauvreau's *The Evangelical Century* (1991) challenged the widely accepted assumptions that the intrusions of evolutionary science and biblical criticism inflicted mortal wounds on the evangelicalism of the late-Victorian era. Gauvreau has demonstrated that the mainstream Protestantism of the late nineteenth century was able successfully to absorb and often to ignore these "challenges." He has suggested, therefore, that the intellectual crisis that Ramsay Cook and David Marshall assumed led to a new, less traditional, and eventually irrelevant Protestantism in English Canada, never really happened. Rather, the ability of many significant preacher-professors, and especially those in the Methodist and Presbyterian Church colleges, to negotiate successfully the choppy theological and

"regenerators," almost all of whom could only be considered "dissenters and other outsiders."

³¹ Clifford, "The Interpreters of the United Church of Canada," 208. See Grant's *Church in the Canadian Era*, 78-79 and 105-110 for arguments along these lines. For more recent interpretations, see Grant, "Unauthoritative Reflections," and "The United Church and Its Heritage in Evangelism," *Touchstone*, 1:1 (October, 1983).

intellectual waters of the late nineteenth century, encouraged a period of growth, not decline. "The years between 1860 and 1900 were," Gauvreau argued, "a flourishing period for the evangelical creed in the wider cultural life of English Canada rather than a time of troubles for the evangelical churches or the prelude to the triumph of secular forms of thought."³² As well as giving deep insight into the intellectual context of the late nineteenth century in Canada, Gauvreau successfully challenged an underlying assumption of those who argue for declension – namely, that the intellectual crisis had sent Canadian evangelicals scrambling for a new, social interpretation of the gospel in vain pursuit of relevancy.

The question of theological change in the mainstream had also been clarified imaginatively by Marguerite Van Die. In her 1989 biographical study of the Methodist theologian and preacher-professor, Nathanael Burwash, Van Die proposed that, like Gauvreau's preacher-professors, this Methodist leader and professor of science was able to withstand the onslaughts of Darwinism through faithful evaluation and absorption of its central conclusions. Because Burwash successfully accommodated his faith to the "assaults" of new knowledge, Van Die argued that "for many individuals an informed faith, based on evangelical experience, was also a valid way to deal with such apparent threats as Darwinian evolution and the higher criticism."³³

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *An Evangelical Mind* was its description of the development and content of a mainstream Methodism that was nuanced enough to accommodate the intrusions of novelty, while

³² Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 287.

³³ Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 12.

protecting the essentials of the evangelical inheritance. Through the powerful example of Burwash, Van Die argued that many in the mainstream were able to function effectively within the cultures of both tradition and change. When confronted with intellectual or social challenges, therefore, "in the case of earnest evangelicals like Burwash, their response flowed naturally out of their understanding of the nature and claims of their religion. Unable to ignore the changes of their own time, they were at the same time fully confident of the power of evangelical Christianity to make effective use of new thought and thereby further its mission to transform the individual and society."³⁴ This ability and willingness to transform and protect traditional faith when confronted by shifting social and intellectual realities, she has argued further, was the basis of the liberal evangelicalism of The United Church of Canada. This was not simply a *social* gospel, but rather a nuanced theology that understood the demands of change while simultaneously protecting and extending the essentials of tradition. The ability of leaders like Nathanael Burwash to transpose their evangelicalism into intellectual forms suitable for the twentieth century was a pioneering example for the generation of mainstream churchmen who followed them.

Transposition was not, of course, limited to the realms of thought. The practical effects of the often radical demographic, economic, and theological shifts in central Canada in the decades before 1925 have been analyzed recently by Phyllis Airhart. In *Serving the Present Age* she has contended that rather than allowing their Wesleyan inheritance to crumble under the weight of external changes, Canadian Methodists successfully reshaped their faith to accommodate the intellectual, social and theological challenges of the late-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

nineteenth century. Though much of the impetus for reshaping came from intellectual sources, Airhart suggested that its manifestations were far more practical. She proposed that in a sincere attempt to fashion a Methodism appropriate for the time, Canadian Methodists of the progressive era translated the Wesleyan conversionism of the revival into a more socially oriented mission to spread "scriptural holiness by reforming the nation."³⁵ The obvious implication of this shift of the evangelical imperative from the individual to the social realm was that the primary emphasis on conversion was displaced. Airhart was not so sure, however, that this was an immediate result. She argued instead that a coherent and sustainable theology of both evangelism and social service grew out of the desire to infuse holiness into the society, and the nation.³⁶ Unlike Cook and Marshall, therefore, Airhart maintained that in the years before 1914, the emphasis on social service did not replace, but rather augmented the still powerful individual conversionism of mainline Methodism. This interpretation was particularly important because it exposed the ways that social and moral reformism worked with, and not against, the currents of traditional evangelicalism in the non-Anglican Protestant mainstream. By demonstrating the important social implications of the theological integrity of the characters in Gauvreau's and Van Die's stories, then, Airhart furthered and explained the intimate connections between the individual and the social gospel that Richard Allen had suggested over twenty years earlier.

The importance of the work of these historians was its nuancing of the process of theological change in the Canadian evangelical mainstream. By

³⁵ Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 144.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 105-109.

rejecting the secularization thesis, the work of Gauvreau, Van Die and Airhart, and to a lesser degree Allen, has undermined seriously the essential assumptions of intellectual and theological crisis which formed the pillars of the arguments for declension. Incorporating many of the insights of American and British historians grappling with similar questions, these authors have demonstrated that in Canada, the majority of Protestants did not respond to the encroachments of modernity by breaking completely with their evangelical inheritance.³⁷ Indeed, as these authors maintain, transposition, not rupture, is the appropriate lens through which to understand the journey of Canadian Protestantism to the twentieth century. As they have suggested, a faith that mixed relatively easily the dual imperatives of individual conversionism and moral and social reform, not a theologically vacant, "essentially social religion," was the Protestant legacy of the late nineteenth century. By assuming that tradition *and* change informed the course of theological and practical developments, then, these historians opened the door for interpretations of twentieth-century Protestantism that take seriously the cultures of both change and tradition.

III

Those historians who separate the Protestant concern with moral and social activism from an evangelical theology, have, as Van Die and Airhart suggest, not only underestimated the complexity of that theological tradition in Canada, but also overlooked its deep spiritual sources. As they and others

³⁷ See, especially, William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957); David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

have pointed out, in the latter half of the century, many Canadian Protestants saw a concrete connection between a pure Christian life and social service in the name of Christ. For influential leaders concerned about both personal spiritual health and proper, Christian national development, the emphasis on personal holiness, already a central component of Wesleyan and Presbyterian teaching, was a reasonable and orthodox basis for committed social activism. Personal sanctification was based on the idea that, through a "second blessing" which followed conversion, believers were elevated to a higher spiritual state, demonstrated primarily by individual purity. A necessary, and after 1880 an increasingly popular corollary to personal purity among mainline Methodists was the expectation that holiness would be expressed through a faith which inspired and actively pursued general spiritual improvement and the extension of the Christian life into personal morality and social relationships. As Van Die and Airhart have demonstrated successfully, by the 1880s, the emphasis on personal sanctification had been extended, quite naturally, to include efforts to sanctify the society, to spread "scriptural holiness by reforming the nation."³⁸ For the Methodists who eventually joined The United Church of Canada, the denominational concern with redeeming the nation fit well with their nineteenth-century Wesleyan emphasis on conversion and sanctification, for both the individual and the nation.

This same concern for the sanctification of the society was also an important part of the Presbyterian understanding of the national role of the church. As with Methodists, among whom by the 1880s holiness had become a source of some debate, different interpretations of sanctification made a

³⁸ Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, Chapter Three, and esp. 78-87; Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 144 and 22-26.

significant impact on several other Protestant denominations in the years after Confederation. Evangelicals from the reformed traditions, including especially Presbyterians and Baptists, were attracted to an interpretation of sanctification that emphasized what were understood to be the moral duties of the converted Christian. This reformed version of holiness was known by different names, but was most often referred to as the “higher” or “victorious” life Keswick theology. Both the Wesleyan holiness advocates and followers of the higher life interpretations maintained that conversion could be followed by a second significant religious experience. The interpretations of holiness differed, however, in how that second experience was expressed; whereas the Wesleyan understanding tended to emphasize the eradication of “inbred sin,” the popular Keswick understanding of sanctification insisted that sin was an ever-present individual reality, and avoided, therefore, the complications of Perfectionism. While some Wesleyan holiness practitioners insisted that sin could be removed from the sinner, and that inviolable personal purity would follow, followers of the Keswick teachings believed that sin could be masked and over-ridden, but never removed.³⁹ As was the case with the mainline Methodist understanding of holiness, this reformed interpretation tended to be more concerned with outward expressions of service, and less with personal purity. It insisted, then, “that conversion ought to be regarded not as a goal, but as the mere beginning of a triumphant Christian life.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Phyllis D. Airhart, “Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914,” in George A. Rawlyk (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760 -1990* (Burlington: The Welch Publishing Company, 1990) 109-110.

⁴⁰ Grant Wacker, “The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Age in American Protestantism, 1880-1910,” *Journal of American History*, 72:1 (June, 1985): 47-48 and Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 83-85.

The Wesleyan and Reformed understandings of sanctification, though they differed in other particulars, were connected by their belief that a sanctified life would be manifested in service for Christ, in the redemption and sanctification of the nation. The visible expressions of this shared interest in the spiritual and moral bases of the society were the inter-denominational crusades against liquor and for the protection of the "Lord's Day" that encouraged Protestant cooperation for the improvement of the nation long before The United Church of Canada was created. This study begins with the assumption, therefore, that the theological, spiritual and practical consensus upon which the United Church was established was neither the "essentially social religion" propagated by radical social gospellers, nor the militantly individualistic and biblically literalist faith of fundamentalism. It was a complex amalgam of the liberal evangelical emphasis on Christian-based social and moral reformism and the established concern for personal salvation. It was liberal enough to accommodate itself to new intellectual and social exigencies, traditional enough to maintain the integrity of its evangelical inheritance and moralistic enough to set a carefully crafted agenda for national development within Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and middle-class parameters. In the early part of the twentieth century it was also the faith of the majority of English Canada.⁴¹

IV

In summary, one of the primary assumptions of this study of The United Church of Canada is that conversion and sanctification were central to the

⁴¹ John Webster Grant, "What's Past is Prologue" in Peter Gordon White (ed.) *Voices and Visions* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) 146; Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Canadian Corporation For Studies in Religion/ Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1988) 77-95. For statistics on church membership see Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914," 102-105.

theology upon which the denomination was founded. In the years leading up to church union these two essential evangelical ideas, with their implications for both the individual and society, were integral to the Protestant understanding of the church, and its place in the development of the new nation. Contrary to those who regard the late nineteenth-century Protestant concern with "Christianizing" the society as an abandonment of evangelical orthodoxy, others have demonstrated how these very concerns were a natural evolution of essential evangelical ideas.⁴² And, because these ideas inspired cooperative effort among Canada's evangelical denominations, these social and moral reformist expressions, and an abiding conversionist emphasis, were the means by which the evangelicalism of the nineteenth century was transposed into the largely united mainstream Protestantism of the twentieth.

Because some recent re-examination of the arguments for secularization has demonstrated that the assumptions upon which these arguments are based are, at least, open to question, a number of new questions have been raised. If, as Grant, Van Die, Gauvreau and Airhart have suggested, the evangelicalism of the nineteenth century was transposed almost intact to the twentieth, the career of that theology in the United Church, Canada's largest Protestant denomination, needs to be examined. Using the foundations already laid by these historians, this study attempts to understand the importance of the evangelical spirituality of the nineteenth century to the thought and action of three significant leaders in the United Church, George Pidgeon, Hugh Dobson, and Gordon Sisco. Until very recently, and due in part to the influence of the secularization interpretations,

⁴² This is an important argument of both Marguerite Van Die and, particularly, Phyllis Airhart.

almost no work has been done on the influence of evangelicalism in the United Church. By arguing that the evangelical imperatives of conversion and social service were fundamental to the United Church's self-understanding and its national mission, this examination of three influential leaders begins the process of reinterpreting Canada's Protestant mainstream between 1920 and 1960.

This is not, of course, the first work to re-examine the theological bases of The United Church of Canada, nor its impact on the culture in which it carried out its national commission. This new path has already been opened by the very recent publication of Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau's revisionist book, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940*.⁴³ In this important work, Christie and Gauvreau have argued that the "full-orbed" Christianity of evangelism and social service was the impetus behind a wide variety of Protestant social welfare activity in the four decades leading up to the Second World War. Christie and Gauvreau's work concentrated on the practical manifestations of the churches' evangelically-based social reformism. Their conclusion that the mainline Protestant denominations in Canada had a powerful impact on the goals and organization of social welfare across the country for much of the twentieth century is a direct challenge to arguments that, in the same period, the churches became increasingly irrelevant. That challenge needs to be developed further, however. Because their arguments for continuing Protestant social influence are based primarily on an analysis of the policy and activities of social welfare in the mainstream churches, the theological

⁴³ Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

analysis of this social activism is treated less completely. The present study is, therefore, also an attempt to provide a more complete intellectual and theological framework for the social welfare work that Christie and Gauvreau have detailed so well.

Focusing on the theology of The United Church of Canada, my primary interpretation will be that it was an abiding mix of the conversionism of evangelism and the national reformism of social service. This provided a theological foundation that guided the variety of work that composed the United Church's self-assumed "national mission." That this "whole gospel" of evangelism and social service was central to this mission until, at least, the 1950s is the argument in the chapters that follow. Finally, the proposal that the evangelically informed and motivated United Church of Canada was an influential fixture of Canadian social and cultural development into the second half of the twentieth century is an important part of this story.

Each of the three men studied here was an important participant at various intersections of the cultures of tradition and change in the United Church's first quarter century. George Campbell Pidgeon, who was the leading Presbyterian architect of church union and the new denomination's first Moderator, was an important United Church leader and evangelistic organizer until the 1960s. His powerful and abiding administrative influence in the church, the radio broadcasts of his preaching, the publication of collections of his sermons, and his longevity in the pulpit at Toronto's Bloor Street United Church maintained his eminent place in the denomination, and in the nation, for thirty years. Pidgeon's western Canadian colleague, Hugh Wesley Dobson, who was an influential Methodist before union, became an equally powerful United Church leader. Because as a western secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service he was the most

senior United churchman active in the West for almost forty years, Dobson was an expert on the peculiarities of United Church work there. Though his extensive social work has been highlighted recently in *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, the content and context of his thought has not been examined seriously. The circumstance in which he worked, and the various streams of his whole gospel, expose much not only about Dobson, but also about United Church influence on the prairie.

The last of the leaders studied, Gordon Alfred Sisco, has received almost no scholarly attention. As the second General Secretary of the church's General Council and as such its Chief Executive Officer, Sisco was a powerful influence on the direction of the United Church in the period of his tenure, 1936 to 1953. His significance for the church, and for its national influence, has been noted in passing very recently by the American church historian, Robert Handy who has suggested that: "Sisco's role in the General Council certainly deserves further study for my impressions from preliminary study are that while he knew how to use the often idealistic rhetoric of the social gospel, he also could use the languages of realism, neo-orthodox theology, ecumenicity and administration."⁴⁴ Though the analysis of Sisco presented here was written before Handy's comments were published, the interpretation in the present study is an attempt to answer many of the intriguing questions that Handy suggested.

In short, then, this is an investigation of the United Church, and of three men who chose to commit their lives to its work. It is, in some important ways, an attempt to answer questions that other historians have

⁴⁴ Robert T. Handy, "Reflections on the Federal Council of Churches, the United Church of Canada and the Social Gospel in the 1930s," in Phyllis Airhart and Roger C. Hutchinson, (eds.), *Christianizing the Social Order: A Founding Vision of the United Church of Canada*. Special Issue, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 12:2 (Fall, 1996) 186.

asked of the Canadian churches of the nineteenth century but not, for the most part, of the twentieth. The chapters below indicate that the often louder voices of the social gospel and of fundamentalism by no means represented the concerns and assumptions of the Protestant majority in the first half of the twentieth century. The men studied here offer, instead, a complicated and inclusive, and appropriately mainstream perspective on the ways in which the whole gospel of the United Church was developed -- and then communicated to the nation -- from 1900 to 1950.

Chapter Two

George Pidgeon, the Inheritance of "Union" and the Progress of Tradition

What makes a preacher is a personal discovery of God which he cannot but tell, and the more vital it is to him the more vitalizing the story of it will be to the world.

– George Campbell Pidgeon, "My Religion"¹

The organic union of the Methodist, Congregational and most of the Presbyterian churches in Canada, consummated in the second decade of the twentieth century, was the belated achievement of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Church union had long been the shared ambition of some of Canada's most powerful Protestant leaders, many of whom had been calling for a combined and "Canadian" church since the 1860s. The mood for cooperation, which was heightened and encouraged by Confederation and by the unions within the various Methodist and Presbyterian divisions, became a vital component of the Canadian Protestant ethos and the over-riding concern of some influential leaders.² George Monro Grant, the Presbyterian Principal of Queen's University and a well-known and influential exponent of liberal evangelical causes, was one of these.³ Calling for cooperation among the churches that would match the newly federated national structure, Grant wondered in 1874 -- in a paper presented just one year before the union of the

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], George Campbell Pidgeon Papers [GPP], box 48, file 1880, "My Religion." See also, *ibid.*, box 46, file 654, "Christ is Preached," 23.

² Phyllis D. Airhart, "Ordering a New Nation and Reordering Protestantism 1867-1914," in George A. Rawlyk (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760 -1990* (Burlington: The Welch Publishing Company, 1990) 99-100.

³ *Ibid.*, 100. See Barry Mack, "George Monro Grant: Evangelical Prophet," (Ph.D. Thesis: Queen's University, 1993).

nation's Presbyterian churches -- "The Church of Canada -- Can Such a Thing Be?"⁴

Grant's vision of a national "Church of Canada" sprang naturally from the cross-denominational and evangelical dream of forging a Protestant Christian population for the new nation. The 1867 Confederation was, for many evangelicals of this period, the cue for a concerted Protestant effort to ensure the individual and social purity of both present and future Canadians. The enthusiastic efforts to convert immigrants from Europe and elsewhere was a result of this evangelical dream of a nation of Protestants committed to establishing "His Dominion in Canada." Young men educated for the ministry in this enthusiastic environment of grand hopes for the nation and its churches were necessarily influenced by the eager and progressive rhetoric of their ministers and church leaders, many of whom were also their instructors.⁵ For many of the leaders trained in this period of almost boundless ecclesiastical aspirations, talk of "union" and "cooperation" in "nation building" came as naturally as the traditional evangelical ideas upon which these new expressions were based.⁶ For many of the new nation's best

⁴ See Grant, "The Church of Canada -- Can Such a Thing Be?" in *Evangelical Alliance Extra* (Montreal: J. McDougall, 1874) 40-45. George C. Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada: The Story of the Union* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1950) 17.

⁵ For the important connections between the work of evangelical leaders in colleges, seminaries, and universities and the direction and stability of the evangelical Protestant message popularly expounded from the pulpit, see Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

⁶ Though several historians of Canadian culture and thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century have argued that these "progressive" ideas contributed to, and were symptoms of the decline of evangelical influence, the opposite interpretation, that social and cultural movements based in evangelical Protestantism furthered and maintained the influence of traditional religious ideas into the twentieth century, has recently been argued compellingly in Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) and, less directly so, Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

and brightest, the latter part of the nineteenth century was the beginning of a ministerial career devoted to the ideas that filled the air during their theological education. In a period characterized by intellectual and moral innovation and reassessment, these young leaders were undoubtedly challenged by the new thinking of their Scottish and German trained teachers.⁷ It is too often forgotten, however, that these same young men were saturated with the certainties of a confident ecclesiastical age in which the goals of establishing an evangelical Protestant nation or of converting the world in a generation were regarded as not only possible, but necessary. The certainties and challenges of this atmosphere were sometimes disruptive of traditional understandings of faith and led some of these young Christians to the radical poles of Christianity. But for many, the talk of union and nation building served to strengthen their convictions about the necessity of individual conversion while leading them to challenge older, more parochial understandings. Among these men, for whom the whole gospel of conversion and social service was a natural one to follow into the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century, was a young Presbyterian, George Campbell Pidgeon. Through a lifetime of distinguished work in the pulpit, social and moral reform, and church leadership, George Pidgeon helped to establish the mediating evangelicalism of the whole gospel in Canada's Protestant mainstream.

⁷ The impact of critical theological and scientific thought in Canadian seminaries and universities has been dealt with extensively in the intellectual histories of late nineteenth-century Canada. See, for example, A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979) who maintains that the introduction of critical and other philosophical methods in Canada led, eventually, to the loss of a cohesive Protestant cultural and intellectual presence. More recently, Michael Gauvreau has countered the notion that evangelicalism was under siege from new, mainly European critical thought. See Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 137-142 and passim.

I

Like so many of his colleagues in this era, the assumptions and presuppositions of evangelical Protestantism were part of the very fabric of George Pidgeon. Growing up in the small community of New Richmond in the lower Gaspé, Pidgeon was immersed in a society where the strict moral and religious tenets of Scots Presbyterianism were rarely absent from communal and personal life. Born the first son of Archibald Pidgeon and Mary Campbell in April, 1872, George was the product of a family where religious experience and deep theological knowledge were as much a part of life as the annual cycle of sowing and harvest.⁸ Though he was instilled early with the questioning faith of a father who rejected the "harsh predestination" of Calvinism, he was instructed in a life of devotion and simple Christian integrity by a mother he once described as:

the most intensely religious person I have ever known. God was in all her thoughts. ... Her claim for us was for a higher moral level than that of the community around us, and for a thoughtfulness that took in all the experiences of life. We always felt that it would have killed her if any of us had fallen into the vices of so many around us in that primitive community. She was a Calvinist in her theology, a theology based on the New Testament. But it was our birth into the life of Christ that was the passion of her soul.⁹

⁸ Pidgeon recalled in detail the nature of his religious upbringing in a sermon he preached in 1939. "What was there in the ministrations of the church to me that created life anew for me? It was just an ordinary church, although it had some extraordinary Christians in it. It preached Christ to me from its pulpit, in Sunday School, and through the religious teaching and example of the home. ... There Christ was preached in the way which renewed from within and shaped character from without" Pidgeon, "Christ is Preached," 2-3.

⁹ John Webster Grant, *George Pidgeon: A Biography* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1962) 11. Throughout his career, Pidgeon spoke about the influence of a strong, faithful mother in his own development, but particularly in the molding of some of the Christian traditions greatest figures. He describes, for example, the powerful influence of "mother-faith" in the lives of Moses and Samuel (Pidgeon, "My Religion," 2-3). This emphasis on the nurturing faith of a religious mother seems to substantiate some recent historiographical trends that highlight both the influence of mothers over their sons and the emphasis on nurture over conversion. See Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, chapter 1, where she maintains that conversion remained a central part of this mother-child relationship into the

It was in this environment, surrounded by parental concerns that he be converted and live a sanctified and exemplary life, that Pidgeon learned that Christianity was both experiential and practical, and that the Christian life began with a second, spiritual birth. It was here, also, that the young Pidgeon, so radically separated by space and time from the centres of power and learning, embarked early on a career of ministerial service that would eventually find him at the heart of the nation's ecclesiastical and social life.

This journey from rural Gaspé to the halls of Canadian Protestant leadership began with the fulfillment of Mary Pidgeon's passionate wish for her son. In the 1880s, after a visit from a Baptist revivalist to the Gaspé peninsula, the Pidgeon family's Presbyterian minister continued the revival in New Richmond, where "most found it possible to combine Presbyterianism with revivalism, and the spiritual pulse of the community was quickened." As Pidgeon entered his teen years and began to reflect seriously on his own religious nature, the revival was reaching its height, and it is clear from Pidgeon's own recollections of the period that he "was affected for life by its evangelical emphasis."¹⁰ Indeed, it was during this time of revival that Pidgeon underwent his conversion – what he later described

twentieth century. See also, Sharon Cook, "Beyond the Congregation: Women and Canadian Evangelicalism Reconsidered," in G. A. Rawlyk (ed.), *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 408-415. Like Nathanael Burwash, Pidgeon was always clear that nurture could never replace conversion. He maintained that "the unconscious influence of a good man and the atmosphere of the home he heads, is more far-reaching than we imagine, but it can never dispense with the necessity of earnest, anxious effort to impart one's spiritual heritage to them and to lift them into the consciousness of a life in Christ." UCCA, GPP, box 38, file 943, "Christianity in Life's Relationships," 7-8. For Pidgeon's recollection of his mother's teaching on the doctrine of Grace see box 41, file 1179, "The Essence of Christianity," 6.

¹⁰ Pidgeon remembered this period as a widespread "wave of grace" that "swept over northern New Brunswick and regions adjacent to which we belonged." UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1404, "The Spiritual Background and Ideal of the United Church of Canada," 11; Pidgeon, "Christ is Preached," 2-3. Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 7 and 12.

as a "direct personal experience" of God.¹¹ He was convinced of the coming of God into his soul, and recalled vividly, even much later in life, how this union set him on a new spiritual and practical life path. "I do not know," he said:

how God came to me; all I know is that he came. I do not recall any special conditions which I fulfilled to bring the blessing; all I know is that prayer persisted in suddenly opened like the bursting of a flower into a luminous condition in which the joy of heaven possessed the soul. The praying of years found its object. Out of all that I had heard about God[']s love emerged as the glowing reality and its warmth and brightness were indescribable. It was as if Christ came from the infinite into the range of consciousness and said:- "Mine" and one could not but echo the claim:- "Mine". ... I knew that I had discovered the pearl of great price.¹²

This exuberant interpretation of his experience of new birth coloured Pidgeon's understanding of Christian salvation, and of ecclesiastical responsibility in bringing experiential Christianity to the nation and to the world, for the duration of his ministerial career. The experience of union with God was, he said, "the essence of religion to me, distilled into one burning drop. Experiences differ; God comes to people in ways adapted to their personality and to their need; but He comes and claims, and if we acknowledge the claim He fills us with the joy of His salvation."¹³ After this personal experience of redemption, Pidgeon felt that he had discovered a Christian truth "which he could not but tell," and thus began his ministerial career.

¹¹ Pidgeon, "My Religion," 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

II

Educational opportunities in the Gaspé were limited. Though Pidgeon had some excellent teachers in his youth, it was not long before his desire for further education removed him from his family and home. There was little doubt that he would pursue a university education; his intention to become a minister of the Presbyterian Church, a vocation whose importance his parents had impressed on him from boyhood and which George had been eager to pursue "for as long as he could remember," required university and theological training.¹⁴ After studying Latin with his local minister, and with the financial assistance of a benefactor, George Pidgeon moved to Quebec City in 1887 and, at the age of fifteen, entered Morrin College, an affiliate of McGill University. Here, Pidgeon was introduced to a broad liberal arts education, and was no doubt influenced by the Principal of the college and first Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, John Cook.¹⁵ In his later writings, Pidgeon remembered Cook as one of the architects of the Presbyterian Union of 1875, and acknowledged his contribution to the wider ecumenical movement that culminated in the creation of The United Church of Canada in 1925. Recalling that when he "went to Morrin College in 1887, Cook was Principal and Professor of Theology, and the vigor of his thinking, the way he interpreted the great truths of Christianity, and the keen criticism with which he pruned the extravagances of his students were subjects of intense interest to those of us who were too young to join his classes," Pidgeon acknowledged the influence of this preacher-professor. This influence was substantial. Cook's belief that the 1875 union was "but a small step to the union which our Lord's intercessory prayer seems to contemplate,"

¹⁴ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

and his wish "for a union in the future before which the present union ... shall appear slight and insignificant" was no doubt infused into the teaching and the learning in the College over which he presided.¹⁶ It is likely, then, that it was at Morrin College, and while still in his teens, that George Pidgeon was first challenged to expand his understanding of Christian "union" to include both personal and ecumenical experiences.

Morrin College could provide only two years of instruction, so in 1889 the aspiring minister relocated to Montreal and enrolled at McGill University. The summer before his initial term in Montreal, Pidgeon had been assigned his first missionary field and his first preaching assignment. Through a decision he later described as "a cruel blunder," the seventeen year old college student who had applied for a summer assistantship was, instead, handed a home mission field in Ontario. Rather than simply assisting a minister, Pidgeon assumed the role of one, preaching three sermons each Sunday and spending his weekdays visiting his scattered congregations.¹⁷ Though the work was difficult, the young preacher's eminence in the pulpit later in life no doubt owed much to the practical experience and education gained in the mission fields of Ontario, and later New Brunswick.¹⁸ More importantly, however, these initial experiences in the pulpit and working as a minister of the church confirmed for the still unordained "preacher" that he was indeed "called to the ministry" and that he had found his life's work.

¹⁶ Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada*, 14 -15.

¹⁷ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 23-24. See also UCCA, GPP, box 61, file 3224, "Sketchy autobiographical notes."

¹⁸ Pidgeon served as a missionary in New Brunswick in 1890 and 1891. In his sermons, he referred to his days as a missionary often and remembered his time in New Brunswick very fondly, due in part to his family's historical connection with the missionary efforts in the area. George's Grandfather "had traveled up and down that coast as a missionary in the second decade of the century." See, UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 975, "Spiritual Descent," 6-7.

Except for months spent on various mission fields in the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario, Montreal and its outskirts were Pidgeon's home from 1889 when he started at McGill until he left to assume a pastorate at Streetsville, Ontario in 1898. In the nine years between his arrival and departure from the increasingly urban and cosmopolitan city, George was as much a scholar as a preacher, successfully graduating from McGill University in 1891, and then from Presbyterian College in 1894. He completed this phase of this theological education at a time when "Canadian Presbyterians were more willing to accept broader perspectives on the nature and interpretation of the faith."¹⁹ After his ordination and induction into the ministry in the spring of 1894, Pidgeon continued his studies towards a Bachelor of Divinity, while assuming a pastorate in the suburb of Montreal West. Though his pastoral work was engaging and time consuming, he completed his thesis and graduated with his first degree in Divinity in 1895, an accomplishment he sought to further by embarking almost immediately on studies towards the Doctor of Divinity degree.

These years of education and pastoral experience, which began with his conversion in the 1880's and continued through his years of study in Montreal, were pivotal for Pidgeon's developing theological and ecclesiastical perspective. Reflecting later in life on this time of personal and national development, he remembered the powerful influence of the evangelical writings of C.H. Spurgeon and D.L. Moody, whom he said "bestrode our narrow world like a collosus." In those "days of spontaneous outbreaks of spiritual energy" when powerful evangelical experiences of conversion were

¹⁹ Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto 1844-1994* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 96.

normal and were often inspired by traveling evangelists “like Wm. Meikle, Herbert L. Gale, Crossley and Hunter, and many others” Pidgeon recalled that “the whole life of many communities” was changed.²⁰ Some historians have characterized this period of Canada’s religious history as one of uncertainty and declension. For Pidgeon these crucial years were anything but “an age of religious doubt.”²¹ Instead, in this period when “the evangelical held the field,” the young minister was encouraged on his vocational path by the power of “revival,” and even considered pursuing the path of professional, itinerant evangelism.²² It was a propulsive energy that, as he recalled, he shared with many ministers and associates.

The experiential world of “revival” was not, of course, the only influence on Pidgeon’s theological development. His life-long fascination with Christian history and theology was instilled during his years as a student. At Presbyterian College in Montreal in the 1890s he was introduced to the “liberal evangelicalism” that was allowing Presbyterian clergymen of Pidgeon’s generation to protect their traditional inheritances while adjusting their faith to meet the intellectual realities of the late nineteenth century.²³ At Presbyterian College he studied under the clergyman-professor and college Principal Donald Harvey MacVicar, whose evangelicalism had a “powerful and lasting influence” on Pidgeon’s ministry and from whom he learned to

²⁰ UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 996, “The Spiritual and the Practical in the Church’s Life,” 2-3 and box 56, file 3121, “Evangelism in the Work of the Church.”

²¹ David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 25.

²² Pidgeon recalled this revivalistic energy, and his intentions to give himself “to that ideal” in a paper presented years after his retirement. See “Evangelism in the Work of the Church,” 2.

²³ Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Canadian Corporation For Studies in Religion/ Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1988) 1-17; on the Free Church roots of this missionary theology in Canada, see Richard Vaudry, *The Free Church in Victorian Canada, 1844-1861* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989).

emphasize the "centrality of the Bible and evangelical doctrine."²⁴ During these same years, Pidgeon encountered teachers who were inspiring a new theological mood in Canadian Presbyterianism which was moving away from an older confessional to a more recent progressive orthodoxy; this new Presbyterianism maintained and emphasized the traditional commitment to personal evangelism while simultaneously elevating the Christian imperative to guide the Christianization of all parts of the larger social organism.²⁵ This was a practical and theological impress that Pidgeon was to carry for the rest of his life. Just as important as these significant teachers, however, was the breadth of reading in traditional and more contemporary evangelical theology that was expected of Presbyterian ministerial candidates. Pidgeon read these books with an excitement and enthusiasm born of spiritual longing. He remembered, in fact, that the "doctrine of the Holy Spirit was the centre of our interest and we studied in order that we might attain. Books on the Holy Spirit and the higher life theology like those by A.J. Gordon, D.L. Moody, F.B. Meyer, John MacNeill of Australia and many other had enormous sale."²⁶ As his later career would attest, these readings were

²⁴ Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 26 and Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 269.

²⁵ Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy*, 91 and Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*.

²⁶ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical in the Church's Life," 3. F.B. Meyer was a particularly strong influence on Pidgeon's theology. In a sermon Preached in March, 1929 (UCCA, GPP, box 41, file 1116, "Risen With Christ or, The Symbolism of Christ's Death and Resurrection in Christian Experience," 1), only days after the death of this Baptist evangelist, Keswick icon and friend of D.L. Moody, Pidgeon claimed that "A saintlier soul, one in whom God dwelt more manifestly and one who brought the Gospel he believed to more abundant triumphs, rarely breathed the breath of life." It is clear from this sermon that Pidgeon attributed much of his own understanding of "life in Christ" to this British preacher: "Through all the years of my ministry F.B. Meyer has stood for what used to be called the Christian higher life." The Reverend Andrew Murray and the Australian John MacNeill were also significant early protagonists in the Keswick Movement. See Rev. J.B. Figgis, *Keswick From Within* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1985) 116-120, and 140. Figgis' account of the early Keswick movement was originally published in London in 1914. George Marsden has indicated that the Baptist A.J. Gordon was an early leader of the American prophetic movement and an initiator of what

more than scholastic requirements; they were mental and spiritual pleasures that directed the theological and ecclesiastical emphases of a generation of Presbyterian leadership.

During this time of continued study and intensive ministerial responsibility, then, the bases of Pidgeon's theology were solidified. Throughout this period he maintained his foundational belief in the need to evangelize and seek "decisions" based in personal experience of God. Nonetheless, an evangelically minded minister, raised in the late-Victorian morality of his time, and influenced by a now powerful social progressivism that was becoming normative in Presbyterian practical theology, had little trouble finding reasons to fight for moral and social reform. As the nineteenth century blurred into the twentieth, Canada was quickly becoming a new nation. The combined influence of an increasingly industrial and urbanizing economy and a population that was growing larger and more diverse with each new wave of immigration from Europe and elsewhere, was changing Canadian society quickly and, in places, radically. This infusion of foreign languages and customs was accompanied by the perceived intrusion of new cultural and moral standards that confronted the staid assumptions of a culture still based on the simple morality of the evangelical persuasion. More importantly, the urban and industrial tendencies of an expanding economy introduced into the population that considered itself "Canadian" a mind-set that was more "metropolitan" in both its aims and its vices.²⁷ In

became the proto-Fundamentalist Niagara Bible Conferences. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 46, and Ronald G. Sawatsky, "Looking for That Blessed Hope: The Roots of Fundamentalism in Canada, 1878-1914," (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Toronto, 1985).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 38. From a quote of Clarence Mackinnon in *Reminiscences* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1938) 140.

this environment, it was next to impossible for any minister – and especially a young one of Pidgeon’s vintage – to ignore or dismiss these threats to his evangelical, middle-class understanding of appropriate Christian behaviour, both personally and corporately. George Pidgeon, who had launched his ministerial career in these years of social metamorphosis, and had who learned much of his theology under the influence of professors who emphasized the evangelical necessity of guiding the development of the society to reflect the spirit of Christ, felt particularly called to defend the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant morality and culture in which he had been raised.²⁸

Not unlike many of his fellow ministers at the turn of the century, then, Pidgeon naturally nurtured the social side of his theology through actively pursuing several moral and social causes. These included the establishment of settlement homes for the “Christianization and Canadianization” of immigrants and crusades to maintain the sanctity of the “Lord’s Day” and the sobriety of the workers who drove the nation’s industrial engines. The war on liquor was an especially important plank of the evangelical moral crusades which sought to bring the entirety of Canadian society into line with the truths of the middle-class, Anglo-Saxon national vision. The fight against both the distribution and consumption of alcohol was a significant part of this drive to protect and extend the accepted morality of the nation’s, and particularly of Toronto’s professional and business classes.²⁹ Other causes were certainly of interest to evangelical moral crusaders, including, especially, attacks on gambling and prostitution. But for Pidgeon and for many of the Protestant leaders of his generation, the “battle

²⁸ Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 23 and 78, *passim*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-89 and 175-176.

against the liquor traffic" was the *cause celebre*.³⁰ It is not surprising, then, that the young minister's first forays into the arena of moral reform were crusades against liquor and its distribution. His first practical accomplishments were campaigns to reduce the availability of liquor in the communities in which he lived and preached; this included, among other things, "a leading role in the local option campaign" in Toronto Junction. These early involvements and occasional successes encouraged him in a lifetime effort to do what he could to purify the nation.³¹

Though these crusades for moral and social reform were sometimes unpopular, and were often presented in the language of "warfare," George Pidgeon's activism should not in any way be confused with a radical social or political agenda. These early engagements often counted on distrust or rejection of existing laws, but the actions of Pidgeon and his generation of Presbyterian reformers were never directed at overthrowing established political or economic structures. On the contrary, Pidgeon fought on the moral and social fronts to maintain the *status quo*; his and his colleagues' reformism was intended to encourage the professional and commercial middle class, to which they belonged, to protect, extend and, eventually, perfect the social, economic and political structures that had already been established in the nineteenth century. Instead of transforming the moral and institutional bases of these structures, therefore, they fought "to legitimate the system and assimilate foreign elements into it."³² The established morality of

³⁰ John W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (updated and expanded) (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 79-80. For relevant background to this movement see Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades Before Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, (ed.), *Drink in Canada: Historical Essays* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

³¹ Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 138-141. Grant, *George Pidgeon*, briefly discusses these early anti-liquor campaigns. See, especially, 32-33 and 37-40.

³² Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 78.

the middle class dictated the parameters of Presbyterian reformism in the early twentieth century.

When Pidgeon received a call to a congregation in Streetsville, Ontario in March, 1898, the change from his ministerial life in the Montreal area was marked. Streetsville was still a village and, located over twenty miles from Toronto, remained largely separated from the dynamic cosmopolitanism of the larger urban centre. Though Pidgeon put some effort into Christian education while at Streetsville and continued his interest in temperance, the sojourn away from urban surroundings allowed him time to hone his preaching skills and evangelistic message. The widespread social upheavals of the period, which had led many Presbyterians and Methodists to Christian social reform, had encouraged many of these same people to emphasize the need for evangelism. Though clearly maintaining his interest in practical Christian work, Pidgeon's message in his preaching at the turn of the century reflected this primary evangelistic concern. A sermon that he wrote soon after his arrival in Streetsville in 1898 demonstrated his desire to communicate the power, the joy and the necessity of Christian salvation to his congregations. Based on his own experience of conversion, and entitled "The Joy of God's Salvation," it explained clearly the foundations, the parameters and the fruits of "being saved." Salvation, he said, "is simply the gladness that arises from personal union and communion with God. It is based on that perfect peace which passes all understanding, & which in turn, arises from the certain assurance that all is well with us, & no harm can befall (*sic*) us in time or eternity because we have given our lives to Christ."³³ The salvation about

³³ UCCA, GPP, box 32, file 519, 3. He preached this same sermon up to 1918.

which he spoke so enthusiastically throughout this sermon was not constrained, however, to one type of new birth experience:

No firmer grounds of gladness exist in the universe than these, & if joy be a possibility for the human soul, the one that rests on them must rejoice. Our first awakening to these realities, if it be sudden, will inspire us with a rapture unparalleled this side of heaven, and although the joy of the newly converted soul is never repeated, yet there are always surprises in the Christian life, as each experience and each advance in knowledge reveals more spiritual treasures in our possession. But even apart from these the peace and joy of Christ abound. His peace & joy are not those of the new convert, which some of us never feel, because as Christ was never converted He could not experience this form of pleasure. But it is none the less deep and real because of that, and ... it will bear us through life and death on the wings of heavenly delight.³⁴

For this young Presbyterian, the experience of salvation, manifested as “the gladness that arises from personal union and communion with God” was an essential Christian occurrence. But conversion, which came to some suddenly, was not limited to this type of experience. “Salvation,” which he understood as a “new birth” was essential; the means by which this union with God was achieved, whether rapturous and sudden or not, did not diminish either the reality or the joy of the union.

After five years at Streetsville, Pidgeon had been almost ten years in the ministry when he was called to a congregation at Victoria church in Toronto Junction, the “affluent suburb” just west of Toronto. This was a move that brought him into closer contact with a group of young Presbyterians who were beginning to chart a new, social reformist course for the denomination in Toronto. The rapidly expanding city of Toronto afforded these young, activist ministers the opportunity to influence the growth of one of the nation’s largest urban centres and its population. This proximity to this

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

new generation of ministers committed to "christianizing" life in the centre of urban Presbyterianism allowed Pidgeon to develop more fully his passion for social service.³⁵ The post in Toronto Junction also allowed him to develop his pastoral talents and presented an excellent opportunity to use his powerful preaching skills to reach this depressed but motivated congregation. Victoria church was attracting a number of young people from the surrounding countryside and Pidgeon was successful, through the attraction of his preaching, in nurturing a congregation that was both eager and responsive.³⁶

His views on evangelism and conversionism, which he partially exposed in "The Joy of God's Salvation," were stated even more obviously in a sermon he wrote while at Streetsville, but preached as late as 1905. Though Pidgeon composed and delivered this sermon during the years he spent completing his Doctorate of Divinity in the Greek New Testament, the simple evangelical and biblical message of "The New Birth" was the unadorned, experientially based message of an evangelist, not an academic. Pidgeon, concerned that some evangelical principles that he cherished were not receiving the attention they once had in the mainline denominations, warned about the dangers of neglecting these evangelical essentials and argued that the spiritual change of the new birth must "be wrought in the soul of every individual."³⁷ He worried, however, that the idea that salvation could be attained through living a good life was replacing the need not only to seek union with God, but to seek that new birth for others. And all of this was due, he argued, to a lack of conviction about the force of the "Saviour's

³⁵ Fraser, *Social Uplifters*, 77-84..

³⁶ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 38.

³⁷ UCCA, GPP, box 32, file 523, "The New Birth," 2. On the waning of traditional evangelistic zeal in this period, see Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 218-219.

words” and a lack of effort “individually and collectively to rescue men from their danger and lead them to Christ & salvation.” Christians needed, he said, to be aroused “to a sense of the danger of the unsaved & of the need of more earnest effort ... for conversion of sinners, both individually and as a congregation.”³⁸ His solution to this problem was not to make his Christian message more current or relevant or to substitute practical Christian action for conversion. His solution was the simple, traditional formula of evangelical Protestantism. The Bible, he suggested, taught the reality of the risen Christ – a Christ crucified and glorified who renews the souls of men.³⁹ After reminding his listeners of this formula, he asked them to “apply these tests. Has God manifest power in you? Has His word become a force in your soul. Is the risen Christ more than a name?” If so, he suggested, all is well. But, if the answers were not affirmative, “no matter what your virtues,” Pidgeon insisted, the sinner remained outside the Kingdom.⁴⁰

In this era, one that some historians have argued was characterized by a turning away from individual conversionism,⁴¹ George Pidgeon maintained that the “essence of Christianity is a new life,” prepared for through “repentance and fellowship with God,” but, nonetheless “a condition into which the soul is brought by [the] action of the Holy Spirit.” It “must be in every nerve and fibre of being or nowhere,” for without it “you cannot be

³⁸ *Ibid.* Pidgeon used many abbreviations and symbols in his handwritten sermons, some of which I have substituted with their full English equivalents.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ It is the general conclusion of those who argue for a “crisis” in Canadian Protestantism after 1860, that by the turn of the century the traditional evangelical concern for the salvation of individuals had been widely replaced by the concern for the “regeneration” of society. This position is argued clearly in Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1985) 195, and Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*. Airhart came to essentially the same conclusion in *Serving the Present Age*.

saved. With it no power in the universe can destroy you – salvation is in yourself.”⁴² This unambiguous description of what true, spiritual “new life” required, the supernatural basis of which he emphasized repeatedly, was intended to counter the “reasoned” faith of those who “infer from God’s love” that “If I use my natural powers I may find God and come into fellowship with Him.” This, he stated emphatically, was an error.⁴³ “The Joy of God’s Salvation” and “The New Birth” demonstrate well that Pidgeon’s understanding of salvation began with a necessary and undeniable incoming of the Holy Spirit, which lifted the sinner from earthly attachments to the supernatural “atmosphere of salvation.” The Christian goal, the essence of the faith, was to achieve this supernatural union with God and to be “born again.” Spiritual rebirth was not, however, an end in itself. The “regeneration” of the soul had inevitable and tangible earthly consequences. In “The Joy of God’s Salvation,” Pidgeon explained how these consequences of salvation were revealed and expressed in the desire to evangelize. After experiencing the “New Birth,” the new Christian is overcome by “the most intense anxiety” for the salvation of those who have not; “No one can rejoice in inheriting life eternal or in being rescued from sin’s awful doom,” Pidgeon insisted, “without yearning to bring his redemption to others who are hastening to his former fate.” He concluded by noting that “If you have not enough regard for your fellows to lead you to labor for their spiritual welfare, you are in the direst need of being revived by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴

In “The New Birth” he continued this argument that the supernatural experience of Christian salvation filled the convert with the desire to

⁴² Pidgeon, “The New Birth,” 6-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁴ Pidgeon, “The Joy of God’s Salvation”.

proselytize, but added that “salvation equals service.” Like so many other members of his generation, Pidgeon understood his faith in both spiritual and practical terms. By arguing that “In expecting to be saved we are looking forward to an eternity of activity in the work of God,” Pidgeon exposed the progressive evangelical bases of this belief.⁴⁵ The traditional evangelical concerns of his faith, including especially the strict, grace centred conversionism, were augmented by the more recent Protestant concern for bringing the nation to Christ and furthering the spiritual Kingdom of God in Canada. These two emphases were not, however, considered separate, let alone incompatible. Pidgeon’s understanding of the experience of new birth included both his primary concern for the conversion of sinners and the secondary, but equally important emphasis on Christian service. These two early sermons indicate, then, that he was able, quite naturally to combine “social concern and evangelistic zeal” into an encompassing and active whole gospel.⁴⁶ For him, like most of his contemporaries, the experience of “union” connected him vertically to the almighty, but horizontally to his fellow humans.

III

By the middle of the first decade of the new century, George Pidgeon was becoming a recognized and significant leader in Canadian Presbyterianism. He was writing a weekly “Sunday School” article for the *Toronto Globe*, and was a well-known and influential voice for the cause of temperance in Canada. Given this growing prominence, it is not surprising that he spear-headed a campaign in 1907 for the creation within the Presbyterian Church of

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ See Chapter One. This is the essential argument, applied to a number of Presbyterian “progressives,” in Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*. See especially, 173-178.

a Board resembling the Methodist "Department of Temperance and Moral Reform." Through correspondence with powerful Presbyterians across the country, including the activist author C.W. Gordon (Ralph Connor), and by the lobbying of presbyteries from the Maritimes to Vancouver, Pidgeon and his supporters were successful in having the national General Assembly of 1907 take the necessary steps for the creation of a Board that was devoted to the causes of moral and social reforms.⁴⁷ Though the original titles of the board were "Temperance and other Moral and Social Reforms" and "Moral and Social Reform," with Pidgeon so squarely behind its creation, and its first convener, this Board was necessarily as concerned with seeking conversions as it was with national purity. When, in 1911, the Board was officially named "Social Service and Evangelism," its bureaucratic title finally reflected the whole gospel thinking upon which it was based. For the new board, as for the ministers who pushed for its creation, evangelism and social service, conversion and sanctification, were but two parts of the equation, "salvation equals service."⁴⁸

Some historians of the late twentieth century have mistakenly identified this Christian concern for service as a novelty, and categorized those who worked for social and moral change as, at least, innovators. When describing his experience of conversion, however, George Pidgeon claimed that through it he had become part of a "heritage" of Christians who had opened the trails of North American evangelicalism. For him, a minister of the gospel who understood conversion as "a new life for Christ, with Christ," that heritage necessarily included social Christian service and, not surprisingly, some of the nineteenth-century's most significant evangelists.

⁴⁷ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 39-40.

⁴⁸ Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 34-38 and *passim*.

Pidgeon was a keen student of history, and complimentary descriptions of the pioneering work of leading American evangelists like Charles Finney and Dwight L. Moody often appeared in his sermons. Moody was a particularly strong influence. In a sermon describing the power of this well-known American evangelist, he recalled attending one of his revivals:

At the close of the meeting, my old friend A.B. Mackay, introduced me to him. He shook hands with me as cordially as if he had come all the way to meet me and added:- "Young man, git that power." To him nothing else was worthwhile.

The powerful impact of this encounter was obvious in Pidgeon's interpretation of the evangelist's advice:

Now he was right. You become and you acquire that which is of supreme importance to you. If the possession of your soul by the Spirit of God is the chief good for man in your estimation and if you make its attainment the object from which nothing can turn you aside, He will come upon you too in His fulness [*sic*]. It is our heritage, particularly in the western world; it has been claimed for us by saints the equal in the saintliness of any in the Church's glorious past, men who experienced and proved His power. It is ours to enter into.⁴⁹

Given this contact, and Pidgeon's respect for this "winner of souls," it is unlikely that the similarity between their theologies is coincidental. In the late nineteenth century Moody and his partner Ira Sankey became famous for orderly, but nonetheless powerful urban revivals that had as their focus the necessity of an immediate and personal conversion experience. As Pidgeon noted in his remembrance of the evangelist, Moody was following closely the path laid by an earlier generation of American evangelists, including Charles Finney and Asa Mahan.⁵⁰ These prominent frontier revivalists are

⁴⁹ UCCA, GPP, box 45, file 1501, "D.L. Moody: A Changed Man - A Changed World," 8-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7. Grant discusses the influence of the writings on Pidgeon's theology in *George Pidgeon*, 53.

remembered primarily as evangelists of the “New School” who worked their way across the frontiers of New York and New England preaching for the immediate surrender of individual souls to “a life in Christ.” Along with this, they, and particularly Finney became equally well known for their translation of Wesleyan holiness into the American Reformed tradition.

George Marsden, in his influential *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, has outlined and described the connections between these early evangelists, their “almost perfectionist” Oberlin theology and the Keswick-influenced evangelism of D.L. Moody. Finney was one of the first evangelists in America’s Early National period to connect his strong pleas for a personal experience of conversion with an equally powerful insistence that the converted demonstrate the reality of their new birth through devoted Christian social service. These same emphases are obvious in Pidgeon’s early sermon “The New Birth,” his celebration of Moody from the pulpit some thirty years later and in many sermons preached in between.⁵¹ In the earlier sermon he reflected the thought of C.I. Scofield, author of the dispensationalist *Reference Bible* who, in 1899, commented “that being filled with the Spirit was ‘indispensable’ before a Christian ‘should be willing to perform the slightest act of service of Christ.’”⁵² Throughout his sermon on the new birth, Pidgeon emphasized the necessity of this incoming of the Holy Spirit as preparation for Christian service and argued that without the help of this spiritual power a person simply lacked the “faculties” necessary for devout work. Unless a person is saved through the action of the Holy Spirit, he argued, “He has no spiritual power over souls, [he] cannot win them,

⁵¹ “D.L. Moody: A Changed Man - A Changed World,” was delivered as a sermon in February, 1937.

⁵² Scofield from his *Plain Papers on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, as quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 79.

renew them, [and] yet he expects to serve God ... The whole expectation is ridiculous."⁵³ The Keswick interpretation of 'holiness,' so very palatable to traditional Reformed minds, in both the personal and social manifestations of its American translation under Moody, stands out as a central theme of Pidgeon's early theology.

More significantly, however, when he recognized the importance of Moody's thought in his own theological development, this Doctor of Divinity and eminent figure in The United Church of Canada included Moody in "a great succession." Using the urban revivalist's emphasis on a necessary experience of conversion, Pidgeon located him in a line of "spiritual endowment" that began with Jonathan Edwards, continued through Charles Finney, and which placed Moody and all who experienced grace through him "in line with the inspired of their own race."⁵⁴ Reflecting on his own conversion, Pidgeon clearly considered himself part of this line and claimed "the right to enter into possession of my heritage."⁵⁵ This "heritage," and thus his inheritance, was the evangelical experience, work and example of Edwards, Finney and Moody.⁵⁶

⁵³ Pidgeon, "The New Birth," 9. This is a theme he continued in sermons preached throughout the rest of his career. See, for example, UCCA, GPP, box 46, file 1629, "The Cross as Emancipation," (1939), which was based on the text of Romans 6:11-14, and in which he argued that "It is only when you put your will into His hands, determined that your will can never again consent to the entry of that evil in your life that God gets His opportunity. When you reach that position Christ takes command and it will be literally true that in all these things you will be more than conqueror through Him that loved you."

⁵⁴ Pidgeon, "D.L. Moody: A Changed Man - A Changed World," 7; "The Spiritual Background and Ideal of the United Church of Canada," 13.

⁵⁵ Pidgeon, "My Religion," 4. See his description of his conversion as an act of "possession of my heritage," above.

⁵⁶ The importance of Moody's "urban revivalism" for Presbyterian progressives in Scotland and Canada is discussed in Fraser, *The Social Uplifters*, 12-16, *passim* and Fraser, *Church, College and Clergy*, 97.

IV

After two years as head of the Board of Moral and Social Reform, Pidgeon, now in his late thirties and an established and accomplished preacher, added a new dimension to his expanding career. Though he enjoyed congregational life, he accepted a teaching position at Westminster Hall in Vancouver. The geographical change could not have been an easy one. At the time of his departure, the Toronto area was becoming a centre of both Protestant preaching and leadership in North America.⁵⁷ For a still young master of the pulpit, Toronto provided opportunities for both career and ecclesiastical advancement that were not so abundant in many other parts of Canada. Vancouver was a relatively unsophisticated city, even after the massive immigration that increasingly defined its character throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Its monumental growth had made it an urban centre with a diverse population, but one that lacked much of the physical, cultural and social infrastructure that made Toronto comfortable. Nonetheless, the expanding and increasingly heterogeneous character of the city made it an exciting post for a young preacher and his family.

The call to Westminster Hall in 1909 had other attractions. Under the direction of the irenic evangelical John Mackay, this new Presbyterian College offered an openness in curriculum and a compact, summer-month school "year" that allowed both students and faculty to pursue other ecclesiastical interests, especially during the winter months.⁵⁸ For Pidgeon, the short academic year allowed him to continue his passion for preaching, and indeed

⁵⁷ Alwyn Austin, "The Transplanted Mission: The C.I.M. and Canadian Evangelicalism," in Rawlyk, *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, 356-362.

⁵⁸ Robert K. Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917-1981* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 27-28.

to commit himself to evangelistic tours that covered large sections of British Columbia. Vancouver itself was an attraction. With its ocean and mountain access and its mild climate, it was an appealing spot for a young family to settle. The promise of a growing urban centre, which Mackay and others described with an infectious optimism, added to the excitement and the challenge of the new calling. The city and its frontier expectancy also held attractions for some of the leading theologians of the time, including the Scottish biblical critic George Adam Smith and Presbyterian scholar James Moffat, who regularly added their knowledge and spirituality to the classrooms of Westminster Hall.⁵⁹ It was to this intriguing western city and its recently established Presbyterian college that George Pidgeon went to assume the positions of registrar and professor of Practical Theology.

While teaching at Westminster Hall, Pidgeon very much lived what he taught in his classes on social ethics and practical Christianity. His time in Vancouver was divided between his teaching and college duties, some time in the pulpit, and active work on the part of various social and moral causes. Temperance, a consistent feature of his ongoing social involvements, was the centre of his Vancouver work, but the still-frontier nature of British Columbian society presented Pidgeon with an array of goals to pursue, and quickly made his time there a particularly pragmatic period. While maintaining his chairmanship of the Presbyterian Board of Moral and Social Reform, he took on the leadership of the Christian Social Council of British Columbia, and, in 1913, became an executive member of the Social Service Council of Vancouver. His work in British Columbia, which focused on the problems of drinking, gambling and prostitution, was essentially concerned

⁵⁹ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 42; Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land*, 28.

with improving the moral climate of the province, and particularly its largest city. Notwithstanding this concentration on curtailing vice, he and other activist Christians were learning that moral causes were also social and economic ones. Increasingly, therefore, Christian action came to mean more than simply closing down the taverns, curtailing gambling on Sundays and restricting access to prostitutes. Reformers in the early part of the twentieth century were learning that moral action had social consequences, a reality Pidgeon encountered in Vancouver when, in the process of enforcing laws against prostitution, the churches were encouraged to provide for the "poor girls" they put out of work.⁶⁰ As a result, the churches established "rescue missions" in several major cities, where the former prostitutes were sheltered as well as evangelized. This obviously social side of the work was not, of course, completely novel.⁶¹ "Rescue" work and active aid amongst the poor had been central to many Protestant church programs for years. In the early part of the century, however, social and economic questions were increasingly perceived as necessary accompaniments to moral solutions.⁶²

⁶⁰ Pidgeon discussed this realization in the Canadian churches, using the example of the problem of Prostitution in the Klondyke, and the government's demand that the churches prepare for the results of the enforcement of the law against it, to make his point. "It was then that our Church awakened to the fact that in all her long history she had never lifted a finger on behalf of the most neglected and most deeply wronged element in the community, namely, the girl who had gone astray." UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1405, "The Missionary Policy of the United Church of Canada," 13-14.

⁶¹ Pidgeon also discusses the success of the rescue homes, and the quality of the women who ran them in *ibid.*, 14. On this question see also, Marilyn Whiteley, "Called to a More Suitable Mission: Conversionism in the Life of Annie Leake Tuttle," *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers*, vol. 8 (1988-1990) 34-47, and "Conversion and Corrective Domesticity: The Mission of the Chinese Rescue Home," *ibid.*, 117-136. See also Sharon Cook, "Through Sunshine and Shadow:" *The Women's Christian Temperance Union, Evangelicalism, and Reform in Ontario, 1874-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 161-166.

⁶² Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

Always concerned with public affairs, Pidgeon took well to the social side of Christian service, and very naturally became involved in many of the current economic and social questions. Nonetheless, the evangelical basis of his interest in social and moral reform remained always intact, even in the face of mounting disagreement between Christian reformers and political and economic radicals, both of whom were fighting for similar ends, but who often disagreed vociferously over means. For this preacher-professor who insisted that the new birth was a necessary prerequisite for Christian service, the socially based and spiritually weak efforts of some reformers, both in and out of the churches, appeared distinctly contrary to his own understanding of service. By 1914, this separation within the movements for social change was obvious to Pidgeon, who commented on the differences after a Social Service Congress meeting in Ottawa.⁶³ In this period, when social service was still associated primarily with the churches, Pidgeon remained steadfastly opposed to an understanding of service separate from individual redemption. True charitable or moral service could not be effective without Christian salvation, a point he continued to make in his evangelistic work. This evangelically based social perspective, one that was strengthened through his contact with opposing perspectives as his practical work increased in British Columbia, became a standard part of his ecclesiastical thinking, and one that increasingly separated him from those reformers who put the regeneration of the social structures ahead of the salvation of the individual.

⁶³ In an article in *The Westminster Hall Magazine*, Pidgeon commented on the differing methods and views between the “reformer” and “radical” camps. See the magazine, 5:2 (March, 1914). This distinction between the social reform and true, evangelically based “kingdom work” is one that he maintained until the end of his career. See, for example, UCCA, GPP, box 48, file 1928, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done.” The theme of salvation for service was a consistent and emphatic component of his sermons into the 1950s.

Pidgeon recalled these years of evangelistic and social work, combined with teaching and administration as "among the happiest of his life."⁶⁴ His time in Vancouver had been an important part of his development as both a preacher and an activist. The frontier pressures of the expanding province were a crucible in which his various skills were forged and shaped, and the boundaries of his faith and ecclesiology were defined more rigidly. By 1915, and after six years in British Columbia, however, his desire for a full-time pulpit and more consistent pastoral work was growing. Therefore, though he clearly enjoyed academic life and the challenges that church work on the coast offered, Pidgeon took what was perhaps the most significant step in his ministerial career, and accepted the position of Associate Minister at Bloor Street Presbyterian church, Toronto.

V

The time at Westminster Hall had allowed Pidgeon to make contacts with some of Canada's and Britain's most important theologians. Working and living with the visiting lecturers who spent time at the college afforded him the rare opportunity to work away from the leading centres of Protestant theology, but nonetheless to come into contact with influential ideas and thinkers. These ideas were not always novel. Though he was introduced to the new thinking of many of the progressives who passed through the college doors, the writings of the nineteenth-century American revivalist Asa Mahan stood out as particularly important discoveries. These works, which he was encouraged to read by a visiting scholar, had a profound impact on his preaching, even during this point in his career when work in the pulpit was not a primary concern. Pidgeon's continuing interest in the works and

⁶⁴ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 50.

writings of Dwight Moody made Mahan, whose revivalistic and “reformed holiness” interests were reflected in the thought and action of the urban revivalist, a natural influence. And, although Pidgeon enjoyed his time at the college and in Vancouver, his encounter with Mahan rekindled his pastoral interest, and his love for regular pulpit and congregational work.

This nostalgia for ministerial work, touched with a desire to return to Toronto, compelled him to return to a full-time pastoral position.⁶⁵ Bloor Street Presbyterian church had been founded in 1887. It was established as a “university” congregation shortly before a number of the province’s major evangelical colleges were to enter into federation with the University of Toronto to form the country’s most powerful institution of higher learning.⁶⁶ As such it was, by the time of Pidgeon’s arrival, one of the most important and most dynamic congregations in the city. The continued northward growth of Toronto made Bloor Street Presbyterian a well placed church; as some of the city’s wealthiest and most powerful families began moving to the neighborhoods around the university, it was able and willing to accept them into the congregation. More importantly, however, was the proximity of the church to the student population, a constituency of young people that often was attracted by the appeals of evangelistic preaching.⁶⁷ It was an ecclesiastical

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53. Mahan continued to influence Pidgeon’s view of evangelism until the end of his career. At one point he wrote a long, celebratory essay on Mahan’s conversion and the nature of his relationship with God. See UCCA, GPP, box 61, file 3221, “God’s Dealings with Asa Mahan,” and Pidgeon, “Evangelism in the Work of the Church.”

⁶⁶ Marguerite Van Die, “The Double Vision’: Evangelical Piety as Derivative and Indigenous in Victorian English Canada,” in Mark Noll, David Bebbington and G.A. Rawlyk, (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 254. On the history of Bloor Street, see Evening Circle of the Women’s Association, (ed.), *Seventy Years at Bloor Street: A History of Bloor Street United Church Toronto, 1887-1957* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1957).

⁶⁷ Pidgeon made specific reference in his sermons to students and their needs. His evangelistic tone is obvious in a sermon he preached several times at Bloor Street United

and intellectual climate for which Pidgeon was well prepared. His contact with both students and higher education in Montreal and Vancouver, his experience as an evangelist and as a congregational pastor, and his stature in the nation's Christian social and moral reform movements made him an excellent choice for the diverse population and needs of Bloor Street church and its surrounding community. For Pidgeon, the return to Toronto meant not only a return to congregational work, but also the rewards and hazards of being placed much closer to the centre of Protestant thinking and power.

Though the position of associate minister afforded him the opportunity to improve his preaching and ministerial skills in a large, cosmopolitan setting, the reality of the war in Europe clouded the first years at Bloor Street. The Pidgeon family had left Vancouver partly because of the toll the war had taken on the enrollment, and therefore the vitality of Westminster Hall. Arriving in Toronto in 1915, Pidgeon was aware immediately of the impact of the war on his new congregation. Though he took the position at Bloor Street, in part, because of the opportunities it presented for working with young people, he did not meet many of the young men of the congregation when he arrived. Their absence and the need occasionally to inform parents in the congregation of the deaths of their children, led Pidgeon to wonder if his evangelistic efforts and talents could be put to better use in Europe. When the Y.M.C.A. called for "evangelistic reinforcement" in 1917, Pidgeon accepted this call "to hold evangelistic meetings as close to the battle lines as possible."⁶⁸ After only two years at

Church from 1928 through to 1937. See UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 994, "The Good Shepherd."

⁶⁸ Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 56-57. Pidgeon mentions both the Y.M.C.A. campaign of 1918 and the "spirit of sacrifice" of the soldiers who fought and died in Europe in "The Missionary Policy of the United Church of Canada," 6.

Bloor Street and though comfortably settled in Toronto, he left for a preaching tour amongst Canadian troops which kept him in England and France from the fall of 1917 through to the summer of the following year.

His call and mission were clear. He went to Europe to preach for decisions and to spread his evangelistic message to the searching, and often confused soldiers of Canada's 2nd Division. David Marshall has noted a distinct evangelical message in Pidgeon's wartime sermons, commenting that he "pressed the soldiers in a revival-meeting fashion to repent immediately." This evangelical tone and the appeals for conversion were typical of the message delivered by the chaplains at the front, a theological emphasis that is not surprising given the context of their delivery. While acknowledging the evangelical preaching of Pidgeon and others during the war, Marshall sees in this concern with "repentance" and "decision" a "return to more traditional Christianity" than that which had been expounded at home before the conflict.⁶⁹ The message of some chaplains at the front was certainly altered by the horror and danger of the situation, but Pidgeon's response to these conditions was not to fall back on some "older," more traditional Christian message, but rather to maintain the evangelistic method and evangelical emphases that were the well-established and central foundations of his theology. There was no need for him to revise his preaching. For Pidgeon, the answer to the questions raised by service in war were essentially the same as the answer to the questions raised by living in a city or farming in the country: he asked the soldiers to repent, recognize the gift of grace, and accept Jesus Christ as their personal saviour. This evangelical formula may have

⁶⁹ Marshall, 170-173. See also Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Chaplains of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) 161-193.

seemed especially appropriate in the context of the suffering and tragedy of war, but it was certainly not a new formula for Pidgeon. The gospel of repentance and conversion, though presented through the powerful imagery of battle and sacrifice, was the same message he had delivered in Streetsville and Toronto Junction some fifteen years earlier, and it was the basis of his evangelistic tours in British Columbia. Then, as in Europe during the war, preaching the gospel of the new birth was the central Christian message from Pidgeon's pulpit.

Soon after his return from Europe in 1918, Pidgeon's career took another turn. W.G. Wallace, the minister who had headed the congregation since its establishment in the 1880s had decided in Pidgeon's absence to step down. In September of 1918, at the age of 46, Pidgeon lost his "associate" status and became the full-time minister of Bloor Street Presbyterian church, an appointment of some stature within Canadian Protestantism. The change of title and responsibility was a logical one. Through various ecumenical and inter-religious contacts Pidgeon had quickly become a significant part of Toronto's spiritual, reform and business life.⁷⁰ Moreover, his position as convener of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, which he assumed in 1917, and his 1918 appointment to the presidency of the Social Service Council of Canada kept him involved in regional and national affairs to an extent to which few others could boast. Even with these other responsibilities, however, he continued to make pulpit work his primary concern and, now more prominent, he became known among many as the

⁷⁰ In his biography, John Grant argued that Pidgeon's "close friendship with Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman of the old Holy Blossom Synagogue was one of the first of its kind in the city," and maintained that he was always a willing ecumenist (pp. 46-47 and 58-59). By aiding in the establishment and direction of the "Toronto Business Men's Noon-day Bible Club" Pidgeon also fostered close connections with many of Toronto's most prominent business, civic and ecclesiastical leaders (pp. 55-56).

finest Canadian preacher of the time.⁷¹ His efforts as minister included, as they had previously, an active social and moral reform commitment, a national duty that was buttressed by his continued emphasis in his preaching on the fundamental necessity of conversion. This conversionist emphasis, which he maintained even as he introduced novel educational and homiletical techniques in his first years at Bloor Street, became strengthened as his national and ecclesiastical efforts, and his spiritual and practical aspirations were focused increasingly on the movement for church union.

VI

The journey from the nineteenth century and the Gaspé to the centre of twentieth century Protestantism was a geographically meandering, but theologically uncomplicated one for George Pidgeon. By the early 1920s, though he had visited, lived, evangelized and taught in many parts of Canada and in Europe, the central tenets of his faith remained essentially the same as those upon which he had been raised and in which he had been educated. His own reading, the influence of his teachers and his admiration for "colossi" like D.L. Moody and Asa Mahan had nuanced and refined his understanding of both "salvation" and "service." Nonetheless, the experience of "personal union with God," which his mother had impressed on him as a young man, and which he would recall enthusiastically as an established leader of The United Church of Canada, remained the cornerstone of his ecclesiastical and social outlook. Though he conceded that it happened in many different ways, he maintained that without this essential Christian experience, one that he described alternately as "new birth," "conversion" and "union," no other experience or action was properly motivated. He did not discount, however,

⁷¹ Frank Chamberlain, "George C. Pidgeon," *The United Church Observer* (August, 1971): 36; Grant, *George Pidgeon*, 59.

the necessity of Christian moral and social service. Indeed, for him, and for most of his contemporaries, the two were linked and indivisible. Without salvation one could not serve, but true salvation was obvious in the service of the convert. Like the liberal evangelicals who taught him, and like the American revivalists who were so influential in his theological development, Pidgeon preached that salvation led to service. And for Pidgeon that service meant creating properly motivated Christians and Canadians who were committed to maintaining and extending the middle-class moral and social assumptions of the still Victorian Anglo-Saxon English Protestant majority. The creation of a strong, productive and righteous nation required the creation of citizenry connected and motivated by this homogeneous national ideal. But he was always clear that without "supernatural union with Christ," the "indwelling of the Holy Spirit" and elevation to "the atmosphere of salvation" any idea of Christian service was "ridiculous." This primary concern for personal spiritual "union," and through it the preservation of the late-Victorian moral *status quo*, and thereby the extension of the Kingdom in Canada, remained the essence of Pidgeon's faith and the motivation that directed his ecclesiastical and personal activities for the rest of his ministerial career.

Chapter Three

**"Christ in me means Christ through me:"
George Pidgeon and the Evangelism of Union**

Union with God is the first condition of spiritual life; it must be maintained at all hazards; union with men is the second condition of life; it must be maintained in every way consistent with the first.

-- George Campbell Pidgeon, "The Divine Society"¹

On June 10, 1925, the Reverend Samuel Dwight Chown proclaimed to a gathering of some 8 000 Christians "that the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Congregational Churches of Canada, and the Methodist Church, Canada, along with the General Council of Local Union Churches are now united and constituted as one Church to be designated and known as 'The United Church of Canada.'" Recalling the event some twenty-five years later, George Pidgeon, the first Moderator of the United Church noted that this pronouncement was a "solemn moment, the realization of our dreams and the culmination of our efforts, and subdued applause swept through the entire assembly."² The solemnity of the moment, and its vivid recollection by one of the most significant actors in the drama of church union are not surprising. For George Pidgeon, and for many of the hundreds of thousands of Canadian Christians who entered with him into the new denomination, the journey to union, which had its origins in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was a troubling, long and, ironically, divisive one. But, even with the disruption of families and communities caused by theological

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], George Campbell Pidgeon Papers [GPP], box 38, file 939, "The Divine Society," 6. This was a theme Pidgeon maintained in many of the sermons he preached around the time of church union. See also, box 39, file 989, "The Church the Body of Christ," 5.

² George C. Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada: The Story of the Union* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1950) 79-80.

difference and denominational chauvinism, the journey was, Pidgeon believed, a successful one; for this "solemn moment," which Pidgeon recalled and described so joyfully but ambiguously, was in many ways an "evangelical moment."

As one of the most prominent leaders in the extended effort to unite a significant section of Canadian Protestantism, Pidgeon understood well the complex and often contrary motivations behind the movement. Chown's ceremonial proclamation of union recognized clearly the various denominational contributions, but, more significantly, the inclusive words of the proclamation acknowledged the theological and practical diversity of the new church. After over a decade of concentrated effort for the cause of church union, George Pidgeon knew that however varied in their interests, the unionists in the uniting churches were joined from the beginning by the dream of a single, united and efficient Protestant presence in the new nation. Clearly, this dream left little room for inter-denominational rivalry, especially as immigrant populations and frontier areas expanded more quickly than denominational missionary efforts. As he noted in his history of the union, in the first decades of the twentieth century the "need for cooperation in Home Mission work became more urgent with the passing of the years. ... The Churches which were to unite later on were committed to meeting the spiritual need of their people wherever they might settle, and it became clear that this could not be done if they kept on wasting their resources of men and money in competition with one another."³ The widespread call for cooperation among the denominations was not, however, based simply on want of greater efficiency. To reach new populations quickly,

³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

and to organize Protestant missions in new areas was certainly facilitated by decreased competition. Increased cooperation for its own sake, and as a Christian imperative, was, however, a more powerful motivator than the recognition that ecclesiastical rivalry was wasteful and expensive. The eventual national union of the Methodist, Congregationalist, Local Union and many Presbyterian churches, often dismissed as a bureaucratic and monetary, as opposed to a theological, achievement, was for many evangelical leaders of the late nineteenth century a national requirement. Some argued that a Christian nation needed a national church devoted to the "Christianization" of the new dominion. George Pidgeon, who sincerely believed that the future of Canada rested on the ability of devoted Protestants to bring the nation in line with the sober morality and social vision of its middle-class, Anglo-Saxon keepers, certainly agreed. But unlike others who were pursuing the creation of this "righteous" Canada and "building the Kingdom of God" by changing accepted social structures and relationships, Pidgeon maintained that these objectives could only be attained through, first, the widespread experience of personal union with Christ. This primary goal, to be accomplished through the efforts of a Protestant church united in fact and in spirit for the evangelization of the nation, was, Pidgeon believed in 1925, the first calling of the "national church."

I

This spiritual goal was rooted in theology; the experiences of his first quarter century in the classroom, the pulpit and the work of moral and social reform had forged for Pidgeon a progressive, though traditionally informed and remarkably consistent theology. The evangelical bases of his thought were clear in his preaching from his first pulpit assignments and, though he certainly nuanced his thinking on spiritual matters throughout his career, the

essentials of his pastoral and social message remained intact, even in the face of the country's increasing social and religious change. As a minister, Pidgeon endeavored to protect his, and "the race's" theological inheritance. When it appeared that the theology of evangelism and social service was being questioned or rejected, his preaching and action in defence of the essentials of the whole gospel became more passionate. He maintained that the best hope for Canadians, their churches and their society was the protection and extension of the social, cultural and theological inheritance of the Anglo-Saxon majority. And, as far as Pidgeon was concerned, the basis of everything was the salvation of individual sinners.

His many sermons from the 1920s are saturated with references to salvation and its attainment. In these, as in earlier and later writings, he was clear that the simpler the message, the more powerful the result; emotion, not intellect or clever scholastics was the way to union with God. The "intellect," he said, "is insufficient for the discernment of spiritual truth." Rather, "it is the heart, the seat of personality, and the source of all its outgoings that God must illumine." The simple presentation of the gospel, directed at the heart, was central to his understanding of the role of the church; a plain telling of the meaning of salvation, and through it the widespread experience of "personal union with God, the source of all things," was the church's essential duty. This was a view of salvation that was based not on "the Divine Being of theory or doctrine," but rather the personal discovery of God: "to find for myself God, my Father and Redeemer, with his purposes of mercy to me and his purposes of love to others through me is to find my portion and the joy of my heart forever."⁴ This salvationist theology,

⁴ UCCA, GPP, box 38, file 934, "The Rapture in Religion," 7. See also *Ibid.*, box 38, file 948, "The Character of Jesus in the Light of the Cross."

based on the emotive, experiential evangelicalism of the nineteenth century, was the foundation of his Christian thought and action. All aspects of his Christianity, including both his theological and practical emphases, were rooted in this fundamental concern for the salvation of individual Canadians.

This personal emphasis in his theology was the direct result of an abiding and undeniable acceptance of the reality of sin and its power to keep human souls from their intended spiritual position in union with the Divine. Naturally, then, a significant part of Pidgeon's soteriological formula was individual recognition and rejection of sin, a process the evangelists of his youth called "repentance," and an approach to the salvation of men and women that he maintained. The effectiveness of the "personal appeal" depended, he argued, on making individuals aware of their fallen nature and then encouraging them to turn from it.⁵ "The first condition of salvation is, therefore, repentance; God can do nothing for us," he concluded, "until we definitely and finally break with our sins."⁶ Without sin, and the repentance of the sinner from it, there could be no salvation. Pidgeon's career-long emphasis on the necessity and possibility of the union of the human soul with the divine was predicated on his belief that individual sin was a real, destructive and ever-present fact of the human and Christian life.⁷ "We do not need to be told," he preached, "that our sinfulness unfits us for that life in God. All that is divine is against it, and against us in so far as we are identified

⁵ *Ibid.*, box 48, file 1888, "Jesus, Redeemer and Lord," 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, box 38, file 961, "Communion Service," 7.

⁷ For Pidgeon's understanding of sin, see "Communion Service," and "Jesus, Redeemer and Lord."

with it. It is God's problem; He must solve it if His love is ever to reach its object, and He alone can."⁸

In this soteriological system, which reflected the traditional theology of his Reformed education and upbringing, the solution to "God's problem" was obvious. The central truth of this gospel was that "Christ died for our sins," and thereby removed "Whatever obstacle sin raised between men and God." As a result, Christ "fulfilled the Father's purpose" and provided a channel "through which the divine grace reaches effectiveness in sinful men."⁹ This channel for grace, which was made available by the death of Christ, had as its focal point, the cross. Pidgeon argued clearly throughout his pastorate that a central truth of Christian salvation was that "Something was done on calvary which was definite and final. It will never be done again." He was so convinced of the centrality of the cross, and of the salvific power of Christ's death on it, that he made the cross the core of his ministerial message. Indeed, the story of the death of Christ on Calvary and "the complete deliverance of the soul of man"¹⁰ accomplished through it was so central to his preaching that when asked what he would choose if he had only one sermon to preach, he replied: "For me there could be only one answer -- The Cross." For, he said, the "Gospel of the Cross saved men. It worked. Where it was preached with simple faith, men were led to God. No other message had the same effect. It was the source of the church's power."¹¹ This central place for the cross, and the hope of its evangelistic power became a primary theme in his sermons, especially after the realization of church union in 1925. He stated his understanding of its meaning and power on numerous occasions, and in each

⁸ UCCA, GPP, box 46, file 1626, "The Cross in Redemption," 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹ UCCA, GPP, box 46, file 1650, "If I had only one Sermon to Preach," 1 and 2-3.

instance the message was the same; the sacrifice of Christ on the cross opened the door for the grace of God to reach humankind. The centrality of the cross and the redemptive power of Christ's sacrifice on it were, of course, essential teachings of the Anglo-American evangelicalism of which Pidgeon's theology was so clearly a product. It was an emphasis from the nineteenth century that he preserved throughout his pastorate in the twentieth. "To preach Christ is to preach Him crucified," Pidgeon maintained;¹² "All this grace of God toward man is summed up," he said, "in the Cross."¹³

Pidgeon's soteriology began, then, with what he understood to be the "working out" of salvation from "God's side." The great love and concern for the lost compelled the Almighty to "enter history" into which "He came to save and did save."¹⁴ The way to salvation was opened by the canceling of the debt of sin on the cross.¹⁵ This divine deliverance from sin and its destructive power was, for him, the central and primary fact of God's part in the equation of salvation.¹⁶ This grace, which he understood as the expression of God's love for humankind, and which he believed was demonstrated in the events of Christ's life, and particularly Jesus' death and resurrection, was the starting point for human union with the divine. "Salvation," he argued, "is all of

¹² *Ibid.*, box 46, file 1654, "Christ is Preached," 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, box 41, file 1179, "The Essence of Christianity," 4-5 and 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, box 39, file 1009, "The Christian Life," 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8; Pidgeon, "The Cross" (1929), 11 and *passim*.

¹⁶ Pidgeon is clearly Augustinian in his interpretation of salvation when he argues for the necessary offer of Grace. In the "spiritual world, spiritual Life [comes] only from spiritual life. Holy Spirit -- author of spiritual life -- acts through God's people, but He alone works the change." Pidgeon, "New Birth," 5. This particular theological emphasis was a favourite expository device, almost certainly learned while at Presbyterian College, and one which he maintained throughout his career. See Brian J. Fraser, *Church, College, and Clergy: A History of Theological Education at Knox College, Toronto 1844-1994* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 73 and UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 972, "God's Sovereign Grace"; box 38, file 929, "Saved By Grace" (1923); box 38, file 938, "Salvation: Its Mode and Meaning," (1924-1935). See also *ibid.*, box 23, file 407, Pidgeon to John Stevenson, December 22, 1933.

grace; even the ability to receive it is God's gift."¹⁷ The essential gift of grace was the final and complete break with sin that God's sacrifice on the cross accomplished; "Deliverance from sin's power is God's act and work ... It is His part in our salvation."¹⁸ The concept of grace, its role in salvation, and its success in human life through Christ and the cross formed the core of Pidgeon's theological system. The doctrines of grace were for Pidgeon "the cornerstone of Protestantism. They are the essence of the faith which we call Evangelical. Our whole religious background has imbued us with the conviction that there is no hope for men apart from them."¹⁹

This strong emphasis on the work of grace in the process of redemption, which was classically Protestant in its interpretation, did not preclude the necessity of human effort. Like his more recent evangelical predecessors, Pidgeon preached that though grace was the prerequisite act necessary for salvation, it was incumbent on the Christian to accept this offer. The decision for which he so often called in his sermons was the decision to accept the free offer of grace, in the faith that it was through this grace, established and made available through Christ, that the individual was saved. And so it was that he preached that "God's grace is God providing; man's faith is man accepting; this one and only way of salvation runs right through the Christian's life."²⁰ Salvation through the offer of grace and personal acceptance by faith was the only means of redemption that Pidgeon understood.

¹⁷ UCCA, GPP, box 55, file 3050 "Saved by Grace" (1958), 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, box 46, file 1629, "The Cross as Emancipation" (1939), 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, box 38, file 929, "Saved by Grace" (1923), 1. In a later sermon, Pidgeon repeats his belief that "the very soul of our evangelical faith is the boundless grace of god which fills to overflowing every soul that opens to receive it." See "Salvation its Mode and Meaning," 13.

²⁰ Pidgeon, "The Cross as Emancipation," 5.

Though the decision to accept the free offer of grace was an essential beginning, the experience of "conversion" was never so simple as merely accepting by faith the saving grace of God. This fundamental first step was, Pidgeon taught, the beginning, not the end of the process of redemption. Contrary to some "raise your hand" forms of evangelism that became popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Pidgeon's Calvinist inheritance would not allow him to fall into the "error" of believing that the death of Christ was "a substitutionary atonement that did not call for sorrow for sin and the regenerating work of the Spirit."²¹ For Pidgeon, individual sin was real, continuing and destructive, and, therefore, salvation was possible only through faith in the atonement of Christ. Conversion was, however, more than simply "believing." The process of salvation involved not only a decision to accept the gift of grace, but equally a commitment to turn from sin. "Do you not see," he asked from the pulpit of Bloor Street in 1939, "that a salvation which leaves a man under the power of sin robs repentance and the change of heart of both depth and genuineness?"²² Though the process of salvation began, necessarily, with the acceptance of grace, the reality of conversion was expressed more completely through what Pidgeon consistently referred to as the new birth.

The success of the human union with God for which Pidgeon preached rested on the "germ of obedience" found in Christian faith. "Moral character and conduct is the fruit, not the root, of the tree of life. If the faith with which

²¹ Marguerite Van Die, "The Double Vision': Evangelical Piety as Derivative and Indigenous in Victorian English Canada," in Mark Noll, David Bebbington and George Rawlyk, (eds.), *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 258. On the popularity of forms of "easy evangelism" see Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 40-47.

²² Pidgeon, "The Cross as Emancipation," 1.

you answer to Christ does not carry with it committal to Him and to all that He stands for," Pidgeon insisted, "it is not the faith that saves."²³ "Complete salvation" was, then, a combination of the decision to accept the offer of grace and a commitment to live a Christian life.²⁴ It was, in other words, a new birth and a new life in Christ which were the result of both "justification" and "sanctification." The call for, and description of, the new birth were perhaps the most enduring elements of Pidgeon's sermonizing. The paramount emphasis of his remarkably unvarying pastoral career was the necessity of conversion; it was a message he preached from his earliest until his last sermons. Often employing the language and anxious tone of the evangelist, Pidgeon would insist that the "privilege of entrusting yourself and all your concerns to eternal love in the person of the Son of God stands out in spiritual history as the first of God's gifts in the order of time and in importance. It is a definite act, a commitment of oneself to Him beyond the possibility of withdrawal." He would then ask the "vital" question – "Have you taken that definite step?"²⁵ That "definite step" necessarily included a radical change of life; "conversion is an outward expression of something that has happened within. The man becomes something the very opposite of what he was."²⁶

²³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

²⁴ This layered understanding of salvation is obvious in a sermon preached in 1924 in which he argued that "God's yearning for the lost [is] still the same. What conversion means [is] open heart and life to this Heart. What ultimate salvation means [is] the completing of the Union." Pidgeon, "The Character of Jesus in the Light of the Cross," 10.

²⁵ UCCA, GPP, box 50, file 2000, "Having Done all, Stand," 8. The evangelical language of "decision" and "commitment" was commonplace in Pidgeon's preaching. He often asked his audience if they had "decided" for Christ. This technique was one which he used throughout his career. See, for example, Pidgeon, "New Birth," and UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 986, "If Thou Would'st Enter Into Life"; "Jesus, Redeemer and Lord"; box 56, file 3121, "Evangelism in the Work of the Church."

²⁶ UCCA, GPP, box 48, file 1861, "The Universal Gospel: IV. 'Paul's Conversion,'" 1. This particular interpretation of conversionism was not specific to Pidgeon or limited in its

Following this step of acceptance, the next was the possession of the soul by Christ who "reinforces all that is good in him, raises it to the throne and gives it authority and power. The sin is dead because the full tide of life is flowing in a new direction."²⁷ This "'Newness of life' is the life in Christ," he preached, and it was, in tandem with Christ, a life lived for the kingdom.²⁸ "What does it mean to die to the old and live to the new? It means that the pleasures and gains of this present world will make no more appeal to you than the sunshine to a dead tree or food and air to a dead man."²⁹ Pidgeon expected, therefore, that a person who was born again would, by opening her or his soul to the spiritual work of God, enter a new life and leave sin behind. "If you are a new man in him put off the old and let that new spiritual quality, like the leaven, change your whole moral character," he said in 1924.³⁰ New birth was only effective if expressed through a new life lived for the improvement first of the self, then of the nation, and then of the world; "complete salvation" was not achieved outside this commitment to Christian living.

Pidgeon taught, therefore, that the new life was not only a spiritual condition, but had a profound practical dimension. Though he always held that the experience of new birth and the spiritual life of the person were individual and "inward," Pidgeon's interpretation of the new life was consistently expressed in social terms.³¹ He preached, therefore, that new

acceptance throughout the United Church. For a similar example, see Professor Johnston, "Conversion, or what is it to Be a Christian?" *The New Outlook*, 1:4 (July 1, 1925): 18.

²⁷ Pidgeon, "The Cross as Emancipation," 8.

²⁸ UCCA, GPP, box 45, file 1588, "Newness of Life," 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, box 41, file 1116, "Risen With Christ or, The Symbolism of Christ's Death and Resurrection in Christian Experience," 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, box 38, file 942, "Religion and Righteousness," 2.

³¹ "Paul was anxious to maintain the inwardness of religion. Spirituality was a state, a condition of the soul, a relationship with God." Pidgeon, "The Christian Life," 13.

birth “means that self is no longer to be life’s centre and object.” The selfishness that lay at the root of sin is replaced by a passion for life that is “not to be lived for its own sake but for the sake of the contribution it can make to others. The individual life is to be invested in the common good.”³² This social emphasis was as central as the individual one, for Pidgeon believed that “Christ in me means Christ through me. The divine can never be cribbed and cabined within the confines of a single soul.” This aspect of the Christian life was so important to Pidgeon, that he often took time in his sermons to explain in exacting detail what the “life in Christ” involved. The emphases in these discussions were occasionally on the spiritual, but his interest in the fruits of the new life were more usually practical.³³ The necessary spiritual “Change in Nature” was followed, Pidgeon explained, by an equally necessary series of moral and temperamental modifications that would lead the newly re-born sinner “to do right and avoid wrong” and “to learn from Christ and be taught by Him in the practical affairs of life.”³⁴ The basis of this new life was, fundamentally, moral. The changes wrought by union with Christ were almost always described by Pidgeon in terms of the uncomplicated morality of professional and business classes at the turn of the century. The individual’s role in the extension of the Kingdom of God in Canada was, therefore, to undergo the experience of new birth and then to be truthful, to chasten anger, to use sanctified and consecrated speech, and, finally, to serve.³⁵

³² UCCA, GPP, box 38, file 921, “Jesus’ Idea of Life,” 2.

³³ The spiritual results of new birth are described in some detail in Pidgeon, “If Thou Would’st Enter Into Life,” 6-8.

³⁴ Pidgeon, “Religion and Righteousness,” 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5-11.

George Pidgeon's whole gospel was, therefore, composed of almost equal parts of both evangelism and social and moral reformism. The primary duty of the church was to facilitate the natural union between humans and God; the challenge for the church in Canada was to bring about these unions among an increasingly diverse population. As he had learned in the early years of the twentieth century, when Wilfrid Laurier's government's more liberal immigration policies were rapidly changing the face of Canada, the duty of the English Canadian Protestant churches to "Canadianize" and "Christianize" was made more urgent with each new wave of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants.³⁶ The job of incorporating these "foreigners" into the social fabric of Canada, and the first step in maintaining a homogenous Protestant culture, fell to the Canadian churches. "The only hope for a changed world," Pidgeon asserted, "is through changed men. Each person whose inner being Christ inhabits may become a medium through which His grace and saving power reach mankind. For your sake and the world's sake, let Him in."³⁷ The creation of a national culture that was made righteous by its conformity to the norms of a British, middle-class morality depended first and foremost on people changed through the experience of new birth. His entreaties to "let Him in" were, therefore, very much directed towards social as well as personal improvement and were aimed at those Canadians old and new who, by remaining outside Pidgeon's culture, were a threat to the

³⁶ Brian J. Fraser, *The Social Uplifters: Presbyterian Progressives and the Social Gospel in Canada, 1875-1915* (Waterloo: Canadian Corporation For Studies in Religion/ Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1988) 88; Mary Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada," in Mark McGowan and David Marshall, (eds.), *Prophets, Priests and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History, 1608 to Present* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992) 169.

³⁷ Pidgeon, "Newness of Life," 20.

stability of a homogenous middle-class, English Protestant nation, and, therefore, to the realization of "His Dominion" in Canada.

II

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century Pidgeon was well established in both his theology and his positions within the church. When he assumed the head ministerial role at Bloor Street Presbyterian upon his return from Europe in 1918, he very quickly made the church his own. Through almost always preaching two sermons each Sunday, he made his "personal union" based theology a mainstay of the growing and diverse congregation at Bloor Street. Though he continued in his capacity as a leader in many social and moral reform movements, even assuming the leadership of the Social Service Council of Canada in the early twenties, his primary preoccupation in the years after the war became the movement for church union.

For years Pidgeon was a lukewarm church unionist. Though he was later widely lauded, and sometimes condemned, for his significant contribution to the successful union, in the early years of the debates he was typically moderate in his position, refusing for some time to take a strong stand in support of the proposal. Indeed in 1911, he was calling for delays in the process of uniting the churches, still not enthusiastic enough in his "church unionism" to encourage a serious rift in the Presbyterian Church. His call for wide and complete Protestant union, an ambition he had absorbed from his teachers at Morrin and elsewhere, and a message that he had preached as early as his pastorates at the end of the century, was very much a part of his ecclesiology. He was temperate in his pursuit of the unionist dream, however, because he believed initially that the interests of the evangelical faith, and therefore of the nation, were not necessarily served best

by a unionism which divided the church irreparably.³⁸ He considered for some time the proposal for organic union, and did not become a well-known apologist for the movement until the second decade of the century. His position as head of the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, and the practical missionary problems he witnessed when he assumed this mantle in 1917, helped persuade him that organic union was both a theological and a practical necessity. By the time he went to conduct evangelistic tours among the troops fighting in Europe, the older evangelical unionist imperatives of his faith had joined with these more recent concerns about the necessity of effective practical Christian work in Canada to make of him a powerful proponent of organic church union.³⁹

Though his recognition of the practical benefits undoubtedly helped to solidify this support, Pidgeon's more primary evangelical motivations were always the foundation of his unionism. In the first decades of the new century, while the interests of some mainline Protestants were shifting from individual to social religious concerns,⁴⁰ Pidgeon continued to hold and to

³⁸ John Webster Grant, *George Pidgeon: A Biography* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1962) 61-62.

³⁹ Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness," 177.

⁴⁰ Though some comprehensive studies have established that social Christianity was becoming a popular Protestant option in the years around the turn of the century, there is some disagreement about the period in which social Christian concerns enjoyed their greatest popularity. Both Richard Allen and Michael Bliss have argued that the "social gospel" was strongest in the years following 1914. See Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) and Michael Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 44 (1968): 213-233. Contrary to these interpretations, David Marshall has argued that the experience of the First World War forced a re-evaluation of social Christian emphases and the liberal theology that he contends informed Canadian Protestantism in the years between 1880 and 1914. He, along with Ramsay Cook, dates the pinnacle of Canadian Protestantism as an 'essentially social religion' to the years before the First War. See, David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 156-180 and Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

preach that the basis of Christianity was the belief that "Our Salvation comes through our union with Christ," and that this "gift of the Spirit of God is personal, and is personally received."⁴¹ This belief in the reality of salvation through personal union with God was the same one that he had learned from his parents and experienced as an adolescent, that he had witnessed in revivals and that he appreciated in the work of D.L. Moody. In the years leading up to union, this message of salvation through grace and faith, accomplished through the saving work of Christ on Calvary and the union of the human soul with God remained the defining element of his support for the formation and the work of The United Church of Canada.

In many significant ways the creation of the United Church represented the victory of "progressive" theology in Canada; its creation provided a large, national institutional base for the efforts to work for the extension of "His Dominion."⁴² Nonetheless, the ability of many who held essentially traditional and evangelical theologies to support the new church enthusiastically indicates that union was also a victory for those with more conservative views. The claims of some contemporary evangelicals and fundamentalists, including William Aberhart and T.T. Shields notwithstanding, the support of these more traditionally inclined unionists, including that of George Pidgeon, was not misplaced.⁴³ The progress towards

⁴¹ Pidgeon, "Salvation: Its Mode and Meaning," 1; UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 979, "Pentecost," 4.

⁴² The liberal and social gospel foundations of the union movement and of the United Church of Canada are commonly assumed in both popular and historical literature. See, for example Robert K. Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917-1981* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 31; Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 202 and *passim*; Allen, *The Social Passion*, chapter 16, "The Social Gospel and Church Union."

⁴³ Both Shields and Aberhart were clear that they saw the United Church of Canada as the home of many "modernists" and "liberals" and recognized it early as a threat to their particularly conservative aspirations for Canadian Protestantism. See John G. Stackhouse,

church union, which became a major preoccupation of many Methodists and Presbyterians, had a solid foundation in evangelical, as well as social gospel principles. After 1902, when the Presbyterian Principal William Patrick suggested to the Methodist General Conference that the two denominations should pursue seriously a united church, the dormant idea of church union became surprisingly, and widely popular.⁴⁴ As early as 1904, these two churches, and by then the Congregational Church of Canada, had declared the possibility and desirability of creating a united Protestant body. As discussions continued, and overtures for union were made to both Anglicans and Baptists, members of the three major participating denominations met to construct a theological Basis of Union. This process, which many assumed would be difficult and protracted given the varying theological assumptions of the Methodist and Presbyterian communions, was surprisingly easy, and the resulting document was surprisingly conservative.⁴⁵

The Basis, which appeared in 1906, was an uncontroversial mix of conservative theological points essentially acceptable to both of the major communions. The agreed starting point for the initial discussions on the doctrinal aspects of the Basis turned out to be Reformed statements of faith, which were agreed upon as suitable statements by both the Toronto and Montreal subcommittees on doctrine. In Toronto, both the Presbyterian representative William McLaren and the Methodist Nathanael Burwash accepted a recently published American "Brief Statement of the Reformed

Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1993) 38.

⁴⁴ N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1985) 13-16 and Fraser, *Church, College and Clergy*, 115-116.

⁴⁵ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (updated and expanded) (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 107-108.

Faith" as a suitable summary of shared doctrine, while in Montreal the doctrinal subcommittee based its work on a statement of the English Presbyterian Church.⁴⁶ The process of developing a workable theological compromise was facilitated in great measure by the slow taming of the harsher elements of Calvin's soteriology by North American Reformed leaders in the nineteenth century, and the willingness of Methodist thinkers to acknowledge similarities in the Reformed and Wesleyan doctrines on grace. It is clear from the contents of the eventual Basis that the Reformed emphases of the Presbyterian members enjoyed more prominence than those of their Methodist counterparts. The emphasis on the sovereign power of God in the redemptive process is, for example, far more obvious than the Arminian emphases of the Methodists.⁴⁷

Many interpretations of the ease with which the various subcommittees, and the various theological perspectives came together so quickly were offered at the time of the completion of the Basis and in later historical treatments. The majority of these, from Presbyterian and Methodist critics in the years before union through to the various analyses by John Webster Grant, contended that agreement was, at worst, achieved by compromising the doctrinal distinctives and foundations of the Arminian

⁴⁶ Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 159-160.

⁴⁷ Marguerite Van Die has pointed out that the leading Methodist divines involved in the formulation of the doctrinal basis of union, including Nathanael Burwash, had little trouble accepting the very Augustinian formulation of grace offered in it. Indeed, ten years after church union was completed, Pidgeon noted in a discussion of old doctrinal controversies between "Calvinists teaching the divine election or God's sovereign purpose in our salvation and Arminians, particularly in the Methodist Church, insisting on the freedom of the individual," that "Most of us today accept John Wesley's position in regard to election, while acknowledging the mystery behind it all." See UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1404, "The Spiritual Background and Ideal of United Church of Canada," 8.

and Reformed creeds, or, at best, because theology was “at a discount.”⁴⁸ Both of these criticisms were answered at the time of the debates by Burwash who maintained that the Basis, far from representing a watering-down of evangelical thought, was the natural outcome of an historical process that had brought the Presbyterians and the Methodists together “in revival spirit, in methods of work, and in the great message of evangelistic truth which is proclaimed alike from all pulpits.”⁴⁹ Burwash believed that the content of the Basis represented a doctrinal leap that was not a compromise but rather a progressive Protestant development that reflected a pan-denominational evangelical theology that concentrated on the essentials of “the atoning work of Christ and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰ This was a position with which the very Presbyterian George Pidgeon agreed absolutely.

Pidgeon simply did not agree that doctrine was unimportant to the creation of The United Church of Canada. Though some interpreters of union argued to the contrary, he understood the movement for a new ecumenical Protestant church in terms of a cleansing of theology and a return to a purer evangelical faith. Instead of concentrating on doctrinal division, what he referred to as “secondary” passions, Pidgeon maintained that “the

⁴⁸ This particular understanding of the doctrinal Basis is, and has been almost unanimous among interpreters of union. E. Lloyd Morrow’s hostile pre-union study, and C.E. Silcox’s 1933 history and analysis of The United Church of Canada’s development and first years both maintained that doctrine was of little interest to those who drew up the Basis. See E. Lloyd Morrow, *Church Union in Canada: Its History, Motives, Doctrine and Government* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1923) 114-232 and C.E. Silcox, *Church Union in Canada: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933). More recently John Grant has speculated that the framers of the Basis were more concerned with “forging a new instrument for social betterment” than creating a novel theological approach. See Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 108. David Marshall has made a similar argument and contends that the lack of theological creativity led to an “Era of Drift” because the United Church “lacked a statement of theology suitable for the age.” See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 190.

⁴⁹ Nathanael Burwash as quoted in Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 163.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

only way we can justify Church Union is by putting into the central and vital place a passion deeper and stronger" than those that divided earlier generations. Given his theological presuppositions, these "central and vital" emphases were clear. So that the new church would remain true to its mission, Pidgeon called on its members to emphasize always:

God and His righteousness and love and purpose of redemption, Christ and His Cross, and the faith which replies, and the vicarious living which He inspires, the Holy Spirit and His presence and life-giving energy, [and] spiritual character and action which are the reproduction in us of what God is and does ...⁵¹

Accepting and believing these central truths was not, however, enough; The United Church of Canada had a commission to spread these truths to a nation and world in need, and that meant only one thing for its members. "If you believe what you say you believe, you cannot but advocate these truths -- which is to say, you cannot but be a missionary."⁵²

In the various sermons that Pidgeon preached at Bloor Street United and other locations across the country in the years leading up to and following the consummation of Union in 1925, "personal union," and the necessity of direct access to God's grace for salvation were standard and common themes. Indeed, it was in the context of his message that "Conscious union with God is as necessary for spiritual growth as the sun and air are to the growth of the plant," that Pidgeon interpreted the question of church union.⁵³ For, "whenever men agree on the immediacy of access to the divine as the cornerstone of Christianity, the obligation to unite with them gains the

⁵¹ UCCA, GPP, box 48, file 1857, "The Universal Gospel': Christ's Commission -- universal elements in Jesus' attitude and teaching," 10-11. This sermon was preached in 1943, but is a fair representation of Pidgeon's feelings at the time of union.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, box 39, file 1038, "In the Likeness of Men," 3.

force of divine law.”⁵⁴ Because Pidgeon believed that “immediacy of access to the divine” was the “very life of our evangelical religion” and that “separation from one another means to that extent separation from God,”⁵⁵ church union represented for him not only a necessary move for Canada’s Protestant evangelical churches, but a sure method of increasing the access of the souls of Canadians to “the heart of God.” It was, therefore, essentially a missionary endeavor. For Pidgeon, then, The United Church of Canada was evangelical in both its motivations and its purposes.

Doctrine formed the basis of this evangelical understanding of the new church. From Pidgeon’s perspective, the discernment of essentials from the complicated mass of theologies and disputes transplanted in the new nation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was the genius of the United Church. When analyzing the motivations for union in the later years of his pastorate at Bloor Street and in his retirement, Pidgeon consistently maintained this perspective. The new Church’s understanding of its purpose was, he claimed, “determined by the histories of the churches which entered the Union and by their joint outlook as they came together.” Though the three founding churches of the new denomination “had often argued against each other in vindicating their views of the operations of his grace,” as they “strove in their different ways to meet the conditions and needs of a young nation,” these differences “fell into the back-ground and each discovered the other preaching the same Gospel of the grace of God in Christ.”⁵⁶ Concluding this analysis of the process of uniting, Pidgeon turned from doctrine to history to prove the inevitability of a greatly united Canadian Protestantism.

⁵⁴ Pidgeon, “The Church the Body of Christ,” 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶ Pidgeon, “Saved by Grace” (1958), 1-2. Pidgeon, *The United Church of Canada*, 29.

Claiming that “when the issues that caused the divisions had been outgrown or forgotten, the reasons for separation disappeared with them, and the way to union was opened,” Pidgeon continued an argument established by Nathanael Burwash some forty-five years earlier. Like Burwash, who had contended against critics of the proposed union that the movement for union had a solid historical basis for action, Pidgeon noted that “we were following the example of our fathers and acting on a principle established many times in Canadian history when we established the union of 1925.”⁵⁷

Clearly, history was important to this interpretation of union, but immediately after his explanation of the historical roots of the movement, Pidgeon emphasized again the traditional doctrinal foundations of unionism and noted that “the basis on which those churches united may be summed up” in what he called the quintessence of St. Paul’s whole doctrine of salvation – that by Grace you have been saved by faith.⁵⁸ This reference to Paul’s explanation that it was by God’s grace, and faith, that humans were saved and that redemption was not through, but rather for good works, identified clearly Pidgeon’s own understanding of church union as a theological achievement. His contention in 1958 that the primary achievement of the union movement was the creation of a united evangelical church, established on the foundations of the doctrines of grace, was not simply the nostalgic recollection of an aging former leader. The point he made about the doctrinal bases of The United Church of Canada at that time, so many years later, reflected perfectly his take on the new church at the time of union. In a sermon preached in the months just following the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. Marguerite Van Die has demonstrated that the Methodist Burwash espoused an almost identical historical and doctrinal explanation for church union in 1912. See Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 151-156 and 161-164.

⁵⁸ Pidgeon, “Saved by Grace” (1958), 3.

completion of union in June, 1925, Pidgeon claimed that in "the United Church we are laying stress on the central doctrine of the faith." Before union the churches had emphasized "secondary matters" of "minor importance," and allowed these to separate them. With the creation of The United Church of Canada, and a united theology, all of this changed: "There is a body of truth known as the Doctrines of Grace by the preaching of which men are saved. These are at the heart of our Statement of Doctrine. The emphasis which our Union places on this entitles us to expect new measures of the wonderful grace of God."⁵⁹ Given his evangelical disposition, and the conservative soteriology of the twenty doctrinal articles of the Basis of Union, this strong belief that The United Church of Canada was an evangelical denomination, and that this spiritual basis would express itself in powerful and widespread religious "outpourings," was a natural one for Pidgeon.

III

By emphasizing the primacy of evangelical spiritual concerns, Pidgeon was not neglecting, of course, what he called the practical work of the church. The widespread acceptance of social concern and action by Canadian evangelicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been well documented.⁶⁰ The United Church was the heir to much of this social Christianity, and was the spiritual home for a wide variety of social activists, including some clearly committed to a social gospel. The mainstream of the church was well disposed to social Christian work, and Pidgeon was no exception to this, assuming, like many of his colleagues in the new church, that true

⁵⁹ UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 996, "The Spiritual and the Practical in the Church's Life," 14-15.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*; Richard Allen, *The Social Passion*; Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators*; Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*; Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*.

evangelical Christianity was expressed in both the "Spiritual and the Practical." He was conscious, however, of some within the denomination who "wanted the spiritual emphasized exclusively" and of others who were more concerned with the purely practical work of the church. He challenged these interpretations with his defence of the whole gospel: "Really the two are one. Spiritual revival is always the source of missionary activity; missionary enterprise is the necessary expression of spiritual renewal."⁶¹

Pidgeon continued to be an active participant and organizer in the social and practical work that had become central to Canadian Protestantism during the first thirty years of his career. His consistent involvement in the moral work of the crusade against alcohol and various other vices, and his leadership of the Social Service Council of Canada exposed these practical, reformist interests. This work, and the contact it afforded with other Christian activists made him aware, however, of the changes that "practical work" had undergone in a relatively short period of time. He granted that the widespread and cross-denominational revivals in the Maritimes and Ontario in the late nineteenth century had "As usual in the Church's history, ... issued in social and missionary activity." Originally, this had led to an increase in missionaries in foreign fields, and a flourishing of the Temperance societies, and so, he noted, the "movement soon broadened and deepened." But, he observed in 1925, something had changed in the way the movement understood itself, so that what had began as "warfare against established iniquity" soon led to the creation of departments of moral and social reform in the churches, which, he was pleased to note, "led, and are still leading in

⁶¹ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical," 1-2. Pidgeon uses "missionary" here in its broadest sense, including under it not just evangelism, but also social and moral church work.

constructive effort for social betterment." The mistake that had been made, however, was that some churchpeople had come to believe that "social work" was the Kingdom.⁶² During the heated days of the Winnipeg General Strike six years earlier, Pidgeon had exposed his increasing concern about the disruptive potential of this spiritually ungrounded activism. Confronted by what was perceived by many to be open anarchy on the prairie, Pidgeon had railed against the importation of "foreign Bolshevism" and the assaults on "British government and institutions" that he saw behind the labour radicalism of the day.⁶³ Though he continued to support and actively organize the social and practical work within the new United Church, Pidgeon's own theological and cultural presuppositions would not allow him to see this work encourage open opposition to the middle-class, Anglo-Saxon bases of the nation's social order. Because he believed that the establishment of the Kingdom was predicated on the Christianization of the very institutions he saw threatened by "foreign Bolshevism," his social Christianity ended where challenges to the institutional *status quo* began.

He believed, of course, that such subversion would not gain a foothold in Canada as long as Canadian Protestants kept their priorities in order. Without the stability of individual conversion and Canadianization, undesirable and dangerous forms of social activism would prosper. As he observed some of his colleagues interpreting the Kingdom of God as a social goal, therefore, he commented that this "has been called the most beneficent error in the history of interpretation." This exclusively social understanding was not entirely wrong, but, he emphasized, "it fell far short of the whole truth. Social service is not religion." His conclusion that "Spiritual religion

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶³ Allen, *The Social Passion*, 110 and 104-114.

directs and impells [*sic*] social and missionary activity, but we must never mistake the stream for the spring," exposed the differences developing between his understanding of the Kingdom of God and that of more radical, and likely Methodist social reformers.⁶⁴ As church union approached and then became a reality, this defence of a theology that sought individual conversions first, and which was based on a "proper," spiritual interpretation of the Kingdom of God, remained central components of Pidgeon's message.

The assumption that a postmillennial understanding of the Kingdom became the majority opinion of Canada's Protestants in the last half of the nineteenth century has become a well-established and generally accepted interpretation of the period.⁶⁵ That Protestants divided themselves along the line separating the less popular pre- and more widely accepted postmillennial understandings of the Kingdom into the first half of the twentieth century is an opinion not only of historians, but also of those who lived at the time. George Pidgeon, for instance, knew that millennial questions were important to his congregation and he raised the question of the nature of Christ's Kingdom regularly in his preaching. Like many Methodists and Presbyterians of his era, the call to work for the extension of Kingdom of God was sprinkled throughout his sermons, and he was clear that humans had a part to play in creating the necessary conditions for the establishment of the Kingdom on earth.⁶⁶ This emphasis on human action jibed well with his gradual

⁶⁴ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical," 4-5.

⁶⁵ David Marshall argued that this division, and particularly the differences in biblical interpretation upon which the separate millennialisms were based, indicated "the beginnings of the breakdown of the shaky evangelical consensus; it also indicated that the Bible and how to read it were becoming very difficult and controversial matters." See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 81-82.

⁶⁶ In a 1924 sermon he argued that human welfare is "His concern; His Kingdom our responsibility to the full measure of our capacity, and it is to be established everywhere." See Pidgeon, "Christianity in Life's Relationships," 12; See, for other examples, Pidgeon, "Pentecost," 11; and UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 1038, "In the Likeness of Man," 3-4.

interpretation of the creation of the Kingdom and his clearly postmillennial understanding of its nature. "God's way of establishing His Kingdom on earth," he said, "is to put all things under Jesus' feet. Not merely has God planned to put all things under Jesus, but he has actually done it. The deeds to the Kingdom have been put into Christ's hands. Dominion over all things is His by right, and all that remains is to take possession. The process of the ages, of which we form a part, is to extend His dominion stage by stage until all life is brought under His control."⁶⁷ It was typical of the prevailing millennial thought of Pidgeon's era that the establishment of the Kingdom was a gradual process by which the spirit of Christ was infused into the world and that the countries of the world would become Christian through the work of humans, in conjunction with the spirit of Christ. This was clearly a perspective which Pidgeon shared, and it was an understanding of the Kingdom of God that he held in common with many social Christians.

It was popular in this period of heightened social action on the part of churchpeople to translate the idea of the Kingdom of God from the older apocalyptic interpretation to a more progressive and human based rendering.⁶⁸ In extreme forms, the idea of the Kingdom took on purely utopian trappings, and was seen by some to include simply the establishment of a society along the social lines developed by Christ, exposed in the gospels, and described by those who composed books on Christ's social ethic.⁶⁹ This

⁶⁷ UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1405, "The Missionary policy of the United Church of Canada," 1.

⁶⁸ The uses of the idea of an almost utopian Kingdom of God by social reforming Christians is explained and demonstrated well in Allen, *The Social Passion*, *passim*. See also Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 118-124.

⁶⁹ This sort of thinking of sometimes attributed, incorrectly, to the majority of English Canadian Protestants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators*.

radical human centred approach to the Kingdom, though it shared Pidgeon's emphasis on gradual establishment, was in many other ways separated from his own understanding of the spiritual Kingdom of God. At church union, Pidgeon observed that many were indeed confused about the meaning of the Kingdom. This awareness of "confusion" and variety in millennial thinking is surprising, perhaps, given the widespread historical conclusion that postmillennial thought had a great deal to do with the creation of a theological and national mood that fostered an organic Protestant union.⁷⁰ The variety of millennial interpretation is explained in part by the fact there were many Christians who shared some, but not necessarily all of the beliefs of the postmillennial interpretation. There were, in other words, several different and distinct postmillennialisms, only parts of which were common amongst the various Christian perspectives. The confusion is explained also by the continuing influence of the premillennial interpretation.

The confusion that Pidgeon identified was, therefore, on the one hand, the association of the establishment of the Kingdom of God exclusively with social reform, and, on the other, a rejection of the idea of the gradual Kingdom. This latter view, which he called the "apocalyptic," was the premillennial understanding of the Kingdom that became increasingly popular after 1880 and was, by 1925, an established and favourite interpretation of some conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists.⁷¹ Though fundamentalism *per se* did not have as powerful and divisive an effect in Canada as it did in this period in the United States, the fundamentalist attraction to premillennialism had several supporters within

⁷⁰ Marguerite Van Die makes this argument in *An Evangelical Mind*, 170-177.

⁷¹ Marsden. *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

the Canadian Protestant spectrum.⁷² Within Presbyterianism, as well as some strains of Baptism, apocalyptic interpretations of the return of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom enjoyed limited, though not insubstantial acceptance. These two understandings of the Kingdom of God with which he disagreed, the "social reform" and the "apocalyptic," were often the targets of Pidgeon's eschatological logic.

Pidgeon rejected both of the "misconceptions" of the Kingdom that he identified in the theological air. He renounced the entirely social emphases of the environmental reformists, claiming that they had, by concentrating on human effort and down-playing the role of the divine, misrepresented the spiritual nature of the Kingdom. In the months following church union, Pidgeon, then Moderator of the denomination, believed that this particular theological error was being reversed and that the church was witnessing a return to a more "spiritual" interpretation, a result, he claimed of the influence of premillennial thought. Though he clearly dissociated himself from the overly pessimistic view of "premillenarianism," he credited this eschatological approach with bringing "us back from the social to the religious interpretation of the Kingdom."⁷³ Even with this acknowledgment of some good, he was quick to point out that neither of the polar interpretations understood the reality of Christ's Kingdom. Jesus himself had been tempted to follow erroneous interpretations of the Kingdom, Pidgeon argued, but eventually the "external, like the Davidic Kingdom that sought ideal

⁷² Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 268-269; Ronald G. Sawatsky, "'Looking for That Blessed Hope: The Roots of Fundamentalism in Canada, 1878-1914,'" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Toronto, 1985).

⁷³ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical in the United Church of Canada," 8. For Pidgeon's rejection of premillennial thought see also, "The Character of Jesus in the Light of the Cross," 3; "In the Likeness of Men," 3-4; box 48, file 1928, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done," 6-9.

conditions, or the apocalyptic that anticipated the confusion of His foes, were rejected as inadequate." Instead, Pidgeon told his congregation, Jesus' singular concern with imparting "to men His own Divine life and to sustain them in it, were made the objectives of the ministry into which he put all that God had given Him."⁷⁴

Through a theological method that was characteristically evangelical and mediating, Pidgeon argued, like the social Christians, that the Kingdom of God was progressive and expressed itself in service, but also that its ultimate ends were spiritual. The interpretation that he preached, that the "Kingdom of God is God's gift; it can never be man's attainment," and his insistence that humans "must be changed in nature and quickened with a divine life before they can enter the Kingdom, or even see it," was clearly based in his whole gospel theology. Because he preached that personal spiritual union with God through the experience of new birth was the ultimate Christian goal, his understanding of the Kingdom necessarily reflected this central redemptive concern. In Pidgeon's eschatology, then, the Kingdom was a spiritual one, and humans entered into it through the new birth; "That is, the Kingdom has come, but only those born anew have their eyes open to see it."⁷⁵

But Pidgeon's understanding of the Kingdom also included significant moral and social work conducted, necessarily, by those whose eyes had been opened. In fact, he preached that "Spiritual religion is both individual and social; each must enter alone into the secret place of the Most High, but, apart

⁷⁴ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical in the United Church of Canada," 8. See also, "The Spiritual Background and Ideal of the United Church of Canada," 2-3 and "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be done," 2.

⁷⁵ Pidgeon, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be done," 5-10. Michael Gauvreau contends that, at the end of the nineteenth century, this evangelically based interpretation of the Kingdom of God was widespread. See, *The Evangelical Century*, 213-214.

from others, he cannot receive the full measure of grace from God."⁷⁶ The new birth, which was essential not only for salvation but for pointing out the reality and the needs of the Kingdom of God, expressed itself in a new life, devoted to action intended to extend the Kingdom of God. Pidgeon could not understand, therefore, any interpretation of the Kingdom that did not begin with the salvation of individual sinners, regardless of its ends. Any such understanding was, he believed, destined to fail.

Indeed, he insisted that social reformers who ignored this conversionist imperative "lack the radiance of the promises of God's Kingdom and they provide no means for their realization." Pidgeon believed that utopian visions that neglected the spiritual were ultimately useless because "You cannot have the Kingdom without the King. To Him alone is given the dominion and the glory and the power and he must exercise it personally or your splendid visions will die at dawn." In the end, he concluded, it "is the person and the power of the King which has given this hope its splendor."⁷⁷ The Kingdom ideal that was central to whole gospel was this mixed kingdom of spiritual and practical ends. It could not be built, but only received. This did not diminish the role of Canadian Christians, however. The Kingdom of God was surely a spiritual gift, but the making of a righteous Canada was just as surely dependent on the continued social and moral work of the nation's converted citizens. Temperance crusades, anti-gaming efforts and redemptive homes would not of themselves establish the Kingdom. But they would help to ensure that Canada and its social, economic, political, and, of course, individual parts reflected, as closely as possible, the spirit of Christ.

⁷⁶ Pidgeon, "Pentecost," 8.

⁷⁷ Pidgeon, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done," 11-13.

The activist implications of this layered interpretation of the Kingdom certainly reflected Pidgeon's social Christian priorities; his progressive, individual and social reading of the gospel, and his deep desire for Canada to be a Protestant nation, made devoted social service an integral part of his Christianity. Nonetheless, his social priorities, and the individual basis of his "social gospel" separated him from the much more radical activism of contemporaries like Salem Bland and J.S. Woodsworth, men who generally believed that "social salvation precedes individual salvation both temporally and in importance." As his interpretation of the Kingdom underscores, every aspect of Pidgeon's spiritual and practical thinking was predicated on his belief in the necessity of human spiritual union with the divine. His insistence that "Christ quickens the man first then uses the changed individual to transform his environment," clearly separated him from those in and out of his tradition who were more concerned with the salvation of the society than the salvation of the individual.⁷⁸ Indeed, this was a separation that he wanted others to understand; even while actively involved in temperance campaigns and the leadership of the Social Service Council of Canada, therefore, Pidgeon lashed out at those who worked exclusively for social salvation, and mistook "social service" for "religion."

Around the time of church union, and often in his sermons, Pidgeon began to separate his understanding of Christianity from more radical interpretations. The priorities of those who sought to redeem the environment to improve the lot of Canadians were, he believed, misplaced; true, biblical Christianity did not "fall into the mistake" of thinking that "the

⁷⁸ Pidgeon, "In the Likeness of Men," 2. The extent of the critique of the "social reform" ideal in this sermon indicates that it was written as a direct counter to Christian interpretations that concentrated on social service as the heart of religious belief and practice.

spirit of human relationships” could be corrected “by changing the system under which people lived.” The answers to all of society’s iniquities were found in “the inner life” and the improvement of “the conditions under which it lived.” The Christian’s duty, though it involved active service for the extension of the Kingdom, began by accepting the offer of grace and giving “Him full scope in our lives” to “finish in us His perfect work.”⁷⁹

By 1925 Pidgeon’s impatience with interpretations of the social gospel which neglected the necessity of conversion was being expressed in sermons. In these he reminded his congregation that Christ had rejected the route of social reform and emphasized instead “that our greatest need was a new life, a life not merely for earth but for eternity, to be lived in union with the Divine.”⁸⁰ Clearly, his conversionist perspective, and his layered understanding of the postmillennial Kingdom that was its expression, separated Pidgeon from some extreme manifestations of the social gospel movement. It is true, as Richard Allen has argued, that “the social gospel, in several of its phases, was a primary force in church union.”⁸¹ It is at least equally evident, however, that for George Pidgeon, one of the most persuasive and active moral and social reformers of his generation, and one of the architects of The United Church of Canada, the social salvationist beliefs and actions of the radical social gospellers were wrong. And by the time of union, when, from his vantage point in Toronto he saw much social and moral work to be done, he called for and pursued the one avenue that he was sure would quell these threats to the nation’s development. Though immigration in the early 1920s was more likely to bring English speaking

⁷⁹ Pidgeon, “Christianity in Life’s Relationships,” 11-12.

⁸⁰ Pidgeon, “The Spiritual and the Practical in the United Church of Canada,” 11-13.

⁸¹ Allen, *The Social Passion*, 256.

Anglo-Saxons than almost anyone else to the cities of the nation, the setbacks in the fight for prohibition after 1919 and the early stirrings of modernity encouraged Pidgeon's social activism. Therefore, he called on the newly formed United Church of Canada to pursue enthusiastically the conversion of Canada's unredeemed.

IV

As first Moderator of the church, Pidgeon wasted little time spreading his evangelical vision of the new church. In his sermons, the message of the new birth was often accompanied by an appeal for evangelistic effort by those spiritually capable on behalf of those who were not. In his new position, he made this appeal for evangelism a staple of his message and took every opportunity to call for the United Church's aid in quickening the spiritual and, therefore, the social pulse of the nation and of the world. In one of his earliest church-wide pronouncements on his official priorities, he argued in the *New Outlook* that the infant church was facing two great tasks: "The first is spiritual. The wider relationship into which we have entered has meant a rich experience to all; we need now to give this awakened spirit a new expression. Give our people the opportunity and their renewed joy and power will manifest itself in a way that will mean a deepening of the spiritual life of believers and the bringing of many to the Cross." Exposing his hope that a united church would foster a revival of religion, and his expectation that the new denomination would be a "national church," Pidgeon explained that the "second task that confronts us is missionary. We are the United Church of Canada; we must therefore see that the entire religious need of the nation is met. We have our own people to attend to wherever they may go, and if our church is to be national in any real sense whatever others are not doing is also our responsibility." Pidgeon recognized that this missionary

effort would not be easy and noted that some "losses have been sustained." He was nevertheless optimistic that "the spirit of our church will develop new resources to meet the needs."⁸² This national evangelistic hope and call for effort was the core of his message as the church's official representative.

This evangelistic concern was not limited to the calls of the Moderator. The hopeful revivalism that was evident as early as the inaugural service celebrating the achievement of union continued to have a powerful influence over the direction of the practical work of the United Church during the next twenty-five years, and particularly in the decade following union.⁸³ The many church publications concerning the appropriate work of the church, and concerning especially the mission of its most activist division, the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, were filled with the social reform emphases of the era. These calls for various measures of service were accompanied, however, by continuous concern for the work of evangelism. The hope for a national revival of religion was palpable in the years following union, a feeling that was expressed clearly and often. Many of these expressions followed the style of the last *Annual Report* of The Board of Home Missions and Social Service of the Presbyterian Church. This report, which was the defunct Board's last before its amalgamation with the United Church Board in September of 1926, noted that the "Church is in need of and believes, that there is approaching another period of revival which will purify and establish it upon a firmer basis, by revealing it as the synthesis of

⁸² George Pidgeon, "Message from the Moderator," *The New Outlook* 1:4 (July 1, 1925): 4.

⁸³ The revivalistic tone of the inaugural service, and particularly of the speeches made during it, are evident from the description of the event S.D. Chown, *The Story of Church Union in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1930), the addresses published in the first two numbers of the *New Outlook*, and in Pidgeon's description of the evangelical tone of the event in *The United Church of Canada*, 78-85. See also Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 167.

all true life, the explanation of all history, and the motive of all noble striving." The report claimed that this desire for revival was widespread and was demonstrated by an "increasing interest in Evangelistic work" which had been "manifested throughout the year" with "more requests for Missions being received than could be filled."⁸⁴ A year later, the former head of this Presbyterian board, and after Union, the head of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, D.N. McLachlan claimed that, "No subject in the Church circles is receiving more careful consideration than evangelism" and noted that the issue of "conversion" was a particular concern.⁸⁵

The "careful consideration" afforded the topic of evangelism in the church in the years following union was not simply idle theorizing about its meaning. The national interest in missionary work that had been noted in the annual reports of the Boards, and the common expectation that a revival would accompany a successful union, led to a notable interest in practical missionary activities, one that was soon reflected in efforts to inaugurate national evangelistic campaigns. As Moderator, and then as a respected elder churchman when his term ended in 1926, Pidgeon was regularly consulted about and very often a leader in the organization of these missionary efforts. The first of these grew out of the first General Council's call for active church effort for "the re-consecration of spiritual life, re-visualization of the task of the Church, the re-dedication of the entire membership to God, and the extension of the Kingdom of God by definite evangelistic effort."⁸⁶ This was an invitation that Pidgeon could not ignore, and he urged his congregation

⁸⁴ United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report 1926*, 20.

⁸⁵ D.N. McLachlan, "Annual Reports of Secretaries," United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report 1927*, 19.

⁸⁶ Pidgeon, "The Spiritual and the Practical in the United Church of Canada," 1.

and the new United Church membership to which he spoke on his nationwide Moderator's tour to heed this call and pursue the goals laid out in 1925. The wishes of the General Council, a body composed of representatives of conferences from across the country, reflected in large part the goals of the congregations of the church, a reality reflected in the emphasis on evangelism that was obvious in various Conference reports from the year after union. A report from the Western conferences in the early months of 1926, for example, called for the "continuance of the effort of the inaugural year of the United Church" and for a push to "introduce the adherents of Churches and others not now in active Christian communion and activity to enter more definitely the fellowship of the life and work of The United Church by profession of their faith in Christ."⁸⁷ This mood in the conferences was, of course, in line with the direction of Pidgeon's thought and action in the years following Union.

In the 1920s and 1930s Pidgeon continued to preach that evangelism was central to the church's mission, a conviction that was a natural product of his belief in the necessity of new birth. He was clear, however, that this effort to evangelize was a many varied thing. Cognizant that the methods of mass evangelism were eyed warily by many Canadians, he proposed that evangelism "does not mean that we undertake specifically to preach, or do religious work at certain times and in certain ways; this may be necessary but with most people it can only be incidental; it means rather the dedication of the whole life to the work of the kingdom. Your work, your play, your associations and aspirations are all the means to that end."⁸⁸ This expansion

⁸⁷ "Report of Evangelism and Social Service, Resolution re Evangelism," from United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives [UCBCA], Hugh Wesley Dobson Papers [HDP], box A10, file Ci.

⁸⁸ Pidgeon. "If Thou Would'st Enter Into Life," 7.

of the meaning of evangelism to include a conscious Christian life and a religiosity which was expressed in all aspects of living, has been confused by some historians with a turn from a conversionist perspective.⁸⁹ This “new evangelism” had, of course, proponents who stressed almost exclusively the practical side of the evangelism, but for Pidgeon, and for McLachlan who emphasized a more inclusive evangelism in the same period, “conversion” and “mystical rapture of the soul” were foundational to the church’s evangelism. The push for the establishment of the Kingdom of God was paramount in this new evangelism, but for Pidgeon, as always, the message of the new birth was the foundation upon which this kingdom work was based. For many in the church, including the head of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, and powerful figures like the author C.W. Gordon, though they were not so likely as Pidgeon to use the language of the nineteenth-century revivalist, the experience of conversion nonetheless remained paramount. The victory over social evil through the communion of the individual soul with the Divine was considered an inevitable aspect of the victory over individual sin through a process of personal “decision” and “commitment” to Christ.⁹⁰

This “evangelistic” concern, with its emphasis on both individual and social redemption was, in increasing variety, the defining element of The United Church of Canada in the 1930s. The economic boom and Depression that was so much a part of the character and course of Canadian society in this first full decade after union, had a profound effect on the development of the church. During these confounding and tragic years, the denomination’s understanding of itself was molded equally by its confrontation with

⁸⁹ This is a primary conclusion of Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*.

⁹⁰ C.W. Gordon and G.I. Campbell, “Evangelism” in *Annual Report 1926*, 9-10.

contemporary exigencies and by its powerful evangelical inheritance. Though the social realities of the era demanded the attention of churchpeople, and indeed became the singular concern of some, the prophetic and evangelistic possibilities that the suffering associated with the Great Depression presented to the churches was not lost on their leadership. George Pidgeon was at the forefront of these evangelical pursuits of the United Church. By the late 1920s he was one of the most recognized leaders in the denomination. Though his official role of leadership had ended with his one year term as Moderator, his role as pastor of one of the nation's leading congregations was still regarded with respect. After a busy year in his official position, during which he traveled across Canada visiting as many new congregations as possible, and representing the church in the United States, Pidgeon returned to his full time pastoral work at Bloor Street United in 1926.⁹¹

In these years after his return to pastoral life, a new note began to sound in Pidgeon's sermons and communications. Though he told one friend that, in terms of the spiritual progress of the new church, he felt that "So far things are encouraging -- more so than I dared anticipate," there was nonetheless a new awareness on his part of the problem of "secularism."⁹² He often treated with humour what he clearly saw as a threat, noting, as he did in a sermon he preached at least eight times between 1928 and 1943, that faith was becoming a controversial topic. He began this sermon by stating that "My subject has been announced as 'My Religion.' A friend came to a Y.M.C.A

⁹¹ Pidgeon went to the United States to preach and act as a representative of the new Church to the curious. The interest of an American audience, and the traditional nature of the sermons he delivered are obvious from a reprint of a sermon from "The Churchman Afield" section of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, April 24, 1926. The sermon, entitled "The Ideal Life in Christ," was preached at the First Presbyterian Church, New York to a "large congregation, interested in the new United Church of Canada," on Sunday April 18, 1926. See UCCA, GPP, box 39, file 1016.

⁹² UCCA, GPP, box 20, file 336, Pidgeon to J.R. Dobson, February 18, 1926.

gathering where I was announced to speak on this subject with the remark -- 'I thought I'd like to hear a man who has the courage to say he has a religion in these days.'"⁹³ This opener, and his facetious and ironic clincher that religion "is, nevertheless an important asset" no doubt brought some laughter from his audience, but the increasing evidence of a society which was losing touch with its Christian past troubled Pidgeon.⁹⁴ By 1935, his fears about the problem of unbelief had increased to the point that he noted "for the first time at home and abroad we face a militant atheism." Identifying Russia and China as particular foreign threats to the faith, he commented that "at home wherever unemployment is found the leaders of social discontent are at work fomenting rebellion against the state and war to the knife against Christianity."⁹⁵ These attacks were, in Pidgeon's mind, and in the minds of many of his contemporaries, particularly pernicious. When Canadians challenged "the state" and "Christianity" -- when they threatened the *status quo* -- they were striking at the very bases of Pidgeon's vision of "His Dominion" in Canada.⁹⁶

These troubling attacks on the institutional bases of Pidgeon's national vision were augmented by the perceived rise of materialism world-wide. This "new world spirit" which demonstrated that "the service of mammon was the real antagonist to the service of God" was becoming a serious concern for missionaries. In spite of all the pessimism these references to the obstacles to

⁹³ Pidgeon, "My Religion," 1.

⁹⁴ UCCA, GPP, box 20, file 339a, Pidgeon to Mr. Chas. J. Stephens, December 23, 1929, where Pidgeon argued that the need of the day was an emphasis on "Theism pure and simple."

⁹⁵ Pidgeon, "The Missionary policy of the United Church of Canada," 16

⁹⁶ These fears were widespread among "prominent churchmen." See N.K. Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties: Some Aspects of the Canadian Experience," in D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort. (eds.), *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980) 125.

Christian work exposed, however, Pidgeon interpreted this time of instability as an opportunity for evangelism. "The whole spirit of the world has changed in the last few years. Youth is on the march. They are possessed with the spirit of crusaders. They see certain evils and are ready to sacrifice liberty and wealth and comfort to remove them. Never were men as ready to give their lives to a cause as now. This is an atmosphere in which the Cross flourishes."⁹⁷ There is little doubt that what he identified as "secularism" troubled Pidgeon deeply, but he did not think to respond to this novel situation with any other message or method than those which he had always preached -- redemption for individuals and then society still depended on the widespread experience of personal union with God. The combined persuasion of his belief in the spiritual power and possibilities of a united church and his recognition of increasing secularity and threats to the accepted norms of English Canadian life, led Pidgeon to support an array of evangelistic enterprises throughout the 1930s in the hope that these individual spiritual unions would be realized, and that a better, more unified, and more Protestant nation would follow.

⁹⁷ Pidgeon. "The Missionary policy of the United Church of Canada," 17.

Chapter Four

For "The Evangelization of Canadian Life:" George Pidgeon and the Proclamation of the Gospel to the Nation

The times in which Christianity swept the nations, lifting them into new light and life, were times when the Gospel of Salvation through Christ was proclaimed in simple confidence with personal experience behind it. When the men who were its voices began to rationalize, its career of conquest was halted.

— George Campbell Pidgeon, "The Cross as Power"¹

By 1930, at least one aging United Churchman was concerned about the lack of a traditional evangelistic emphasis in the work of the denomination. Just five years after the creation of The United Church of Canada, S.D. Chown, the influential former Superintendent of the Methodist Church, and a well-known social Christian, pondered critically the fate of the "old style" evangelicalism. Noting the influence of new intellectual currents and "a lack of emphasis upon the supernatural," Chown, with a nostalgia that reflected his advanced age, longed for a return to the "earlier typical" experiential religion he remembered from his youth.²

Contrary to Chown's laments about its demise, however, an emphasis on experiential faith, and particularly on "conversion," were, in fact, defining elements of mainstream Protestantism during the 1930s. This stress on converting Canadians was especially obvious in The United Church of Canada, which, often under the guidance of George Pidgeon, was involved in

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], George Campbell Pidgeon Papers [GPP], box 46, file 1628, "The Cross as Power," 1

² Samuel Dwight Chown, *Some Causes of the Decline of the Earlier Typical Evangelism* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1930); See also G.A. Rawlyk, "'Liberal Modernism' or 'Accommodating Evangelicalism'?" *Protestant Christianity and Canadian Culture, 1860-1930: An Historiographical Probe*, (unpublished paper, 1993) 1. Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 187, mentions the nostalgia apparent in Chown's later writings.

a series of Protestant efforts to encourage revival throughout the land. In the decades that followed his term as the first Moderator of the church, Pidgeon translated his essential belief in the necessity of individual conversion into active support for, and organization of, a number of evangelistic efforts. Though these campaigns provided evidence of the continuing impress of evangelicalism in the Protestant mainstream, they also served to expose and intensify theological and practical disagreements in the young denomination. But for the influential preacher, reformer and United Church leader George Pidgeon, the need to "Evangelize Canadian Life" was not open to debate. Bringing the "simple presentation" of "the Gospel of salvation through Christ" to the nation remained the central feature of his work during the troubled years of the Depression. Increasingly, however, Pidgeon found his evangelically-based Christian reformism under attack from many in the church, and in the country, who were less likely to share the theological and cultural assumptions of his national faith.

I

Even during the 1930s, when the reality of social iniquity and inequity was obvious, and the immediate answers seemed to many to be more social than spiritual, Pidgeon maintained his evangelical vision of the church's mission; "Of all the agencies to bring about Christ's dominion over mankind," he claimed in 1935, "missions are closest to the mind and heart of God." Pidgeon understood this missionary imperative in terms of the United Church's duties to the nation, noting that missions were the method by which Christ's dominion was extended "from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth."³ Confronted in the late 1920s by the threat of renewed immigration

³ *Ibid.*, box 44, file 1405, "The Missionary policy of the United Church of Canada," 2. The reference to Psalm 72:8 and the ideas of "His Dominion" are a conspicuous aspect of

that significantly increased the population of non-Anglo-Saxons, and shaken in the early 1930s by the various attacks on the *status quo* inspired by the deficiencies of unfettered capitalism, the need to "Christianize" the nation took on renewed urgency. Indeed, Pidgeon insisted that the effort to establish "His Dominion" in Canada was the essential task of the United Church:

More than any other Church in Christendom we are a home missionary Church. All the Churches of Christendom share with us the burden of world evangelization; to the Canadian Church alone is entrusted the Christianizing of Canadian life. Of the Christian denominations in this country the United Church is unique in its home missionary outlook and policy.

The unique qualities that he identified, including the "inherited sense of nation-wide responsibility," increased the urgency of the United Church's mission. But unlike many others who were interpreting the denomination's responsibility in terms of radical social change, Pidgeon remained convinced of the primacy of evangelism, and of home missions, above all else.⁴

He took this responsibility for home missionary work seriously and applied it, as he always had, to his personal and inter-denominational church work. Now in full stride as an elder minister of the church, widely respected as both a wise and able leader and pulpit preacher, this first Moderator saw both pain and opportunity in the economic and social hardships that were endemic during the years of the Great Depression. Never one to shy from evangelistic opportunities, or new technologies, Pidgeon seized on radio broadcasting early and used it as an efficient means of evangelism in the Toronto area. Through an arrangement with a local radio station, beginning around 1929 Pidgeon's Bloor Street sermons were broadcast live to an

Pidgeon's understanding here. On the effects of the Depression, see Michael Horn (ed.), *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman, 1972).

⁴ Pidgeon, "The Missionary Policy of the United Church of Canada," 10.

audience unable or unwilling to attend regular church services.⁵ His sermons from this period, like those of previous decades, were replete with evangelical emphases, and it was this continuing stress on the necessity of new birth, to be followed by a new life “lived in Christ,” that attracted the attention of his audience. Pidgeon’s “good old fashioned” radio ministry found a core of support among an audience that habitually contacted him to thank him heartily for his evangelical broadcasts and to consult him on matters as diverse as biblical interpretation and personal grooming.⁶ Pidgeon was pleased that his broadcasts attracted so much attention and response, and he was particularly impressed by the number of requests he received for reprints of favourite radio sermons. Though his traditional emphases were not received charitably by some who felt his message was out of touch with contemporary social concerns, the majority of the correspondence relating to his radio ministry thanked Pidgeon for his genuine evangelical message.⁷

The number and similarity of the letters of praise indicated that there was, as Pidgeon had assumed, an audience for more traditional preaching that emphasized conversion, biblical authority, and the old evangelical stand-bys like the Cross and personal holiness. The letters, which were usually

⁵ See, for example, UCCA, GPP, box 24, file 410, Caroline Stocking to Pidgeon, February 6, 1930 and box 24, file 423, Mrs. M. Minnes to Pidgeon, February 26, 1933. John Grant has argued that radio preachers were popular during the Depression “partly because they provided the only form of entertainment that many people could afford.” See *The Church in the Canadian Era (updated and expanded)* (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 148-49.

⁶ See, for example, UCCA, GPP, box 24, file 418, Miss J. Scott to Pidgeon, April 9, 1932; box 27, file 457, Mildred Young to Pidgeon, September 9, 1940.

⁷ One commentator thought that Pidgeon, and the type of religion he represented, were not concerned enough with “social and economic” justice, and, indeed, that “religion has failed.” It is interesting to note, however, that this same critic felt that Pidgeon was open-minded and accessible enough that he first wrote to him to “appeal on behalf of our fellow beings for your help in a real Christian work, namely – the reconstruction of the economic system.” See the series of letters from Samuel Hale (October 27-November 22, 1931) in *ibid.*, box 24, file 414.

composed by older members of the community who responded more readily to “old fashioned preaching” also exposed, however, the increasing separation between traditionalists like Pidgeon, and other, often younger and more liberal United Church ministers. This new generation was more likely to avoid Pidgeon’s new birth oriented evangelism and tended, especially in the early 1930s, to concentrate on eradicating social as opposed to individual sources of sin. At the time, however, this did not trouble Pidgeon; he continued to believe that Canadians were searching for, and responding to an evangelical message. He used the tool of radio to expand his commitment to home evangelism beyond his congregation and his denomination and encouraged other Protestant bodies to pursue conversions through widespread evangelistic activity.⁸

The Canadian churches needed little goading, however. From the first years of the decade, sincere evangelistic effort, often under the guidance of the United Church, was a hallmark of Protestant activity. In the early 1930s, the United Church expressed its understanding of itself as a “uniting” as well as a united body, and undertook to organize and set in motion an inter-denominational mission for “The Evangelization of Canadian Life.” Under Pidgeon’s chairmanship, the 1931 Board of Evangelism and Social Service resolution that the churches in Canada pursue together “a forward step along spiritual, moral and social lines” was initiated.⁹ Pidgeon and his colleague D.N. McLachlan were instrumental in developing the campaign, and worked

⁸ On the beginnings of public religious broadcasting in Canada, see Russell Johnston, “The Early trials of Protestant radio, 1922-38,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 75:3 (1994): 376-402.

⁹ United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives [UCBCA], Hugh Wesley Dobson Papers [HDP], box B13, file 1, “The Christianization of Canadian Life.” This undated circular on the movement was written by D.N. McLachlan, sometime after 1934.

together early in the process to formulate a plan of action. Pidgeon and McLachlan were appointed to direct the operations and activities of the United Church's "Commission on Evangelism" which was itself appointed by the executive of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Following an inaugural meeting of the Commission, of which Pidgeon was the Chairman and McLachlan the Secretary, they reported that it "was discovered that a wistful longing for a more dynamic and creative spiritual life is widely diffused throughout the Church." They were encouraged enough by this longing that they set in motion a national evangelistic effort.¹⁰

By the spring of 1932, the general outlines of the movement had been filled in and "The Evangelization of Canadian Life" began. This inclusive effort, which emphasized both the "enrichment of the spiritual life of the people" and "the application of Christian methods in industry" received support and cooperation from the Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches and, later, the Salvation Army and the Society of Friends. The Joint Committee, formed in early 1932, recognized "in the present depression a challenge and opportunity for the Christian Church." The means which the interdenominational Committee chose to exploit the opportunity afforded by the economic circumstance carried the clear stamp of Pidgeon's own theological priorities. The recommendations the Committee made in May, 1932 did not neglect the social realities of the era, but nonetheless concentrated on spiritual answers to practical problems. In its interpretation of "God's challenge to His Church to-day" the committee identified the need

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, box B4, file k, untitled report on the meeting of "The Commission on Evangelism" of May 28, 1931. This report was signed by both George Pidgeon and D.N. McLachlan. See also N.K. Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties: Some Aspects of the Canadian Experience," in D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort, (eds.), *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980) 128.

for genuine repentance for sins, past and present. This contrition was to be followed by "public and private prayer for the Nation, the Church, the individual," and a "fresh study of the nature and sovereignty of God; of the meaning and purpose of the incarnation of His dear Son, of His Atoning Death, His triumphant resurrection and the reality of His reign as King." These, among other emphases were, finally, to express themselves in an "insistent call to evangelism, to bring home to each individual heart and life the Gospel of the Kingdom, to greater, more sustained and better planned efforts to reach the unreached."

The ultimate goal of the inter-church campaign was, therefore, "to bring about the evangelization and consecration alike of the individual, of the community, and of the nation in every phase and department of human life and activity." This meant that evangelization should infuse the spirit of Christ into "our own lives, our homes, our churches, our communities, our politics, our business, our industry, our social life." What remained, the Joint Committee believed, was to make its recommendations "part of a sustained and simultaneous movement thus to set forward the Kingdom of God and to make our Dominion His Dominion – in short, a Dominion-wide and definitely spiritual forward movement participated in by all Churches."¹¹ The goals of this inter-denominational campaign were nothing less than the conversion of the individual, and of the social, political and economic life of the nation to the spirit of Christ. This ambitious ecumenical and national effort, which rested firmly on nineteenth-century assumptions about the primacy of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant and Victorian morals and institutions,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, box B4, file k, "The Evangelization of Canadian Life," 1-2. This is a report of the resolutions and questions of the inter-church "joint Committee," dated May 4, 1932, and signed by George Pidgeon (chairman) and D. N. McLachlan, (Secretary).

was quickly overshadowed by a movement built on similar foundations, but which, as Keith Clifford has noted, “was not quite what they had anticipated.”¹²

Plans for the “Evangelization of Canadian Life” went ahead over the summer of 1932, with the emphasis on preparing for the campaign, which was to be undertaken no sooner than the early months of 1933. The various participating denominations were instructed to prepare for the mission through the production of supporting literature, prayer, “newspaper evangelism” and regional conferences.¹³ Before this work reached full-stride, however, the campaign was sidelined temporarily by a more aggressive and ostentatious, but less Canadian evangelistic effort. The arrival of the Oxford Group Movement, one of the most intriguing, and certainly one of the most well studied campaigns associated with the United Church in the thirties, was an important milestone in George Pidgeon’s career. Led by the American Frank Buchman, the Group became known in the early 1930s for its novel take on some traditional evangelical ideas.

The Movement’s early influence was such that much of the energy intended for the “Evangelization of Canadian Life” was re-directed to the Oxford Group when it arrived in Canada in the fall of 1932, though the inter-denominational campaign was by no means forgotten.¹⁴ Buchman, who was born in the 1870s, had absorbed much of his theology from the Keswick Conference movement, and was particularly influenced by its concern with personal evangelism, sanctification and missions.¹⁵ These theological

¹² Clifford, “Religion in the Thirties,” 128.

¹³ “The Evangelization of Canadian Life,” 3-4. David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 212-213.

¹⁴ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 213-15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

similarities with Pidgeon's own evangelical presuppositions made a tight connection between the work of the Oxford Group Movement in Canada and this influential United Churchman almost inevitable. Recognizing in the Oxford Group Movement the foundations of the evangelical revival for which he had often called, Pidgeon very quickly associated his name with the Group, its methods and, most importantly, its aims.

In late 1932 Pidgeon and some others in the United Church turned their attention increasingly to forwarding the evangelistic cause of Buchman's Movement. From the time of Union, many in the leadership of the church had noted that the population was "ready and waiting for a definite forward movement along the lines of an intensive evangelistic effort."¹⁶ The inter-denominational campaign initiated early in 1932 was an extension of this desire to proselytize, but many in The United Church of Canada were no doubt now also attracted to the work of the Oxford Group Movement, at least in part, by its self-contained and extra-denominational nature. In this decade of severe fiscal restraint any opportunity to surrender some United Church work to an apparently able, committed, and independently supported agency was attractive. Moreover, because of its evangelistic emphases and the enthusiasm for Christianity that it had begun to foster in Ontario and Quebec near the end of 1932, many in the United Church agreed with George Pidgeon's opinion in 1933 that Buchman's Oxford Group was "certainly of God."¹⁷ Enthusiasm for the movement was not limited to leadership of the church. The almost immediate popularity of the

¹⁶ G.I. Campbell, "Report to the Board of Evangelism and Social Service," (1928) from UCBCA, HDP, box B4, file K. For an example of the desire for "a deeply sincere religious revival" amongst the laity, see UCCA, GPP, box 23, file 403, Mrs. Marjorie Whitney to Pidgeon, March 24, 1932.

¹⁷ UCCA, GPP, box 23, file 401, Pidgeon to Geo. F. Shepperd, January 20, 1933.

Group's evangelistic meetings, which was evident as early as the first gathering in Montreal in October 1932, substantiated the belief in congregations and presbyteries across the country that the time was right for a revivalistic campaign.

Though much in the Movement's theological perspective was simple and indefinite, and of dubious social utility in an age of economic need, the familiar evangelical bases of its program struck a chord not only with some influential United Church leaders, but also with many Canadians. As the Group made its way across the country in 1933, it attracted larger and larger crowds; its meetings in the western provinces, and in Vancouver were attended by thousands. This popularity can be attributed partly to simple curiosity. Nevertheless, it is clear that the evangelistic emphasis of the Movement, and particularly its insistence on lives changed through the experience of conversion, harmonized well with the continuing mainstream belief that such an experience was an important aspect of the Christian life.¹⁸

The traditional ideas that Buchman and his "army of life-changers" propagated, even when obscured and tamed through modern language, were particularly attractive to George Pidgeon. The Oxford Group Movement's emphasis on the need for an experience of conversion, its commitment to "World-changing through Life-changing," its call for witnessing and sharing, and its dedication to moral reform reflected, only slightly imperfectly, Pidgeon's own Christian imperatives.¹⁹ The influence of nineteenth-century evangelicalism on Buchman's theology was clear in the Movement's

¹⁸ Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) 224-228.

¹⁹ See UCCA, GPP, box 23, file 403, "The Oxford Group: 'World-changing through Life-changing.'" For the Oxford Group Movement's understanding of itself see *ibid.*, box 23, file 406 "The Oxford Group: A Manifesto."

understanding of justification and sanctification, the two central concerns of its optimistic world mission. The traditional language of “conversion” and “holiness” was almost absent from the Group’s rhetoric, but these very emphases were nonetheless central to its program of evangelism. It was to these that Pidgeon’s attention was drawn when he received reports of the Montreal meetings in the fall of 1932.

Pidgeon’s enthusiastic support was not based, however, entirely on the spiritual message of the Group. The Movement was very proud of its association with “British Businessmen and aristocrats,” the very people Buchman claimed composed his legions of life-changers.²⁰ The British and bourgeois aspects of the Group no doubt made it particularly appealing to some Canadian Christian reformers who wished to mold their country within Anglo-Saxon middle-class parameters. For Pidgeon, who had concerned himself from the earliest days of his ministry with spreading the late-Victorian morality of the business and commercial classes to the diverse population of Canada, the Movement’s obviously British and upper-class aspirations might have seemed irresistible. The Group’s strategy of holding its public meetings in the “ballrooms of the Ritz, the Chateau Laurier, and the King Edward,” of conducting meetings in “evening dress,” and of emphasizing its members’ “social, athletic and cultural antecedents,” was successful in securing the “interest and attendance of large numbers of the ‘best people.’”²¹ While this shocked and outraged many socially concerned churchpeople who resented the expensive, high-class affectations of these “Dinner Jacket Evangelists,” even at the zenith of the Depression, Pidgeon

²⁰ Clifford, “Religion in the Thirties,” 128.

²¹ The Committee of Thirty, *The Challenge of the Oxford Group Movement: An Attempt at Appraisal* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1933) 1.

and others were smitten by these very pretensions. The aura of respectability at the meetings, confirmed by the middle-class moral emphases of the Group, were very attractive to people who believed, like Pidgeon, that proper national development rested on the religious, moral and social teachings that the Oxford Group Movement appeared to embody.²² The popularity of the Group as it made its way across the country seemed to confirm that many in the nation agreed.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Pidgeon was intrigued enough by the powerful testimonies that reached him in Toronto that he went to Montreal and then Ottawa to examine the claims of "changed lives" for himself. Evidently, he was not disappointed.²³ Pidgeon followed the Movement from Montreal to Ottawa, and by the time he had attended a number of meetings in October and November of 1932, he was ready to claim that he had "never seen as many lives changed and Christians lifted into joyous experiences of the grace of God as I have here in the last few weeks."²⁴

His opinion was not shared among many of his United Church colleagues. Some, like the editor of the *New Outlook*, W.B. Creighton, found the often intimate and detailed "sharing" at the Group's meetings very offensive. The "unblushing exhibitionism" of the sometimes sexually frank

²² The appeal of the Group to a large section of the progressive and professional Churchmen who were leaders in the denomination, and who likely shared Pidgeon's moral vision, seems to support this argument. See Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 228-229.

²³ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 214. Marshall's description of the Oxford Group Movement and its early activity in Canada is a useful introduction. See *ibid.* 213-227. For an equally useful interpretation that avoids the pitfalls of Marshall's "secularization" analysis, see Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 228-234 and Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties," 128-131. For more detailed analysis, see Robert G. Stewart, "Radiant Smiles in the Dirty Thirties: History and Ideology of the Oxford Group Movement in Canada, 1932-1936," (M.Div. Thesis: Vancouver School of Theology, 1974).

²⁴ UCCA, GPP, box 23, file 403, Pidgeon to Professor J.M. Shaw, Queen's Theological College, March 11, 1933.

"confessions" led Creighton to publish sharp criticisms of the movement in the pages of the church paper he edited.²⁵ The extent of Pidgeon's support for the Oxford Group Movement was exposed in a pointed reply, which appeared in the *New Outlook* a week after Creighton's attack. In this retort to the editor's negative opinion, which Pidgeon and five other clergymen signed, the protesters noted that the Movement was revitalizing the essential spiritual work of the Canadian church through lives changed in great numbers.²⁶ For Pidgeon, the work of the Oxford Group Movement was the closest English Canadian society had come to a revival in decades; he believed, therefore, that if its efforts could continue unhindered, its life-changing message would further the Christianization of Canadian life.

But another, smaller section of United Church ministers was coming to believe that the middle-class and professional morality that Pidgeon and others insisted the church should protect and extend was itself the source of much of the tragedy of the time. These churchmen were increasingly convinced that the solutions to the iniquities and inequities of the Depression were not found in the extension of traditional morality, but rather in revolutionary economic and social change. For these ministers, many of whom were associated with the radical Fellowship for a Christian Social Order [FCSO], the moral panaceas of the Oxford Group Movement and its conservative supporters furthered, and certainly did not correct, the suffering of the years of economic depression. They believed that the Kingdom of God was not extended by the acceptance of traditional morality, but rather by the

²⁵ Clifford, "Religion in the Dirty Thirties," 128; Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 219 and Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 229.

²⁶ "A Protest," *New Outlook* (December 28, 1932): 1210. See also a handwritten copy, in Pidgeon's script, in UCCA, GPP, box 23, file 400.

creation of an entirely new social order.²⁷ The emergence of this radicalized group of social Christians, and the almost concomitant ascendancy of the traditionally oriented, and socially exclusive Oxford Group Movement demonstrated the clear division that was developing between old and new conceptions of the United Church's national mission in the 1930s. When members of the FCSO were instrumental in composing and narrowly passing a radical economic statement from the Toronto Conference in 1933, the old guard, led by Pidgeon who called the proposals "absurd," rallied against the report.²⁸

"Christianizing the Social Order," which was drafted by the FCSO theologian John Line of Victoria College, included radical injunctions against the evils of capitalism and called for the end of exploitive economies through widespread socialization of national institutions.²⁹ A similar report tabled in the Montreal Conference inspired as much outrage as the Toronto effort, and

²⁷ The history and thought of the FCSO is discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight.

²⁸ For Pidgeon's reaction, see Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 238 and Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 238. See also Roger C. Hutchison, Introduction to R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos, (eds.), *Towards the Christian Revolution*, 2d ed. (Kingston: Ronald P. Frye & Company 1989) xiv-xv. In public pronouncements, Pidgeon was not entirely consistent in his analysis. Although he railed against the conference in newspapers (see Marshall, 238), in the pulpit he was more reserved, even noting in a Bloor Street sermon that "The statement on 'Christianizing the Social Order' adopted and issued by the last General Council of our Church has commanded the respect and influenced the thinking of Christian men all over the land." He did warn his congregation, however, against confusing "the declamations of extremists with the deliberate pronouncements of the courts of the Church." See UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1406, "The Social Outlook of the United Church of Canada," 2-3. For more obvious arguments against radical social gospel emphases, see UCCA, GPP, box 44, file 1465, "What is Religion," (1936) 10-14.

²⁹ United Church of Canada, Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Eleventh Annual Report* (1935), 49-63; Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 146-147; Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 237-239; Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 238-241. There was a great deal of negative reaction in the press to the report. In response to what the conference felt was a misrepresentation of its position, the Chairman of the Sessional Committee on Evangelism and Social Service wrote to major newspapers across the country. His first point was to defend the conference's attachment to "its fundamental task, viz., the redemption of individual lives." See UCBCA, HDP, box B4, file K, D.T. McClintock to the Editor of --, July 11, 1933.

was, like its Ontario equivalent, "dismissed as CCF propaganda."³⁰ Those who supported, and those who rejected these reports were divided by fundamentally differing interpretations of the Kingdom of God, and, therefore of the mission of the national church. Those who continued to believe, like George Pidgeon, that Canada was destined to be a nation of people acting like loyal, Anglo-Saxon middle-class Protestants were horrified at the proposition that the economic and social bases of the nation be overturned. Pidgeon, who had declared his dislike for revolutionary answers during the Winnipeg General Strike, was no more amenable to them now. And just like Pidgeon, the mainstream majority, who still held this late-Victorian conception of national progress, continued to believe that the extension of the Kingdom required Christian inspired tinkering with, but never revolutionary overthrow of, the *status quo*. Nevertheless, even as a conservative spirit grew within the United Church, the minority that questioned this attachment to prevailing structures increased in number and influence throughout the 1930s.

II

The popularity of the Oxford Group Movement began to fade by 1934, the result of a change in public opinion that accompanied a shift in the Movement's emphasis from individually centred "life-changing" to a more collective and controversial "world-changing" perspective.³¹ By this time the United Church had recognized officially the increasing call for traditional,

³⁰ Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties," 126-127, discusses the reaction to both reports. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau have suggested that the tenacity of the "old guard" might be explained by their desire to maintain the financial support "of our monied men" during the Depression. See *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 238-239.

³¹ Robert A. Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in G.A. Rawlyk (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) 176 and Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties," 130-131.

individual religious experience and even issued a *Statement on Evangelism* which emphasized that, whatever else it might be, "Evangelism here means a powerful interest in human redemption as this is seen in the crisis of personal experience."³² When it accepted the *Statement*, the Sixth General Council (1934) recommended that "preaching missions" be held within congregations. The Council was clear, however, that churches should avoid the "financial embarrassments" of using "outside evangelists" by employing other ministers from neighboring churches to preach "while the local pastor is, with intense concentration, conducting personal interviews throughout the day." Finally, the Council advised that "pursuant to every preaching mission" study groups composed of the "rank and file" should "investigate the application of the teachings of Jesus to our practical, social, economic and political problems with a view to personal enlistment in the Christian programme."³³ The 1934 General Council believed, moreover, that The Joint Committee for the "Evangelization of Canadian Life," still active under the Chairmanship of George Pidgeon, would be a useful ally in this congregational evangelism.

Alongside these changing emphases within the United Church, the inter-denominational Committee continued to represent the mainstream evangelistic efforts of the Baptist Church, the Church of England, the Evangelical, Presbyterian and United Churches, as well as the Salvation

³² *The Statement on Evangelism* (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, 1934). This pamphlet combined both "The Statement on Evangelism" and the sixth General Council's recommendations based on the "Statement." See UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file A. The significance of the *Statement* is evaluated from very different positions in Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 245-248 and Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 240-243.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.

Army, the Society of Friends and the YMCA.³⁴ Maintaining its earlier emphases on the "Christianization of the nation" through active evangelization, the Joint Committee organized a "Nation-wide effort" for autumn, 1936. In this period, Pidgeon remained concerned that some Canadian Christians had lost touch with the spiritual bases of their faith, and were, therefore, failing to meet the needs of the Depression years. He believed that the inability to deal adequately with the effects of economic turmoil was based in "the shift of emphasis from the spiritual to the external." Continuing an argument he had made at union, Pidgeon maintained that during the Depression, the "need of the moment" demanded that the Church "should give more thought to those deeper experiences and principles out of which all reform must flow." He agreed that the "social idealism and passion of the Church in our time is truly of God," but he reiterated that "our first need now is to bring the Divine Spirit, who inspires it, into more complete control of the lives through whom it is to be carried into effect."³⁵ The service of the Kingdom of God, established on a foundation of personal union with the divine, remained the core of Pidgeon's evangelism, and the basis of the Joint Committee's national campaign when it finally got into motion in 1936. Following the diversions of the Oxford Group Movement and the radicalism of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, it is not surprising that Pidgeon expected much from this revived campaign.

This emphasis on preaching that demanded a traditional "decision for Christ," and a social message that rested heavily on perpetuating Anglo-Saxon and middle-class national goals turned out to be, however, the

³⁴ George C. Pidgeon, "The Challenge of Jesus to Canadian Life," *The Western Recorder* 12:2 (August, 1936): 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

campaign's weakness. This effort to "Christianize the Nation" had little impact because, as John Grant has indicated, its "traditional combination of evangelism and Christian patriotism had become old-fashioned, and neither pietists nor social radicals were greatly moved by it."³⁶ It was increasingly clear in the late 1930s that the very bases of Pidgeon's whole gospel message, though they continued to inspire an older generation of mainstream leadership, were becoming much less inspiring to Canadians.

III

The tenacity of Pidgeon's confidence in the ability of the whole gospel to save the nation was demonstrated, however, by his refusal to alter the fundamentals of his faith, even when confronted with increasing indifference to them. The perpetuation of the "years of crisis," made definite by the declaration of war in September, 1939, seemed only to vindicate Pidgeon's message. The breakdown of international relations throughout the 1930s was widely interpreted as evidence of the need for a universal Christian message that would unify the peoples and the countries of the world. The advent of a second international war at the end of the decade substantiated a growing sense among Canadian churchpeople that their Christian efforts had failed. Pidgeon argued in the 1930s that Christianity was falling short in all its efforts, a reality he saw demonstrated by the inadequacies of social reform, of the movement for peace, of the fight for justice and of missionary endeavors.³⁷ The war served, therefore, to confirm Pidgeon's belief that the

³⁶ Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 149. David Marshall reports that interest and attendance were high, but that some influential United Church people, like Richard Roberts, felt that the campaign was "the last kick of a decayed Moodyism." See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 247.

³⁷ Pidgeon, "The Challenge of Jesus to Canadian Life," 4.

domestic and international tragedies of the era were related directly to the vanity of a nation and a world losing their spiritual moorings.

With language that shared much with the “universal” aspirations of the ecumenical movement, Pidgeon proposed in his Bloor Street sermons that paramount among the causes of the Second World War was a lack of “union.” During this conflict, Pidgeon joined a number of Canadian and international churchpeople who believed that the answer to the “cleavages” and “sharpened antagonisms between the different groups into which men range themselves” was the “Universal Gospel” of Christ.³⁸ The class, religious and race pride that was demonstrated by the various combatants in the world war indicated for Pidgeon that the future hope of humankind lay with the universal acceptance of Christian principles. In the war years, though he took some sermon time to express opinions about the nations and leaders involved in the conflict, his message of the primary necessity of individual “decision” for Christ, and personal union with the Divine remained paramount.³⁹ The problems of international conflict, like personal and national failings, were problems of sin. Pidgeon approached these separate manifestations of sinfulness with precisely the same remedy he had diagnosed for decades; true reform personally, nationally and globally required genuine repentance and acceptance of the free offer of grace.⁴⁰

³⁸ Pidgeon, “The Universal Gospel,” 1. This was one of a series of sermons on the universal gospel that Pidgeon preached during 1943. On the rise of ecumenism, and the growing opinion that a “Christian Totalitarianism” was necessary for peace, see Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918 - 1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991) 240-245 and Chapter Nine.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1; Pidgeon, “Jesus, Redeemer and Lord,” 2-3; Pidgeon, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done,” 8-9.

⁴⁰ The response of The United Church of Canada to the Second World War is discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine.

The apparent revival of orthodox and individual interpretations of sin and salvation during the pre-war and war years were, therefore, very pleasing to Pidgeon. This growing desire to emphasize more traditional theologies was evinced in the United Church by the appearance during the war of official and solidly traditional codifications of United Church theology.⁴¹ Though he clearly believed in progressive social and individual improvement, Pidgeon had never accepted the social perfectionist assumptions of some of his contemporaries. In 1944, therefore, he was pleased to note that his conviction that the establishment of the Kingdom was primarily an act of God, and only partly a result of human effort, was becoming a widely accepted United Church interpretation. Reflecting almost exactly the anti-liberal language of his contemporaries who were experimenting with the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, he maintained that faith in inevitable progress was dashed "by the collapse of all our hopes and dreams." Christian self-confidence had, he lamented, "turned to pride and the effect has been the catastrophe of the ages."⁴² For Pidgeon, who had clung to traditional understandings of sin, salvation, the sovereignty of God and the reformation of the social order during the zenith of this unfettered Christian optimism, the growing acceptance of these convictions seemed to vindicate the constancy of his faith. And as he approached what would have been the end of his pastoral career, the apparent popularity of his style of faith no doubt encouraged his decision to continue in active church work.

⁴¹ See, for example, John Dow, *This is Our Faith: An Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, 1943) and Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 153.

⁴² Pidgeon, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done," 10. On the influence of neo-orthodox thought in the mainline churches during the 1930s and 1940s, see Clifford, "Religion in the Thirties," 132-134. This influence is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Nine.

In the different world of the post-war era, therefore, when the evidence of significant social and moral change was abundant, Pidgeon continued to struggle for the creation of "His Dominion in Canada."⁴³ Now in 1945, and 73 years old, he was a solid, if aging fixture of United Church life. Still preaching regularly at Bloor Street United, and continuing the pastoral duties associated with his position with this central congregation, Pidgeon's progressive evangelical whole gospel continued to be heard in downtown Toronto. The conservative mood of the church indicated that this message was one worth preaching. It remained to be seen, however, if a population thrust into the modern age by depression and war was still receptive to Pidgeon's late-Victorian vision. At the end of the war and after so many years of sacrifice, Canadians were in an ambiguous position between wariness and hope. The increased productivity of the war years had initiated a period of economic growth that was certainly encouraging, but which many who had survived the Depression eyed cautiously.⁴⁴ The leadership of the church had assumed that the post-war period would include a difficult time of readjustment, and had taken the initiative in planning an evangelistic "Church Forward Movement." This nation-wide evangelistic campaign, characteristically named the "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom," sought to convert and energize Canadians for the serious work of building the Kingdom in Canada. It was a classic expression of the continuing United Church desire to "Christianize the nation" through conversion and social service. These national and whole gospel emphases made this campaign especially attractive to George Pidgeon; unfortunately for the fortunes of liberal

⁴³ Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," 190-192.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Norrie and Douglas Owsram, *A History of the Canadian Economy* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Canada, 1991) 524-544.

evangelicalism in The United Church of Canada, however, it turned out to be less appealing to the people of Canada.⁴⁵

The disappointing results from this ostentatious Crusade, which ran sporadically between 1945 and 1948, were related directly to the theological and practical assumptions behind it. Though the Crusade was supported by a wide cross-section of the increasingly diverse leadership of the church, it was Pidgeon's particularly conservative perspective that demonstrated the inadequacies of the appeal. In a time when it appeared to Pidgeon that the church and the nation were moving further apart, when mainstream Christians were increasingly compartmentalizing the sacred and the secular, he regarded the Crusade as a means to correct this error. And he believed it would do so in part by re-awakening the nation's citizens to the importance of protecting and extending the British, middle-class morality and institutions that he believed were necessary for the establishment of God's dominion. In 1947, Pidgeon argued "that the ruler, by whatsoever means raised to the position of authority, stands for God's will and law, and has God's authority behind him in so doing."⁴⁶ He believed, of course, that the salvation of Canadians and the proper development of Canada within the parameters of his own Anglo-Saxon, middle-class perspective were linked inseparably. Pidgeon maintained his faith in the United Church commission to save citizen's and "provide for our nation servants of the character and conscience which drives them to self-investment in the common good."⁴⁷ He continued, therefore, to interpret "God's moral laws" within the language and priorities of the Protestant middle-class ethos he presented, and represented, as

⁴⁵ The "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom" is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

⁴⁶ UCCA, GPP, box 50, file 1998, "Christ and Canadian Citizenship," 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

normative. Around the time that other influential United Church leaders were questioning the Christian nature of national institutions, Pidgeon told his audience to “get away from the idea that service to God and service to your country belong to two separate compartments, sealed from each other. There is no more effective way of having God’s will done in the land,” he continued, “than through the free institutions of a free people.”⁴⁸ Because of his foundational belief that the nation’s still British institutions were free, Pidgeon maintained that it was through them that Canada, and Christ, could be served best. In 1947, an evangelism so conceived and presented was likely to have little appeal for a diverse population that was, as Pidgeon feared, slowly accepting the idea that the proper functioning of national institutions had little to do with God.

IV

The reality for churchpeople in the post-war era was that these traditional interpretations of the proper, godly development of the nation were increasingly unfashionable. Indeed, Pidgeon and others of his vintage and perspective were discovering that what they had believed were prevailing norms were, in fact, becoming increasingly marginal as Canada became increasingly modern. This was a reality that Pidgeon could not ignore. As he prepared to leave the pulpit of Bloor Street United in 1948, he continued to preach on the necessity of new birth, and the importance of being saved for service.⁴⁹ But he began also to sound a new note of apprehension about the

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* The argument that during the Second World War some influential United Church people were questioning these assumptions about the righteousness of the established institutions and morality of the Anglo-Saxon majority is made in Chapter Nine.

⁴⁹ His post-war sermons maintained the essential progressive evangelical themes of his earlier preaching career. For his continuing emphasis on the necessity of new birth, see *ibid.*, 3 and Pidgeon, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done,” 5-6; UCCA, GPP, box 50, file 2000, 7-9.

emerging, popular values of the nation. At a time when he was confused about whether to stay on or retire, Pidgeon indicated that he understood that maintaining the ideal of "His Dominion" was becoming more, not less challenging. His message now was that service for Christ required suffering. In the post-war years, as the professional and commercial classes began increasingly to deem the social consumption of alcohol acceptable, suffering for the Kingdom had come to mean neither accepting nor serving intoxicants, even if it meant being socially "boycotted." Pidgeon maintained, of course, that it was still best to avoid alcohol altogether, but he was forced to admit that "it will cost heavily for those who take the stand."⁵⁰ The battle over the availability of liquor in Canada had never been an easy one; temperance and prohibition, though historically respectable positions among the middle and upper-classes, were often unpopular stances that sometimes drew attack. After the war, however, Pidgeon noticed that it was the very classes upon whom he had previously rested the future of the nation that were making liquor a part of home and business life. At the end of the first half of the twentieth century Pidgeon's Anglo-Saxon, middle-class national vision was becoming less recognizable, and less compelling among the Anglo-Saxon, middle-class majority.

This decline in the popularity and strength of the foundations of Pidgeon's Christian and national faith, as well as his advancing age, likely encouraged him to retire from the ministry. In November, 1948 George Pidgeon preached his last two sermons as head pastor of Bloor Street United Church. He was by now 76 years old, and it was becoming obvious that his life-long Christian interest in spreading individual and corporate union with

⁵⁰ Pidgeon, "Having Done All, Stand," 12-13.

the divine, and thereby the Kingdom of God, was losing currency.⁵¹ His “good old fashioned” preaching, so pleasing to his elderly radio audience in the 1930s, had become increasingly inappropriate for the younger, more modern audience in the pews in 1948. This aging, retiring progressive recognized and understood the change well. In his last sermon, therefore, he argued that the “faith of our fathers is robbed of its fruit if we fail to go on to the higher visions which their achievements made possible.”⁵² He was careful to emphasize that these “higher visions” still rested on the abiding essentials of the whole gospel, evangelism and social service. But he encouraged his “central congregation” in Toronto to pursue these Christian goals with an open-mind; “you perfect the fathers’ faith,” he preached, “not by fanatical adherence to its form but by loyalty to its outcome.” Recognizing abundant threats to the national influence of Protestantism in the post-war world, Pidgeon challenged his congregation to remain committed to the “principle of development” and to allow “truths received from the past” to “grow into the new conceptions of a new age.”⁵³ The pastor who replaced Pidgeon at Bloor Street, Ernest Marshall Howse, was very much the embodiment of new conceptions for novel circumstances. Howse’s faith was much more modernistic than Pidgeon’s. His appointment indicated, therefore, not only that this “central congregation” was looking for new conceptions, but also that the next generation believed that these were necessary if the congregation, and The United Church of Canada, were to fulfill their

⁵¹ See Wright, “The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945,” 190-192.

⁵² UCCA, GPP, box 50, file 2049, “Perfecting the Father’s Faith,” 13-14. On Howse, see his autobiography, *Roses in December: The Autobiography of Ernest Marshall Howse* (Winfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books, 1982).

⁵³ Pidgeon, “Having Done All, Stand,” 6-14.

commission to “carry still farther forward the work of the Kingdom of God.”⁵⁴

After he left Bloor Street, and even as he approached his nineties, Pidgeon remained a respected United Church figure. He was asked often to preach or speak on behalf of the church, and to publish collections of sermons with Canada’s secular presses.⁵⁵ He took these opportunities to emphasize the necessity of maintaining the United Church mission to the nation and to the world.⁵⁶ Many of his contemporaries emerged from the Depression and the Second World War convinced of the impossibility of extending the Kingdom in Canada. Pidgeon, who had been so instrumental in the creation and extension of the “national church,” understood the importance of the ideal of the Kingdom of God to the self-understanding of the denomination. He believed that the soul of the church that he had helped to create for the good of Canada was tied intimately to the continuing faith that its activity would aid in “Christianizing the nation” and thereby extending the Kingdom of God. The “years of crisis” and the changing nation that the fledgling church encountered soon after its birth, forced many of its leaders to reconsider seriously what the national mission of the “national church” was. The various answers arrived at in the 1940s, the 1950s and beyond altered significantly the theological and practical bases of The United Church of Canada. As long as he was able, Pidgeon resisted this change and fought to keep the whole gospel, and particularly his belief in the necessity of a new birth and a new life lived for the extension of the Kingdom, central to the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ These collections were well-received, and often reviewed in popular magazines. See B.K. Sandwell, “Canadian Sermons Seem To Avoid Dogma and Ecclesiasticism,” in *Saturday Night* (February 15, 1949): 13.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Pidgeon, “Evangelism in the Work of the Church.”

church's mission. In 1958, as he approached 86 years of age, Pidgeon reminded an audience of church people that they belonged to a "young Church based on" the "timeless truth" of salvation by faith alone. Speaking with wisdom gained from seventy years in the pulpit spreading and defending the centrality of this "timeless truth," he warned them that they must "guard it vigilantly," for it "will not be openly assailed, but your Church's foundations may be subtly undermined."⁵⁷ Indeed, given his longevity, this was a process whose beginnings he lived to see.

George Pidgeon died in June, 1971. At 99 years old he was the last of a generation of United churchmen committed to extending the Kingdom of God in Canada through "definite decisions" for Christ and evangelically based social and moral reformism. In his church work, Pidgeon had emphasized consistently, and with passionate steadfastness, that the Christianization of Canadian society, and indeed the Kingdom of God were dependent primarily on the "new birth" of individuals to a "new life" in Christ. By the time he preached his last sermons on these ideas in 1960, however, his had become a voice calling from the wilderness. By the early 1970s, the assumptions and emphases of Pidgeon's turn-of-the-century, evangelical and Anglo-Saxon national vision no longer were compelling to many United Church people. After the vision of "His Dominion" became blurred and then was lost in the changing social and demographic realities after 1945, the dual evangelistic and social service lenses of Pidgeon's generation were interpreted by many as blinders. At Pidgeon's death, therefore, most in the pulpit and at headquarters, and many in the pews, saw the future of Canada very differently. This new perspective was by then separated from an earlier

⁵⁷ Pidgeon, "Saved by Grace" (1958), 15.

generation's whole gospel presumptions -- individual, social and national emphases that had been so central and so exciting for young Presbyterians, and for young Methodists, at the turn of the century.

Chapter Five

“Defining the Whole:” Hugh Dobson and the Gospel of the Kingdom in Canada

... present religious experiences and active social devotion, if they are not rooted in great sacred memories, are apt to be like the seed sown in the thin soil, which springs up quickly but as quickly withers away.

– Eugene Lyman, *Meaning and Truth*¹

By the first decade of the twentieth century the Protestant effort to convert the non-Protestant populations of Canada, to “Christianize” the institutions of the new nation, and thereby to realize the dream of a Christian Dominion was well established. Indeed, it had become the central preoccupation of the mainline denominations. The establishment of training schools for native and immigrant children and comprehensive church-based efforts to reform individuals and the nation were the obvious manifestations of this desire to “Christianize the nation.” For young ministers who began their pastoral careers in this era of national expansion, the impulse to create a Christian Kingdom on earth was a powerful motivator for a variety of work, all of which fell under the commission to “spread the Gospel.” What “Gospel” meant in the sometimes radically novel circumstances that the churches encountered, especially as they followed the expansion of the population westward, was a pressing question for this new generation of churchmen. The impediments to the creation of Christian nation were obvious; the solutions were less so. Of course, for some the evangelical answers of an earlier period defined the gospel that they chose to preach. But for many more, the answers

¹ Eugene Lyman, *Meaning and Truth* (1933) as quoted in William McGuire King, “An enthusiasm for humanity: the social emphasis in religion and its accommodation in Protestant theology,” in Michael J. Lacey (ed.), *Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Cambridge University Press, 1989) 67.

provided by their elders seemed insufficient for the people and the situations they felt compelled to change.

In the halls of church colleges and, especially, on the mission fields of the nation, new problems and new emphases led, almost necessarily, to a new gospel. Increasingly in the years following Confederation, the "good news" of Canadian Protestantism included not only the gospel of personal salvation, but also the evangel of the coming Kingdom of God. George Pidgeon's insistence that the Kingdom would be achieved through personal and then societal redemption was typical of the whole gospel message. Indeed, this imperative to establish "His Dominion" was a blueprint for ecclesiastical and national development so popular among Pidgeon's generation that it was shared, and pursued, across denominational lines. Methodist contemporaries of Pidgeon, raised and educated like him in the progressive milieu of the late nineteenth century, were instrumental in both defining and propagating this national, Kingdom based faith. Methodists working in the West were especially open to an interpretation of the gospel that included solutions to problems terrestrial as well as celestial; and among these, Hugh Dobson, one of the most outspoken evangelists for this Kingdom of God in the western provinces, was also the most influential.

I

Descended from "originally Huguenot stock" from Yorkshire who were "the first Methodists in Canada," Hugh Wesley Dobson claimed to have come by his prestigious second name honestly.² Before the family departed England to

² Hugh Wesley Dobson, "My Thirty-Six Years," United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report* (1949) 44-45. And United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives [UCBCA], Hugh Wesley Dobson Papers [HDP], box A11, file P, "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON." Dobson signed this brief autobiography, "Regina, April, 1925." The errors in spelling are Dobson's.

settle in the colonies in 1772, he claimed in an early autobiographical piece, "they were honored by a visit from John Wesley to wish them Godspeed."³ With its roots traced to Methodist beginnings, and buttressed by generations of loyal adherents, Dobson's Christian inheritance was not only "distinguished," as he claimed, but also solidly traditional.⁴ He was born near Molesworth in Huron County, Ontario, in March, 1879, and was raised there by a family committed to both learning and faith; he was the grandson of a carpenter who "read the scriptures in the original Hebrew and Greek, preached in English, and always prayed, at least in family worship, in Gaelic."⁵ The expectations of his name, and the long history of Methodism in his family background, all but ensured that Dobson would be raised in the conventional forms of his family's faith, and that he would reach the prescribed spiritual milestones. Though he was vague about exactly when, Dobson was clear that as a child he was "converted and joined the church," at Palmerston, Ontario.⁶ Though his description of the event is brief, his 1925 recollection of it indicates that even as he witnessed and participated in the birth of The United Church of Canada, and after twenty-seven years of "steadily preaching," his conversion remained a powerful marker along his religious journey.

Like so many young men of his generation, Dobson's strong commitment to Christianity and the Christian life extended well beyond the experience of personal regeneration. Indeed, probably before he celebrated his sixteenth birthday and certainly not many years after his conversion, this

³ Dobson, "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON."

⁴ In another autobiographical piece from the same period, Dobson wrote that "He came of distinguished ancestry on both sides". See UCBCA, HDP, box A11, file P, "Hugh Wesley Dobson"

⁵ Dobson, "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON."

⁶ *Ibid.*

young Methodist from rural Ontario expanded his Christian commitments, and made one of the most important friendships of both his personal and professional lives. When still essentially a boy, Dobson “offered himself to the ministry” and vowed his life to Christ in the home of T. Albert Moore, the well-respected Methodist leader who later became superintendent of the church and ended his career as the first General Secretary of the General Council of The United Church of Canada.⁷ With this vow for Kingdom work in mind, Dobson completed High School, and, now qualified to begin studies towards pastoral work in the Methodist Church, he turned his attention to the ministry.⁸ A move west of Winnipeg to Neepawa, Manitoba, where he worked on a farm for “one or two seasons,” helped transpose him from Ontario to the exciting circumstances of the Canada’s prairie, while he was only seventeen years old.⁹ The still young north-west held many attractions, especially for a teenaged Methodist who wished to pursue a ministerial career. The exciting stories from the “frontier,” the potential and need for effective “Kingdom work” and the recent establishment of a Methodist training college in Winnipeg, would have made the West an attractive location in 1897.¹⁰

The territory to which Dobson moved near the end of the century was young and essentially undeveloped. As late as the time of Confederation, the

⁷ *Ibid.* and UCBCA, HDP, B18a, file M (3), Dobson to T.A. Moore, 8 April, 1926, where, in a letter devoted to Board business written in the first year after church union, Dobson asked for Moore’s confidence noting “the most intimate and personal relations I have had with you since I vowed my life to Christ in your home.”

⁸ Dobson, “Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON,” 1. Dobson noted later in his life that he had been instructed and “led to Christ” by many excellent teachers and ministers, most of whom he could still name at his retirement. See, Dobson, “My Thirty-Six Years,” 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For the lures and the difficulties of westward migration see Douglas O’ram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). O’ram’s ambiguous conclusion is especially interesting.

eastern and southern parts of what was to become Manitoba were still essentially frontier settlements. Just over a decade before Dobson arrived, a missionary described the Winnipeg region as reminiscent of the "the scenes familiar to the Hudson's Bay Company two hundred years ago."¹¹ The Methodists were active for some years in the north and west, but were slower than most in establishing a presence along the Red River. It did not take long, however, for the church to make a clear and significant contribution to the developing material, cultural and spiritual world of the new province of Manitoba and in particular to the village of Winnipeg. When George Young, the first of many Methodist missionaries to stay for some time in the Red River settlement arrived in 1868, he encountered a scarcely populated, mud-ridden village. Before long, however, a Methodist church had been established, and by the early 1870s the families served by First Grace Methodist Church were asking for a suitable, denominational school in which to educate their children.¹² The establishment of schools for the education of "immigrant" children from other parts of the world and Canada was a concern common to all the Canadian churches as they expanded west. The Methodists though they were slower than others in establishing educational facilities on the prairie, shared with other churches generally, and the Presbyterians particularly, the belief that the effort to forge a nation from Canada's disparate parts would be facilitated through Protestant schooling. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic, Anglican and

¹¹ From the Methodist Missionary James Woodsworth's memoir, *Thirty Years in the Canadian North West* (Toronto, 1917) as quoted in Benjamin Smillie, "The Woodsworths: James and J. S. -- father and son," in Dennis L. Butcher *et al.*, (eds.), *Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1985) 101.

¹² A.G. Bedford, *The University of Winnipeg: A History of the Founding Colleges* (Toronto and Buffalo: The University of Toronto Press, 1976) 21-22.

Presbyterian churches were well on the way to setting up educational facilities in the Red River area.¹³ The Methodist contribution to the education of Winnipeg's children was not established until the 1870s.

Soon after building Grace Church, George Young and his congregation turned their attention, and their meager resources to the creation of a Methodist school. By 1872 a small building had been constructed, and a teacher installed, and the first Methodist school in Winnipeg opened its doors. After only four years of instruction, however, this early Methodist attempt to establish a denominational foothold was out of money, and the short period of Methodist educational influence in Winnipeg was over. Interest in a denominational college did not end with the first school, however. During the following decade westerners increasingly called for the creation of another educational institution, and in 1888, following the wishes of the Manitoba and North West conference of the church, Winnipeg had another Methodist college. With a charter from the provincial legislature, and support from the conference, the new school began immediately to attract faculty and then students to its buildings, and in 1890 Wesley College graduated its first Bachelors of Arts.¹⁴ Hugh Dobson was attracted west a few

¹³ The trials of the Presbyterian attempts to establish communities and schools in pre-Confederation Manitoba are examined well in Michael Owen, "Keeping Canada's God's Country: Presbyterian school-homes for Ruthenian children," in Butcher *et. al.*, *Prairie Spirit.*, 184-201; the motivations of Presbyterians and the Methodists are discussed in Marilyn Barber, "Nationalism, Nativism and the Social Gospel: The Protestant Church Response to Foreign Immigrants in Western Canada, 1897-1914," in Richard Allen, (ed.), *The Social Gospel in Canada: Papers of the Inter-Disciplinary Conference on the Social Gospel in Canada* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1975) 186-223. For a brief account of the experiences of all the churches, see John W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era (updated and expanded)* (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 30-35.

¹⁴ Bedford, 23-29 describes the early history of what became Wesley College. See also *Journal of the Methodist General Conference 1890*, 237.

years later, at least in part, by the possibility of receiving an education at this new Methodist college.

Wesley College, unlike its earlier manifestation, was intended from the beginning to be an institution of higher learning. From its first meeting in 1884, the Manitoba and Northwest Conference called for the creation of “a theological school at Winnipeg ... in order to enable the Conference to supply the means of education to the Probationers for the ministry within its bounds.”¹⁵ Designed to train a suitable ministry for work in the north-west, Wesley College was created with a sense of mission that reflected its peculiar western situation. It was not established to compete with Victoria College, the Methodist’s central institution in the east. Rather it was created by the western conference, in the West, to provide the denomination with a school devoted to teaching Wesleyan and Christian essentials, but suited also to the particular needs of the expanding north-west territory. The geographical location of the college, and the character with which this circumstance endowed it, was no doubt an attraction to those young men seeking entry to the ministry. It was almost certainly a powerful motivation for Hugh Dobson who arrived in the Winnipeg area in 1897, and began preliminary studies at Wesley College in the first month of the following year.¹⁶ Pulpit work, like his education, also began early for Dobson, who, only months after arriving in the conference, took a brief position as a supply preacher in Birtle, Manitoba.

During the time between his early experiences in the pulpit and the college in 1897 and his graduation with a Bachelor of Divinity in 1908, Dobson

¹⁵ *Methodist Church, Minutes of Conferences 1884*, “Manitoba and Northwest Conference Report,” 40 and *Journal of the Methodist General Conference 1890*, 239.

¹⁶ Dobson, “Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON.”

learned much from his complementary experience in both the classroom and with congregations. His initial studies at Wesley (1897-99) were followed by almost three years on a rural circuit centred in Winnipegosis (1899-1902), where he was received on trial in 1901. With a new appointment to serve a congregation in Whitemouth in 1902, Dobson was able to return to the Winnipeg area and to complete his Bachelor of Arts (1904), while continuing to work as a probationer. After receiving his B.A., Dobson began theological study almost immediately (1904-1908), but maintained his connection with pastoral work by remaining at Whitemouth until 1906, when he was ordained. After his ordination to the Methodist ministry, he was transferred to Winnipeg's Grace Church to replace J.S. Woodsworth as Associate Minister. Hugh Dobson's years of formal education ended when he left Grace Methodist, Winnipeg and Wesley College in 1908. He took with him a theology and practical ministry that bore the impress of his wide educational and pastoral experience between 1897 and 1908.

II

By 1899, though he had passed what was called the "previous exam" and had qualified himself for continuous study at Wesley College, Dobson chose to continue his pastoral work. Instead of pursuing studies in Winnipeg, therefore, he accepted another supply position, traveling this time to a very remote church. Still a teenager, he began his probation for the ministry in Winnipegosis, a small outpost on the south-western shore of the sprawling lake of the same name. Using the outpost as his headquarters, Dobson spent two years "on the Northern Lakes and up and down the Big Saskatchewan," presumably involved in extensive missionary and pastoral activities. On his itinerant tours, he could not have avoided the possibilities and the problems that existed in both established Native and newly settled immigrant

communities on the prairie. These encounters likely nuanced his understanding of the role of the ministry and solidified his commitment to working in the West to establish the Kingdom of God in Canada. In these northern and western locations, the proliferation of recently arrived immigrants demonstrated to Dobson the need to “Canadianize” as well as “Christianize.” In these months spent outside of college, then, Dobson almost certainly began to develop a sense of personal, ecclesiastical and national mission that was both spiritual and practical – a whole gospel perspective that was the foundation of his long career as a western churchman.

After spending over two years as a minister in Winnipegosis and elsewhere, Dobson settled more or less permanently in the south of the province. The Winnipeg he returned to in the fall of 1902 was very different from that encountered by George Young thirty-five years earlier. Indeed, at the turn of the century, Winnipeg was in the midst of a decade of stunning growth and change. An influx of a wide variety of immigrants from all over the world, almost all of whom spent at least some time in Winnipeg as part of their trip west, gave the prairie destination a cosmopolitan character. Moreover, a good number of those arriving in the West chose the dynamic city as their destination, and as the railway that carried them there became increasingly important to the trade in wheat, Winnipeg quickly became the agricultural hub of the prairie.¹⁷ The availability of labour, combined with the attractions of the transportation system, led to a number of significant and lasting changes. Perhaps the most important of these was an influx of capital and industry that led one minister who also returned to the city in 1902 to

¹⁷ Richard Allen, “Salem Bland and the spirituality of the social gospel: Winnipeg and the West, 1903-1913,” in Butcher, *et. al.*, *Prairie Spirit*, 218-219.

note that in the "ten years since I stood in this pulpit as your pastor, ... the growth of material prosperity has completely changed the appearance of this city. I see the difference in your streets, warehouses and public buildings; in your trees, gardens and beautiful grounds; in your substantial and elegant homes and in the clothing, comfort and culture of your children."¹⁸ For the young men and women who began studies in the city at this time, these changes meant more than material and cultural progress. By 1900, the over forty thousand residents of Winnipeg were building a new city in a new land; the faculty and students at the city's Methodist college were just as certainly working on a Christian message intended to keep up.

Hugh Dobson returned from the rural missions of northern Manitoba at the zenith of this turbulent social and economic period. Though Wesley College itself looked much as it had four years earlier, a number of significant changes in the make-up of the faculty and in the number of students during the period of Dobson's study there led the institution in new directions. Until 1902 a group of teachers, most of whom were appointed in the previous decade, remained loyal to the traditional and official curriculum of the Methodist Church. As the college entered the new century, however, the original faculty was slowly augmented by a coterie of young, mainly Ontario-trained teachers who altered tangibly the tenor and the pedagogy of the institution. Though on paper the course offerings remained much the same, the faculty delivering the lectures began, at a rather accelerated pace after the turn-of-the-century, to infuse them with a new spirit.

¹⁸ Rev. James Allen, *God-Given Education: A Sermon* (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Free Press Company, 1902). Held in United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], pamphlet collection.

Dobson's return to Wesley coincided with the arrival of one of these new professors, the Victoria College and Oxford trained philosopher George John Blewett. Though he was to distinguish himself later as a well-respected member of the faculty of Victoria College, Blewett began his teaching career as a professor at Wesley in 1902. Blewett had studied under the idealist Edward Caird at Oxford, and when he arrived at Wesley he was beginning to make a contribution to Methodist thought by developing a particularly Canadian and Methodist philosophy of religion that blended successfully the tenets of Christianity and the "authority of reason."¹⁹ This admixture of belief and a rational mindset was not novel. As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries met in Canada, denominational college professors like George Blewett and his Victoria College senior Nathanael Burwash were articulating a theological approach that respected the authority and the truths of their tradition, while allowing these same traditions to be refracted, through the lenses of reason and study, for a new age and circumstance. For the myriad students who came into contact with the open, though well marked intellectual territory mapped out by older teachers like Burwash and the younger leaders like Blewett, a method of mixing learning and faith, a middle way through the conflicts of science and religion, was made clear.²⁰ The selective Idealism of a younger generation of teachers also imparted a powerful belief in the necessity of

¹⁹ A.B. McKillop treats the questions of idealism and Canadian religion generally, and the work of George John Blewett and John Watson particularly in *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979) 210-212 and *passim*. See also Morton Paterson, "The Mind of a Methodist: The Personalist Theology of George John Blewett in its Historical Context," *United Church of Canada Bulletin* 27 (1978): 94-103 and Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott, *The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada, 1850-1950* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981) chapter nine.

²⁰ This is a central argument in Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

mixing individual faith with effort for the improvement of the moral and social environment. For these young people, many of whom were expected to carry the denomination into the new century, the mediating, rational and orthodox education granted them by their teachers formed the basis of a view of the church in society that respected tradition but which sought to make that tradition relevant to the changing social and cultural climate of an expanding and maturing new nation. It was this same dynamic social circumstance, however, that made the more theoretical, intellectual work of Burwash and many of his contemporaries increasingly old-fashioned, and the newer thought of teachers like Blewett appealing.

The progressive thought of Burwash's generation had prepared a generation of church leaders for the crises of intellectual change. These older professors' particular understanding of what "change" meant had less resonance, however, in a church that wanted to Christianize and Canadianize a society that was increasing its immigrant population, expanding its technologies and amusements and creating a series of problems more practical than intellectual. As Marguerite Van Die has explained, even as early as the first decade of twentieth century the conflict of science and religion, the very basis of the new intellectual world of the older generation of denominationally based Idealist philosophers, was no longer a functioning world view for many Canadians.²¹ Indeed, only some in the pulpit and very few in the pew had ever considered the problems of faith and reason, and for the generation of Methodist leaders trained in the early years of the century, these problems and their thoughtful answers seemed increasingly

²¹ Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 187-188.

unimportant. Particularly at Wesley, where students in theology spent so much of their college year away from the classroom and in the mission fields of western Canada, intellectual “crises” of change took a distinct second place to practical ones.

Though their professors had given them the intellectual tools for change, enthusiastic young ministers-in-training like Hugh Dobson were open to more hands-on answers. For them, the essential priorities of the faith remained the same; spreading the “good news” of the Christian message – Christianizing the nation and building the Kingdom -- was the core of their faith and of their motivation. Like their teachers, this new generation sought the conversion and salvation of their new national brothers and sisters. But they also felt the need to spread the gospel in a shifting social context, and they understood that this second motivation had less to do with adjusting religion to science, and more to do with the practical work of making Canada a Christian nation. The issues they faced, then, were centred less on the intellectual defence of the faith and more on the problems of defending and extending their Anglo-Saxon language, faith and morality in a nation that was composed increasingly of immigrants who did not share or understand this homogenous national vision. Fortunately for these young preachers, the shifting social realities of the late nineteenth century had produced some Methodist preacher-professors who shared these same practical concerns, and to which many young men turned on their journey to ordination.

This practical evangelical tack, demonstrated in the late nineteenth century by the proliferation of school-homes and missions for “foreigners,” became an increasingly standard theological direction for the Methodists in the early twentieth century. Through the efforts and influence of practically-minded preachers and professors, this pragmatic understanding of church

work began to influence teaching in denominational training schools across the country. The early impress of the reformer and denominational leader T. Albert Moore likely influenced Dobson's early understanding of Christianity as a personal as well as social faith.²² But, though Dobson was not clear about this, George Blewett's emphasis on the social imperatives of individual Christian achievement, and the atmosphere his teaching fostered at Wesley, were probably as central to the socially conscious Christianity that Dobson was developing while studying there. The theological atmosphere at Wesley experienced a powerful shift towards a more pragmatic, Kingdom-based Christianity, however, following the arrival of the social gospeller Salem Bland.

By the time he arrived in Winnipeg to teach Church History and New Testament in September, 1903, Bland was forty-four years old and already a well-respected minister.²³ He was known throughout central Canada as a gifted preacher and also as an outspoken evangelist of social Christianity. In the 1890's Bland read extensively in American and British social Christian and critical literature and was influenced by the increased reception of these ideas at Queen's University, where, as a regular attendee at Principal George Munro Grant's "Theological Alumni Conferences," he was exposed to the practical concern to apply the new insights of scientific thought to the needs of the church.²⁴ In the years following his arrival, Bland's social Christianity

²² Dobson indicated the extent of Moore's tutelage when, speaking of himself, he explained that "he owes much for inspiration to him both as a boy and man." See Dobson, "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON."

²³ Allen, "Salem Bland," 221-222.

²⁴ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 9-11.

became the norm at the Wesley to the extent that he, and the college, became the “effective centre” of the expanding social gospel movement in the West.²⁵

During the first years of Bland’s tenure at Wesley, Hugh Dobson was distinguishing himself as an active member of the Wesley student population. After returning to the college to study in 1902, Dobson enrolled as a full-time student in Arts, completed his remaining requirements for the B.A. in two years, and graduated with his first degree in the spring of 1904. Wesley’s small campus was an active one, and Dobson took full advantage of the opportunities for learning and entertainment that his surroundings offered. Besides the time spent on mission work, he occupied himself outside of his studies by serving as President of the Literary society, leading several intercollegiate and international debates, and writing for the college paper, *Vox Wesleyana*. Through these various endeavors, Dobson honed his already substantial pastoral and preaching skills to the point that, upon graduation, his classmates noted that with “rare ability as a public speaker, and with remarkable power of command over an audience, he cannot but be a success in the line of work that he has chosen.”²⁶

The “line of work” that he had chosen remained, of course, the ministry. It was a vow of life work for Christ that he had made with T. Albert Moore in his early teen years, and it was a career path that he chose to pursue immediately through further education. His successful completion of the Bachelor of Arts degree, and his continuing status as a probationer, qualified him for theological study and for the still essential, and eminently practical “circuit work.” Methodist probationers had originally been educated almost exclusively through working alongside a more experienced preacher, learning

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶ *Vox Wesleyana*, 8:7 (midsummer, 1904): 159.

the craft of pastoral life at his side. In the middle of the nineteenth century this educational process was formalized, and though "experience" continued to be more important than "education," young probationers were likely to be affiliated with denominational colleges and given the opportunity to study for a year at a Methodist institution. After the Methodist Union of 1884, the process of education became increasingly centred on a solid theological education as well as intensive circuit work.²⁷ After being accepted as a probationer by the local circuit, young men like Dobson were assigned to a charge and almost immediately began work there.

With his experience at Birtle and in the north, and after providing evidence of his conversion and "calling," Hugh had been accepted as a probationer at Winnipegosis in 1901. His first charge was Whitemouth, a small village east of Winnipeg, which was no doubt chosen because of its proximity to Wesley College. It was as a probationer, then, that he completed his Arts degree, and began studies in theology. During his time at college, which lasted until his graduation with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1908, and included extensive pastoral work away from campus, Dobson remained connected with the intellectual and practical developments at Wesley College. His work in the field and his continuing association with the college introduced him to ideas and endeavors that were central to his ministerial education and to the formation of his understanding of the Christian gospel for Canada in the twentieth century.

²⁷ These changes in the formal educational requirements for the Methodist ministry are described in Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) 254-262. For an intriguing example of how the different methods of teaching ministers affected theological persuasion see Benjamin Smillie, "The Woodsworths: James and J.S. -- father and son," in *Prairie Spirit*, 107.

At Wesley, especially, the social and national emphases of this theology were obvious. During the time that Dobson was completing the various requirements for his two Wesley degrees, Salem Bland was adjusting to and influencing the life of the church in the north-west. After arriving in Winnipeg to teach at Wesley in the fall of 1903, Bland embarked on the construction of a practical Methodism that was suited for the particular needs of an increasingly populated and cosmopolitan West. Wesley College, which was established at least in part for the very same reason, was, at the time, the perfect place for a sometimes radical preacher to begin his experiments with a "New Christianity." Bland had been attracted to Winnipeg by the challenges and opportunities the north-west provided, and it was in this peculiarly hot social furnace that much of his social gospel thought was forged and tested. As early as 1904, when he was barely acclimatized to Winnipeg and to Wesley, Bland was stirring the social waters of his newly adopted city by attacking the practices of its commercial elite.²⁸ Though he did not go as far as to accept and preach Marxist truths, Bland was clear that the perpetuation of unchristian and unacceptable morals and lifestyles in the West generally, and in Winnipeg particularly, was the result of the inequalities of the capitalist system. In this city that had grown by leaps and bounds on the wealth generated by wheat, and on the labour of poorly paid immigrant workers, the economic and, by default, the political power rested with those who controlled the capital. During his time in Winnipeg, Bland and many other more radical preachers on the prairie became increasingly convinced that to create a truly Christian territory from the still virginal West would require

²⁸ The dominance of a commercial elite in Winnipeg and their "common set" of values is described in Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975) 23-42; Allen, "Salem Bland."

more than simply educating the masses in the respectable and “commercially acceptable” Christianity of the Anglo-Saxon middle classes.

The social ideal that Bland imagined lay at the root of Kingdom of God in the West was inimical to the accepted notions of the area’s economic, geographic and demographic expansion. Bland’s Christian city was one based on interdependent and ultimately equal social relationships; the economic imperatives that drove Winnipeg were based much more on the individualistic industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century. And as Bland’s conviction that Christianity and capitalism were incompatible grew, he and those in the West who were his followers became increasingly radical and their views increasingly unwelcome. Though Bland remained a popular and much sought after speaker, by 1913 his version of “Christian Canada” had become more radical and his addresses so controversial that his removal from the Wesley faculty for financial reasons in 1917 was considered by many to be the work of the vested commercial and business interests Bland’s Christian socialist message attacked. Richard Allen has argued that the power of any “interests” other than financial were unlikely to have influenced the College’s staffing decisions during the lean war years. Notwithstanding Allen’s compelling evidence to the contrary, however, it is clear that by the end of the First War, Bland’s radical and highly political form of social gospel had alienated him from the *status quo* to the extent that many *believed* that it had orchestrated his academic demise.²⁹

Salem Bland’s influence on Hugh Dobson was less radical. During the period between 1903, when Dobson was still an Arts student, and 1908 when he graduated with his Bachelor of Divinity, Bland’s social gospel thinking was

²⁹ Allen, *Social Passion*, 54-60.

still developing. When Dobson inevitably encountered the professor in the college or in various other settings, including conference events and ministerial meetings, he would have met a teacher and preacher committed like so many others to the Christianization of Canada. In the first decade of the century, these convictions encouraged Bland in the direction of moral reform activity more than radical political or social change. Though his contact with Winnipeg's commercial, and mainly Methodist, elite was forcing him to question the true bases of inequality and vice, his energies at this time were directed more at battling the moral threats to the establishment of the Kingdom in Canada.

In those early years of his tenure at Wesley, Bland was certainly committed to fashioning "an alternative religious vision for the prairies," but his methods then were less overtly against the *status quo*; his efforts, like those of other professors at Wesley, were directed at more conventional, often popular enemies.³⁰ Under the broad rubric of a purer "prairie spirituality," Bland attacked the widely recognized social evils of the age: liquor, gambling, Sabbath neglect and many other destructive vices were the targets of Bland's keen social eye. This was a critique of moral and social failings that he held in common with a multitude of concerned Protestants who, like the Presbyterian reformer George Pidgeon, were struggling to protect and extend their particular morality throughout the country. Bland's teachings on church history and New Testament imparted to his students the Canadian Christian imperative to establish the accepted morality of Protestant Anglo-Saxon culture among the immigrant populations of the West and quicken the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the prairies. It was in this vision of a

³⁰ Allen, "Salem Bland," 221.

western "city on the hill" and the reform implications of Bland's dream of a conciliatory, congenial and moral prairie society that the student Hugh Dobson encountered, and inevitably learned from Professor Salem Bland.³¹

In his discussion of the early history of Wesley College, Gerald Friesen noted that the "character of college life is a vague and elusive thing."³² Before Bland's arrival the tenor of the college was influenced by a small group of professors who were instrumental in beginning the discussion of the social implications of the gospel. Teachers like W.J. Rose, James Elliot and Blewett highlighted the social realities of the city, which was becoming known as the "vice capital of Canada," to impress upon their students the necessity of Christian social and moral reform.³³ By so doing they made Wesley an inviting home for Bland's variety of reform-based gospel. That Wesley became a central intellectual base for the development and promulgation of social gospel thought and action in Canada was the result, however, of Bland's persuasive socially grounded perspective. With his arrival, and with the continuing development of both Winnipeg and the north-west, the reformist message, and the idealist vision of the unspoiled prairie, became popular throughout the territories served by Wesley graduates, and, of course, at the college itself. The character of campus life may be difficult to pin-down, but for Wesley students, and for Canadian Methodists, for almost a decade before the onset of the First World War, the character of their western college was unusually clear. With increasing fervor as Bland's tenure continued, the predominant message in the halls of the college, and also from the pulpits of many of its preaching graduates, was that Christianity was a faith of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 220

³² Gerald Friesen, "Principal J.H. Riddell: The sane and safe leader of Wesley College," in Butcher *et. al.*, *Prairie Spirit*, 254.

³³ Artibise, *Winnipeg*, 246-264.

relationships; Christian expectations were not limited to the individual experiences of redemption, but necessarily extended into the social, commercial and political realm. This theological and social imperative was especially compelling in the West; rapid and massive immigration had caused problems that challenged the ideal of the unspoiled prairie, and made social and moral reform, and particularly the protection of "English" mores seem essential. The very western and practical message that emanated from Wesley during the period from 1903 through to the end of the first war took much of its spirit and strength from Salem Bland.

So pervasive was this spirit at Wesley that even the traditionally raised Hugh Dobson was forever altered by its impress. It is clear from the rest of his career in the church that Dobson was affected permanently by the teachings and general influence of the reformist spirit at Wesley and in Winnipeg, and that he, like so many who encountered this emphasis on Christianizing all aspects of Canadian life incorporated these powerful "social" and "communitarian" ideas into his own theology. Like Bland, Dobson became active in the fight against vice and in movements to reform the social character of the nation, and he, like the professor, would put particular emphasis on temperance and Sabbath observance. Important as these specific reform inheritances were, however, Dobson was influenced more completely and more deeply by the theological, cultural and biblical bases of Bland's progressive thought. The most significant contribution of Protestant thinkers in the generations that immediately preceded Dobson's, was the expansion of the biblical idea of the "Kingdom of God."

Through this liberal evangelical emphasis, which was hallmarked by theological "immanentism," North American Protestant leaders of the early twentieth century began to understand their faith, and particularly its

relationship to the world in which they lived, in substantially novel ways. As new scholarship led to questions about the singular authority of the biblical texts, North American divines in the mainstream, building on the earlier evangelical impulse to transform culture, began to see God revealed in and not in opposition to culture, science and "the world." Nature, and the supernatural, were increasingly understood together as part of "the one system of God."³⁴ This immanent perspective, where the Almighty is an active part of the world, opened the door to many novel, sometimes radical reinterpretations of the appropriate Christian stand in relation to culture and knowledge. The breakdown of the barriers that had traditionally separated the sacred world of God from the profane world of humankind allowed churchpeople to see culture and learning as manifestations, not enemies of the Word. As a result, Christian thinkers and, later, preachers were able to incorporate the realities of "the world" into the intricacies of their theologies; if culture and knowledge were part of God's system, they could certainly be part of his plan for salvation. The lens of immanence allowed many Christians to see science and reason in concert, to behold the culture of humankind as, at least potentially, the culture of God, and, perhaps most importantly for Canadian Methodism, to understand the biblical idea of the Kingdom of God not as a state to be anticipated, but as an accomplishment to be achieved through human effort. In this way, much of North American Protestant Christianity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was recast in more pragmatic molds by many, including the majority of Canada's mainstream evangelicals.

³⁴ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 2-9, 40-43 and *passim*. For the Canadian context, see Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*.

In the first decades of the twentieth century the idea of the immanent and earthly "spiritual" reign was so widespread in mainstream Protestantism that disagreements concerning the Kingdom of God centred less on its transcendent or immanent character and more on the appropriate human means for bringing it about as quickly as possible. By the time Bland was teaching at Wesley, he and many other Canadian Protestant leaders had accepted and acted on the idea that the work of the Christian towards the realization of the Kingdom of God had as much to do with reforming society as it did with saving the individual. This idea of Kingdom embraced by the majority of mainstream Protestants in Canada and the United States was not the apocalyptic, immediate second-coming chiliasm of the premillennialists. Its emphasis was, instead, a progressive Kingdom where the spirit, and not the person of Christ reigned on earth, embodied in harmonious social, economic and political relationships.

The widening acceptance of an "immanent" theology in this period does not indicate a rejection of the "transcendent," but rather an augmentation of the interpretation of God. For people like Dobson, immanence denoted a God active in the world, and obviously part of its development, but, as William McGuire King has made clear, these same social Christians were likely to believe in "a God who is both transcendent and immanent." From this nuanced perspective, then, "God is not the 'Process' but 'the source and guide of all progress.'"³⁵ This blurring of the secular earthly and sacred transcendent worlds that necessarily accompanied the shift in emphasis towards an earthly Kingdom of God, and which was especially obvious in the increased effort to bring Christ's reign about through

³⁵ William McGuire King, "Enthusiasm for Humanity," 71-72 and Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, 95-105.

human-based reform, should not be interpreted, therefore, as a shift away from the traditional emphasis on conversion. The primary concern of Methodist leaders and teachers at the turn-of-the-century remained the salvation of individual souls, so that they would be open to God's guidance. Just as young Presbyterians like George Pidgeon called congregations to the experience of new birth, so too did most young Methodist probationers absorb and disseminate the gospel of individual salvation through conversion.³⁶ It was this practical, evangelical and Kingdom centred faith, and not the radical, political social gospel of Bland's later years, that Hugh Dobson took with him when he left Wesley College in 1908.

III

Contrary to Ramsay Cook's claim that by 1907 "theological liberalism had made such substantial inroads into Canadian Methodism and Presbyterianism that traditional Protestant doctrines were in almost total disarray," for many young clergymen at the turn-of-the-century the opposite was true.³⁷ The intellectual challenges that many historians assume mortally disrupted Canadian Christian development in the late nineteenth century, though they did unsettle some thinkers and ministers, led the majority, like

³⁶ Phyllis Airhart presents compelling evidence that, contrary to the assumption that "evangelistic" preaching aimed at a "verdict" was increasingly forgotten, in the first decade of the twentieth-century the Methodist Church in Canada, including so-called "radical" Methodists like Bland, T. Albert Moore and S.D. Chown, believed and preached that social reform and "Kingdom building" were inseparable from the imperative to convert and save. In the years before the First World War, Airhart notes, "It is difficult to find a Methodist proposal that presents social reform as separate from, let alone taking precedence over, the salvation of individuals." See *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 105-109.

³⁷ Cook, *The Regenerators*, 215. For other, less extreme views of the influence of "liberal" theological perspectives, see Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind*, 178-196 and *passim*; Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*, 111-114; and Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 3 -36.

Hugh Dobson, to a new understanding of traditional truths.³⁸ In the West, the Christian reformist example of teachers like Bland, and of young leaders in Winnipeg like J.S. Woodsworth was powerful, and it encouraged still younger ministers to see their duties in the church in a particularly pragmatic light. Regardless, however, of Cook's assumption of "theological disarray," these same young men did not immediately jettison their traditional inheritances from family and church and fill the theological void with a fundamentally social faith. Indeed, Hugh Dobson was able to develop a pragmatic western faith that mixed easily the imperatives of both tradition and change. Through a careful process of adapting the intellectual and practical influence of active leaders and teachers to the realities he encountered in his pastorates, Dobson was able to fashion a theological and social perspective that was suited to both his religious inheritance and his ministerial circumstance.

In many ways, Dobson's education began as he completed his formal degrees. In 1906, the year he was ordained into the Methodist ministry, he was appointed to a pastoral position in Winnipeg.³⁹ Filling a position recently vacated by J.S. Woodsworth, Dobson became the Associate to William Sparling at Winnipeg's oldest Methodist church. Established in the early 1870s by the pioneering George Young, Grace Methodist was a centre of church activity in the north-west for many years. When Dobson arrived there in 1906, Winnipeg's boom years had spurred notable growth in both the

³⁸ For arguments that liberal influences forced widespread rejection of traditional orthodoxies see David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); A.B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence; Cook, The Regenerators*. For a contrary view of the effects of intellectual challenges, see Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, chaps. 4 -6.

³⁹ Dobson, "Re: Hugh Wesley Dobson." Dobson was ordained at Neepawa, where he first settled when he left Ontario in 1897.

constituency and the mission of the church. This growth, and the challenges presented by the settlement of immigrants and the increase in vice that accompanied the expansion of the city's commercial and population base, made Grace Methodist an attractive placement for a young minister committed to both social and evangelistic activism.⁴⁰ If the Kingdom of God was to be extended, Winnipeg's young, unsettled character and its glorious potential, made the city a particularly attractive place to start, and its call was one that Reverend Dobson responded to with energy and purpose.

Answering "Winnipeg's call" was a popular ministerial activity in those yeasty years. The city was already the home of ministers like Salem Bland who saw the open prairie through the lenses of frontier optimism and Kingdom potential. The discrepancies between labourers and owners, the "problem" and the treatment of immigrants, and the promise of souls and societies to mold attracted many young ministers to the West.⁴¹ Some were following paths laid by their elders who ventured west in less prosperous times, intent like their seniors to cut Canada's newest provinces from Methodist patterns. Though the generations sometimes differed in their aims, with the older often more intent on securing conversions than reforms, they did share a passion for influencing the development of prairie, and therefore Canadian society. This was a passion that was typical of most young Canadian Protestants who entered the ministry in the years after Confederation, and it was a persuasion towards nation building that was shared equally among Presbyterians and Methodists. It is not surprising, then, that it was also very much the passion of Hugh Dobson. His position at Grace in Winnipeg allowed him to develop this national ideal further, partly

⁴⁰ Artibise, *Winnipeg*, 102-125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 178-182.

because of the opportunities he was afforded for “Canadianizing” work among the swelling immigrant populations.

Dobson had both the good luck and the misfortune to replace the outspoken James Shaver Woodsworth.⁴² Woodsworth had been transferred to the urban church in 1902, after he had threatened to resign from the ministry and his isolated pastorate in Keewatin. His reasons for wanting to leave the Methodist clergy were certainly based in some significant theological questioning, but this questioning was not, apparently, an impediment to securing better pastoral assignments.⁴³ In 1906, Woodsworth took a leave of absence from Grace, a result partly of the tension his “sociological” sermons were causing in Winnipeg’s wealthiest congregation.⁴⁴ By 1907, Woodsworth had left Grace and taken over the “immigrant” work at All Peoples Mission.⁴⁵ Sparling was forced to find an associate who was less likely to antagonize the traditional Protestantism of his congregation.

The need for an associate at Grace who could mix the dual priorities of personal evangelism and social service was filled by Hugh Dobson. He was already combining successfully the traditional orthodoxy of his upbringing

⁴² For background on J.S. Woodsworth, see Kenneth W. McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959) and Allen Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J. S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

⁴³ On Woodsworth’s theological questions, see Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1985) 214; on Woodsworth’s use of the threat of resignation for career advancement see Smillie, “The Woodsworths: James and J.S.,” 110 and Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996) 9-13, where the authors contend forcefully that Woodsworth’s “theological questions” were far less “radical” than most of his biographers have presumed. They claim, in fact, that in “certain important respects Woodsworth’s perspectives on theological questions were distinctly more ‘conservative’ than those of his older colleagues, S.D.. Chown and T. Albert Moore” (p. 11).

⁴⁴ Smillie, “The Woodsworths: James and J. S.,” 110.

⁴⁵ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 9.

with an emphasis on the necessity of spreading Anglo-Saxon Protestant truths to the nation and its peoples. His ability to do so, and the willingness of the church to appoint him to Grace Methodist, indicates that mixing the basics of evangelical conversionism and the imperatives of Christian social and moral reformism came easily to Dobson.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, arriving on the heels of a figure as forceful and as controversial as Woodsworth could not have been easy. The placement at Grace was certainly a prestigious one for Dobson, but unease must have accompanied excitement. By 1906, after studies at Wesley and experience in various pastorates, Dobson's theology was reaching a level of maturity that allowed him to begin the process of developing his personal theological and national stance. He was very much a product of his time. The whole gospel of evangelism and social service, designed and employed to ensure the Christianization of Canada's citizens and institutions, was, by now, the essence of Dobson's pastoral theology. His appointment to Grace Methodist church demonstrates not only that he was an exceptional young pastor, but also that his theological perspective, even after years of study at Wesley, was less aggressively geared towards social redemption than the aspiring radical he replaced. The tensions within the congregation at Grace would not have been mitigated by the appointment of an associate just as willing as Woodsworth to ignore the calls for "less ill-digested sociology and more simple gospel preaching."⁴⁷ The reform impulse was by no means contrary to the spirit of the congregations, but it was widely considered to be subordinate to the Methodist imperatives of individual justification and personal holiness.

⁴⁶ A similar argument has been made recently in Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 3-4.

⁴⁷ McNaught, *Prophet in Politics*, 24 and Smillie, "The Woodsworths-James and J.S.," 110.

Dobson was at Grace Methodist church for two years. By 1908 with his degree in divinity completed, he was invited to take a position as a minister in Brandon. Regardless of the invitation, and contrary to his wishes perhaps, Dobson was "appointed" to a circuit, and once again became an itinerant preacher to the communities around Grenfell, Saskatchewan. Before moving west, however, he was married to Edythe Thomas, a "Grace Church girl" whom he met while working there, and who became an important foundation for his increasingly demanding work.⁴⁸ Now, twenty-nine years old and newly married, Dobson had completed the training phase of his ministerial career, and passed all the landmarks of early adulthood. He moved to Saskatchewan with his new wife to assume his first full-time pastorate, and finally fulfilled his vow to Christ, and to T. Albert Moore, to devote his life to building the Kingdom of God.⁴⁹ The literature he was collecting at this time indicates that his social and moral concerns were wide ranging. In the early years of the second decade of the century, Dobson was working to reform the nation and extend the Kingdom through acquiring and disseminating information about issues that ranged from the welfare of children and mothers, to the "white slave" trade to conditions in Canada's urban centres. He was also beginning his lifelong campaign against the availability and consumption of alcohol, and, was, therefore, likely becoming an obvious presence in Christian reform activity on the prairie.⁵⁰

Due likely to his increasing exposure, it was not long before Dobson was lured away from his relatively stable pastorate around Grenfell, to accept

⁴⁸ Dobson, "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON."

⁴⁹ Dobson, "Hugh Wesley Dobson."

⁵⁰ Records relating to Dobson's activity prior to 1913 are scarce, to say the least. It is clear, however, from various sections of his collection of papers, that he was an active reformer, and an avid collector, reader and distributor of Christian reformist literature, from soon after he left Wesley College. See UCBCA, HDP, boxes A1, A2 and A3.

a position on the faculty of the newly established Regina College. This Methodist institution, which was opened for students in the fall of 1911, was created, the directors explained, "to realize a very definite policy -- to fulfill a very distinctive mission." The new college in Regina was not intended "to duplicate or compete in any way with existing institutions," but rather, endeavored to "build up a strong independent educational organization, which would help to meet the needs that are in a measure peculiar to this Western country." Hugh Dobson's practical and evangelical theology, and his understanding of the potentials and the pitfalls of prairie church work, jibed well with this western emphasis, and also with the school's concern "to throw around the student life a moral influence that would make effectively for character and higher citizenship."⁵¹ The opportunity to contribute to the education of young people was attractive not only for the experience a teaching position offered, therefore. Dobson's position as instructor in Biology, and then as registrar, gave him the opportunity to participate directly in forming "new men" from, and for the diverse western population, and thereby allowed him to contribute to extending the Kingdom.⁵² His roles as instructor and administrator, like his roles as preacher and social reformer, had one point: to extend the influence of the church, to christianize and Canadianize the population, and, therefore, to further the rule of the spirit of Christ on earth.

IV

Dobson's social and moral activism, and his growing expertise in a wide variety of reformist causes, did not go unnoticed by his superiors. By 1913, his ability as a lecturer and preacher had become widely known, and his efforts to

⁵¹ *Journal of the Methodist General Conference 1914*, 168.

⁵² Dobson explains his positions at Regina College in "Re: HUGH WESLEY DOBSON."

bring issues like prohibition and child care to the public mind were being recognized not only in the Saskatchewan and Manitoba conferences, but at headquarters in Toronto as well. When the decision was made to appoint a western field secretary for the Methodist Department of Social Service and Evangelism, Dobson's name rose quickly to the top of the list.⁵³ It is unlikely that Dobson received the appointment based on his expertise in social issues alone. As the only field secretary, Dobson reported directly to the influential General Secretary of the Department, and his close personal friend, T. Albert Moore. Though the Methodist Department had been established in 1902, when Moore took over its leadership in 1910, "there was a decisive shift in emphasis away from narrowly conceived moral reform, and that quintessentially Methodist concern with temperance."⁵⁴ As a result, this department, which was established in part to elevate the stature of social reform in the church, became a more broadly focused, aggressive and, ultimately very powerful division.

Like other mainline evangelical denominations in North America in the early years of the twentieth century, the Methodist Church, Canada established a bureaucratic arm to represent the church's endeavors in social and moral reform. From the beginning, the emphasis in the Methodist Department was on propagating the gospel of social reform, a reality substantiated by the other, more awkward names it carried. Known in its early manifestations as "Temperance and Moral Reform," the Department

⁵³ Moore's offer of the position, including an outline of duties and Dobson's acceptance are found in UCBCA, HDP, box A11, file G. On the significance of Dobson's appointment, see Robert K. Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia 1917-1981* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995) 25.

⁵⁴ On the early development and leadership of the roughly equivalent Methodist and Presbyterian departments, see Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 20-22, and Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 102.

quickly took to the title of Social Service and Evangelism, one which it maintained more or less intact until it was absorbed into the United Church.⁵⁵ The social gospel roots of these departments in the various denominations are obvious; their duties were often described in the reformist language that saw the “application of the principles of the Gospel of Jesus to the Economic, Political, Social and Moral relations of life” as a central function of the church.⁵⁶ But the evangelicalism that fostered the social gospel demanded that reform and “Christianization” not be separated from the imperative to save souls, and so “evangelism” remained a central part of the mission of the various boards before and after church union. Though the priority of one over the other sometimes shifted in the current thought of departmental leaders, the assumption that reform work could be successful without active evangelism was rare and certainly not popular.⁵⁷ Hugh Dobson’s mixed inheritance of both traditional, personal Methodism and progressive, socially conscious faith, had, by the time he took control of the

⁵⁵ The change of name to Social Service and Evangelism came in 1914, one year after Dobson’s appointment to the Department. In explaining the change, the Department noted that when it “was organized, eleven years ago, its chief work was expected to be the problem of Prohibition. To-day, while it gives no less care to this work, it stands for an evangelism as intense as that of the apostolic Church, and a social service as wide as the laws of the Kingdom of God demand in their application to the complex conditions of our rapidly changing country.” See the report on “Temperance, Prohibition and Moral Reform” in the Methodist Church, *Minutes of Conferences 1913*, 392.

⁵⁶ This Methodist motto was inscribed on the Departmental letterhead for a number of years.

⁵⁷ This whole gospel perspective was, in fact, departmental orthodoxy. When the General Board of the re-organized and re-named Department of Social Service and Evangelism met in 1914, it released a statement explaining the theological position undergirding its operations: “It is the conviction of this Board that no antagonism exists between Evangelism and Social Service. They should never be separated. They are not competing programmes of church activity. Both must be stressed in the successful work of the church. The evangelist and the social worker can have no contradiction of religious ideals and must co-operate to secure success in their endeavors. They are the complement to each other. Evangelism needs social service to give direction to the life and activities of the sinner saved by grace; social service needs evangelism to secure the proper spirit in the worker and permanence to his work.” See the report on “Social Service and Evangelism” in the *Methodist Year Book 1915*, 115.

Department's western programs, flowered into a complete and comfortable theology. He was most well-known, perhaps, for his sometimes outspoken views on "prohibition" and "Canadianization," but he never separated these public concerns from his continuing faith in the regenerating power of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Because his theology was nuanced this way, and because his experience was more typical than exceptional, he was an excellent choice to assume such a significant position.⁵⁸

There was much good fortune in Dobson's appointment to Social Service and Evangelism. He joined just as the Department, now fully under T. Albert Moore's influential sway, was becoming powerful. Inter-denominational links forged in the second decade of the twentieth century strengthened both the exposure and the influence of the departments of the major denominations. Moreover, the broadened scope of the Methodist division initiated by T.A. Moore had the effect of extending its influence and exposure. The Department's moral and social emphases, all of which were intended to extend the Kingdom of God "to the complex conditions of our rapidly changing country" fit well with Dobson's own theological priorities. Like the powerful leaders under whom he worked, including Moore and S.D. Chown, Dobson was part of the progressive effort to Christianize, and thereby to Canadianize, the ever-complicated mix of people populating the farms and cities between the seas. In this era of almost hegemonic church influence in social reform and cultural development, to be a leader of Social Service and Evangelism was to be at the forefront of national change. Aside from elevating Dobson well beyond the limited circle of congregations and students

⁵⁸ On this point see the various writings of John Webster Grant and particularly "What's Past is Prologue," in Peter Gordon White (ed.), *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) 130-134.

provided by his previous work, the new position gave him a much enlarged pulpit from which he could communicate his own passions. More importantly, it gave him an influential and visible platform from which he could attempt to infuse his understanding of the national role of the church into the ministers and congregations under his purview.

Even with this power, however, communicating the whole gospel of social and individual regeneration to the people of western Canada was, as it turned out, no easy task. Though many of the churchmen with whom Dobson worked accepted, and often influenced, the essentials of his pragmatic evangelical faith, the congregations of the nation were often less accepting of his social and moral message. Because of his indefatigable passion for the reforms he advocated and the issues he publicized, for the first years of his time with the Department, he felt compelled to emphasize the activist message of his evangelically based social Christianity. Congregations exposed to the message of hygiene, child welfare and temperance were often unreceptive, and sometimes untactfully dismissive. An abiding popular attachment to an evangelical tradition that emphasized individual and personal *over* collective religious work made the widespread acceptance of Dobson's whole gospel of evangelism *and* social service difficult.

As a result, recognizing the ease with which the population accepted the personal aspects of that gospel, Dobson and many of his reform-inclined colleagues put their energies into balancing the whole gospel through the evangelism of social service. They were, as many histories of this period demonstrate, intent on spreading the gospel of social and moral reform.⁵⁹ But Dobson and others concentrated on a *social* gospel to correct a perceived

⁵⁹ See, for example, Allen, *The Social Passion*; Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*.

imbalance in the *whole* gospel. This sincere effort to spread the gospel of Christ to the nation and to make the country “healthier” through temperance crusades, hygiene lectures and Lord’s Day protests, was more than the manifestation of an “essentially social religion.” The ministers of the Protestant churches who were entrusted after Confederation with building a Christian nation from the disparate, and often “non-Anglo-Saxon” people who were populating Canada, understood, perhaps better than others, that this was a troublesome assignment. To do so required making “new people” for a new country, and it required, therefore, a gospel as complicated as its intended audience. In the minds of committed progressives like those in the various departments of Evangelism and Social Service, there were no simple ways of building the Kingdom of God in Canada. For his part, Hugh Dobson understood that progress in Christianizing the nation required a willingness to balance the gospel necessary for that task, through the introduction of ideas that were not necessarily popular.

Nuanced religious thought is too often associated with elite theological constructions. In the first decades of the new century, however, truly perceptive church thought was emanating mainly from the practical encounters between Canadian Protestants and the dynamic populations of the expanding nation. These encounters encouraged denominational leaders to expand their understanding of Christian directives to “save,” to “regenerate” and to create “new men for God.” This older, individualistic rhetoric, which was standard evangelical language in the nineteenth century, necessarily formed the basis of new conceptions of the gospel in the twentieth. Phyllis Airhart has suggested that the language of the personal experience of justification and sanctification was absorbed easily into the language of

progressive social Christianity.⁶⁰ This transposition of the language of personal salvation to the realm of social action did not, however, reduce its evangelistic intent. Rather, the new circumstances that early twentieth-century churchmen encountered led them to a wider gospel that emphasized equally the need to create both new people for God and new citizens for Canada. In the cultural environment in which this whole gospel developed, most Canadians already understood the language of personal, Christ-centred “new birth;” the new language of social service and moral reform for the sake of making Canada “His Dominion” had, however, to be taught. In the early decades of the twentieth century, therefore, evangelists of the whole gospel, which carried both social and individual imperatives, fought more aggressively on the social front, where the battles had just begun, and less so on the individual front, where, for the time being, the war was won.

The fronts of this “war on ignorance” were often drawn at the pulpit. Dobson and his colleagues spent a good deal of their time literally “preaching to the converted” – but the gospel of reform that they were preaching was still new in many rural congregations used to traditional, biblically-based and personally directed spiritual messages from the pulpit. Social concerns expressed through talk of venereal disease or “white slavery” were, therefore, unsettling, and sometimes passionately resisted. As leader of the Methodist efforts in evangelism and social service in the West, Dobson was at the centre of these conflicts. His correspondence from this period with his superior Moore suggests that these leaders saw the propagation of the more nuanced whole gospel as their particular battle, and that they considered themselves at war with older ideas. The battlefields of this conflict were often the churches

⁶⁰ Airhart, *Serving the Present Age*; Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full -Orbed Christianity*, 42-43.

of the nation, as the church-sponsored social reformer, activist and hygiene expert Beatrice Brigden discovered. When she attempted to communicate her social message in the rural communities of the West and the Maritimes, Brigden was often left to her own resources, forgotten, ignored and sometimes explicitly refused access to the congregations of "conservative" ministers. Much of the hostility towards her message stemmed from its scandalous "sexual" content, but the level of the reaction indicates, as Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau have argued, that church sponsored reformism was often viewed with trepidation in rural congregations.⁶¹

But battles for theological, and therefore institutional, territory were fought more obviously in district, conference and General Conference meetings. Moore and Dobson communicated often about the needs of the age and the role of the church and it is clear that they were encountering resistance to their social Christian emphases for a number of years. Moore wrote to Dobson in 1918 to inform him "that a desperate effort is being made by some of the Brethren who, by the way, have never been outstandingly successful, in Evangelism, to put over on the Church the old type of Evangelism and to insist upon the Department engaging one or two special men whom they think are wonderful on these lines." Moore was not much concerned, however, about this conservative onslaught, for he predicted confidently that "we will win out during this Conference."⁶² Regardless of Moore's confidence, the tone of his missive indicates that, on the one hand

⁶¹ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 24-34.

⁶² UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (1), Moore to Dobson, June 10, 1919. By 1919, Methodist General Conference directives on "evangelism" were sounding very much like the whole gospel that was popular in the Department of Evangelism and Social Service. See, *ibid.*, Moore to Dear Brother, November 9, 1918.

the battles for the acceptance of their whole gospel were being won, but on the other, that the war was far from over.⁶³

The tenacity of the more exclusively individualistic understanding of evangelism is surprising, not simply because of its persistence in an era in which some interpreters have argued traditional evangelical theology was all but dead in the mainstream, but also because the “evangelism” that Moore and Dobson had espoused was not antithetical to older, less complex interpretations of the gospel. Though they did tend to concentrate on social and moral issues like prohibition, their progressive gospel was not a gospel of social salvation. Even as they lectured on a variety of social issues, they continued to stress the “value of professional evangelism,” “pastoral evangelism” and “personal evangelism,” and did not replace individual salvation with social regeneration.⁶⁴ In their theology, salvation of the individual was of paramount importance, but they stressed that it alone was not enough. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau underestimated the centrality of this primary imperative to save individuals when they argued recently that ministers and leaders interested in social and moral reform in the early twentieth century used “the spiritual quickening brought about by evangelism” as an “effective instrument for educating traditional Protestants in the outlook of the new Christianity whose dominant goal was social salvation.” In such an interpretation, evangelism becomes simply a tool by which people in the pew are “converted” to a social gospel perspective, and personal salvation is separated unnaturally from the drive to reform

⁶³ Richard Allen's account of the popularity of radical, socialistic proposals at district conferences in this period suggests that Moore's concerns were unnecessary, but not unfounded. See *The Social Passion*, 70-79.

⁶⁴ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(3), Moore to Dobson, November 22, 1918, 4.

society.⁶⁵ For evangelists of the whole gospel, however, including Presbyterians like George Pidgeon and the Methodist Dobson, evangelism was not a tool for social salvation, but rather a central Christian requirement and an indispensable first step in Kingdom work. True social reform -- effective Kingdom work -- could only be achieved by *Christians*, those people who had a personal relationship with Christ. The church Dobson and Moore supported, and fought for, had, in Moore's words, "the grave responsibility ... to carry on an aggressive evangelistic effort which will not only appeal to the individual to get right with God, but will also carry with it the higher purpose of an Evangelism which will include the whole of life, not only of the individual, but also the community, the nation, and the world, in the Kingdom of God."⁶⁶ As the name of their Department suggested, for its leaders, the imperatives of Social Service and Evangelism were equally important. "These two things," Dobson wrote to the ministers of the western conferences in 1918, "are one and not twain."⁶⁷

Even with this traditional concern for the personal relationship of the sinner with Christ, Dobson has been interpreted as a social gospeller overly

⁶⁵ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 55-57, 72-74 and 242. Some in the department were, in fact, making the contrary argument that raising social consciousness would lead to evangelistic success. In 1918, W.W. Andrews wrote to Moore arguing that "We must learn to convict men of sin, of social sin." Reminding people of their "meanness," "barbarism," "lack of good sportsmanship," and "cowardly acceptance of special privilege with its injustice" would surely "lead to repentance." "This work," he concluded "should climax in conversions." See UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (3), Andrews to Dr. Moore, September 1, 1918.

⁶⁶ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(3), Moore to Dobson, November 22, 1918. In the same letter, Moore stated the same idea differently when he argued that planning for two weeks of special evangelistic services was valuable "not merely to stress the invitation of the individual to give himself to Christ, but to effectively appeal to the Christian people to re-dedicate themselves as workers for Christ in the building of His Kingdom in their own community."

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Dear Brother, November 14, 1918.

concerned with “regenerating society.”⁶⁸ The characterization, while not entirely correct, is understandable. Dobson was very obviously concerned with the social implications of his, and his denomination’s, faith. As his passion for “Canadianizing” and Kingdom work increased, so too did his pronouncements concerning the social aspects of Christian faith and his sometimes radical condemnations of “present evils.”⁶⁹ And as Dobson continued to critique and to encourage reformism on his almost continuous lecture and preaching tours, his notoriety increased (a result of his work that Moore noted and appreciated.)⁷⁰ This exposure gave Dobson a platform from which to speak, and the message he carried was the social side of the whole gospel. Indeed, in the second decade of the twentieth century, Dobson, like many Protestant leaders in Canada, would become almost exclusively concerned with propagating the social message he believed was essential to the Christian gospel and to proper national development. Already by the time

⁶⁸ David R. Elliot, “Hugh Wesley Dobson (1879-1956): Regenerator of Society,” *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers*, 9 (1991-1992) 28-34. In this article, Elliot attempts to position Dobson within Richard Allen’s categories of social gospel thought in Canada. Given Dobson’s concern for both evangelism and social service, Elliot concluded, not entirely erroneously, that he was a “progressive social gospeller.” Within the categories established by Allen, Elliot’s characterization is warranted. It is frustrating, however, that Elliot, like so many historians of Canadian culture, assumed, with Ramsay Cook, that Christian association with social reformism was somehow objectively destructive of tradition and intrinsically blameworthy. In an extreme example of this tendency, Elliot concluded his article by commenting that “Dobson could be accused of focusing more on social service and thus secularizing Christianity by not addressing the ultimate questions of philosophy and theology.” (p. 37)

⁶⁹ Dobson was often criticized, and even harassed because of his harsh and unflinching critiques of the liquor trade, gambling and the perceived permissiveness of society. In one instance, while visiting a town on the coast of British Columbia, Dobson was locked in his hotel room and kept from spreading his temperance message. David Elliot has noted the extent and nature of these reactions against Dobson’s social reform agenda in *ibid.*, 32-33 and 35.

⁷⁰ In a letter sent in 1918, Moore noted Dobson’s exposure, commenting that “Your work has never gripped the people in the West so strong as this year. The references in newspapers and occasional references in letters all indicate the great work that you are doing.” See UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(4), Moore to Dear Brother Dobson, March 18, 1918.

he became a Field Secretary in 1913, Dobson had recognized that social Christian concerns were already receiving wide attention in many parts of the church. Nevertheless, in the years that followed, he continued to emphasize the denomination's social obligations lest they become lost in the confusion of debates over church union or in the challenges of reconstruction after the Great War.⁷¹

By some measures, his evangelism of the social Christian message had been all too effective. The declaration of war in 1914 heralded an exciting era of social cooperation and success in moral reform that churches applauded throughout the conflict. As Michael Bliss and Richard Allen have noted, during the war cooperative economic activity, community-based aid and even state and private efforts in settling immigrants and helping the needy became more common. By war's end in 1918, the long fight for prohibition had been almost universally won and a public consciousness which emphasized cooperation and mutual concern had been fostered by the unifying force of the first national war effort.⁷² Church initiated reform was becoming standard in the secular sphere.

By 1918, however, Dobson was growing concerned that social and moral reform activity was becoming separated from denominational work and, therefore, that the once solid evangelical leadership in these areas might be threatened. Since 1913, he had favoured cooperation with other denominations and organizations, and noted in 1918 that "there is a very great need to prevent overlapping." In these years, he had supported the

⁷¹ These circumstances are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

⁷² J.M. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 44 (September, 1968) and Allen, *The Social passion*, 63-80; David Marshall argued, to the contrary, that the devastating effects of the war led many people, and churches, to question the basic assumptions of social Christianity. See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 156-180.

inter-denominational Social Service Council of Canada. This Council, which was created in 1908 to represent the combined social efforts of the Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches, was founded principally to exert political pressure for temperance legislation. Noting this mandate in 1908, the eminent Methodist activist Samuel Dwight Chown worried that the Council's efforts would leave him with nothing to do.⁷³ In the environment of almost universal legal prohibition in 1918, and as the Council increased its areas of moral and social concern, Dobson began to worry that the Social Service Council of Canada was taking over the work of the churches. He asserted to Moore, therefore, that:

It must be insisted too that we have to do this work within our churches. The ends we seek are not merely the securing of laws and law enforcement, but the securing of a well-informed body of Christians whose attitude of mind will be right on all social, economic questions. We won't hand over Social Service work to outside committees because Social Service work is Christian work, and to hand over Social Service work to other bodies is essentially to hand over the work of the Church. While the Methodist Church exists as a Christian institution my conviction is that it must do Social Service work.⁷⁴

Like Chown before him, Dobson was concerned that if "outside committees" took over the churches' social and moral reform efforts, they would in effect be taking the churches' work.

Statements like these, where Dobson and other church leaders so obviously link ecclesiastical work with social service, have been interpreted by some to signify an "unorthodox" sea-change in the self-understanding of

⁷³ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 208-209. The Social Service Council's mandate and activity after the war is discussed also in Allen, *The Social Passion*, 65-68.

⁷⁴ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(4), Dobson to Dr. Moore, May 21, 1918. Richard Allen discusses the migration of social Christian ideas into the mainstream of national and provincial politics and secular and church-based organizations in *The Social Passion*, 198-218.

the Canadian Protestant churches.⁷⁵ Dobson never contended, however, that social service was the only work of the church. Indeed, his insistence that social work be carried on within the churches underlines the complexity of his interpretation of the gospel. The Canadian churches' social service agenda required not only citizens committed to service, but also, as Dobson made clear, *Christian* citizens informed of the importance and necessity of proper social and economic relations.⁷⁶ This faith in the ability of Christians to redeem and reform the nation is precisely why Dobson chose not to "leave the church and enter politics." While other social activists associated with Methodism, including J.S. Woodsworth, William Ivens and A.E. Smith pursued social reform outside the "restrictive" walls of the mainstream church, Dobson maintained his belief that the national social change for which he worked so vigorously *was* church work. For Dobson, then, like so many of his contemporaries who were not social radicals, leaving the church made little sense. Though Dobson was certain that simply converting people was not enough, he was equally convinced that social service without Christian commitment was empty, even wasted effort.⁷⁷ All of his work was

⁷⁵ This is an assumption peculiar to those who argue for secularization. See, for example, Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*.

⁷⁶ In a 1918 letter to a minister who asked Dobson's advice about the best place to conduct social work, Dobson noted that many ministers were leaving the church to pursue social work in the secular realm and argued that "I find more opportunity to serve than I am able, either physically or mentally, to make use of, within the conditions of the church." It is clear from his response to the query that Dobson felt that the church was the best institution from which to effect significant social change. See UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file H, Dobson to W.J. Haggith, March 14, 1918.

⁷⁷ It is worthwhile noting again that Dobson's position was typical of the Methodist, and particularly the Departmental theological stance in the years preceding church union. In its 1915 report, the Department argued that "The inward weakness and soul taint of sin, which are always more fatal than any outward conditions, however unfavorable, can find cleansing and forgiveness and regeneration for the better life among men, only in Him who is both Lord and Saviour." Through this argument for individual "surrender to Jesus," who "alone is the Saviour from sin," the departmental report maintained that "surrender must be complete" and "that the implications of Christian discipleship must be followed to the end: that the whole man in all his network of relations, family, civic, economic, must be

directed by this conversionist imperative. It was not enough, he believed, simply to have a social conscience, or even to make the laws of the land Christian. The point of his church work was much more universal; it was intended, as was all his activity, to help usher in the Kingdom of God, and the rule of the spirit of Christ, in Canada.

V

This theological and practical emphasis on Christian inspired nation and Kingdom building was the *sine qua non* of Dobson's church work. His whole gospel perspective was demonstrated by his assertion in 1919 that "the Religious appeal ultimately, is the strongest and the most enduring of all appeals for human betterment."⁷⁸ This belief was the natural product of a theology that was forged in the heat of Canada's complicated social journey into the twentieth century. Progress, the by-word of Christian and of national development in the last decades of the nineteenth century, was a key component of Dobson's faith. "Betterment," in humans and, therefore, in their societies, was the basis of his, and much of his generation's, understanding of the Christian gospel; salvation through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ for those with faith remained, of course, central to this gospel.⁷⁹ But it was also much more. The "good news" that Dobson preached included not only the message that individual Christians would be

dominated by the leavening influences of the Gospel of Christ." "It is ours to help build the Kingdom of God on earth," the report concluded, and this end was to be achieved through "conquer[ing] the world for Him" by saving souls first and then enlisting "Christ's witnesses" to overthrow a multitude of evils from drunkenness to immoral entertainments. The Kingdom was to be established, in other words, through equal measures of Social Service and Evangelism. See the report of the Department of Social Service and Evangelism in *The Methodist Yearbook 1915*, 120.

⁷⁸ Elliot, "Hugh Wesley Dobson," 35. This quote from a letter to a minister who was leaving the ministry, May, 1919.

⁷⁹ Work "for the betterment of the people" was a concept that was central to the Department of Social Service and Evangelism's understanding of its work. See, for example, *The Methodist Yearbook 1915*, 120.

saved, but also the social Christian belief that these same Christians would, with effort, help to make Canada a Christian nation, and thereby facilitate the extension of the Kingdom of God.

In the last years of the second decade of the century, and in the shadow of the social unrest in the western provinces, many Canadian Protestants were convinced, perhaps more than ever, of the need for unified Christian effort to bring “the principles of the Gospel of Jesus to the Economic, Political, Social and Moral relations of life.” After the war, mainstream Protestant efforts for the Kingdom intensified. As always, however, “Kingdom work” began with individual work; the “promotion of evangelism” and the “Christianization” of Canada’s population were the essential starting points of the Methodist and Presbyterian programs of “aggressive evangelism” in the immediate post-war era. The two pronged and intimately connected efforts of the departments of Evangelism and Social Service were suited particularly well to a nation recovering from four years of losses and sacrifices to war. The emphasis in the whole gospel on salvation for individuals and their societies through active evangelization and social reformism was not only appropriate for a nation wondering about redemption and rebuilding after the war; because its theological assumptions were shared almost universally across denominational lines, the whole gospel was increasingly important for Protestant churches wondering about the possibility of a united effort for Kingdom building in Canada. These similarities in denominational goals and methods after the war encouraged increased effort for the creation of a United Church. For his part, Dobson’s position as a leader in this Kingdom work suited him perfectly for the various social and ecclesiastical efforts in which he participated after 1918.

Thus, with the combined inheritance of his late nineteenth century Methodist upbringing and the social passion of his western education and experience intact, Dobson entered the unsettling experiences of reconstruction, church union and the devastating “years of crisis” that followed quickly on its heels, with the optimistic vigor that characterized his early church work. And even as his enthusiasm for building the Kingdom of God on earth, and particularly as his concern for a Christian Canada propelled him into new areas of church work, and into a new church, Dobson maintained his faith in the many layers of the whole gospel. As he was to learn, however, his was a faith that became increasingly difficult to defend as the nation he struggled to make Christian encountered the ravages of the Great Depression and the modernity of a second world war.

Chapter Six

“Refining the Whole:” Hugh Dobson and the Gospels of Tradition and Change

In a Bloor Street sermon preached in January, 1925, George Pidgeon noted that when British immigrants established the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregationalist churches in Canada, they “knew right well that the new conditions of a new land would bring out a Christian life peculiarly its own.”¹ Pidgeon’s goal in this pro-union sermon was to suggest that if Christianity was to prosper, especially in new circumstances, it had to be willing to change. In the years leading up to church union, Hugh Dobson agreed with his Presbyterian colleague. Indeed, in the circumstance of the expanding and demographically diverse western provinces, the Methodist Field Secretary responsible for evangelism and social service understood, perhaps better than almost any other Canadian churchperson, that success in the “new land” and among the “new people” of the prairie required a church adaptive in both method and message to the exigencies of change. As he surveyed the western territory and its disparate population and landscape, Dobson remained convinced that the twin emphases of the whole gospel were the necessary foundations of any effective program of Canadianization and Christianization. But his experiences on numerous tours in the vast territory between Winnipeg and Vancouver had convinced him also that Christian work could only be successful there if it were adapted to the diverse needs, and the various audiences it was intended to address. In the midst of shifting ecclesiastical and social circumstances, negotiating the demands of tradition and change within the parameters of the whole gospel, and protecting the

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives, George Campbell Pidgeon Papers, box 39, file 975, “Spiritual Descent,” 6-7.

goals of his practical evangelicalism, became important parts of Dobson's western work in the 1920s. Through the social unrest in Winnipeg after the end of the Great War, and through the discussions, and local unions, that led to The United Church of Canada, Hugh Dobson honed his interpretation of the whole gospel for the 1920s.

I

Perhaps the most significant of the many preludes to the developments in Canadian Protestantism in the middle decades of the twentieth century was the First World War. Much of the scholarly interpretation of this period presumes that the Great War encouraged the mainstream churches to re-assess the assumptions of their Kingdom work. These arguments maintain that in the face of the "scientific butchery" of the war, the widespread belief in "progress" became just another casualty.² For some, of course, and particularly for those who insisted on saving societies over individuals, the horrors of the war were enough to force a re-evaluation of the potential of collective human righteousness. For many of these radical social gossellers, the goal of salvation through revolutionary social alteration became far less tangible and the methods of achieving it less clear.

For many more, however, the war was a powerful reminder that the work of Kingdom and nation building was difficult. Regardless of the goals accomplished during the war, its devastating effects suggested that progress towards the Kingdom was not linear, but rather beset by the hills and valleys of achievement and disappointment. Of course, this was not news. Social

² See David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 156-180; Robert A. Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in G.A. Rawlyk, (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) 144-145.

Christians like Hugh Dobson certainly held progress as a central aspect of their faith; Kingdom building, like nation building was a slow, evolutionary process of identifying and then removing social evil. As William McGuire King has explained, Protestant "Progressives" rarely assumed that progress was inevitable. Evangelists of the Kingdom in Canada, like Dobson, were convinced of the "possibility of progress," but not necessarily certain of progress itself. Progress towards the rule of the spirit of Christ on earth required the willful effort of Canadian Christians and devotion to the basics of Christian social reform, conditions that were fostered and nurtured by individual Christian commitment.³ From this perspective, then, catastrophes like war were more likely to encourage increased Kingdom work than to destroy the faith of social Christians. For these leaders, including Hugh Dobson and his colleagues in the Methodist Department of Social Service and Evangelism, the war was certainly a powerful reminder that the Christian Kingdom was not imminent. The issues the war raised, however, did not necessarily inspire these men to re-evaluate and re-prioritize their theologies.

Much of the denominational introspection that did take place was, in fact, economic. In 1918, pressured by the war's effects on its coffers, the Methodist Church established a "Committee on Overlapping" which made recommendations to curb spending. One of these recommendations was to remove evangelism from the work of the Department of Social Service and Evangelism and make it the responsibility of other departments. This idea, of course, ran counter to the theological and practical assumptions of those who managed the Department, and they rejected the suggestion. Instead, the

³ William McGuire King, "An enthusiasm for humanity: the social emphasis in religion and its accommodation in Protestant theology," in Michael J. Lacey (ed.), *Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Cambridge University Press, 1989) 68-71.

Department proposed that the General Conference “give an immediate and full recognition to what we are convinced is a call of God to lead the people of this country into a closer fellowship with [Christ], a deeper experience of religion, and more earnest personal service to the Kingdom of God.” This call for recognition of the evangelistic opportunity the war’s end presented was augmented by the call for a practical, “aggressive and responsible effort to enlist the lives of the masses of people now outside the Church” into active service for the Kingdom of God. And, finally, as if to make their attachment to evangelism perfectly clear, the representatives from the Department of Social Service and Evangelism who were considering the recommendations on over-lapping asked that the General Conference endorse their proposal that “evangelism” take priority in the Department’s name. All these recommendations were passed, and in 1918 the Department of Social Service and Evangelism became known as “Evangelism and Social Service.”⁴ In this period, ministers like Hugh Dobson were struggling to impress the importance of Christian social reform on the congregations of the nation. Nevertheless, the response of the Department to the suggestion that social service should become its only concern demonstrated clearly that for those who were concerned with moral and social reform, evangelism remained an essential and central component of that work.

Because of the war’s powerful example of the need and the potential for increased Kingdom work on all fronts, the Department made these changes to its name, while concomitantly issuing increasingly radical, almost socialistic pronouncements concerning the “planning” of the Canadian

⁴ *Journal of the Methodist General Conference 1918*, 334.

economy and labour issues.⁵ The works of the American Baptist social gospel thinker Walter Rauschenbusch had become popular reading among those who headed the Department, just as departmental pamphlets that touted the need for evangelism were being distributed throughout the church.⁶ Holding these two post-war thrusts for “aggressive” evangelism and “aggressive” social change together was the departmental orthodoxy that “Never for one moment will there come to [the church’s] mind a thought that either of these phases of service to humanity conflicts with the other, or that both together make too big a task for the Church to undertake.”⁷ Though particular emphases may have been pursued more aggressively in the difficult years following the war, small variations in thought and activity did not represent a change in theological direction for the Department or for the church -- Kingdom building through evangelism and social service, even during the difficult years of reconstruction, remained the central preoccupation of the Methodist Church.

And so it went for mainstream Protestantism in the aftermath of the First World War. For Dobson, and for his colleagues in the Department of Evangelism and Social Service, the war was a catalyst for heightened effort on all fronts of their national mission. This tack may have required more effort

⁵ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 63-79.

⁶ On Rauschenbusch see UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(3), W. W. Andrews to Dr Moore, October 20, 1918. Marguerite Van Die has demonstrated that Rauschenbusch was compulsory ministerial reading by 1914. See *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989) 173-174. On Evangelism see the various departmental publications that followed the 1918 General Conference's call for more aggressive evangelistic effort. In particular, see UCBCA, HDP, box A2, file G, “Evangelism,” and “Intensive Evangelism.”

⁷ Report on “Social Service and Evangelism,” *Methodist Year Book 1915*, 115.

from the already over-worked clergy, but it did not require a new theology.⁸ The accepted blueprint for national Kingdom work was already well-known, and explained in the nuances of the whole gospel.⁹ It is perhaps more useful, therefore, to interpret the character of post-war Canadian Protestantism in terms of “aggressive” continuity, not significant change.

For Dobson, who was by 1918 a well established and powerful Methodist presence in the West, aggressive continuity meant increased work on all fronts of the battle for the Kingdom of God. Just days after the official end of the conflict in Europe, Dobson wrote to ministers under his jurisdiction to inform them of the General Conference commitment to social reconstruction and of “the inauguration of a nation wide Evangelistic Campaign.” Like the Kingdom work that was so important to the Department of Evangelism and Social Service before the war, the post-war work was based in the dual imperatives of the whole gospel; the social and the evangelistic were, Dobson emphasized, the same thing.¹⁰ Interpretation of this post-war period has been confused by the mainstream churches’ apparently conflicting approaches to reconstruction. While some historians have argued that the churches abandoned the liberal emphases of the social gospel in favor of a more “evangelical” approach, others have maintained that Canada’s Protestant churches, and particularly the Methodists, increased their social

⁸ For details of the expectations placed on chronically over-worked and under-paid Methodist clergymen in the early decades of the century, see Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996) 23-24.

⁹ This emphasis on the whole gospel was not restricted to the Department, but was the approach of the “vast majority of Methodists” who “continued to call for a sensible blending of evangelistic and social-service work.” On this point see Neil Semple, *The Lord’s Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996) 408.

¹⁰ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore(3), Dobson to Dear Brother, November 14, 1918.

Christian activities at war's end.¹¹ The reality is, more likely, that the churches were not attached to any particular method of assuring the continued development of the Kingdom in Canada; the war had strengthened their commitment to all forms of Christian service, including their traditional concern for evangelism *and* social service.

Nonetheless, in the years following the First War, some cracks did begin to appear in the whole gospel orthodoxy. Although, the various efforts to redeem the nation do not indicate rejection of the dual streams of the whole gospel, the differences among church people do suggest that for some, more singular attachment to one or the other method made sense in the post-war era. In the period directly after the war, and indeed for much of the 1920s and beyond, discussions about the best method for making Canada and its peoples "Christian," and about what "Christian" meant, became more prevalent. The whole gospel orthodoxy of the Methodist church was too restrictive for some ministers who, like the activists James S. Woodsworth and A.E. Smith, left the church because they felt, as Smith told a labour church congregation, "it was next to impossible to preach the genuine gospel of Christ in the churches."¹² Both of these men had been active in the Winnipeg labour movement before the General Strike of 1919 and both cited the insurmountable "dominance of the church's affairs by a wealthy business

¹¹ Michael Bliss has argued that "Methodists in 1918 were ready to participate in the creation of a peacetime community as unified and egalitarian as the wartime society" and noted that "It is surprising how many other Canadians shared their determination." See J.M. Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 44 (September, 1968). A contrary argument is found in Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 156-180.

¹² Richard Allen, *The Social passion*, 116. On Woodsworth's resignation see Allen, *The Social Passion*, 49-50; Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 9-12; Allen Mills, *Fool for Christ: The Political Thought of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 56; Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1985) 220-221.

élite” as a reason for resignation.¹³ For the overwhelming majority of Methodist ministers, however, the denominational orthodoxy, and even the influence of business interests, were acceptable and they continued to work for the Kingdom through the Methodist church. But even this majority who stayed and who continued to preach a unified gospel of evangelism and social service, were more likely than previously to concentrate their efforts on one or the other part of Kingdom building.

Dobson’s continued attachment to the dual priorities of the whole gospel notwithstanding, in the years leading up to union the social parts of his faith remained his central concern. This was by no means a radical change in theological direction; social Christianity had always maintained a prominent place in his understanding of Kingdom work, and in his personal passions. But, even as many around him spoke more clearly than they had for years about the church’s need to “intensify her evangelistic spirit and activities,” Dobson was increasingly convinced that the war had ushered in a “new world” that required a new church designed in thought and action to keep up, and to guide. The need for guidance during the period of reconstruction was clear on the prairies, and particularly in Winnipeg, “the most volatile of Canadian communities.” The activities of outspoken reformers like Woodsworth, Smith and their colleague, the labour church minister William Ivens, had encouraged a form of labour radicalism in Winnipeg that was both well-subscribed and legitimized by its connection, through some of its leaders, to the Methodist Church. The business interests

¹³ Mills, *Fool for Christ*, 56; Allen, *The Social Passion*, 50 and 116.

of the city were equally well-supported and had, because of their influence over the governance of the city, developed an "aggressive self-confidence."¹⁴

In April 1919, the disagreements between the two groups, which had been increasing since the turn of the century, evolved into a general sympathetic strike by Winnipeg's workers. The business people of the city, and indeed many in the country believed the strike had little to do with workers' concerns, and interpreted it as the revolutionary stirrings of foreign Bolsheviks who intended to destroy the "Canadian way of life." With rhetoric couched in the symbols of British loyalty and Canadian freedom, the conflict with the strikers was presented as a war against "Bolshevik conspiracy." In this atmosphere, labour had little hope for victory, and when the strike ended with arrests and bloodshed in June, businessmen, politicians and more conservative social Christians alike were pleased at the demise and disarray of "revolutionary" action on the prairie.¹⁵ The West, alas, was not red.

Dobson found blame for the strike in "the indifference of the vast mass of comfortable people of Canada to the conditions of the uncomfortable, and in the selfishness of stand-patism."¹⁶ Notwithstanding this support for "the uncomfortable," and his disdain for conservatism, when confronted with the obvious power of the labour churches in Winnipeg, Dobson expressed concern about the future direction of the mainline churches, and the loss of some outspoken ministers.¹⁷ Almost a year to the day after the end of the

¹⁴ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 361; Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth 1874-1914* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975) 23-58.

¹⁵ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 320-364. The conservative understanding of the strike by some Christian reformers is demonstrated by George Pidgeon's conviction that it was the work of "foreign Bolshevism." See Chapter Three.

¹⁶ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (1), Dobson to Dr. Moore, July 21, 1919, 3.

¹⁷ On the labour church, see Vera Fast, "The Labour Church in Winnipeg," in Dennis L. Butcher *et al.*, (eds.), *Prairie Spirit: Perspectives on the Heritage of the United Church of Canada in the West* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1985) 233-249.

war, and only months after the end of the General Strike, Dobson suggested to T.A. Moore that in the turmoil of the present national circumstance, it was imperative that they "hold on to every minister in our Church, and especially to those who have a vision of the changing order." Citing the results of the recent Ontario elections, where the United Farmers of Ontario had taken power with the support of labour, Dobson enthused that, unlike the present unrest, "we are heading for, I trust, a peaceful revolution" with "changes to come [that] are wonderful beyond our dreaming." As excited as he was about these changes, however, he felt it necessary to warn Moore that "unless our Churches adjust themselves and take the lead in that change, the old Churches will be where the old parties in Ontario are." To keep ahead of the change, and to ensure that it was "wonderful," meant that the mainstream of the Methodist Church "must not merely adjust ourselves, but we must take the lead. Therein," he concluded, "lies the strength of our church at the present moment."¹⁸ Even after the Winnipeg Strike, and the involvement in it by Methodist radicals, the continuing struggle of the "uncomfortable" encouraged Dobson to insist that the Protestant church maintain its Christian duty to direct progressive social change in Canada.¹⁹

Like many others, Dobson responded to the intellectual and practical challenges of the post-war years by seeking to solidify and maintain the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Dr Moore, November 10, 1919. Dobson's enthusiasm about the success of the United Farmers of Ontario in 1919 was no doubt based in his constant communication with the farmers of the western provinces, many of whom shared the distrust of the political establishment that had catapulted the U.F.O. to power. The Alberta leader, Henry Wise Wood, exposed the connection between the farmers political desires and mainstream churchmen like Dobson when he argued in 1918 that "The Kingdom of Heaven and the perfect democracy are synonymous terms." See Robert Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974) 315-320.

¹⁹ This was an opinion that he expressed in the immediate aftermath of the strike. See Dobson to Dr. Moore, July 21, 1919, 3.

domestic social victories won during the war. Strengthened by the almost universal legal acceptance of prohibition and by other visible accomplishments, many mainstream churchpeople saw the Kingdom more clearly than they had before the conflict.²⁰ For Dobson, continuing the fight to establish the Kingdom of God in Canada meant increasing the church's social activism, and his workload.²¹ This work included, of course, the battle to protect the prohibition won during the war from the substantial forces fighting to have the law repealed. Though the activity of encouraging congregations and "influential men" to canvass various legislatures in support of prohibition, took up much of his time, he pursued a host of other concerns.²² Because of his location on the prairies, which until the Great War had been the prime destination of much of Canada's immigrant population, Dobson was particularly concerned about the Canadianization of "foreign" adults and children. His concern, like that of so many others, was that these new non-Anglo-Saxon settlers would disrupt the proper "British" development of the nation.²³ One of his central objectives was to maintain the commitment of the Methodist Church in the West to teach "the English language and Canadian traditions and laws to adult immigrants" and their

²⁰ On the wartime changes in provincial and federal legislation that reflected the desires of progressive church people, see Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Reform in Canada, 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 39-40.

²¹ In 1926 Dobson reflected on the extent of the work he was expected to do, when he apologized to a correspondent for neglecting to reply to his letter. Writing from his Regina office, and describing months of traveling on church business, Dobson commented that "The work here is really far more than one person can do." See UCBCA, HDP, box A10, file Mac, Dobson to Mr. McCullagh, February 24, 1926.

²² On his prohibition efforts, see, for example, *ibid.*, box A4, file Moore (2), Dobson to Dear Brother, January 17, 1919.

²³ Dobson collected extensive literature on the methods, aggressive and otherwise, of incorporating the "inferior" peoples of the world safely into Canadian society. For the range of opinion on the danger of the immigrants, see UCBCA, HDP, box A2, file A, "Problem of the Melting Pot," and "The Race Problem as it Affects Canada."

children.²⁴ After the war, therefore, he was actively involved in maintaining the Methodist contribution to “bulldozing immigrants into conformity with mainline Protestant values.”²⁵ But, as usual, his concerns in the last years of the war and during reconstruction extended to many areas. Child welfare, proper nutrition and the availability of reasonably priced food were all concerns that occupied his time.

In 1918, as Secretary of the “Regina Citizen’s Committee on Food Economy and Price Control,” Dobson battled with businesses to oppose planned price increases on bread. In the same year he continued his activism on the problems of “venereal disease,” at one point successfully spearheading a campaign in Saskatchewan “for compulsory registration and treatment of social diseases.”²⁶ And, as usual, in 1918 and 1919 he maintained his frantic “Field Secretary’s schedule” of itinerant lecturing, preaching, and leadership. In one three month period in the fall and winter of 1919, he toured several communities in the four western provinces, on a schedule that included two trips through Alberta to British Columbia and back to Regina. On this one of several similar trips he made throughout the year, he attended conference meetings in Alberta and Saskatchewan, stopping between preaching and lecturing engagements to meet with provincial “prohibition executives,” Social Service Congresses, and ministers to discuss the evangelistic “Forward Movement.” In this last tour, which ran from September 21 to December 31, he was home in Regina for a total of twenty days, no more than four of them consecutively. During these “office days” he responded to the correspondence

²⁴ *Ibid.*, “Your Committee wishes to Recommend --.”

²⁵ John Webster Grant, “What’s Past is Prologue” in Peter Gordon White (ed.), *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) 130.

²⁶ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (4), Dobson to Dr. Moore, May 3, 1918, 2-3.

he had missed on the road, attended to his business with several agencies and ongoing concerns in the city, visited with his family, and took a day off for illness. By 1919, perhaps, Edythe and their three boys were becoming used to his almost continuous absence and his absolute devotion to the work of establishing the Kingdom of God in western Canada.²⁷ The frequency of his long, itinerant tours indicate that Hugh, too, had become accustomed to accepting the sacrifices demanded by his ceaseless effort to mold Canada in the moral and social forms of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

Dobson was not, of course, alone in this work. Extending the Kingdom in Canada remained the paramount concern of Canada's mainstream Protestants in the years following the war, much as it had in those preceding it. In the immediate post-war period and in the early 1920s, this Kingdom centred faith emphasized increased church-directed social activism. This mainstream insistence on social and moral effort was intended to keep the nation focused on the goals of social progress which Protestants had illuminated in the years before the war, and towards which they had progressed during the conflict. For his part, while recognizing that since the war Canada had confronted, sometimes violently, a new "Changing order," Hugh Dobson continued in his western work. The fact that Canada had changed under the pressure of war was not lost on Dobson. The European conflict had launched the nation onto a new path of development, a path that many understood was more modern, and more insecure. Under Dobson's leadership, then, the work of Evangelism and Social Service in the West became more concerned with settling the social problems of vice, hunger and

²⁷ For the details of his travels, see UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (1), "Itinerary of Hugh Dobson 1919" and box A4, file Moore (2), Dobson to Dr. Moore, January 24, 1919. His correspondence with Moore from 1913-1926 details the intensity and itinerancy of Dobson's work as Field Secretary.

disease, and bringing stability and order to a nation that seemed at times to be verging on chaotic disruption. Though essentially geared towards activism on the moral, social and legal fronts, this perspective did not, of course, neglect traditional evangelistic work, as Dobson's continuing insistence on "preaching for decisions" demonstrated.²⁸ Nonetheless, as the second decade of the century ended Christian social and moral reform remained his overriding personal and professional passion.

II

This emphasis on the church's social efforts remained the basis of Dobson's faith in the years that led him, his Department and his denomination into The United Church of Canada. Though he found that "the work requires too uniform a type of message and not always what my heart is aching to say to the people," in the years immediately preceding and following the formation of the United Church, Dobson was clear that the new church's social message was the most important one for Canadian society. "Never before," he wrote to Moore, "have we needed the emphasis on the social aspects of Christianity as we need it at present."²⁹

As the proposal for union gained momentum, however, Dobson had questioned openly the proposed denomination's commitment to Christian social work. While many Presbyterians worried about losing the traditional theological and ethnic bases of their historic denomination, active Methodists like Dobson expressed the same concern for preserving their tradition by

²⁸ His continuing emphasis on "preaching for decisions" is exposed in *ibid.*, box A7, file D, Dobson to Francis Doxsee, October 20, 1922; box A8, file B(1), Dobson to Mrs. Charles Beck, March 20, 1924; David R. Elliot, "Hugh Wesley Dobson (1879-1956): Regenerator of Society," *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers*, 9 (1991-1992) 32.

²⁹ UCBCA, HDP, box A10, file Moo, Dobson to Dr. Moore, December 29, 1925.

worrying about the future of church based social activism.³⁰ They wondered if more conservative denominational, and particularly Presbyterian influence would hamper the important social side of the United Church's mandate. For these progressive leaders, the creation of a united Protestant church was by no means a guarantee of continued Kingdom work on all fronts. Like other means of extending the Kingdom of God in Canada, it was a good proposal "fraught with all sorts of dangers." Dobson expressed his personal reservations about the effect of the United Church on social service both before and after the new denomination was officially created. Though he publicly supported the church, privately, and to his superiors, he wondered openly about the its effectiveness.

Less than a year after the creation of the United Church, Dobson wrote in confidence to T. Albert Moore, using their solid personal relationship as a means of transmitting his concerns about the union to headquarters.³¹ With the casual assurance of an old and trusted friend, Dobson ended this letter to the new General Secretary of The United Church of Canada with his personal take on the denomination. "I might write with greater diplomacy," he began, "but I prefer to trust you with my mind." Admitting that he was "in somewhat of a quandary at times about Church Union," he confessed that he was not yet sure if the new denomination was "to be a movement of liberation" or "bondage." Dobson, who had admitted before Union never to have been impressed by arguments about "the size of the church that will be

³⁰ On Presbyterian concerns before Union, see N. Keith Clifford, *The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985).

³¹ UCBCA, HDP, box B18a, file M (3), Dobson to Moore, April 8, 1926. That Dobson was expressing himself to more than just his friend is demonstrated by his conclusion to the letter: "I leave with you, and the sense of the most intimate and personal relations I have had with you since I vowed my life to Christ in your home, the judgment as to what degree you should use this letter, or parts of it, with the members of the executive."

resultant," wondered if the progressive spirit was to be lost in the complicated bureaucracy of the new church.³² Still working in the shadow of the Great War which had, he believed, culminated a century of "mighty upheavals" and led to a "change in the temper of the people," Dobson worried that the "machinery" of the United Church would hinder necessary "changes and adjustments in the nature of the work that the church is doing."³³

Of course, Dobson was not entirely negative about the United Church. Combined effort for the Kingdom through evangelism and social service was integral to the theology that had led to church union. The continuing influence of the whole gospel emphasis on evangelism and social service for the sake of the Kingdom had convinced Dobson of the new denomination's possibilities. In the years before union he had reported on the powerful effect that cooperative effort was having on the religious mood of the areas under his purview. The movement for church union had already shown tangible effects in the West before the United Church was officially formed; the proliferation of cooperative "local union" churches had demonstrated the popular western desire for a united denomination. Dobson had noted these manifestations of the united spirit with enthusiasm and had reported to his colleagues that the church union movement was "having a noticeable effect in the West, particularly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in bringing about joint activities along all lines of effort included within the scope of our Department."³⁴ In 1923 he had been particularly pleased that in Manitoba "Districts and Presbyteries have been co-terminus and joint meetings are

³² *Ibid.* On Dobson's impressions on the size of the new church, see *ibid.*, box B4, file L, from a document entitled, "For the General Board of Evangelism and Social Service." A note on the document indicates that this report was written in 1923.

³³ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Dr. Moore, December 29, 1925.

³⁴ On Local Union Churches, see N. Keith Clifford, "Church union and western Canada," in Butcher, *et al.*, (eds.) *Prairie Spirit*, 283-285.

being held throughout the province at the present time." For all the successful, united work he had seen in his western domain, however, Dobson had remained only cautiously optimistic about the potential of a United Church. Though he hoped that its creation would inspire "high forms of service" and "the dawn of a new day of spiritual progress," he was nonetheless reserved in his enthusiasm for the new denomination.³⁵ He believed that there was nothing inevitable about the power of a United Church to further the effort for Kingdom building in Canada. If it was to be successful in its national mission, the new church would have to work as hard, if not harder than its predecessors to ensure that the "new era of the cross" was more about opportunity than difficulty.³⁶

The content of Dobson's thought and action in the years immediately before and after union indicates that, above all else, he believed strongly that the new age ushered in by the war, and by the formation of The United Church of Canada in June, 1925, required more vigilant Kingdom work. During this time, Dobson maintained his pre-war insistence that the social directives of the gospel be as central as the individual to the new church. At the end of the United Church's first six months, Dobson encouraged Moore, who as the newly appointed General Secretary of General Council was in a position of significant power, to think about the direction of the new church. As he had a decade earlier, Dobson asserted that there "is a tendency to follow the line of least resistance and to react in such a way as to merely emphasise the individual and his or her responsibility and to run to fads." Rather than following the obsessive individualism of the sectarian "fads" Dobson was encountering on the prairie, he sought to buttress the mainstream whole

³⁵ UCBCA, HDP, "For the General Board of Evangelism and Social Service (1923)."

³⁶ *Ibid.*

gospel in the new church.³⁷ He suggested, therefore, that the United Church should continue to “emphasise greatly individual responsibility” and maintain the whole gospel commitment to “see and fulfill the Christian life in application to social, national, and international matters.”³⁸

Just six months later, in another letter to Moore concerning the staffing of the United Church’s proposed, combined Board of Evangelism and Social Service, Dobson made the same point again.³⁹ Now, more concerned than previously about the stature of social Christianity in the new denomination, Dobson asked Moore: “Is the United Church proposing to go backward or forward on its emphasis of giving a lead to her people in the putting into practice of the principles of the Gospel of Christ in the industrial, commercial, political, and international life of our times?” With the prairie economy still emerging from the post-war recession, and confronted with the possibility of increased immigration, Dobson worried that the social emphasis that had been so central to his work and leadership in the Methodist Department might be in question during the creation of the new United Church equivalent. Because he remained fundamentally concerned about national development, he asserted strongly that social Christian “work must be and will be the supreme work of Christianity in this country.” Defending the Methodist combination of Kingdom building through effective evangelism and social service, Dobson argued emphatically that the social side of the new Board’s work must be established as firmly as the evangelistic. “If the Church,

³⁷ John Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) Chapter 4; W.E. Mann, *Sect, Cult, and Church in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955).

³⁸ Dobson to Dr. Moore, December 29, 1925.

³⁹ Though the United Church of Canada came into existence in June, 1925, the various denominational equivalents of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service did not collapse into a single United Church board until September, 1926.

the size of the United Church of Canada can't afford a man or two to give special attention to that," he warned, "I venture to think that the Church will scarcely win the approval of her own conscience, to say nothing of the 'well done' of her Lord."⁴⁰

III

During the remainder of the decade, Dobson began to re-emphasize the evangelistic side of his work. By the end of 1926, Dobson's stature within the new church generally, and in the realm of Evangelism and Social Service specifically had increased substantially. In 1925, his ceaseless efforts on behalf of Christian social service had been recognized by an honorary Doctorate in Divinity from Wesley College, his *alma mater* and the source of much of his social Christian perspective. When he was asked to compose his own biography for *Vox Wesleyana* on the occasion of his convocation, Dobson wrote that as a leader in Evangelism and Social Service he had "made most significant and worthy contributions in various realms of the work of Social Service." When he stated that he "has the reputation of being one of the most able, widely informed and vigorous exponents of Christianity applied to Social Welfare in the Dominion," Dobson was no doubt reflecting, at least in part, the opinion of many within the United Church.⁴¹ The report on the awarding of the degree in one of the last issues of the Methodist *Christian Guardian* corroborated Dobson's flattering self-opinion when the author wondered "if there is a town or country place in Western Canada that has not heard Rev. Hugh Dobson." The *Guardian's* impression that his "advocacy of the cause of temperance for many years ranks him as one of the leading

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Moore, April 8, 1926. See also box B4, file L, "To the General Board of Evangelism and Social Service," (1925).

⁴¹ Hugh Dobson, "Rev. Hugh Wesley Dobson, D.D.," *Vox Wesleyana* 28:3 (May, 1925): 41. See also Dobson's, hand-written version in UCBCA, HDP, box A11, file P.

workers and a foremost authority” was obviously one that was shared at the headquarters of the new United Church of Canada.⁴² Just a year after Dobson had been honoured by Wesley, his untiring efforts were recognized when the various boards of Evangelism and Social Service of the three uniting denominations were collapsed and combined to form the United Church Board. Due mainly to his unmatched knowledge of western Canada and his exceptional record in leading Christian social welfare in the West, Dobson was appointed Associate Secretary, and given substantial power within the new United Church Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Recognized nationally as a respected authority, and reporting only to the Secretary of the Board, Dobson now wielded significant influence in and out of the church.

These markers of his importance in social Christian leadership and service, and his strong statements in favour of a social approach to the gospel at Union, might belie a post-war rejection of the evangelical nuance that hallmarked Dobson’s gospel before the conflict. His lament in 1925 that he missed “the privilege of preaching as the Spirit gives me utterance,” indicates that he was devoting almost all of his time to lecturing on a set program of social and moral causes.⁴³ At the time of Union, however, the revivalistic overtones of the inaugural ceremonies, and the calls for evangelistic renewal were not lost on Dobson.⁴⁴ Ever since the end of the war his time had been

⁴² *Christian Guardian*, XCVI: 17 (April 29, 1925): 20.

⁴³ Dobson to Dr. Moore, December 29, 1925.

⁴⁴ Marguerite Van Die has described the revivalistic nature of the June 10, 1925 inauguration of The United Church of Canada in *An Evangelical Mind*, 167. The revivalistic emphasis was also apparent in the United Church’s official publication, *The New Outlook*, for sometime after the event. See, for example, James Endicott, “The United Church of Canada in the Life of the World,” 1:2 (June 17, 1925) 10; “The Message of the Wesleyan Methodist Church,” 1:2 (June 17, 1925): 11; “A Prophetic Movement,” 1:3 (June 24, 1925): 3-4; George C. Pidgeon, “Message from the Moderator,” 1:4 (July 1, 1925): 4; Professor Johnston, “Conversion, or what it is to Be a Christian?” 1:4 (July 1, 1925): 18.

primarily directed towards his continuing fight for prohibition, his interests in promoting child welfare, in controlling venereal disease, in establishing redemptive homes for girls, and in encouraging fair pricing on food, labour equity, and "Canadianization."⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he also continued to encourage the church to "call men to repent of their sin and enlist in the service of him who was the herald of 'Peace and Good Will among men.'"⁴⁶

During the decade following the end of the Great War, and especially as the new denomination began to shape its identity, Dobson's understanding of the whole gospel shifted slightly. He became convinced that the United Church's mission to the nation could not be limited to any one part of the church's varied work. In these years of increasing theological polarization, when "conservatives" and "liberals" in the churches were disputing the priorities of the faith, Dobson's openness to variety was indicative of trends in the Canadian mainstream. Generally eschewing the more distinct categories of belief that were defining Protestant thought in churches and in courts in the United States, the mainstream denominations who had joined to form the United Church sought to establish their place in society, and their new denomination, on a less rigid, more accommodating theological basis. This perspective succeeded, not because of a "watering-down" of theology, but rather because those in the pews, the pulpits and the head offices who were setting the course of mainstream Protestant thought in Canada, refused, for the most part, to limit their faith to rigid, exclusive categories.

⁴⁵ The records of his effort for these causes are contained in UCBCA, HDP, boxes A1 to A5. For his interest in redemptive homes for girls, see box A5, file A2.

⁴⁶ UCBCA, HDP, box A4, file Moore (3), from a motion by Hugh Dobson, in the minutes of the Saskatchewan Group of the General Board of Evangelism and Social Service, Friday, November 29, 1918.

For this English Canadian Protestant majority, and particularly for those in the United Church, the end remained the Christianization of the nation and its people -- the means ran the gamut from lecturing on temperance and hygiene to converting sinners and "foreigners." And so it was that in 1924 and 1925, Dobson could enthuse equally about the work of evangelism and of social service, and that a large section of Canadian Protestants, often with different priorities, could find common, unifying theological and practical ground. For Dobson and for the cooperating churches, the whole gospel provided a theology that mixed well, even effortlessly, these two priorities of the evangelical tradition. The ongoing effort to "serve the present age" did not require, then, that Dobson sever his ties with an evangelical past. On the contrary, he followed the "need as God sees it," and endeavored to preach a message, and take action, appropriate for the time, and he considered it all part of making the United Church "an evangelical movement."⁴⁷ The apparent variations in his theological priorities were, in fact, his answer to Kingdom building in varying circumstances; "I do not know," he wrote to an inquiring correspondent, "any one way of saving humanity." Dobson acted often on his belief that "God's ways are as complex as life itself," and so adjusted his efforts as the situation dictated, lecturing on social reform to those overly concerned with the individual, preaching for a verdict to those who had forgotten the conversionist imperative.⁴⁸ Such openness to accommodating the message to the circumstance was the defining element of the liberal evangelicalism that lay at the root of the whole gospel, and which made the United Church a possibility.

⁴⁷ Dobson, "To the General Board of Evangelism and Social Service," (1925).

⁴⁸ Dobson to Mrs. Charles Beck, March 20, 1924.

In the 1920s, with the nation still emerging from the long shadows of the war and the economic recession that followed it, life was complex indeed. The Kingdom needed attention. In 1924, Dobson noted with some alarm that "Many people are suffering in an acute pessimism, a malady that more than once has spread over the world 'when a new day was dawning.'" Though he was involved deeply in his temperance and child welfare work, he instructed the ministers of his western domain that the pessimism he saw needed to be confronted to assure success in the larger work of building the Kingdom. The negative public mood was, he coached them, "an attitude of mind that calls for the Evangel of Jesus Christ; a frame of mind that spells opportunity for the highest service that we can render humanity; an aggressive evangelism."⁴⁹ This favorable attitude towards the opportunity for evangelism was the source of his optimism about the spiritual possibilities of a United Church. After the initial confusion of uniting three churches and departments, then, Dobson began to hone his thought on the place of evangelism in the new denomination. Preaching for decision had always been central to his mission, and it was an aspect of the work that he missed when touring and lecturing on social and moral reform occupied the majority his time.⁵⁰ After the first years of Union, however, it was a subject that became increasingly central to his personal and professional efforts.

Evangelism was a topic of particular interest not just for Dobson, but in the new church generally. The hope, widely heard before the consummation of union in 1925, that the union would lead to a new age of "revival"

⁴⁹ UCBCA, HDP, box A10, file Ci, Dobson to Dear Brother, September 30, 1924.

⁵⁰ Dobson to Mrs. Charles Beck, March 20, 1924.

remained a highly motivating force.⁵¹ By 1928, when Dobson was settled into his position as an Associate Secretary of the United Church's Board of Evangelism and Social Service, he was reflecting this interest in evangelism, a mindset that he communicated to his new superior, D.N. McLachlan, in regular dispatches to headquarters. Two years earlier, Dobson had relocated his family, and his western headquarters to Vancouver. Now, from the coast, looking eastward, Dobson surmised that "during the first three years of the United Church, in the very great effort to get local churches and the Church as whole working harmoniously together, there has been a sad lack of that bold, courageous preaching that characterized the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church and the Congregational Church in dealing with the issues of life." He sensed that much of the national church was substituting worship for "preaching" and thereby taking "an easy way to escape the Cross, and the danger of proclaiming the truth in regard to great public issues."⁵² Dobson worried, therefore, that the sometimes controversial work of the Kingdom, and particularly the message of temperance, was, as he had feared, being sacrificed for the sake of unity.⁵³

Dobson was expressing these concerns not out of some territorial jealousy, but rather because he saw his vision of the whole gospel, and of the Kingdom, being jeopardized. Addressing issues like temperance, venereal disease and industrial relations was more than a personal passion; powerful preaching on the pressing social issues of the day was, he explained, a central

⁵¹ For another churchman's high expectations for evangelism after union see the editorial, "A Prophetic Movement," *New Outlook*, 1:3 (June 24, 1925): 3-4. See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 186-187 and 207. See Chapter Three.

⁵² UCBCA, HDP, box B18a, file Mc(2), Dobson to Dr. McLachlan, February 25, 1928.

⁵³ In the mid-1920s, Dobson was Secretary of the Saskatchewan Prohibition League, and, until he moved to Vancouver, the editor of the League's occasional newsletter, *The Prairie Bulletin*. An example of the *Bulletin* can be found in UCBCA, HDP, box B24, file 2.

aspect of the United Church's evangelistic efforts, and therefore of its national mission. As he had in the past, Dobson argued that the Kingdom was both a goal and a tool of evangelism. Citing the Old Testament prophetic example, he told McLachlan that "the last twenty-five to fifty years of emphasis on Social Service and the ideas of the Kingdom of God" had helped to encourage a new age of evangelistic opportunity in the church. This new age was not a reaction against the practical mainstream emphases of the last half-century, but rather it was their desirable result. Illustrating his point, and, perhaps, noting the success of Evangelism and Social Service, he reminded his superior that "We have made people aware of slums, and of dependency, and of poverty, and of the significance of the drink traffic." This awareness, combined with "the renewed preaching of the idea of the Kingdom of God," and "the tragedies of the industrial age and the war" had, he contended, "made people aware of what ought to be, and might be" and encouraged "a sense of having missed the mark, which among many people, has become almost a despair."

Like the "pessimism" he had identified before Union, Dobson interpreted this sour public mood as an opportunity for evangelism. What the nation needed was not more evidence of what was wrong, but rather a message of expectation that would "lift the people out of this sense of sin; not to deny that there is sin, but to lift them up over top of it by the creation of hope." In language similar to that used by George Pidgeon in Toronto at about the same time, Dobson pointed out that "the thing that creates hope in the greatest way is to make people aware of the unity between man and God" and that through the resulting "renewed hope and the renewed activity" they will enter "into a new life." The result, he believed, would necessarily be beneficial for the Kingdom: "It is the most natural thing for us under the sun,

following that, if we can get the idea to the people, to appeal to them in any age to change their life attitudes and to believe and trust and commit themselves in full confidence of what man is -- a child of God -- to a divine life."⁵⁴

There was, in fact, a resurgence of spiritual searching in the late 1920s, the very period in which Dobson was articulating this understanding of evangelism. David Marshall has interpreted the rise in calls for "revival" in the 1930s as a response to desperation inspired by the economic depression in that decade.⁵⁵ Long before the collapse of 1929, however, and even at the height of the "roaring twenties," Dobson was preaching sermons on Christian evangelism as part of his itinerant schedule. Like other members of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, he was responding to spiritual longings encountered in the course of various church activities. When he mentioned in 1928 that workers, managers and a doctor at a mine he visited were "among a great many people" who were "receptive to the life time Jesus lived" and interested in evangelism, Dobson was reflecting a general mood among the leadership of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service.⁵⁶ In the years before 1930 this evangelistic mood was found among the laity as well. In 1928, a publication called *The Christian Realizer* was published by a retired United Church minister for those caught by "the tide of interest in personal religion" and who "have learned much and want to learn more of that side of

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, box B18b, file Mc(2)a, Dobson to Dr. McLachlan, December 13, 1928.

⁵⁵ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 210-212.

⁵⁶ Dobson to Dr. McLachlan, December 13, 1928. See also UCBCA, HDP, box B4, file K, "Report to Board of Evangelism and Social Service." The author of this report, G.I. Campbell, who had been conducting Board business in the Maritimes, noted "awakened interest in the church" and stated he was "fully convinced that the membership of the church will respond to a renewed consecration of life and service to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour."

Christianity which is called experiential.”⁵⁷ The editor obviously believed that there was a constituency for this “experiential” emphasis in The United Church of Canada, as did some United Church leaders who began to call increasingly for domestic, nation-wide evangelistic missions.⁵⁸ Though the realities of the Great Depression may have encouraged more *intensive* evangelism, the foundations of the national campaigns of the Depression era were well in place and already an established concern of the leadership and laity of the United Church in the late 1920s.

By the end of the third decade of the century, then, Dobson was increasingly comfortable within The United Church of Canada. His concerns that its formation would hinder the “supreme” social work of the church did not materialize to the extent that he had feared. And the evidence of genuine interest in evangelistic effort among both the leadership and the laity encouraged his faith in the ability of the denomination to lead positive social, moral and spiritual change. As the next decade unfolded, however, his assumptions about the most effective means of extending the Kingdom were tested as the nation, and particularly the western provinces were confronted by a series of crises. In this challenging atmosphere, some in the church scrutinized the mixed practical and spiritual assumptions of the whole gospel, and questioned the efficacy of one or both of its parts in the commission to “Christianize the Social Order.” As these divisions in the theology of evangelism and social service became more apparent, many of the leaders of the young church rallied to protect their understanding of the whole gospel.

⁵⁷ It was edited by R.P. Byers, Toronto. A copy of the first volume of the magazine can be found in UCBCA, HDP, box B34, file A.

⁵⁸ G.I. Campbell, “Report to Board of Evangelism and Social Service,” where Dobson’s colleague, Campbell, called for a “thoroughly planned Dominion-wide campaign of Intensive Evangelistic Missions....”

Not surprisingly, Hugh Dobson was one of those who rose to defend the continued United Church emphasis on both the evangelistic and the reformist imperatives that he believed were the foundations of the hope for the coming of the Kingdom in Canada.

Chapter Seven

“Defending the Whole:” Hugh Dobson and The United Church of Canada through the ‘Years of Crisis’ and Beyond

The evangelist God raises up will be suited to the need, not as man sees it, but as God sees it. The Church has never yet accepted the evangelist God has sent, but has invariably cast him out. Few indeed, especially during a period of Spiritual declension, are divinely wise enough to see the real need and to know the real remedy, so will not recognize the man of God when he comes.

– Hugh Wesley Dobson, “Evangelism”¹

As the controversies surrounding the Oxford Group Movement demonstrated, the strains of the 1930s made evangelism a current and contentious topic in The United Church of Canada. In that difficult decade, Canada’s “national church” began to settle into a theological confidence fostered by the accommodation of traditions and the tempering of pride that ten years of cohabitation had forced on the diverse membership of the new denomination. Though many in the pulpit and the pew continued at times to identify themselves and others with defunct denominational labels, by the time the church turned its attention from the ravages of the Depression to the problems of another world war the threads of identity had been almost entirely absorbed in the complicated pattern of the new denomination. Even with the growing confidence of unity in identification, however, the turbulence of the era was visible in economy and ideology alike. The unrest in the homes and cities of the nation was reflected in the United Church’s struggles to define and finance its mission; much more than in the past, appropriate priorities and means in a time of hardship became the denomination’s intellectual and practical preoccupations. And in this time of

¹ **United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives [UCBCA], Hugh Wesley Dobson Papers [HDP], box B6, file B.**

radicalism and ferment, tradition, as much as change, established the parameters of this discussion.

The debates surrounding the proper place and function of Canada's largest, and most widely representative Protestant denomination took place at many levels in the 1930s, but were most obvious and public when they involved the church's leadership. The public airing of internal theological disputes, demonstrated so ostentatiously when disagreements over the Oxford Group Movement sullied the pages of the denominational and secular press, became increasingly common throughout the decade. As was the case with the Oxford Group, the most public disagreements were those associated with the questions of evangelism and social service. The laity and leadership of the church grappled with the increasing difficulty of holding the mediating evangelicalism of the church's basis together in an increasingly dynamic political, social and economic environment. In that era of obvious problems, many began to search for obvious answers; the sometimes muddy streams of the liberal evangelical creed, so essential in establishing a unified mainline denomination, began to appear to some to be shallow and still. For United churchmen during this tumultuous decade, the challenge of the infant church became the challenge of holding its confusing, often seemingly contradictory theological parts together. For some the challenge was impossible. But for the majority, many of whom had been successful in blending traditional evangelicalism with novel social activism for years, the problems that confronted the theology of evangelism and social service during the Depression, the Second World War and into the 1950s, were likely to be seen as opportunities, not crises. And, ironically, this environment of openness to the confusions of tradition and change led many to define more clearly the fundamentals of the theologies of The United Church of Canada.

Though much of the theological debate and definition of this period took place in the halls of the national headquarters in Toronto, the devastations of the Depression led to a surge of practical and theological re-evaluation by those church leaders who worked in direct contact with the effects of the economic downturn. In the western provinces, where the combination of the collapse of international capital markets and the devastation of drought created particularly difficult times, the leadership was very aware of, and experienced personally the problems in the communities served by the church. During these disturbing years the most powerful United Church leader in the western provinces was Hugh Wesley Dobson. As an Associate Secretary, and second-in-command nationally of the church's most influential and visible board, Dobson was in a position of peculiar clairvoyance; during an era when the western provinces and the faith of The United Church of Canada were mysterious to many, Hugh Dobson understood both well. This deep insight certainly came from his important position on the Board of Evangelism and Social Service and from his western location and background, but it was from his own balanced, practical whole gospel position that he was able to understand well the tensions in evangelism and social service in the decades after 1925.

I

During the years of the Great Depression that had such devastating effects in large sections of North America, Hugh Dobson's western circumstance placed him in the centre of some of the most disrupted parts of Canada. The residents of the western provinces were hit especially hard by the collapse of international capital markets and drought, both of which damaged deeply the agricultural base of the region. As Gerald Friesen has noted, the agricultural crisis, which made drawing a living from farming virtually impossible,

actually began before the Wall Street collapse of 1929.² Its unfortunate effects were felt with increasing pain for almost the entire decade, when thick dust-storms, clouds of locust, and penetrating poverty made life on the prairies harsh, dirty and, often tragic.³

The consequences of the Depression became obvious quickly on the prairie. In his 1930 report to the Board, Dobson, reflecting on the toll the economic downturn had already taken on westerners, noted that the “year has been a very strenuous one.” As always, of course, Dobson had maintained his kinetic schedule of speaking and touring, a side of his work that brought him into direct contact with those who were looking to the church for aid. As poverty spread in both urban and rural areas, Dobson recognized a developing appetite for nourishment of all kinds.⁴ Those he met on his extensive travels were certainly hungry for food and employment, but they also sought less tangible relief. Describing his regular contact with those suffering from agricultural and economic failure, Dobson reported that “Preaching regularly, and addressing congregations as well as small groups I have found a growing favour toward evangelical Christianity.” He was aware, of course, of the desperate material needs of the people of the West, but he reported with pleasure that these same people “know their help cometh only from God.”⁵

Though many leaders and laity in the United Church had been advocating a nation-wide evangelistic effort ever since union, in the very early years of the 1930s Dobson was noting an increased call from the

² Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 386.

³ *Ibid.*, 386-388

⁴ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁵ Hugh Dobson, “Annual Reports of the Secretaries,” in United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service *Annual Report 1930*, 14.

beleaguered people of the prairie provinces. There was, he said in 1931, "very deep interest on the whole question of unemployment and the Christianizing of the industrial order." The Depression's effects on labour and the condemnation of industrial capitalism that desperate unemployment and poverty inspired, were manifestations of wider spiritual, cultural and social questioning.⁶ When Dobson reported this "deep interest" in the pragmatic to McLachlan, he added that "I think, too, that there is a recognition of the supreme opportunity that we have now for Christian evangelism. People are eager for any good news that we can give to them," he continued, "and if the Christian message is, indeed, good news, we ought to be able to demonstrate it today."⁷ Although the difficulties associated with the Great Depression were much more than spiritual, during this time in which these difficulties raised significant social and spiritual questions, it appeared to Dobson, and to many others, that evangelism and social service were the appropriate responses. Indeed the pain of the Great Depression – the dislocation, the loss of hope, the unemployment, and the search for answers so obvious on the prairie – provided an excellent opportunity for Dobson to put his long-held views on evangelism and social service into practice, and thereby to extend further the work of Christianizing the nation and building the Kingdom. In these dark days, Dobson was encouraged by his powerful millennial hope.

As he had with church union, then, Dobson understood the implications of the Depression for Canadians, and for the national church, in terms of "difficulty and opportunity." Contrary to David Marshall's claim that

⁶ Michiel Horn, *The Dirty Thirties: Canadians in the Great Depression* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1972) 390-552 exposes the variety of this critical re-thinking.

⁷ United Church of Canada British Columbia Conference Archives [UCBCA], Hugh Wesley Dobson Papers [HDP], box B18b, file Mc(2)B, Dobson to D.N. McLachlan, February 16, 1931.

United churchmen were faced with the question “Why no revival?” throughout the 1930s, in 1932 Dobson wrote “that everywhere there is in actual fact a revival – of a purer and more undefiled religious life in our churches. So we are singing a song even in the night. The Christian movement always did thrive on pain. It became the way to salvation and progress.”⁸ The pain of the long night of the Depression, which Dobson saw demonstrated in the congregations and communities he visited and tried to inspire, was not entirely destructive. Indeed, he saw good signs all around and expected “great gains” for the “Christian movement” in the West, and beyond.

These gains were certainly related to the advance of the Kingdom through continued moral reform activity, including, of course, the ongoing battles against liquor, venereal disease and declining moral standards. But in the 1930s, Dobson’s interests and causes also included active social effort on behalf of the unemployed, in the campaign to secure a minimum wage and mother’s pensions, and in lobbying for effective collective bargaining.⁹ Even in this period of extreme social dislocation, however, the possibility that Dobson saw was for a full expression of the whole gospel; “Never has the Christian Church had a greater opportunity for witnessing for Christ and the Kingdom,” he wrote to the conferences in 1932. The times called, he

⁸ *Ibid.*, Dobson to D.N. McLachlan, February 5, 1932. See David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 227.

⁹ Dobson’s papers indicate that he was reading widely on all of these topics, including some Marxist and FCSO literature. See UCBCA, HDP, box B4, file A. He was active in work for the unemployed, and was President of “The Provincial Committee on Unemployment and Relief” in British Columbia. See *ibid.*, box B4, file F. Dobson’s early interest in collective bargaining is noted in Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “United Church Support for Collective Bargaining in the 1940s,” in Phyllis Airhart and Roger C. Hutchinson, (eds.), *Christianizing the Social Order: A Founding Vision of the United Church of Canada*. Special Issue, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 12:2 (Fall, 1996) 253 and 262, n. 10.

suggested, "for the old custom of 'witnessing' particularly in conversation, to the things for which as Christians we stand -- conversion, regeneration, faith in the coming Kingdom and in the coming of a more Christian world order." With eschatological language, he concluded that "awaiting, or wistfulness, ripening into expectation and decision is a phase of its coming," and reminded the church that there "are 'multitudes, multitudes in the Valley of Decision' today."¹⁰ The difficulties which surrounded him during the Depression obviously led Dobson to increase the concerns of his social service and reform work. But this practical effort was accompanied by a clearer accent on the conversionist inheritances of his evangelical faith. Increasingly, through personal efforts to help those in need, to correct the iniquities and inequities he saw, and to foster the revival he believed was imminent, Dobson encouraged the "widening experience of redemption both of the individual and of society" and found hope in the opportunity that this "awakening throughout the world in evangelical activity" offered.¹¹

In the early years of the 1930s, then, when his work was "colored, of course, by the financial depression and the life experiences through which the people are passing," Dobson was surprisingly enthusiastic. Though he was troubled deeply by the tragedy he witnessed wherever and whenever he traveled, in 1932, and even as the difficulties associated with the economy and crop production increased, he was pleased to report that "men's minds have become more alert on life itself as life's objective, rather than on what life accumulates and controls." The effect of this drift from material concerns was a widespread "turning to and a seeking for God in an attempt to dissolve the divine purpose in human affairs and having learned it, a readiness to follow

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, box B18b, file C(3), Dobson to Dear Sir and Brother, June 30, 1932.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Dobson to Dear Sir and Brother, October 20, 1933.

His Creative Purpose." The evidence of spiritual longing surrounded him, and in it Dobson found a source of hope, for both the laity and the church he served. The trend toward evangelical Christianity that he had identified in 1930 continued and was, he said in 1932, "clearly marked by a greater sensitivity to the significance of Jesus' attitude to human values and His teaching on the Kingdom of God in relation to social and economic maladjustment and to the project of establishing a Christian World Order." Just as significantly, he noted that it "has also been revealed by a turning to an evangelical experience as the beginning of a new way of life." "Redemption," he was pleased to report, "is becoming a vital experience with many people and as a result Church work has an added zest and new meaning."¹² In 1932, at the zenith of the poverty and tragedy of the agricultural and economic crisis on the prairie, opportunity for regeneration of individuals and societies, and hope for the Kingdom, seemed endless.

Nonetheless, other difficulties were clear. In the wider United Church community, the threats of materialistic philosophies and of sectarian Christian options had been recognized by the end of the 1920s. In 1928, for example, Dobson had noted the negative cultural effects of "fatalistic philosophies and cynical attitudes, and the despairing note," a reality of church work that the Board was forced to engage.¹³ In central Canada, these intellectual threats may have seemed more obvious. In the early 1930s, the Toronto based Secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, D.N. McLachlan, attempted to counter the harmful influences of secular philosophies and theological "errors" by suggesting, like Dobson, that the

¹² Hugh W. Dobson, "Annual Reports of Secretaries," United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report 1932*, 19.

¹³ Dobson to McLachlan, December 13, 1928.

spirit of the times required a strong evangelistic effort. But complicated times required complicated means, and the 1930s were proving to be a very complicated decade indeed. Where once the churches had been concerned almost exclusively with the influence of other, less desirable denominations, McLachlan was clear that in the 1930s the largest Protestant denomination in the country was in competition with many other options for the minds and hearts of Canadians.

In this circumstance, and in different parts of the country, evangelism, once considered a relatively uncomplicated means of reaching all people, was forced to change. The increasing diversity of Canadian society, a process that had been accelerated by more liberal immigration policies after the Great War, indicated that old assumptions about, and methods of, Christianization and Canadianization were becoming inadequate. The difficulty for the evangelist of the 1930s was to find a message that could reach audiences that ranged from those who had abandoned religion for the excitement of new entertainments, to religious radicals of both “fundamentalist” and “modernist” stripes, to “humanists” and materialists. Finding an appropriate message was only half the battle. For, it was becoming clear that traditional methods of evangelism were no longer effective among audiences that were less likely to understand the symbols, and the language, of the mass evangelism of the nineteenth-century.¹⁴ In a large country that was assuming the many voices of its different peoples, the “national church” was finding it difficult to communicate its vision of the Kingdom in Canada to the nation. The challenge of the 1930s, then, was not simply to make the ideal of a Christian nation founded on Protestant and Anglo-Saxon assumptions

¹⁴ D.N. McLachlan, “Annual Reports of Secretaries,” United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, *Annual Report 1930*, 19.

relevant in a desperate age, but also to make that ideal understandable and inspiring to an increasingly diverse, and increasingly uninterested, population.¹⁵

In some ways, the theology of the young church was not necessarily up to that challenge. The United Church was established on the shared bases of the whole gospel, but at the end of the denomination's first decade, those bases were being separated by some, and, in the eyes of some, the whole gospel itself was beginning to break in two. For some strident but numerically small minorities in the United Church, the combined gospel of evangelism and social service seemed too muddy a response to the individual and social devastations of the Depression, and the widening disinterest in the church's work. In the middle years of the 1930s, powerful arguments for an immediate emphasis on either the evangelistic *or* the social action sides of the once solid whole gospel coin began to appear; they were presented by some as singular and separate cures for the ailments, spiritual and otherwise, of the nation. The teaching and preaching from various pulpits, and in official church publications and elsewhere, indicate, as John Grant has suggested, that by "the 1930s advocates of the two were competing for attention."¹⁶ In the middle, however, between the competing poles of social and individual regeneration, the majority remained attached to the effectiveness of the whole gospel

But those on the margins were getting louder. Indeed, in the early 1930s, some socially-oriented ministers began to feel that the radical pronouncements and influence of groups like the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order had swung the social service pendulum too far to the left.

¹⁵ N. Keith Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Studies in Religion* II:4 (1973).

¹⁶ John Webster Grant, "Unauthoritative Reflections on the United Church's Story," *Touchstone* 12:1 (January, 1994) 9.

Though most were less strident than George Pidgeon, who labeled radical social pronouncements “absurd,” many church leaders who had never shied from active social preaching noted with some alarm the narrow social emphasis of several people within the denomination.¹⁷ By the middle of the decade socially active ministers, including the outspoken Richard Roberts of Toronto and Hugh Dobson, were questioning the social soteriologies of their colleagues in the colleges and conferences.¹⁸ The mood of those who opposed the radical pronouncements of some in the denomination was demonstrated by increased and widespread reflection on the theology of the church. Some leaders, including Hugh Dobson, were growing concerned that the whole gospel upon which the denomination had been established was being forgotten in the rush to find definite, often radical solutions to the economic and social problems of the decade.

In response to this radical threat, the fear of theological disintegration was expressed repeatedly in the 1935 *Annual Report* of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. In various reports, the essential connection between evangelistic and social activism was stressed. The Chairman of the Board, J.J. Coulter, noted the importance of church-based social action, but warned that “the Social Service wing of the Christian forces must rest upon the Evangelistic, and will surely meet with setback and defeat unless it recognizes its sheer dependence on true Evangelism.” Where leaders like Dobson and Moore had previously emphasized social service in order to bring it the credibility that evangelism already maintained, in the mid-1930s

¹⁷ For George Pidgeon’s reaction to the FCSO, see Chapter Four.

¹⁸ The reaction of Richard Roberts is explained in Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 238. A more nuanced picture is painted in Catherine Gidney, “Richard Roberts: A Case Study in Liberal Protestantism in Canada During the Interwar Years.” (M.A. Thesis, Queen’s University, 1993).

Coulter was led to argue that “in a considerable degree our social service has caught up to the Evangelism to which it belongs” and wondered “if, indeed, it has not with some gone beyond.” In the face of this apparent shift in priorities, Coulter insisted that the Board recognize “that true, full-orbed Evangelism is primary and fundamental” and expressed his “deep desire ... that we may prove to be effectively a board of Evangelism.” The “practical consequences of true Evangelism in the wide area imperfectly designated as Social Service,” would, he concluded, necessarily follow.¹⁹

Coulter’s concerns about maintaining the evangelistic balance in the traditional United Church emphasis on a whole gospel were shared throughout the Board. Secretary McLachlan’s argument that “unless there is a spiritual movement in which Christianity will have its proper place, there can be very little hope of genuine progress along social lines,” continued the Chairman’s analysis.²⁰ The defense of the whole gospel was sustained also by the western Associate Secretary, Hugh Dobson. Likely responding to those who were lumping socially active evangelicals in with Christian socialists, the latter defended his whole gospel position by asserting that “I have never presented Evangelism as an alternative to social adjustment and action.” Rather, he insisted on an evangelism that “appealed to the Church and the people for a change of life and outlook and committal in a more definite way to the fulfillment of the Christian purpose.”²¹ Evangelism, the means by which people were brought into the Christian church and redeemed,

¹⁹ J.J. Coulter, “Chairman’s address to Eleventh Annual Meeting, Board of Evangelism and Social Service,” in the Board’s *Annual Report 1935*, 5-7. For a report on the Board’s “attempt to bring evangelism and social service into closer relationship in the people’s thinking,” see *New Outlook* 11:16 (April 17, 1935) 408.

²⁰ D.N. McLachlan in “Annual Report of Secretaries,” in Board of Evangelism and Social Service *Annual Report 1935*, 29.

²¹ Hugh Dobson, *ibid.*, 30.

remained a primary component of Dobson's interpretation of the church's national mission. Without it, as Coulter and McLachlan had observed, the effort to establish the Kingdom of God in Canada could not proceed.

Dobson's re-emphasis of the evangelistic note in the whole gospel, and in The United Church of Canada, became an essential part his work for the remainder of his career. In some ways he was riding a tide of enthusiasm for evangelism that was widespread and powerful in the church throughout the 1930s. The popularity and controversy of the Oxford Group Movement in the first half of the decade, and the interdenominational evangelistic efforts that were almost continuous after 1935, boldly demonstrated this enthusiasm. The positive analysis of evangelism offered by the Board of Evangelism and Social Service in its 1934 report on the issue to the General Council was itself a reflection of the mood in the denomination. This report, which was commissioned by the General Council in 1932, was entitled "The Statement on Evangelism" and was presented to the next General Council meeting in 1934. The traditional tone of the "Statement" is clear, especially when it is compared with the comprehensive, even radical social and economic prescriptions of the simultaneous report on "Christianizing the Social Order."²² "Evangelism," the "Statement" began, "here means a powerful interest in human redemption as this is seen in the crisis of personal experience."²³ Though the report self-consciously separated The United Church of Canada from the "limitations" of the "Evangelical quickening in

²² Both "The Statement on Evangelism" and the report on "Christianizing the Social Order" are found in the Board of Evangelism and Social Service's *Annual Report 1935*.

²³ "The Statement on Evangelism," 38. The "Statement" and particularly its definition of evangelism, have been discussed recently in Ian M. Manson "Religious Revival and Social Transformation: George Pidgeon and the United Church of Canada in the 1930s," in Airhart and Hutchinson, (eds.), *Christianizing the Social Order*, 216 and in Roger Hutchinson, "Christianizing the Social Order: A Three-Dimensional Task," in *ibid.*, 231-233.

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," it nonetheless maintained the emphasis on "the character of sin, the atoning sacrifice of Christ, the redemptive power of God, the guidance of the Spirit and the authority of Scripture" in the church's work. This emphasis on the United Church's ties to traditional evangelicalism were clearly directed at more radical churchpeople, like those in the FCSO who were suggesting that these traditional individualistic emphases were irrelevant. But because the orthodoxy of the United Church was the whole gospel, and not the evangelicalism of the past, these recommendations were balanced by equal emphasis on modern ideas.²⁴ The Report argued not only that true, personal evangelism was manifested in social obligation, but also that those in the church who based their faith and work on the "rejection of a scientific view of the world," and who insisted on "unhistorical methods of treating Holy Scripture" while remaining indifferent to "the culture of one's age" misunderstood the modern church. The imperatives of the United Church's missionary policy, and the Report's loyalty to the liberal evangelical bases of the denomination, were demonstrated best in the Board's judgment that "Evangelism must go on though the Evangelists may change."²⁵ Truly, tradition and change were alive and well in the United Church in the 1930s; the "Statement on Evangelism" was an official attempt to demarcate clearly the boundaries of both in this passionate era.

²⁴ John Grant has noted recently the "generally negative attitude" of many in the FCSO "to the evangelical strain in the church's life." See, John W. Grant, "From Revelation to Revolution: Some Thoughts on the Background of the Social Gospel," in Airhart and Hutchinson, (eds.), *Christianizing the Social Order*. For the opinion of the FCSO, see John Line, "The Theological Principles," in R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos, (eds.), *Towards the Christian Revolution*. (Kingston: Ronald P. Frye & Company, 1989) 28-34.

²⁵ "The Statement on Evangelism". 40-41.

The Report's argument that "The evangel must be for man, the whole of man and man in all his relations," evinced a disposition for theological clarity that was typical of the time.²⁶ This search for clarity did not lead, however, to a simplified gospel of either tradition *or* change. By the mid-1930s the language of a "whole" Christian message that was directed at, and intended for the redemption of both the individual and society was well-known. The crises of the first third of the century, and most notably the Great War, had revitalized the fashion of theological definition. Though some of this re-examination and clarification was, as some have argued, the result of a nostalgic traditionalism inspired by the crises of war and Depression, it was also, and more so, a defense of more modern thought.²⁷ Even with its traditional evangelical emphases, the theological restatement was only partly a response to the threats of a culture less inclined than previously to the Christian message. For many who directed the church's activity the internal threats presented by the polarization of opinion on how best to "Christianize" the nation were just as frightening as the external ones. Clarification of the whole gospel became, therefore, a means of defending the intellectual, spiritual and practical bases of the fledgling church. If the emphasis on personal religion and evangelism in the 1930s was, as David Marshall has

²⁶ In 1936, the General Council of the Church recognized that "Keen students of religious life today are emphasizing 'The Return to Theology.'" They considered this a significant development, and commended it noting that "As the sense of inadequacy grows upon us we must know that our real need is God and basic to the realization of this need is the return to theology." See UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file D, "Report from the Board of Evangelism and Social Service Concerning the Seventh General Council's CALL TO ADVANCE...", 6.

²⁷ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 207-211 and Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 224-243 both make the argument that the Depression intensified the call for evangelistic effort amongst both the laity and the clergy. Marshall is very clear that the "deterioration of Canadian society" so visible during the Depression "encouraged reorientation in Canadian Protestant thinking towards a more conservative outlook which took into account the reality of sinfulness and human tragedy" (p. 234).

suggested, simply a sentimental traditionalism inspired by “disillusion and despair,” the statements of the church and its various representatives would not have been so ostentatiously traditional *and* modern.²⁸

During the 1930s, there was, in fact, a widespread return to, and protection of tradition. That tradition was not, however, the evangelicalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but rather the relatively younger and twentieth-century orthodoxy of the whole gospel. As the decade progressed, the church argued for a theology based on evangelism and social service with greater clarity and conviction than ever in its history. In announcing the inauguration of national evangelistic efforts in 1936, the General Council made this theological basis for church work clear: “Perish we would say the antithesis of individual Gospel versus Social Gospel: perish even the distinction between them. We will evangelize with a whole gospel or none for none other is the Gospel of our Lord.”²⁹ This whole gospel emphasis was more than academic; the evangelistic movements inspired and led by The United Church of Canada in the 1930s were based explicitly on the ongoing necessity of saving individuals for the sake of extending the Kingdom.

By 1936, Dobson had been in active church service in the West for over a quarter of a century. What he had learned from his travels as a secretary of Evangelism and Social Service made him without equal in his understanding

²⁸ Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 228.

²⁹ From a circular entitled “THE WHOLE GOSPEL,” which was likely compiled by Hugh Dobson from various General Council Statements and sent to the western conferences for study. See UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file H. Text of the “Evangelization of Canadian Life,” and the “Call to Advance” is found in the *Record of Proceedings of the Seventh General Council*, 79-81. See also, “Report from the Board of Evangelism and Social Service Concerning the Seventh General Council’s CALL TO ADVANCE...” 8-9 and box B6, file A, the United Church of Canada, Toronto Conference, “Evangelistic Campaign” and “Report of Committee on Evangelism and Social Service,” both from 1935.

of the particular needs of the provinces he served. His knowledge of the West and of the effects of the Depression there, led him to believe that "Throughout Western Canad[a] there is everywhere a very definite need for Christian Evangelism." This call did not imply, he said, "that the need is less in other parts," but he was certain that the country, and particularly those parts of it west of Ontario, needed the "'good news of God,'" where the "emphasis is upon both 'good news' and 'God.'" The effects of the Great Depression in the West continued to devastate the lives of those who remained on the land and in the depressed urban centres. While the eastern provinces were recovering from the worst years of the economic crisis, western Canadians remained at the mercy of dry weather, insect populations and international pricing policy, even as crop yields remained disastrously low.³⁰ In these difficult times, Dobson's understanding of the needs of both the church and the population of the West, led him to the conclusion that the prairies had particular needs which could only be met by an evangelism that cultivated Christian hope. "I say without ceasing to be [a] realist about pain and death," he continued, "that we must place the accent on joy, victory, fellowship and life." He believed that this message of hope, through evangelism, was "what is most needed in Western Canada, perhaps everywhere."³¹

Though others equally well versed on the peculiarities of the West, like the Saskatchewan-based professor and historian E.H. Oliver, were abandoning their faith in the possibility of progress and the Kingdom of God, Dobson remained committed first and foremost to spreading the message of

³⁰ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 385 and 388.

³¹ UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file B, "Throughout Western Canadian...", 1-2.

the coming Kingdom.³² In this time of continuing material requirements, he argued that “the deepest need is for a quality in the soul of man that looks with courage and hope, with deep desire and steadfast purpose, for the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.”³³ For Dobson, then, the crisis of the Great Depression did not lead to rejection of the progressive assumptions that lay at the root of his post-millennial hope. On the contrary, the difficulty and opportunity that the economic hardship and social dislocation inspired, encouraged his faith in the United Church’s ability to help to usher in the “Kingdom of God on Earth.” The evangelistic message for which he called, and which he preached, was one that emphasized hope and victory in the face of undeniable hardship. Instead of losing faith in progress towards the Kingdom, therefore, it was in his continuing faith in the possibility of building the Kingdom of God in Canada that Dobson found solace for himself, and for the people of the prairie. Given this emphasis, it is not surprising that his tone during the 1930s became distinctly more urgent.³⁴ He argued, therefore, that the evangelism that would be effective in the West “must put the accent upon what is coming not what is waning.” “If we are not aware of God’s reign coming in our present disasters and if we do not know God living creatively now ,” he asked, “how can we convincingly bear to the soul of the people ‘Good news of God now.’” The apocalyptic mood inspired by the Depression, and encouraged by the rise to power of more

³² E.H. Oliver’s reaction to the Depression, and his apparent “conservative” reversal are discussed in Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 234 -237. Marshall contends that the despair of the Great Depression led many previously committed to the Kingdom ideal to abandon the “progressive” assumptions which formed the bedrock of that faith.

³³ *Ibid.*, box B6, file H, “The Whole Church with a Whole Gospel.”

³⁴ See UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file J, Dobson to McLachlan, December 30, 1935. On the importance of “expectation” and “urgency” in postmillennial Kingdom thought, see Grant, “Revelation to Revolution,” 162.

apocalyptic interpretations in government and in faith, was, Dobson believed, an opportunity for the United Church.³⁵

Noting the obvious public attraction to the hope offered by the premillennial and economic panaceas promised by Alberta premier, "Bible Bill" Aberhart, Dobson suggested that the United Church had a message to offer as well. The good news Dobson presented to westerners was the promise of hope, and the evangelistic vehicle he used was the message of the coming of Christ's reign on earth. Though he was no premillennialist, the evidence of the popularity of its immediate promises encouraged Dobson, at times, to speak with the urgency of one. He beseeched the church to understand the power of the "coming reign;" "When we have really learned that we are at the dawn and not the twilight," he concluded, "then we can herald good news of God."³⁶ In the 1930s, then, the Kingdom of God, rather than becoming a lost, unattainable dream, remained a significant aspect of the church's ministry, and became even more central to Dobson's message for the West.

II

Though Dobson's faith in the Kingdom and its coming in Canada had survived both the Great War and the Great Depression, in the late years of the decade he became aware that faith in the coming Kingdom of God was waning among many of those with whom he worked. This threat to the Kingdom ideal was more pronounced, Dobson felt, because the United Church itself seemed to be avoiding its responsibility to emphasize the

³⁵ The leadership and message of Social Credit Premier "Bible Bill" Aberhart in Alberta had widespread cultural manifestations. See David R. Elliot, and Iris Miller, *Bible Bill: A Biography of William Aberhart* (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987), and John Stackhouse, Jr., "William Aberhart: Beyond Fundamentalism," in *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 35-45.

³⁶ Dobson, "Throughout Western Canadian....," 6.

theological and practical basics of the Kingdom. In the mid-1930s, the church's priorities appeared to be exactly what Dobson believed was necessary; national efforts to advance the Kingdom through evangelistic and social action were the General Council's priorities, and the church as a whole was energized by the evangelical emphasis. The decision by the 1936 General Council to replace D.N. McLachlan with the energetic and committed James R. Mutchmor indicated, also, that the whole gospel direction of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service was safe. As the new Secretary, Mutchmor was clear that the work of the Kingdom was paramount, a position that Dobson supported vigorously. But by 1938, as the energy of the initial years of the national evangelistic efforts subsided, Dobson began to worry that the church's message to the nation was losing its direction. Dobson's concerns became obvious in an article that he wrote for the *New Outlook*. Commissioned to compose a piece on the question of evangelism, Dobson took the opportunity to challenge the church publicly on its current priorities and message.

Under the title "The Message and the Messenger," in this 1938 article, Dobson encouraged the coming General Council to take the opportunity afforded it to consider the evangelistic message of the church, and its effectiveness. "The Council should consider very seriously," he wrote, "whether we as ministers and lay leaders called and appointed to our great tasks seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness? Are we obedient to the Divine Commission?" Because he was worried that the church was not fulfilling its duties to the Kingdom, and, therefore, failing in its "commission" to ensure the Christianization of the nation, Dobson asked more questions than he answered. He challenged the church on pastoral oversight, the content of worship, its obedience to God, the sanctity of the sacraments, and its national commitment. His prescriptions for the faults of

the church were representative of his continuing theological assumptions: "A new emphasis upon honesty, upon love going far beyond justice, upon responsibility for word and deed, the practice of the good neighbour, and Christ's teaching of 'Forgiveness' is greatly needed." But he reminded the *New Outlook's* many readers that these lofty social accomplishments could happen only one way: "The Church must learn how by the clarity of its thinking and the winsomeness of its preaching to secure 'decisions for Christ.'" But it was in receiving these commitments that Dobson saw the greatest need for the church. "How few are received on profession of faith!" he lamented. "These times demand decisions for Christ and the thorough training of those admitted to the church for effective witness for God and His coming Kingdom." The central role of the United Church in the social and moral progress of the nation, and of the Kingdom was at stake, and it was time, therefore, for the church "to define more clearly the Salvation we offer in the name of Christ to humanity now."³⁷ By the late 1930s, this Associate Secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service was becoming even more convinced than previously that proselytizing with a clear emphasis on decision was imperative, and that the future of the "coming Kingdom," and of Canada, rested on its success.³⁸

Dobson's concern sprang from what he perceived to be a growing popular and church-based insensitivity to the bases of the whole gospel. Though he had been enthusiastic about the "revival" of evangelical thinking

³⁷ Hugh Dobson, "The Message and the Messenger," *New Outlook*, 14:17 (September 9, 1938): 838. See other versions in UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file M, Dobson to Mutchmor, August 23, 1938 and box B6, file B, "Evangelism: the Message and the Messenger."

³⁸ For Dobson's emphasis on the importance of "preaching for a verdict" and the necessity of "decisions for Christ," see UCBCA, HDP, box B13, file 1, "The Christian Message." On his concern about the waning influence of the Kingdom ideal, see "The Message and the Messenger," 838.

in the early 1930s, as the decade progressed Dobson's fear that some in the United Church were questioning, or in some cases ignoring, the necessary connection between conversion and Christian social action grew. A case in point involved one of his own social reform institutions. For many years one of Dobson's favorite projects had been the efficient and effective maintenance of Redemptive Homes for Women. These homes, which were intended for the protection of unmarried mothers and others, had been one of the central jewels in Dobson's expansive social service crown. During the 1920s, and throughout the 1930s, he was keenly interested in maintaining these church homes for women who were the victims of "moral breakdown." These redemptive homes were concerned with helping homeless "girls," many of whom were pregnant with "illegitimate" children. With the assistance of hospitals, doctors and social service agencies, these church-sponsored homes provided the women and children who came to them with shelter, food and medical assistance. Daily quiet hours for study and prayer, "Mission Circle work," Bible classes, and prayer meetings were also an important part of the offerings at the homes. Those who ran the homes were pleased to report that these efforts often led to "spiritual quickening" which resulted in "professions of faith" and "renewed membership vows."³⁹

In 1938, in his interviews to fill a vacant superintendent's position at a Home in British Columbia, Dobson was "surprised at the lack of accent on the thought of Christian redemption" among the candidates. In a troubled letter to his superior, J.R. Mutchmor, Dobson worried that the candidates he

³⁹ UCBCA, HDP, box B10, file T, "The United Church Home for Girls -- Vancouver, B.C.: Superintendent's Report, 1933-34." The work of these homes in British Columbia is described in various reports in files T and V. The conditions in these homes are discussed briefly in Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: The Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1988) 16.

was interviewing “seem alien to the thought of changed lives through Christ.” Because he was concerned that this might indicate where the denominational mission was failing, he stated that “I am sure our church must face more steadily the necessity of winning persons and families to Christ and redeeming them through God’s Grace.”⁴⁰ Where previously he had been able to assume that those involved in Christian social service would recognize the need for individual redemption, he was now seeing that some no longer considered the one necessary for the other. And he could not help wondering if the United Church was at least partly responsible for this troubling change.

His solution to this problem was simple; if the emphasis on winning persons was to be maintained, he suggested that “a vast change must take place in ‘the use of the Bible’. The old expository method is fading and the new sense of value of the Bible is not fortified by a clear enough knowledge on the part of many to break the word to the people through the use of the Bible.” Clearly Dobson felt that there was not enough emphasis on biblical imperatives in much of the modern preaching. He worried not only that the biblical basis was being forgotten, but that its neglect was allowing the evangelistic imperative to be over-looked. “We must keep on suggesting the purpose of Christian missions and the necessity of preaching for a verdict,” he advised the new Secretary. “Upon our Christian leaders must be laid what we used to call ‘the burden of souls’. New ways will be found for action but we need ‘expectancy.’”⁴¹ Though some historians have argued that the conversionist emphasis in mainstream Canadian Protestantism was all but

⁴⁰ UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file M, Dobson to J.R. Mutchmor, December 29, 1938. For earlier fears about “the tide of secularism” see box B28, file J, Dobson to D.N. McLachlan, July 7, 1936.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

lost by the turn of the century, Dobson had not begun to raise the alarm about the waning of the imperative to convert until the last years of the 1930s.⁴² When he did raise it, however, he was obviously shaken by a degree of disinterest in redemption that he had not previously witnessed. For Dobson and most others who had helped to establish the United Church in Canada, to work for the Kingdom without concern for individual salvation was a theological impossibility.

The 1930s had been a decade of significant disruption and disagreement in the United Church. In the late years of the decade, Dobson became convinced that there was a growing divide between those in the United Church who, in his view, were heralding the "Kingdom of Man" and those whose anticipated a "Kingdom of God."⁴³ In this atmosphere, Dobson's work for the latter necessarily intensified. The passion of his pleas for spiritual, moral and social reform exposed his fear that he was witnessing the beginning of a foundational shift in the culture of the nation and in the theological identity of the United Church. As the worries of the Depression blurred with those associated with renewed international conflict, however, his public and private discourse, continued to call for the same remedies for the ailments of the not-yet-Christian Dominion.⁴⁴ Inspired perhaps by the revival of interest in "evangelical experience," or by the success of the

⁴² See Phyllis Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism, and the Methodist Tradition in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), and Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

⁴³ Dobson, "The Message and the Messenger," 838; John Line, "The Theological Principles." This was a concern that Dobson shared with the former Moderator, Richard Roberts. Roberts' concern that the church was being split between proponents of the social and the individual gospel is detailed in Gidney, "Richard Roberts: A Case Study in Liberal Protestantism in Canada During the Interwar Years," 110.

⁴⁴ On the United Church and the international situation, see Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918-1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

“evangelical sects,” Dobson began to call again for the increasingly unfashionable “mass evangelism” of the past.⁴⁵ Arguing that “I do not think the church has the right to survive if it can’t tackle the crowd,” he declared in 1937 that “Open air preaching is again within the order of the day.”⁴⁶ Almost despite himself, then, as Dobson encountered ever more rapid change, he began to respond with tradition.

Contrary to the wishes of both Dobson and the United Church, however, by 1940 it was becoming clear that traditional methods were no longer widely influential in the rapidly changing Dominion. When Mutchmor and the other members of the executive of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service called for widespread preaching missions in late 1939, the congregational and ministerial response was often less than enthusiastic. In British Columbia, where Dobson had asked the ministers of the conference to detail “preaching efforts” in their churches, he was told repeatedly that “past experiences have been disappointing.”⁴⁷ The ministers of the conference who responded to the leadership’s suggestions for special preaching services quite overwhelmingly rejected the idea. Though many were “in full accord with the plans of our leaders,” they were also keen to point out that “the most vital and effective work is in the regular, patient work of the ministry concentrating on the regular services and activities.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the reaction against the idea of mass preaching missions was so strong

⁴⁵ On the influence of “conservative evangelicals” in the West see Burkinshaw, *Pilgrims in Lotus Land*, 121-148.

⁴⁶ UCBCA, “Hugh Wesley Dobson,” Vertical/ Biographical file, “The Christian Front,” 6.

⁴⁷ UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file N, Mutchmor to Mr. Convener, December 11, 1939; box B6, file J, J. Dinnage Hobden to Dear Convener, n.d., and attached response from “Geo. Hamilton.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, box B6, file J, F.E. Runnals to Mr. Convener, January 17, 1940. Many of the reports in this file make very similar arguments and point out the ministry’s discomfort with the idea of a “special preaching mission.”

that one minister announced frankly that "Preaching missions do not appeal to the mass of our people," and noted ironically that congregants "make it known that we have more preaching than enough."⁴⁹ By 1940 it was clear, at least to those working in regular charges, that the appeal of mass evangelism was fading, for both the ministry and the laity.

Disinterest in the medium does not necessarily suggest, however, a rejection of the message. The variety and number of entertainments available that surpassed the attractions of a "preaching mission" likely contributed to the lack of success. Indeed, as George Pidgeon's experience with the Oxford Group Movement demonstrated, popular attachment to the idea and process of being "born again" and living a "new life" remained strong. But the rise and fall of the Oxford Group also demonstrated that how the message was packaged and delivered was increasingly important. At the end of the 1930s, therefore, how to keep the evangelists "up to date" was becoming a difficult challenge, as well as an important point of intersection for the cultures of tradition and change.

III

As the Second World War became a central part of life in Canada, Dobson's approach to church and Kingdom work remained solidly grounded in the essentials of the whole gospel. Because he approached the domestic problems inspired by the war in the same mode of "crisis" that had maintained him through the Depression and its aftermath, he saw no reason for serious modification of his message or his techniques. Noting that historically spiritual "revelation became clearer in the midst of calamity," Dobson encouraged his radio audience with the hope that "Days of calamity may

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Hugh M. Rae to My Dear Herbison, January 25, 1940.

become days of vision and days of opportunity, to those attuned to the Infinite who observe the deep ways of God.”⁵⁰ Though he was well aware by now of the internal and external threats to his understanding of theology and activity, he nonetheless continued to speak and act in much the same way he had since the end of the First World War. He continued, therefore, to appeal to the church and to the nation to use the opportunity provided by the “constant feeling of crisis and impending catastrophe” to advance the Kingdom in Canada.⁵¹ His themes in public discourse remained essentially the same as those he had been expounding for decades, and included a continuing emphasis on the impediments to the Kingdom that to him were so obvious in Canada and in the world. The traffic in, and widening social acceptance of liquor, the popularity of gambling, injustice in racial, social and labour relationships, and his relatively more recent concern with divorce and the spiritual health of families all remained central to his appeals.⁵²

Naturally, Dobson continued to insist that progress in all these social areas was dependent on a strong, effective evangelism, especially during times of crisis. “Every need for Evangelism in normal times,” he argued early in the conflict “is tenfold greater in war times and times when nations are in distress.”⁵³ Consequently, he reminded radio listeners in 1940, “Our primary

⁵⁰ UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file D, Hugh Dobson, “Christian strategy in times like these,” 2. See also box B28, file O, Dobson to Mutchmor, June 19, 1940.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, box B6, file A, Hugh Dobson, “Morning Devotions: Address for C.B.C. Broadcast May 6th/39.”

⁵² Dobson placed a great deal of emphasis on importance of the family as a basic Christian and national building block. Dobson’s expectations for families are expressed best in the title of his 1940 pamphlet, *The Christian Family is Essential to Democracy to Canadian National Life and to The Coming Kingdom of God, For Which We Pray* (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, 1940). On his concerns about the family, and particularly the threats of civil marriage, divorce, and deserted wives see, UCBCA, HDP, box B10, files R and S.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, box B22, file P4, Dobson to Rev. Harry Heathfield, June 27, 1940. See box B28, file N, Dobson to Mutchmor, December 30, 1939 for a similar argument.

activity wherever there is a United Church of Canada congregation or mission ... is to spread, that is, to broadcast the Gospel of God in Christ and win men and women and to redeem them, to his service and to the doing of God's will on earth as it is in heaven."⁵⁴ Clearly, then, the imperatives of the whole gospel for effective Kingdom work through a combination of evangelism and social service remained central to Dobson's conception of The United Church of Canada and of his own work. These old ideas, upon which he had based his life's work, and upon which he believed the United Church was founded, remained the essential components of his gospel to the nation.

Nevertheless, though he was now in his sixties and contemplating the end of his church career, in his public addresses during the war, Dobson maintained his insistence that the church be up to date. Arguing that "What a Christian church undertakes should be relevant to the Gospel of God in Christ and to the human need of the world," he continued to emphasize that the church must keep pace with the demands of culture.⁵⁵ At the same time, he was increasingly aware that the world was changing, and just as likely to emphasize that "Christ and the world are in conflict." Reflecting a growing mood in the United Church that was questioning the denomination's attachment to the direction of prevailing culture, and faced with the realization that the message of the "coming Kingdom" was often received with indifference, after 1943 Dobson spoke increasingly about an "emergent paganism." The possibility of "secularism" and "indifference to humanity"

⁵⁴ UCBCA, "Our Program of Christian Action," 1-2. There is little information available about the context and nature of Dobson's radio ministry. What sermons remain indicate that it was more sporadic than regular. For general context, see Russell Johnston, "The Early trials of Protestant radio, 1922-38." *Canadian Historical Review*, 75:3 (1994): 376-402.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1. See also UCBCA, "Hugh Wesley Dobson," Vertical/ Biographical file, "What matters most in a world like ours," 4.

led him to worry that in "the realm of mental attitude and purpose, and in the realm of desire and the will of man, in the realm of prayer and decision a more serious war is being waged than the European Conflict." The depth of his concern about the cultural war for the minds and hearts of Canadians is exposed by his belief that "the outcome for the world depends more on victory in this clash in the realm of the Spirit than upon the issue in opposing forces of mechanized war."⁵⁶

In the early years of the war he had been encouraged by signs of international ecumenism and his faith that "Christian Churches throughout the world ... are showing the way of world salvation, in industrial, commercial, financial, political relations as well as in individual life and the hidden life of the Spirit."⁵⁷ But as the war continued and claimed a growing toll in Europe and at home, Dobson's mood changed. Increasingly he found the Kingdom ideal, and the message of its coming, challenged by a culture, and a church, less attuned to the efforts, and Grace, of an immanent God.⁵⁸ In response, and in an effort to make redemption an important part of Canadian life, he began to preach more vigorously than ever on the importance of Christianity for the world. The urgency of this appeal is reflected in his 1943 declaration that:

If ever there was a need for the rule of Christ in this world It Is Now. If ever the Christian Church should go into all the world to make disciples of all nations, IT IS NOW. If ever we should preach the good news of God, IT IS NOW. If ever we should

⁵⁶ Dobson, "Christian strategy," 9. On the emergence of paganism and secularism, see Dobson, "Radio Address C.K.W.X. Vancouver," 2 and "The Need and Urgency of Christian Evangelism in This Great Hour," *The Western Recorder*, 19:11, May, 1944, 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4. The popularity of international ecumenism in the 1930s is discussed in Wright, *A World Mission*.

⁵⁸ On his view of the "conviction" for evangelism within the United Church during the war, see UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file Q, Dobson to Mutchmor, October 28, 1943. David R. Elliot, "Hugh Wesley Dobson (1879-1956): Regenerator of Society," *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers*, vol. 9 (1991-1992), 36-37.

baptize persons into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost IT IS NOW . If ever we should persuade people that "Jesus Christ is Lord over all" IT IS NOW . If ever we could convince people that our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is Sovereign over all the earth, and that "the Son of Man" is in everlasting session at His Right hand and Judge over all people IT IS NOW . If ever we should teach people to observe all things whatsoever Jesus commanded then IT IS NOW .⁵⁹

With a renewed emphasis on the grace and sovereignty of God, then, Dobson used the difficulty and judgment inspired by the war as an opportunity to preach for intensified evangelistic effort. As the end of the war approached, he entreated Canadians to use the present opportunity to fight "paganism" by making "disciples of Christ in all nations, among all classes, in every part of the nation, in every ward of the city, in every town, village, hamlet, and rural community. That," he concluded definitively, "is evangelism."⁶⁰ Finding effective means of "making disciples" remained a central preoccupation of his continuing effort to establish the Kingdom in Canada. In earlier times, Dobson would have been pleased to encourage new ways of Kingdom building, believing that opportunity from calamity required an adaptive and creative national church. Nonetheless, as the nation prepared to emerge from a second international conflict, and as technology continued to alter the social landscape, Dobson seemed less rather than more creative. He was clearly enthusiastic about the rapid changes brought by technology, even noting that new inventions "force world fellowship and the overthrow of separatism, class strife, prejudice and indifference."⁶¹ But, contrary to his continued public emphasis on "creative" church work, Dobson

⁵⁹ UCBCA, HDP, box B23, file E2, "Whither Bound – The United Church ?" 4.

⁶⁰ Dobson, "Radio Address C.K.W.X. Vancouver," 2.

⁶¹ Dobson, "Christian strategy," 5. Earlier in the war his view of technology was less favourable. He noted that "It is a great world. It sure needs Christ, but as of old having eaten off the tree of knowledge (science and invention) in this power age, we face the Fall." See Dobson to Mutchmor, June 19, 1940.

continued to view and responded to the war and its attendant changes from within the same parameters he had established earlier in his career. Many of the enemies of the Kingdom he identified were those he had been battling for years, and so his preaching on the need for evangelism and social service sounded strikingly similar to the message he had communicated thirty years earlier. Though the specter of "paganism" at home and globally increased the intensity of his pleas, he continued to recognize unjust commerce and politics and the traditional social vices as the clearest enemies of the Christian Kingdom. But in an era when social consumption of alcohol was increasing along with the mechanization and bureaucratization of work and government, however, his message of abstinence and national progress through Christian action was failing, perhaps for the first time, to speak to the times.

In this changing world, Dobson was conflicted about the most effective way to deal with the dangers of secularism and the state of the Kingdom. Increasingly he approached the threats to his understanding of the coming Christian Kingdom in ways that led him in some novel, sometimes uncharacteristic directions, as the occasional disparities between his public and private statements demonstrate. He continued, of course, to fight for the Kingdom of God, even as it became more apparent than ever that the Kingdom, rather than advancing, was in danger of retreating. As Keith Clifford and Robert Wright have demonstrated, by the early years of the Second World War, the combined effects of a diversifying population and increasing doubts about the "program of Canadianization" and the possibility of "progress" had made the homogenous Anglo-Saxon and middle-class

assumptions of "His Dominion" insupportable.⁶² Even when confronted with undeniable change, however, Dobson expanded the fronts of his Kingdom campaign by taking up the causes of the physically handicapped and tackling the difficult issue of racial intolerance.⁶³

Nonetheless, though he remained hopeful, his frustration with the inability of the Protestant churches to achieve the earthly tasks of Kingdom construction was becoming obvious by 1943. While encouraging his radio and newspaper audiences to be tolerant of "minorities," for example, he expressed to Mutchmor his unease with these same minorities.⁶⁴ Perhaps unable to accept the reality of a population that was increasingly impossible to "Canadianize," and which clearly threatened the assumptions of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant Kingdom, in the depths of the war, in a letter to his superior, Dobson pronounced on the "Jewish problem" by stating simply: "Generally I don't like Jews for some reason though some I came to know well were likable." In the same letter, Dobson contradicted his own public opinion that "We have nothing but minorities in Canada" by expressing concern that "Anglo-Saxons are the minority now in some provinces," and wondering about the impact of immigrant and native American populations.⁶⁵ The ambiguous discrepancies between Dobson's private and

⁶² Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," 322-324; Robert A. Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in G. A. Rawlyk (ed.) *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) 189-192.

⁶³ See, for example, Dobson, "Whither Bound -- The United Church?" 6; and Dobson, "Radio Address C.K.W.X. Vancouver," 3-5.

⁶⁴ For his public call for tolerance see, Dobson, "Radio Address C.K.W.X. Vancouver," 3.

⁶⁵ UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file Q, Dobson to Mutchmor, January 8, 1943. For context on popular and particularly Christian concerns about the influence of Jews in Canada, see Howard Palmer, "Politics, Religion and Antisemitism in Alberta, 1880-1950," and Marilyn Nefsky, "The Shadow of Evil: Nazism and Canadian Protestantism," in Alan Davies, (ed.) *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992) 167-225.

public interpretations likely reflect his personal unease with the progress of his and the church's mission in Canada. Like so many in his generation of churchmen, he was unable to believe that Canada could progress properly if it developed outside of "respectable" white and British parameters. As this discomfort with the achievements of United Church work grew, Dobson responded in various ways, some of which were contradictory. His call for tolerance of diversity even as he was not, and his insistence on creativity in spreading the gospel even as he remained committed to old passions and methods exposed his, as well as the nation's ambivalence in the face of change. During and after the war, the church was beginning to lose touch with the culture of the nation it wished to redeem.⁶⁶

For Dobson, however, what mattered most continued to be the Kingdom, and enlisting disciples for it. Therefore, he saw the challenges of the post-war era as an opportunity to be realized through widespread, intensive and immediate evangelistic effort.⁶⁷ Indeed, the call to evangelize the nation was one widely heard from Canadian Protestantism in the late years of the war and in the post-war era. The United Church led this movement with the almost immediate inauguration of a national evangelistic campaign. In 1945, the "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom" was planned and initiated in a sincere attempt by the church "to meet the need of our world today."⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, perhaps, that need was to be

⁶⁶ This waning cultural connection was not due to a lack of trying. During the war and in the immediate post-war period, Dobson and the Church were working hard to keep the church relevant in the era of "demobilization." See, for example, Dobson, "What matters most in a world like ours;" "Christian strategy in times like these;" and "Whither Bound -- The United Church?"

⁶⁷ UCBCA, "Hugh Wesley Dobson," Vertical/ Biographical file, "The Immediate Task of the Church," 1; Dobson, "The Need and Urgency of Christian Evangelism in This Great Hour."

⁶⁸ UCBCA, HDP, box B33, file C(1), Hugh Dobson, "Broadcast CKWX -- August 18, 1945," 1.

met by a traditional, revival-based evangelistic campaign "in which the Moderator should raise the Cross of Christ in a fresh call to action, to self denial and devotion, to every member and adherent of The United Church." The Crusade was intended, then, to energize the membership of the United Church, as well as "to preach and teach Christ's vision for the Kingdom of God, and to enlist all men and women who might be induced ... to join the Crusade for a new world order."⁶⁹ Though directed at the particular needs of the day, Dobson's and the church's call for evangelism, devotion and work for a "new world order" mirrored emphases in similar campaigns begun after the end of the First World War. Ironically, in planning for guiding the nation through the difficult post-war period, and into a new, modern era, the leaders of the United Church's evangelistic ventures fell back on the traditional methods of previous generations.

John Webster Grant has attributed this return to pageant-like revivalism as "nostalgia." It is more accurate, perhaps, to interpret these earnest efforts to convert and enlist Canadians through the Crusade as an expression of theological consistency as well as an unfortunate attachment to methods that were increasingly out of touch with the priorities of Canadians.⁷⁰ Faced with unprecedented indifference to both the individual and social parts of the whole gospel, religious leaders like Dobson were forced to fight more aggressively than previously to ensure the continued vitality of the Kingdom ideal. In earlier years, when the goal of a homogenous religious and social culture did not seem impossible, the message of the coming

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2. For Dobson's reading of ecumenical "Christian world order" material, see box B34, file W. See Wright, *A World Mission*, 241-243.

⁷⁰ John Webster Grant, "What's Past is Prologue," in Peter Gordon White (ed.), *Voices and Visions: 65 Years of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1990) 139.

Kingdom was more easily transmitted to English Canadians, almost all of whom already fell within, and accepted the limited parameters of "His Dominion." After the war, however, church leaders recognized increasingly that the Kingdom ideal did not carry its earlier cultural power, and they sought to re-establish the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Canadian society. This was especially true for Dobson, who had worried for almost a decade about the growing apathy towards all facets, individual and social, of Kingdom work. For him, therefore, the ostentatious pageantry of the Crusade was a necessary remedy for the lack of conviction that he believed was a threat to the United Church's mission, and he actively promoted and planned Crusade events in Vancouver.⁷¹ In his words, to enlist workers "in the war that never ends for a Christian world requires a call that can be seen and heard. Hence, the pageant, the massed music, the Rally, and the message."⁷²

As early as 1946, however, it was apparent to the church and to Dobson that the evangelistic campaign was neither widely seen nor heard, and it was not achieving the expected results. Though the opening of the Crusade in Vancouver in September, 1945 attracted some 10 000 people to a "colorful pageant" that featured "an 800-voice mixed choir ... set against a backdrop depicting the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ," the influence of the Crusade in the years following was disappointing.⁷³ Dobson's personal frustration with the continuing failure of the church to reach the masses with calls for Christ and for the Kingdom, though mitigated by the early popularity of the Crusade, soon returned. As he had done during the war, Dobson

⁷¹ On his planning efforts, see UCBCA, HDP, box B25, file C2, Dobson to R.C. Chalmers, October 9, 1945.

⁷² Dobson, "Broadcast CKWX -- August 18, 1945," 5.

⁷³ UCBCA, HDP, box B6, file F, "10,000 Attend Opening of 'Crusade For Christ' Rally," from *The Vancouver Sun*, September, 17, 1945. On the results of the Crusade, see Grant, "What's Past is Prologue," 139.

looked for reasons for this failure and started placing blame. He described what he saw as an alarming “drift in the United Church from Bible study and the habit of prayer on the part of church members” as “folly!” In a gloomy letter to Mutchmor in 1946, Dobson lamented that “Very many are drifting out of the church, and many of them [are] our best families who have been loyal in worship and in habits of life.” As far as he was concerned these indicators of diminishing spiritual vitality were the result of “too great a stressing of dignity and form until at last we lose that essence of dignity and good form that is the Christian life and behaviour, and sensitivity to human need and the source of supply to meet the need – in God who is reality.” Dobson was identifying the results of a change in national church life that had pursued respectability and inclusivity, and had, therefore, progressively eschewed evangelical passion. By the middle of the twentieth century this process led Dobson to observe a chill in spiritual life, and to opine that “I am fearful of a doctrinaire attitude towards evangelism and to the Gospel and the development of the ancient evil of formalism.”⁷⁴ Dobson, who understood well the evangelical bases of the effort to build the Kingdom of God in Canada, was concerned that as spiritual passion waned, so too would the impetus for Christian social reformism. And as these spiritual and practical emphases continued to be subdued, he feared that faith in the “coming Kingdom” would also wane. In the post-war years, therefore, Dobson began to worry that Canadians were less willing to put their faith in the ability of the United Church to guide the nation into and through the modern world.

This fear was not all encompassing, however. His growing pessimism notwithstanding, in a another long letter to Mutchmor in 1946, he claimed

⁷⁴ UCBCA, HDP, box B25, file M2, Dobson to Mutchmor, October 24, 1946.

that, contrary to the opinion of some in the denomination, "The church is not failing, but is really having great victories." He added, however, that "there is nevertheless a religious lag, an educational lag, and a cultural lag, an unbalance in the way humanity has gone forward for a better life." The "unbalance" that Dobson saw so clearly, was, in part, a shift of public interest from the deferred Kingdom offerings of the United Church to the more immediately gratifying potentials and realities of invention and efficiency. This was a shift from spiritual to material confidence.⁷⁵ The conflicts inflicted on a culture and society that was, in some ways and in many places, just breaching the modern age, were manifested, then, in problems for the United Church. Though troubled by the destructive capacities of technology and science, at war's end many Canadians were more certain than ever before that the promise of human progress lay in the successes of science and the freedoms of technology. As a result, acceptance of the traditional whole gospel message of a coming Kingdom based in the grace of God and the efforts of converted, active disciples was fading. The Almighty remained, of course, a central reality of life for the overwhelming majority. But, as the war ended and the churches and the nations wondered how to rebuild, these same persons, like North Americans generally, were increasingly relegating supernatural influence to the realms of ethics and behaviour, and putting their faith for a better world in the very human realms of invention, government and scholarship.⁷⁶

Of course, the notion of progress, had not died; indeed it was central to the secular notion of national progress. But its transposition from the sacred

⁷⁵ Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 165.

⁷⁶ On this circumstance in the United States, see Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) 44-49.

to the secular realm changed its nature from Dobson's Kingdom ideal. As Christopher Lasch has suggested, secular progress did not carry any eschatological imperative or urgency; it was divorced, therefore, from the Christian hope for the establishment of Christ's rule on earth.⁷⁷ Without this Christian hope, the centrality of *Christians* to the process of progress became irrelevant, and the conversionist imperative behind "Kingdom-building" was increasingly divorced from the future hope of the mainstream culture. Nevertheless, ever-hopeful, and only dimly aware of this changing cultural sense, Dobson remained confident that the church would continue its mission. In 1946, he told Mutchmor that "By patience and the perseverance of the saints, and the praising of God for the victories we have, we will win out; even if it is with great difficulty that we hang on to the shattered pieces of the ship that is riding a heavy storm in the world today. We will get to shore, too, as Paul said."⁷⁸

The chastened undertone of Dobson's interpretation of the fortunes of the United Church is surprising in an era that many have interpreted as one of prosperity for the mainline denominations.⁷⁹ The disparity between Dobson's heavily qualified hope and later readings of the same period may be explained by differences in form and content. Dobson's concern was not that the church was failing; the signs he considered victorious were likely the very indicators of "revival" that historians like John Grant and John Stackhouse have chosen to highlight. Dobson saw the same signs of revitalization, including increasing attendance at Sunday Schools and regular services, but

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-49.

⁷⁸ UCBCA, HDP, box B25, file M2, Dobson to Mutchmor, December 9, 1946.

⁷⁹ John Webster Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (updated and expanded) (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 160-163; John Stackhouse, Jr. "The Protestant Experience in Canada Since 1945," in Rawlyk (ed.), *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990*, 198-207.

he interpreted them in a different light. These manifestations of religious interest belied an underlying separation from the whole gospel bases of Canadian mainline faith, and perceptive leaders like Hugh Dobson saw the implications of this development clearly. Though returning soldiers did indeed escort their young families to church at record levels, the bases of their and their fellow citizens' faith for the future, the seat of their confidence, was not necessarily what The United Church of Canada was offering.⁸⁰

Dobson saw that even as pews filled, the message of individual and social redemption for the sake of establishing the Kingdom of God was losing its vitality. The passion with which Dobson had approached the task of letting the Spirit of Christ rule in Canada was no longer shared by many of the people to whom he expressed his understanding of the gospel. Though nostalgia and a sincere desire to find spiritual answers to material problems like war and Depression brought many to the churches, as John Grant has suggested, the content of what they heard there was less important to many than the form of its presentation.⁸¹ These recognizable church services, though they calmed with familiar words that sounded old, were, Dobson believed, ultimately uninspiring when devoid of evangelistic passion. He worried, therefore, perhaps more than many others, that Christianity without the imperatives of the Kingdom was likely to wither through the acceptance of the "ancient evil of formalism."⁸² By the end of the Second World War, the very Anglo-Saxon, middle-class morals and standards upon which he and

⁸⁰ Doug Owsram discusses this upswing in church attendance, and its social context after the war in *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 103-106.

⁸¹ Grant, *Church in the Canadian Era*, 162-163.

⁸² On the problem of "formalism" and its weakening of evangelism, see UCBCA, HDP, box B28, file V, Dobson to Mutchmor, April 3, 1950, where he argued that "We have not appealed enough to the heart, nor have we appealed enough to the will. The tendency of our appeal in Preaching Missions has been that we have been merely formal."

his colleagues had pinned the proper, Christian development of the country were stifling the experiential necessities of the Kingdom's extension.

IV

In 1949, Hugh Dobson retired from his official position within the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. Now in his seventieth year, he was slowed by age, and confronted with the realization that he could no longer maintain the heavy schedule of speaking, traveling and preaching that was integral to his post. He was afflicted by numerous ailments, many of which were almost certainly the result of his untiring, often unrestful thirty-six years of work for the Kingdom of God in Canada.⁸³ By 1949, "the constant change from one climate condition to another, from one house and bed to another and the constant change of diet" which were all a part of his years of itinerant work, had taken their toll.⁸⁴ He did not, however, stop working altogether. Indeed, he remained on as an acting Associate Secretary until a suitable replacement could be found. When he did finally end all official work in 1951, he had completed a career with the Christian church that had lasted some forty-five years. It was a career marked by a tenacity and passion for the construction of the Kingdom of God in Canada that had been tested often. Yet, through the horrors of two wars and the upheaval of economic depression, and through the various revolutions in the hearts and minds of those he sought to enlist for his cause, Dobson had never lost his faith that the spirit of Christ would eventually reign on earth.

⁸³ In a letter of "congratulations, commiserations, and great good wishes" for William G. Berry, after he had been appointed to the post of Assistant Secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, Dobson uses a large part of the epistle to catalogue the various medical problems which afflicted him and his colleagues. This was no doubt meant as something of a warning for the "new man." See UCBCA, HDP, box B26, file B2, Dobson to William Berry, April 23, 1947 and Berry's reply of April 27, 1947.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, box B28, file N, Dobson to Mutchmor, November 9, 1939.

In the course of his long career, the centrality of the Kingdom ideal to his understanding of the church, the nation, and the world had been demonstrated by his willingness to shift his theological priorities to protect it. Though he never questioned the fundamental belief in the necessity and connectivity of individual and social redemption, he had occasionally shifted the priority of one passion over the other when he saw an imbalance. By the 1940s, he had become convinced that the work of evangelism, of seeking definite decisions for Christ and His Kingdom, was faltering, and so it became his foremost concern. Reflecting a trend that was obvious across denominational and international lines, in the post-war years his theological assumptions became slightly more conservative, though his Kingdom priorities remained essentially the same.⁸⁵ This conservatism was manifested partly in his insistence on widespread conversions, though this was always a significant component of his ecclesiology.⁸⁶ It was evinced most notably, however, in his apparent acceptance of more conservative theological self-identity. Though he claimed that "I am no fundamentalist in the current usage," he did admit in 1947 that "I like many fundamentalists better than some liberals and modernists."⁸⁷ Where once he had considered the conservative label "an awful accusation to throw against a man," he was, some twenty years later, affiliating himself with it.⁸⁸ "Liberalism" had been central to Dobson's early understanding of religious truth, but in his later years, confronted by increasing secularization of progress and liberalism, he felt more comfortable in the company of those who continued to see God at

⁸⁵ Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 163-164.

⁸⁶ Dobson, "The Immediate task of the Church," 6.

⁸⁷ UCBCA, HDP, box B26, file M2(a), Dobson to Mutchmor, November 4, 1947.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, box A10, file V, Dobson to William A. Vrooman, October 17, 1925.

the centre of all change.⁸⁹ Using the evidence of his apparent shifts, it would be easy to charge Dobson with a theological laxity that allowed him to follow current theological trends. To do so, however, is to misunderstand his theology. Defending and propagating the whole gospel of evangelism *and* social service for the sake of extending the Kingdom of God was his singular passion; the details of how that Kingdom would be established, though defined by clear boundaries, were held less rigidly. He could move relatively easily, therefore, to and from particular positions in order to protect the essentials he would never abandon. His church career is best understood, then, in terms of passionate consistency, not laxity.

In the end, his was a constancy that could not be maintained by The United Church of Canada. Only two years after Hugh Dobson died in June, 1956, the church from within whose walls he had spent a lifetime advocating effective prohibition “recognized the moderate use of alcohol as a legitimate – though not recommended – option for church members.”⁹⁰ Nevertheless, though the fight against the widespread social acceptance of liquor was a central aspect of his life’s work, it was not, perhaps, what he saw as his most significant legacy. About his career, he wrote, “I have done my best to promote the revival of pure and undefiled religion. To visit the sick, the orphan, the prisoner, the aged, the defective, the delinquent, the defendant; and to promote a Christian evangelism; and a better understanding of the breadth, and of the meaning and variety in the significance of the New Testament Gospel of Jesus for the salvation of the world in our day.”⁹¹

⁸⁹ Christopher Lasch’s clear understanding of the career of the concept of “progress” and its association with liberalism in the United States is instructive. See *The True and Only Heaven*, 40–44.

⁹⁰ Grant, “What’s Past is Prologue,” 139.

⁹¹ United Church of Canada, *Minutes of the Thirty-Third British Columbia Conference* (1956) 40.

Though by the time he died, some of his fundamental beliefs were being questioned, and the utopian assumptions of his Kingdom widely rejected, Dobson's legacy is nonetheless clear. The present, sincere efforts of The United Church of Canada to propagate a more just, inclusive society, though they may have lost something in translation to the modern world, borrow much from the idealism of Hugh Wesley Dobson's kingdom.

Chapter Eight

“Instituting Change:” Gordon Sisco and the Radicalization of the Middle

What has happened all these years to make us so placid and respectable? Has the world gone over to Christ or have we made too easy an alliance with the world? It must be one or the other, and if we are honest we will admit which one it is. For one has only to realize the way of the Master, and the way our secular world is tending to realize that at many points they are going in opposite directions. When Christianity ceases to surprise and trouble us it will be because we have departed from the radical spirit of its founder.

– Gordon Sisco, “The Humanism of Jesus”¹

The belief that the economic and agricultural tragedies of the 1930s were, among other things, opportunities for evangelism was common among many in Canada’s Protestant mainstream. Influential leaders in the United Church were pleased to observe, through the dust-storms and lines of job-seekers, indications of spiritual renewal. On the prairies, Hugh Dobson used what he believed was a spiritual awakening to increase his various efforts for individual and social salvation; the Depression years encouraged more aggressive personal evangelism and, of course, more aggressive lobbying and lecturing on the evils of liquor and the inevitable fruits of vice. In Ontario and Quebec, George Pidgeon concentrated his significant energy and sway on fostering and maintaining personal “unions” between individual sinners and God; the development and coordination of numerous evangelistic efforts throughout the decade kept Pidgeon actively involved in the denomination’s efforts to redeem the nation. At the height of this activity, however, another vein of sentiment in the denomination saw these enterprises for evangelism and temperance as sincere, even honorable but ultimately misguided

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], Gordon Alfred Sisco Papers [GSP], box 1, file 12, “The Humanism of Jesus,” 4. This sermon was preached in March, 1936.

attempts to control symptoms while ignoring the disease. The massively destructive problems of the economic Depression indicated to many in The United Church of Canada and elsewhere that the effort to save the nation, to build the Kingdom of God in Canada, required an understanding of the gospel that went beyond the limited individual and social panaceas of the whole gospel. Groups like the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order were contending that true "salvation" would require a re-radicalization of the Christian message, and therefore a new understanding of the "nation" and the Kingdom. This new thinking also implied, of course, a different understanding of the role of the "national church."

The radical mood that was manifested in the nation generally and in some official opinion of The United Church of Canada more particularly is often associated almost exclusively with more revolutionary thought and action. In the church as in broader social and political thought, however, moves towards a more radicalized, more challenging perspective were not limited to the most strident and most "unorthodox" voices. Though some socialists in the denomination called for a revolutionary overhaul of the economic bases of the nation, others, some with substantially more power, were less convinced of the need for such extreme change. They were not, however, satisfied with the *status quo*. Nor were they as certain as others that traditional whole gospel emphases and solutions were likely to solve the nation's and the world's problems. As the Depression lingered, and as older Christian approaches appeared increasingly impotent in the face of powerful economic, intellectual and social challenges, some of these more progressive, even radical churchmen assumed positions of substantial importance in the church. These experiments in leadership exposed mutations in the direction of the theology of the whole gospel which altered subtly, but fundamentally,

the nature of Canada's national church; these experiments began with the election of Gordon Sisco to the position of General Secretary of the General Council.

I

The United Church of Canada entered its seventh General Council in 1936 reeling from the tragedies and sacrifices of the Depression. The troubled social and ideological atmosphere that the economic circumstances of the decade had engendered in cities and churches nationally was obvious at the meeting. Theological and practical controversies stemming from the contentious issues of education, evangelism and social service at the previous meeting in 1934 coloured the expectations and the debate at the 1936 gathering.² In this atmosphere where congregations and conferences were split along ideological lines as clear as those "which marked the left and the right in the Winnipeg general Strike," the Council turned its attention to new blood for new times.³ At this meeting, and for the first time, relative unknowns were elevated to some of the most powerful positions in the denomination. In what was effectively a changing of the guard, from the old to the new, young ministers, most of whom were still active in the pulpit, were chosen to set the denomination's course. The confident but nonetheless junior James Mutchmor was chosen to succeed the ailing D.N. McLachlan as head of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service. And, in an equally surprising move, the Council chose a well-liked, though controversial Toronto minister to act as its General Secretary. The election of Gordon Alfred Sisco to what was

² James R. Mutchmor, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965) 82-84.

³ *Ibid.*, 84. It was well known that this General Council had chosen to fill vacant positions of "great importance" with "relatively youthful men." See, for instance, R.E. Knowles, "Preached by Invitation in a Quebec Catholic Pulpit," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

effectively the most powerful executive position in the denomination raised this preacher from the local pulpit of Danforth United Church to the national stage of the General Secretaryship.⁴ It was a change in position and influence that Sisco would occupy until his death. In that term as General Secretary of General Council, he occupied a position of rare significance as the nation, its peoples and its Protestant churches journeyed to modernity -- a journey that would prove to have a profound influence on the character and place of Canada's "national" denomination.

At his election, though he was almost unknown in the political offices of the denomination, Sisco was a respected pastor who was renowned for powerful preaching that touched on relevant social and political issues.⁵ Like many United Church ministers of his generation, he took his pulpit work seriously, using his influence among his congregations to propagate his vision of a Christian nation. As one who sometimes contradicted the "official lines," he was something of an outsider in the halls of power. Unlike his well-known predecessor T. Albert Moore, Sisco had not worked his way up to power through denominational offices. His acclaim in the church, whatever there was of it, was based almost entirely on his abilities as a speaker, a sermonizer and a debater. From early on in his General Secretaryship those distinguishing qualities that set him apart from his predecessors were

⁴ Because they were the recommended nominees of the "Committee on Vacancies in General Council," both Sisco and Mutchmor were the official candidates for the positions they eventually occupied. Mutchmor's election to the Secretaryship, like almost all the other recommendations of the Committee, was uncontested. The position of General Secretary was more coveted, however, and Sisco ran against four other nominees. Only after four ballots did Sisco garner enough votes to be elected to the position. See *The United Church of Canada, Record of Proceedings of the Seventh General Council* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1936) 40-43.

⁵ For this opinion, see Knowles, "Preached by Invitation in a Quebec Catholic Pulpit," P.M. MacDonald, "Introducing and Interviewing the New Secretary of the General Council Rev. G. A. Sisco, M. A." and "The Reverend Gordon A. Sisco ... An Appreciation," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

obvious. Of these, perhaps the most consistent was an abiding faith in ecumenism. Like his fellow Torontonians and churchman George Pidgeon, Gordon Sisco was an English Protestant from the province of Quebec. Born in the spring of 1891 in Coaticook in the eastern townships of the province, and raised in this “pioneer and austere community” by an American father and a mother “of Irish descent,” Sisco understood early the need to negotiate softly between cultures, languages and beliefs.⁶ The lessons learned growing up Methodist in a Catholic province stayed with Sisco throughout his pastoral and administrative careers.

Like much else in his career, Sisco’s journey to ordination did not follow typical Methodist practice. Unlike his older colleague Hugh Dobson, Sisco did not begin the process of becoming a Methodist preacher until he was in his early twenties. He started his ministerial career relatively late, and was accepted as probationer only on the condition that he improve his educational standing. Neglecting the usual course of studying arts before pursuing theology, Sisco was admitted to the Wesleyan Theological College in Montreal in 1912. At this college, which had been established during the late nineteenth century as part of the Methodist push for a formally trained ministry, Sisco was introduced to teachers and ideas that shaped his priorities, and his social agenda for the rest of his career. During the years that followed his acceptance as a probationer by the Montreal Conference, when many of his contemporaries went to Europe to fight in the First World War, Sisco remained a student, and pursued ordination into the ministry of the Methodist Church. Reflecting on this early theological education in Montreal later in life, Sisco singled out the powerful influence of one Presbyterian

⁶ MacDonald, “Introducing and Interviewing...,” and “The Reverend Gordon A. Sisco ... An Appreciation.”

professor. After 1914 the practice of sharing faculty across denominational lines became more popular and Sisco and his contemporaries at the Methodist College were introduced to the thought of Presbyterian, Anglican and Congregational teachers. Even in these pre-Union expressions of not only physical cooperation but also intellectual agreement, the liberal evangelicalism that was defining Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational theologies in the early twentieth century was shared among the various denominational colleges. And so it was that the Methodist Gordon Sisco could recall after Union that his most important theological influence was the Presbyterian John Scrimger.⁷

In the late nineteenth century Scrimger was on the vanguard of Presbyterian attempts to accommodate the historical faith of the tradition to the intrusions of biblical and biological science. Scrimger argued for a liberality in biblical interpretation that allowed his students to develop an openness to knowledge and learning without abandoning, or dangerously modifying their faith.⁸ Scrimger was one of several Canadian professors who contended that historical criticism of the Bible, which was exposing the very human and textured nature of the Scriptures, actually helped prove the authoritative revelation of Christ and the historical truth of Divine activity in the world.⁹ In this theological system, the Bible remained supreme as an account of the history of God's guidance of human affairs, and was substantiated by new learning. Scrimger and his colleagues at colleges

⁷ Knowles, "Preached by Invitation in a Quebec Catholic Pulpit," and Neil Semple, *The Lord's Dominion: The History of Canadian Methodism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) 393.

⁸ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 152-154.

⁹ *Ibid.*

throughout the nation expounded the idea, therefore, that knowledge and tradition were not exclusive, but rather complementary in the process of Christian revelation.

Scrimger's teaching on the nature and significance of the Old Testament prophets was equally influential. In an age when social criticism and reform were becoming standard Christian expressions in North America, educators like Scrimger taught that Christian social and political action was historically and theologically substantiated by the prophetic tradition. Scrimger contended that the Hebrew prophets, whose lives and thoughts were detailed in Old Testament Books, were as relevant in modern times as they were in ancient. He noted that they did not rely exclusively on the power of individual piety, but rather expressed concern about current injustices in their nation and society, and sought solutions through practical political, educational and legal action. The link between the activist prophetic tradition and the drive to Christianize the nation, a link that emphasized patriotism, conscience and political influence, was one of the most powerful components of the efforts of Canadian Protestants in the twentieth century to build the Kingdom of God in their nation.¹⁰ This historically and biblically justified effort to "spread scriptural holiness throughout the land," to construct "God's Dominion from sea to sea," was a cornerstone of the faith of the Protestants who joined to form The United Church of Canada. And, it remained a foundational belief of the man the church chose as its second General Secretary of the General Council. Gordon Sisco attributed his faith in the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193 -194. Gauvreau's discussion on the influence of the prophetic tradition in the theological teaching and practical activity of the mainline churches at the turn of the century is helpful and provocative. See *ibid.*, 191-201 and Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996) 16-17.

political and social activist imperatives of the Christian tradition, a faith which guided his diverse ministerial career from start to finish, to the teachings of his Presbyterian Professor of Systematic Theology.

Though he did not receive a Bachelor of Divinity from Wesleyan College, Sisco was nonetheless ordained into the Montreal Conference of the Methodist Church in 1916. That he did not receive a degree in a period of increasing professionalization within the Methodist ministry had little effect on his career. He was sent almost immediately to a charge in East Angus, Quebec, and began there to hone his preaching and pastoral skills. He began also his small family, marrying his wife Edith Isobel Bothwell in late 1916. After spending five years in the ministry in Quebec, which included a two year pastorate at East Angus, and a stint in Clarenceville, Sisco was assigned a charge in Cataraqui, near Kingston, Ontario. It was a move out of Quebec that marked his entrance into the centres of English Canadian Protestant influence, and which brought him close enough to a University to pursue his interest in studying Arts. During the years in which more senior churchmen were making the final adjustments and arrangements for the Union of the Congregationalist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, Gordon Sisco chose to further his education at Queen's University. Almost immediately upon his arrival at Cataraqui in 1921, he began working towards his Bachelor of Arts degree, which he received in 1925. During the period of his study at Queen's, he remained a powerful pastoral presence in Cataraqui and then, after church union, at Renfrew. His passion in these years was his preaching, a skill he sought to augment and refine not only in the pulpit, but in the classroom.¹¹

¹¹ By the time Sisco left Renfrew for Port Hope in 1928, he was a much-respected preacher and community leader. When the Official Board of Trinity United Church, Renfrew reluctantly accepted his resignation, it expressed its "regret at Mr. Sisco's leaving Trinity after three years of happy association and profitable service and felt that not only

Taking what he had learned from Scrimger and others seriously, and reflecting the priorities of the denomination, he began in these charges to use his pulpit to call for various kinds of reform, to preach for a "Christian nation." To carry on both a vigorous ministry and a successful scholarly life was doubtless exhausting and demanding. But Sisco was aware that an education would not only improve his interpretive and oral abilities, but would also place him in the mainstream of those who chose to commit their lives to work for the Christian ministry, the church and the Kingdom. As the national culture became increasingly professional, and as expertise came to be associated with education, Sisco understood that a university degree was essential to success in church work. Hence, when looking back on his career, one contemporary commented that the move to Cataraqui, or, more specifically, to the campus of Queen's University "was the watershed in Dr. Sisco's life."¹²

II

Gordon Sisco's pursuit of knowledge was, of course, more than pragmatic. He was a scholar, a reality that was reflected in his well-written and expertly informed sermons, and a passion that led him to pursue graduate studies. In 1928, after three years at Trinity United Church in Renfrew, Sisco moved to Port Hope and to a pastorate he was to hold until 1932. While there, he

Trinity Church but the town of Renfrew would be very much poorer on account of Mr. Sisco's leaving." Sisco too was saddened by the end of his term there, and noted that he would remember his time a Renfrew "as the three happiest years of his life." See UCCA, Records of Trinity-St. Andrew's United Church, box 2, file 8, "Minutes of the Official Board," May 29, 1928.

¹² George Dorey, "A Memorial Service for Dr. Sisco," *United Church Observer*, 15:22 (January 15, 1954) 16 and George Dorey, "Memorial Service for the Rev. Gordon A. Sisco, M.A., D.D., LL.D." in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

returned to Queen's to begin studies towards a Master of Arts degree.¹³ Sisco read widely in many fields including economics, but his paramount interest was the study of history. His Master's thesis, though it delved into an economic analysis of Canada's transportation system, was an historical study of the issues of church and state surrounding the governance of the provinces of Canada West and Canada East in the decades before Confederation.¹⁴ This study, which exposed clearly Sisco's intellectual acumen and his skill as a communicator, also demonstrated his willingness to use whatever platform available, including history, to opine about current circumstance. Through careful analytical connections, Sisco took the opportunity provided by his thesis to comment on the fortunes, past and present, of established churches, on the Church of England, on the economic Depression during which he wrote, and on very current subjects like the future of the St. Lawrence Seaway and the government of Quebec.¹⁵ The opinions that Sisco had developed during his years of pastoral work before and during his return to university, necessarily informed both the questions and the answers in his thesis. At the same time, his study of history, and of economics, also influenced his developing thought on ecclesiastical, national and international questions. Many of his tangential comments on, and critiques of contemporary political and church decisions would, during the next twenty years, appear again in much of his public discourse.¹⁶

¹³ "Reverend Gordon A. Sisco," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

¹⁴ Gordon Alfred Sisco, "The Hincks-Morin Ministry 1851-1854," (M.A. Thesis: Queen's University, 1932).

¹⁵ The present was a consistent feature of Sisco's interpretation of the past. See *ibid.*, 36, 110, 251-262.

¹⁶ The connection between his study of history and his contemporary concerns was typical of his belief, expressed later in his life, that "If we are to live creatively in this world we must take account of the lessons of history. For the past is a quarry out of which we are privileged to draw the raw material of knowledge which thought turns into wisdom for the

During his time in Port Hope, Sisco accomplished more than completing a Master's degree; indeed, he devoted much of his time to developing his homiletical skills. Only a few years after leaving his pastorate there, he indicated that pulpit work, and not history, was his primary interest. In 1936 he told a reporter, "I can truthfully say that preaching has been my chief study, and to preach well my chief aim."¹⁷ During these years that saw Canada journey from the high expectations of the late 1920s to the lows of a devastating economic Depression, Sisco continued to hone both his pastoral skills and his prophetic message, and to apply both to his sermons. It was at Port Hope, and while witnessing the effects of the collapsed economy, that he combined his faith in improving knowledge with his distrust of the economic *status quo*. "We are realizing today, in the midst of an economic depression," he commented in his 1932 thesis, "that nations are in need of a scientific programme of business direction and control."¹⁸ This appreciation for "scientific" answers, and for planned economy, remained important parts of his ecclesiastical and social thought as his church work became more varied. After serving the United community of Port Hope for almost four years, and after completing his graduate work at Queen's, Sisco relocated again, taking over the pastorate of Central United Church in Sarnia. After three years in this southern Ontario town, where he continued to watch the Depression's effects and to note the deterioration in international relations,

guidance of life." See UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 15, "Have We Learned The Lessons of This War?" 1.

¹⁷ MacDonald, "Introducing and Interviewing...."

¹⁸ Sisco, "The Hincks-Morin Ministry," 110.

he was on the move again, relocating his wife and his son and daughter for the last time, to Toronto, in 1935.¹⁹

The move to Danforth United Church in the early thirties was a challenging change. Toronto, like most North American urban centres during the Depression, was socially troubled. The move to this urban and business capital of central Canada, and his encounters with the clear divisions of wealth and poverty in the city, honed Sisco's critical social eye. Even in 1932, he was sure that the economic difficulties of the decade were the result of the recklessness of "productive enterprises blindly carried out with their insistent demand for immediate profits."²⁰ Upon his arrival at Danforth United, Sisco wasted little time expanding and sharpening this message for his mixed, urban congregation. Though the United Church was active in getting food and clothing to the needy, especially in the west, Sisco was not content to let the church simply cover over the wounds of economic desperation. Realizing in the city that it was the poor and the disadvantaged who, much more than their wealthier neighbors, bore the brunt of economic collapse, Sisco chose to speak out against what he saw as the central problem. In what was to become one of his most remembered observations, in the mid-1930s Sisco told his east Toronto congregation that "We middle-class people will some day come to see what has always been true, that the catastrophes of history are not brought on by the weak, but by the strong."²¹

¹⁹ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 15, "The Crisis of Western Civilization." At the beginning of this address to the Sarnia Lions' Club in 1950, Sisco recalls the circumstances of the period at the beginning of his ministry in Sarnia in 1932.

²⁰ *Ibid.* He made the same argument several times in later years. See, for example, UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 21, "Repentance in a Modern Setting," 2.

²¹ "Rev. G.A. Sisco Dead Always Outspoken," and "UC General Council Secretary ... Dies at 63," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

In this statement, which was directed at the apparently unconcerned business people and the complacent and comfortable Christians in his own congregation and in others, Sisco exposed the twin concerns that directed his church work. Christian indifference to inequity, substantiated by the church's uncritical acceptance of, and association with prevailing secular, and particularly commercial norms, made Protestant Christianity ethically and morally weak. This failing was exemplified, he believed, by the historically close, often uncritical association between Christianity and capitalism. In the Protestant west, "Spiritual man," he said, "has become economic man. Protestant individualism has merged with *laissez-faire* individualism."²² Many other churchmen, including those in the Board of Evangelism and Social Service who were fighting so diligently to Christianize the nation, assumed that the church, when applied to the nation would make Canada Christian. From his urban and historically informed perspective in the desperate years of the Depression, Gordon Sisco was not so enthusiastic about what a "Christian" nation, modeled after the Protestant church, would stand for. This unease with the direction of the Canadian churches generally, and with the cultural and social associations of the "national" church specifically, remained a cornerstone of Sisco's understanding of the church, even as he assumed much of its leadership.

III

As his critiques of the problems of profit-taking and church complicity in economic tragedy indicated, Sisco was very much in the pragmatic line of the

²² UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, "The Crisis of Opportunity," 5. This was not an entirely radical perspective. Many others, including some business people, saw the liberal notion of *laissez-faire* at the root of the economic upheavals and openly questioned its efficacy in the face of industrial economic collapse. See, Alvin Finkel, *et al.*, *History of the Canadian Peoples: 1867 to the Present* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman, 1993) 331.

prophetic tradition – knowledge of all kinds, from moral to “scientific,” belonged, he believed, in the tactile world of the public sphere. Business, like government and education, served best, and was best served, when informed by the conscience of an activist Christianity that encouraged more humane, more “Christ-like” practices. For Sisco, then, like so many of his colleagues, the role of the “national” church was by no means confined to nurturing the relationship of the individual soul with God. During his years of preaching surrounded by the hardships of the Depression, Sisco came to believe, as he stated often later, that a religion geared only towards the salvation of the individual was a misguided, ultimately unchristian faith. For, he preached, “The Christian religion is in the world to save the world. The kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.” Therefore, it was “the mission of the Church to penetrate the territory of the secular challenging its transient values with its own eternal values.”²³

Sisco took this practical interpretation of the Christian mission in the world with him to the position of General Secretary of the General Council of The United Church of Canada. In an age when the power of the churches was significant and extended well-beyond the parameters of church walls, the position of General Secretary of the General Council of the “national church” was a very powerful one indeed. Increasingly from 1925 – and well into the 1950s -- the General Secretary administrated the church, and led opinion, on a national stage; the insights of the man in this position were considered not only in discussions on the moral and social direction of the nation, but also in the more “secular” realms of legislation, political systems, international relations and public affairs. Both in and out of the church, the General

²³ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 19, “The Ecumenical Mission of the Church To-day,” 6. See also “Repentance in a Modern Setting,” 2.

Secretary was expected to have a take on all issues, from economics to ecumenics to morality, and his opinion was considered among the most important in the country. Gordon Sisco's prophetically informed and national approach to church work fit perfectly with this influential post. As the nation struggled with the tragedies and questions of the Depression and the Second World War, his outspoken guidance was sought by many, some of whom had very little to do with The United Church of Canada. For Sisco, who had spent many years forming and justifying positions in the pulpit and in the classroom, this side of the General Secretary's work came naturally.

For all its imputed influence, however, the position of General Secretary was, above all else, a bureaucratic one. Recognized publicly as an intelligent and informed commentator, Sisco also brought to the General Secretaryship an intuitive administrative and technical mind. Though he was confronted always with the larger questions of the church in the nation and the world, the majority of the General Secretary's time was devoted to the mundane activities of running one the nation's largest institutions. For the most part, his days were filled with administrative efforts, which included negotiating the sale and purchase of land, fine-tuning the denominational pension and insurance plans, staffing committees, and advising Presbyteries and Conferences on delicate points of ecclesiastical polity.²⁴ The energy which Sisco put into the administrative aspect of his position indicates that he enjoyed the detail work that was so often his responsibility, and that through it he exercised extensive executive power. In the years of the Depression, and in the decades that followed, leadership in thought and action in the United

²⁴ Sisco's professional correspondence exposes the monotony and bureaucracy of the Secretaryship. See, UCCA, General Council Collection, Series III – Correspondence [GCC-III], boxes 40-46, which cover his administrative activities from 1937 to 1953.

Church became increasingly centralized as headquarters in Toronto took on more and diverse authority. Sisco, with his talent for directing even the most trivial operations and decisions at all levels, was a powerful force in the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of the church. His willingness to do so was related directly to the circumstance into which he was elected. The Depression was destructive in many sectors of the Canadian economy, and large institutions, including those that were not directly linked to economic activity, were not, of course, exempted from these effects. In its attempts to maintain the level of its pastoral and social commitments across the country after 1929, and through increased involvement in aiding the most affected regions and communities, The United Church of Canada accumulated a large debt. The combined efforts of cost-cutting in foreign missionary and domestic activity, the often voluntary reduction of ministerial salaries and benefits, and cut-backs in educational and welfare activity notwithstanding, by the time Sisco assumed office the church owed \$1 700 000.²⁵

The decrease in income from contributions, and the extent of the church's involvement in helping prairie communities, resulted in this debt-load which, with little indication of economic improvement in 1937, looked insurmountable. Moreover, as John Grant has established, the still fledgling church was still in the process of defining its "national" role. The needs of the nation during the dark days and nights of western drought and economic collapse forced the church, and its national and regional network of congregations and workers, to lead domestic aid programs. In these days, when the national government was not equipped to do so, the United

²⁵ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 1, Gordon Sisco, "The United Church of Canada," 1; Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 136-138.

Church was called on to lead an ecumenical enterprise of relief. In the process of organizing carloads of clothing and food to the west, and in pooling the resources of other Protestant and Roman Catholic churches, the young United Church was “dramatically called upon to give leadership in a national effort, and in proving itself capable it consolidated the emotional loyalties of many of its members.”²⁶ Therefore, though the Depression had driven the church into debt, it had nonetheless helped usher the denomination on to the national stage, where its role as an influential actor in the lives of Canadians was tangibly established. With the denomination’s evolving national character came the need for effective and directed leadership capable of translating the vision of the national church into fact. This was the mantle that Gordon Sisco and others, including Evangelism and Social Service’s J.R. Mutchmor, were challenged to assume. It was a task that these comparatively young churchman accepted willingly.

The Canadian Protestant desire to guide the nation’s development, and the assumption of young leaders that it was their duty to do so, were not, of course, novel. From the nineteenth century when Bishop Strachan strove to keep the colonies that would become Canada loyal and Anglican, to the committed reformism of socially active Christians in the early twentieth century, the dream of a unified, Protestant nation under God was a powerful and continuous motivator. Like his seniors George Pidgeon and Hugh Dobson, Sisco inherited and was strongly influenced by the nation-building ideal that was so central to the formation and direction of The United Church of Canada. Sisco’s faith, nurtured as it was in the excited reform and progressive environment of the first decades of the twentieth century, and

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

augmented by the prophetic emphases in his education, was well suited for the national pretensions of his denomination. The widespread influence of the United Church, especially during and after the Depression, complemented Sisco's strong belief that the natural place for the church was in, and influencing all aspects of national life. "A Christianity which conceives itself as responsible for the godward development of human culture," he said once, "can leave no part of human culture untouched."²⁷ But what distinguished this understanding of ecclesiastical influence, and what separated the "national" church ideal from "state" or "established" churches, was Sisco's insistence that the church lead science, art, education, business, and the state, and not vice versa. The example of Christ's life, and the fact of his crucifixion taught that "the Church not only has a responsibility to the individual but to the society as well." In the years after he assumed the General Secretaryship, therefore, Sisco preached that "the Church can allow no custom or institution or standard or privilege to exist without challenge which subjects men to exploitation or subordinates their welfare to material ends."²⁸ The church could only be successful when it was challenging, not following those aspects of the world that were contrary to Christ. From his position at the helm of the United Church's General Council, Sisco saw much in the nation that needed to be challenged.

He was aware also, however, that the church which his generation had inherited was facing many novel and little understood circumstances. After only a few months in the position of General Secretary, Sisco was granted an honorary Doctorate of Divinity by Queen's Theological College. Upon his return to his *alma mater* in 1937, at a time when the Fellowship for a

²⁷ Sisco, "The Crisis of Opportunity," 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

Christian Social Order was playing an important role at the College, Sisco delivered a speech to the College entitled "Religion in a Changing World," which allowed him to reflect publicly on these shifting circumstances.²⁹ He began by noting for this audience that "There is hardly a modern book on the physical or the social sciences, there is hardly a dissertation on history or economics or government or morals but what the first few pages will call attention to the radical and far reaching changes that have taken place during the last 25 years." These changes could not be ignored by church people because, he said, "modern unbelief is to a great extent the desperation of confused minds." Therefore, the modern preacher or religious educator, more than ever before in history, was required "to keep abreast of all things while, at the same time, enforcing the sanctions of religion with some degree of authority." Moreover, Sisco continued, it was not simply "in the realm of science that the preacher must show some understanding but in the realms of practical affairs as well." Like their General Secretary, ministers of The United Church of Canada were expected to understand that the "whole industrial order is shot through with unrest and our international relationships are not, at the moment, healthy." These concerns, and the added threat of new counter ideologies like communism and fascism required "knowledge and understanding on the part of the modern preacher," who, when in the pulpit, must avoid "airy generalizations" and demonstrate that "he has disciplined himself by close application and hard thinking."³⁰ Sisco believed that the

²⁹ Richard Allen has noted the impact of the FCSO, and particularly of two of its key thinkers, Gregory Vlastos and Martyn Estall, at Queen's in the mid-1930s. See Richard Allen, "Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada: The 1880's to the 1930's," in Marguerite Van Die, (ed.), *From Heaven on Down to Earth: A Century of Chancellor's Lectures at Queen's Theological College* (Kingston: Queen's Theological College, 1992.)128-131.

³⁰ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 20, "Religion in a Changing World," 2-3.

practical problems of the world that the church inhabited required practical people who understood both the world and the church. And in a nation increasingly defined by economic, demographic, geographical and ideological differences, such hard-minded, informed and active ministers were, he believed, a necessity.

By 1937, Sisco's own experience had led him to this very pragmatic view of the church and of its role in the nation. Many who were still active in the pulpit and in various reform efforts did not share this more critical view of the world. Unlike that of these generally older leaders, Sisco's faith had been imparted and lived in the years of fading progressive idealism. Though he had begun his theological education in 1912, a "placid" era "untroubled by the threat of great international upheavals" when the "dominant word was 'evolution' rather than 'eschatology,'" his experience after 1914 altered his faith. The war and the disasters that followed it forced Sisco and much of his generation to examine the assumptions of the progressives who taught them.³¹ By the middle of the 1930s, though he still referred to himself as "a liberal preacher – as one who belongs to the school of liberal protestantism," Sisco was nonetheless coming to believe that much of what "liberalism" had supposed would lead to the Kingdom of God was challenged by the events of the twentieth century.³² We "are living in a disillusioned generation," he said. "We have given ourselves to great causes during these last 20 years only to see them shattered on the rocks of destiny. We went through a long and agonizing war that was idealized as a war to end [war]. We ended war with a marvellous [*sic*] vision of a League of Nations and a World Court. To-day we have unemployment, poverty, re-armament, new war preparations,

³¹ UCCA, GSP, file 18, "Theological tensions – World Council of Churches," 1.

³² Sisco, "Religion in a Changing World," 5.

threatened revolution, and a world so crazy that at times it makes one's nerves crack." By the late years of the Depression these disappointments had led to such disillusion among clergy and laity that the General Secretary worried that his generation was "tempted to turn away from ideals and hopes which lured us to great sacrifices and then turned us down." These negative outcomes from an age that had promised such progress in the human condition, and the concomitant pessimism, were the result of unfortunate, but nonetheless real change. Looking back to 1914 when nations sought to end war through warfare, Sisco contended that somehow "or other our Western Civilization has taken a wrong turn."³³ As the effects of the Depression and drought lingered, and as a second European conflict seemed likely, this misdirection of the western world, and the church's response to it were becoming Gordon Sisco's fundamental concerns.

In the middle of the 1930s Sisco was well on his way to rejecting some of the basic assumptions of the "liberal protestantism" he still espoused and in which he had been reared. Some of his first reconsiderations were theological; he began in this period to critique the liberal emphasis on the mercy of God and the understatement of the Almighty's judgment. "I have tended to stress," he confessed, "the God of the New Testament as over against the God of the Old ... to see God in terms of a certain Christlikeness rather than in terms of strict justice... . But of late," he continued, "I have come to feel that this is too sharp an antithesis -- that the whole weakness of some of our preaching is that we fail to do justice to what our fathers called 'the wrath of God.'" Like many of his contemporaries in Europe and the

³³ *Ibid.*, 7. The intellectual and social inducements of this pessimism are discussed in Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) 347-356, and esp. 355-356.

United States, Sisco believed that world war and the “destruction and dismay” that it had spawned, had created a circumstance where assumptions about the progressive, perhaps inevitable “Christianization” of life on earth were increasingly feeble. He began, therefore, to articulate his belief that by making God the world’s “cosmic sweetheart” the Protestant churches had propagated a conception of the Almighty that “breaks down in the light of facts.” History and present turmoil indicated “that there is a principle of justice running through life against which conquerors and exploiters hurl themselves in ruin,” but which is complemented by “a power of forgiving love and grace which, entering the heart of man, makes him the herald of a new day and a nobler civilization.”³⁴ This theological position, which was infused with a strong prophetic concern for justice, held much in common with the theological and practical emphases of George Pidgeon and Hugh Dobson. Sisco’s emphasis on fostering a “nobler civilization,” and his belief that this goal would be pursued by Christian people who had accepted the grace of God followed closely the important individual and social emphases of the whole gospel tradition.

IV

Though this theological approach had been the accepted orthodoxy of many leaders in the United Church for some time, it was, for Sisco, a recent theological clarification which was encouraged by a variety of intellectual currents.³⁵ His developing and novel emphasis on the sovereignty of God, and his insistence that The United Church of Canada must challenge and not

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵ On the widespread acceptance of the whole gospel theology of evangelism and social service see Allen, “Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada,” 130; Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918 - 1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991) 6-7.

follow culture, indicate that his thought was being influenced by post-liberal writers like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in Europe and, especially, Reinhold Niebuhr in the United States. These writers, all of whom were born within five years of Sisco and all of whom had rejected many liberal Protestant beliefs after the Great War, had begun in the twenties and thirties to emphasize, among other ideas, the transcendence and sovereignty of God and the necessary separation between the church and the prevailing culture.³⁶ By the late 1930s the work of these men and others had made inroads into the disillusioned camps of liberal Protestantism in North America. Even patriarchs of liberal Protestantism in the United States, including Professors Harry Emerson Fosdick and Henry Sloane Coffin, were influenced by the neo-orthodox position on the churches relationship to the world and its critique of liberalism.³⁷ Like these American contemporaries, and in particular harmony with Reinhold Niebuhr, Sisco borrowed ideas from the neo-orthodox movement, but nonetheless maintained many of the liberal and reform emphases of his United Church faith.

Perhaps more important than direct neo-orthodox impress, however, was the influence of more indigenous thought. During the Depression, Sisco's developing sense that the mainstream needed to emphasize more the radical nature of the gospel message, and his criticism of Protestant complicity in the excesses of laissez-faire economics mirrored some of the central

³⁶ Bob E. Patterson, *Reinhold Niebuhr* (Word Books: Waco Texas, 1977) 131-135 and John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity: Interpreted Through its Development* 2d. ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1988) 242.

³⁷ D.K. McKim, "Neo-Orthodoxy," in Daniel G. Reid *et. al.*, *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 806. The theological assumptions of the movement are discussed well in Dillenberger and Welch, *Protestant Christianity*, 236-256. For Canada in the post-Great War period, see Michael Gauvreau, "War, Culture and the Problem of Religious Certainty," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 22:1 (Spring, 1987).

concerns of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order [FCSO]. This group of intellectuals, concerned laypeople, and outspoken Christian socialists originated in Toronto in 1932. Though the movement's membership represented a variety of denominations, the group was led intellectually by a collection of thinkers who were associated almost exclusively with The United Church of Canada, many of whom taught at its central Canadian colleges. Founded by Christian thinkers and teachers, some of whom borrowed much from the pragmatic and biblically-centred "Christian Realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr's early writings, the movement was established during the darkest years of the Depression. It was organized by "Christians whose religious convictions have led them to the belief that the capitalistic economic system is fundamentally at variance with Christian principles; and who regard the creation of a new social order to be essential to the realization of the Kingdom of God."³⁸ When the original movement became the more established Fellowship for a Christian Social Order in 1934, it began to evangelize for this total revolution in the economic foundations of the western world. Convinced that a "Christian civilization" could not have a competitive and ultimately destructive capitalist economic system as its basis, the FCSO preached and wrote that a planned, socialist economy based on the principles of the Christian gospel was the only reliable alternative to individualistic capitalism.³⁹ Though the Fellowship struggled for influence throughout the Depression, the members and their revolutionary program

³⁸ From the Fellowship's 1935 "Basis of Agreement and Constitution," as reprinted in Roger C. Hutchinson, "The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order: A Social Ethical Analysis of a Christian Socialist Movement," (Th.D. Thesis: Toronto School of Theology, 1975) 272 and 42. Allen, "Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada," 127-133 and 140-144.

³⁹ Roger Hutchinson, "Introduction," in R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos (eds.), *Towards the Christian Revolution* (Kingston: Ronald P. Frye & Company, 1989) vii-xvii.

were nonetheless successful at encouraging a new anti-establishment and counter-cultural tone in some official United Church pronouncements.⁴⁰ As the nation's and the church's energies were directed towards the demands of war after 1939, however, the group's message seemed less relevant and its impact waned. Nonetheless, though the Fellowship came to an effective end in 1945, its influence survived its organization by legitimating and fostering a counter-cultural emphasis that continued to inform some conferences, congregations and leaders after the Second World War.⁴¹

The FCSO was influenced and energized by similar theological and practical movements in the United States. Its Christian socialist priorities, if not all its theological presuppositions, were shared by the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, which was formed in 1932. This American movement held many concerns and emphases in common with the FCSO, including an over-arching desire to reform the individualistic and capitalistic bases of the North American economic system. Like the Canadian movement, the Fellowship of Socialist Christians was guided by a social interpretation of Jesus' motives and plans for humankind, and, though it rejected the secularism of Marxism, it nevertheless believed in the necessity of revolutionary social struggle. The most important intellectual force behind the Fellowship of Socialist Christians was the Christian Realist leader, and

⁴⁰ The most obvious of these was the "Report No. 2 of the committee on Evangelism and Social Service," which emanated from the Toronto Conference in 1933. This report called for the socialization of the economic system and was drafted and endorsed by key thinkers who would form the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order one year later. See Chapter Three; Hutchinson, "The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order," 72-73; and Catherine Gidney, "Richard Roberts: A Case Study in Liberal Protestantism in Canada During the Interwar Years," (M.A. Thesis: Queen's University, 1993) 74-83.

⁴¹ This argument is made clearly in Roger Hutchinson, "The Public Faith of a Democratic Socialist," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21:2 (Summer, 1986): 26-37, and esp. 35.

influential Union Theological Seminary professor, Reinhold Niebuhr.⁴² Because he mixed well some of the implications of Karl Barth's post-liberal vision of Christianity, while maintaining simultaneously the practical imperatives of an activist and culturally critical faith, during the 1930s Niebuhr was a natural leader in American Christian based reform, and a guide for some in The United Church of Canada.⁴³ Nevertheless, his theological proclivities, and his rejection of many of the liberal bases of social Christianity, led him away from social gospel interpretations and answers. For this reason, when he reviewed the FCSO's defence and call to action, *Towards the Christian Revolution*, he warned against what he believed was the Fellowship's singular emphasis on reforming the economic system and the belief that "any perennial problem of the human spirit is solved by such a revolution."⁴⁴ Though he had agreed in the early 1930s that the economic system, and not necessarily individual souls required radical change, by the later years of the decade Niebuhr's renewed faith in the necessity of a personal

⁴² Some leaders of the Canadian Fellowship were also influenced by, but certainly not wholly accepting of neo-orthodox thought. John Line, an important theologian for the FCSO read and wrote on Karl Barth's thought and the FCSO's leading evangelist, J. King Gordon, was a student of Niebuhr, and often agreed completely with his teacher. See John Line, "Barth and Barthianism," *Canadian Journal of Religious Thought* 6:1 (January-February 1929), 98-104; Hutchinson, "The Fellowship for a Christian Social Order," 34; Robert A. Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in G. A. Rawlyk (ed.) *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) 180-181; and Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century*, 270-271.

⁴³ Michael Gauvreau has described how the radical autonomy of the Christian revelation in Barth's theology was unacceptable to Canadian Protestants who believed that "in attempting to preserve the absolute authority of the Christian revelation, the German scholar had sacrificed most of the links between Christianity and culture, something they were not prepared to do -- by inclination or by training." Niebuhr's more moderate cultural position would likely have been more agreeable, and made neo-orthodox critiques more accessible to United Church people. See *The Evangelical Century*, 267-271.

⁴⁴ Hutchinson, "Introduction," xxxi. N. Keith Clifford argued that "the Christian socialism of the FCSO had been overwhelmed by the theological counterforce of the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr.... The new intellectual currents of the time were simply flowing against them." See "Religion in the Thirties: Some Aspects of the Canadian Experience," in D. Francis and H. Ganzevoort (eds.), *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1980) 133.

relationship between humans and God would not allow him to sanction a movement concerned entirely with social panaceas, whether Christian based or not.⁴⁵ Like many in the United Church who could not accept the Christ-centred, but nonetheless revolutionary solutions offered by the FCSO, Niebuhr was unconvinced by their well-meaning, but simple, social reformist vision.

Gordon Sisco was not a member of either of these Fellowships. He did, nevertheless, share much with the ideologies and theologies that lay at the root of their socially critical Christianity. As his vision for the role of the national church in Canada developed during the difficult years of the 1930s, Sisco incorporated ideas from the intellectual air of North American Protestantism into his vision for the United Church. Though he was not a socialist, Sisco was attracted by the revolutionary nature of these reform movements, believing that they were closer to the radical nature of early Christianity than the more complacent mainstream churches. As noted above, by the time he arrived to assume the pulpit at Danforth United in Toronto, Sisco was concerned that Canadian Protestants, who enjoyed the privileges of belonging to the majority faith, had lost touch with the radical nature of the Christianity they espoused. Sisco worried that, instead of following the reformist example of Jesus, mainline Protestants were falling too easily into the traps of respectability. Almost thirty years before Pierre Berton would make a similar critique, from the pulpit of Danforth United Gordon Sisco commented on the comfort of the pews in the churches of English Canada. "To be a member of the Christian Church today in a country

⁴⁵ The shift in Niebuhr's position from the social gospel to almost pure socialism and back to an evangelically informed, "biblically centred" Christian reformism is described and explained in Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 111-166.

like Canada is to be respectable," he said. "The ideals which are recognized and accepted by many Church members are approximately the same as the ideals which secular society asks of people." Sisco argued that membership in the early church required eschewing privilege, rejecting "conventional standards," severing "both intimate and public ties" and opposing "the prevailing customs of the social order." In contrast, he noted, membership in contemporary churches "doesn't involve the slightest loss of caste; it puts the convert in no opposition to the generally accepted maxims of his secular environment."⁴⁶ The result for the churches, and their witness in Canada, was that their "middle class consciousness has not kept pace with social impulses and economic development so that today, in a world that is engulfed in revolution, your most conservative people are the dominant people" in the churches. This dominance of the conservative spirit had, Sisco believed, made modern Protestantism "too much at the mercy of governments and states." This was a position within society that was certainly safe, but which compromised the Christian imperative to be a moral conscience to the nation.⁴⁷

Therefore, though he refused to accept absolutely the revolutionary implications of the goals of the FCSO, Sisco was nonetheless impressed by, and sympathetic to their radical understanding of the gospel and their Christian challenge to prevailing culture. He made this estimation of the FCSO obvious when he reviewed their manifesto, *Towards the Christian Revolution* for the *New Outlook*, early in 1937.⁴⁸ In his review he was clear that he did not accept the close identification of Christianity with "a particular

⁴⁶ Sisco, "The Humanism of Jesus," 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, file 24, "Towards Unity and Freedom," 7.

⁴⁸ Gordon Sisco, review of *Towards the Christian Revolution* in "World of Books," *New Outlook* XIII (February 19, 1937): 160-161.

economic system. That is dangerous because you cannot crowd Jesus into a theory, nor press the Kingdom of God into a formula." He was hesitant, therefore, "to accept the word 'Christian' as synonymous with 'Socialism.'" Nonetheless, though he critiqued the authors for so doing and for not offering "many suggestions as to how we can affect a transition from capitalism to socialism," he was adamant that such radical thinking was central to the continued mission of the denomination.

The United Church of Canada has produced these men or has welcomed them into its fellowship. Is the Church big enough to take them seriously? They are not popular preachers. They have creative rather than reflective minds. They are seeking to challenge and shape the thoughts of a conservative people and to put new content into the meaning and function of religion. Their convictions have come up from the soil-bed of discontent and not from the ranks of complacency. Such men in every age are the moral feelers of the Church; its exploring nerves of touch. If we cannot keep such men within the fellowship of the Church, if we stifle their prophesy merely on the ground that they are radicals, then our Protestant religion will gradually fade out as a saving force in modern life.⁴⁹

Clearly, for Sisco the message of the Fellowship, which he could not condone, was secondary to its role as a "wake up call" for the denomination. The health of the church, and of its mission to the nation and to the world depended on its ability to remain open to the critiques, often unpopular, of its "prophets." His own education in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, and his growing fear that Protestantism in general, and the United Church in particular, were beset by conservative complacency opened his mind to the counter-cultural critiques of these Canadian radicals.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

V

As he did with some of the essential ideas of the FCSO, Sisco took what he found in the religious culture of the 1930s, distilled it and applied it vigorously to his own understanding of the function of the United Church in Canada. As he assumed the General Secretaryship of the General Council and guided the church through the last years of the Depression and the early years of Second World War he continued to augment his understanding with new theological emphases. Though he continued to think of himself as a liberal preacher, and to confess openly his allegiance to modernistic interpretations, his sermons and public activity after 1935 indicate that he was assuming a moderate, post-liberal position. During the Depression, Sisco, like many of his colleagues in the United Church and elsewhere was caught up in the widespread re-examination of current theological assumptions that was going on across denominational and national boundaries.

One of the hallmarks of this sea-change that affected much of North American Protestantism in the decades after the end of the Great War, was a clear reaction against the priority of social activism. In the years leading up to the second international war in twenty-five years, Sisco noted that The United Church of Canada, like other denominations, was a well-maintained agent for social reform. In a 1936 sermon on the necessity of missions, he noted that "Whatever else our churches may lack they do not lack in matters of activity and the means of putting activity across." Though he enthusiastically endorsed the socially active nature of the church, Sisco, mirroring the concerns of some theologians who were re-evaluating the liberal emphasis on human activity, wondered if the church had not become too concerned with "doing" at the expense of "receiving." He reminded his audience that the early Christians described in the New Testament "were

men of action. They met their age with a fine cutting edge of protest." But instead of the active verbs employed by twentieth-century Protestantism, the early Christians, Sisco argued, used passive language "which denoted the power of God on their lives." Reflecting some of the renewed Protestant accent on the sovereignty of God, Sisco pointed out that early Christians did not think that "we are moving inevitably forward. We are progressing. We are on our way. The Kingdom of God is up to us let us do something about it." Instead, he reminded his congregation, the earliest Christian reformers recognized that "We are called, we are chosen, we are changed, we are renewed, we are strengthened." In an effort to re-introduce an emphasis on transcendence into contemporary, popular Protestantism, Sisco entreated United Church people to "recapture" the spirit of passivity in Christian work and to follow God's lead.⁵⁰

Though some of the emphases in Sisco's thought and preaching in the 1930s came from impulses outside the church, his developing interpretation of salvation and its purpose fell very much into the mainstream of the United Church tradition. Throughout the first half of the decade, the whole gospel, which formed the basis of the theology of the denomination, was also, and not surprisingly, becoming the theology of the man who would be the second General Secretary. This simultaneous emphasis on the individual and social imperatives of the gospel found expression in Sisco's belief that "through a redeemed humanity God may come more fully into all our human life." By the middle of the 1930s, however, Sisco had come to believe,

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, box 1, file 24, "The Propulsive Power of Christianity," 4-6. This sermon was preached at Danforth United in January, 1936. Unfortunately, very few of Sisco's sermons from the Danforth years remain, though the titles, preserved in weekly bulletins, do. For the dating and names of many of his Danforth sermons see UCCA, Records of Danforth United Church (Toronto), box 4, file 2, "Service Bulletins, 1935-1937."

like many others, that the two-sides of this whole gospel coin were not being pursued in correct proportion. If the hope of the whole gospel message was to be maintained, he preached, "it will call for something more than a 'get busy' gospel." The "something more" for which Sisco called was a strong evangelistic effort. Concerned that a lack of will and money was hampering this vital church work, he declared that church people "must have a sense of inner compulsion, a constraint to do the thing that must be done, and resources of power to more than match the task."⁵¹ Arguing that missions "are not a chance after-thought" but rather "the very heart beat and bloodlife of the Church," he described why this compulsion to evangelize was necessary:

A man becomes a Christian by the grace of God and then he begins to increase the areas of his awareness. He becomes a nerve o'er which does creep the else unfelt oppressions of the world. That is the ideal Christian experience and when a Christian gives himself up to it how noticeably the religious life thrives in him and what a difference of meaning it makes.⁵²

And it was this process of awakening people to the oppressions of the world through the grace of God, or, in other words, evangelism, that would help to make Canada, and eventually the world a more Christian, a more "noble civilization."

In the first years of his tenure as General Secretary, Sisco worried that the goal of a noble, Christian civilization, which had been pursued for years through "action," was, in the shadows of the Depression and the collapse of international relations, being lost. To correct the fading power of the Christian vision of a better nation, and of a safer world, he claimed that "to day, as in every age of the past, the influence of the Church is in proportion to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7

her passion.” Sisco pleaded, therefore, for an accent on “The Gospel of the Burning Heart” – “Ideas, however true, are not sufficient,” he said. “Programmes, however lofty, are not enough. Well stated creeds and high idealed politics will not lift us up – these have their place but all of them must be converted into a great enthusiasm before they stir the souls of the people.”⁵³ The turbulence and hatred rampant in the western world in the last years of the decade had convinced him that an emphasis on bringing individuals to the Christian life was the necessary first step in true social service. Invoking the example of John Wesley, whose conversion, he said, had “set in motion great spiritual forces that have not died out to this day,” Sisco argued that Wesley’s “movement was the outcome of a burning heart and I believe it can be repeated.”

This emphasis on bringing people to Christianity was not, however, the individualistic evangelism of George Pidgeon and other more traditional United Church ministers. Sisco believed, of course, in the importance of bringing individuals to Christ, but he believed also that an individual interpretation of Christianity was too limited to be useful. To disagree with a perceived privatization of religion, with the belief that “Christianity is a relationship between God and the soul in the deep privacy of the inner life,” was an accepted United Church attitude. But Sisco’s faith went beyond the individual and social necessities of the whole gospel.⁵⁴ During the 1930s he came to believe that the future of Christianity, and indeed of the world, lay not only in a combination of evangelism and social service, but also, and perhaps more urgently, in true national and international ecumenical effort.

⁵³ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, “The Gospel of the Burning Heart,” 7-8.

⁵⁴ Moving beyond the “mechanical formula of ‘evangelism and social service’” was popular in this era, especially among the FCSO. See Allen, “Religion and Political Transformation in English Canada,” 129-130.

The basis of this ecumenism, and indeed of his increasing calls for creating "burning hearts," was his belief throughout the 1930s that Christian fellowship at home and abroad was more than a biblical imperative -- it was, rather, the only means by which humankind could be saved.⁵⁵ Confronted with the probability of another world war, still attempting to cover the wounds of the Depression, and reflecting widely accepted ecumenical truths, Sisco wrote in 1939 that the creation of international "brotherhood," of a "Universal Church," was an immediate Christian imperative. Like many Canadian churchpeople in the 1930s, Sisco turned to a "united" and "totalitarian" Christianity to counter the secular and "collectivist" European ideological threats. And, like the mainstream churchpeople that Robert Wright studied, he did so entirely within the "Canadian church leaders' historic view of the missionary enterprise and of the international role of Protestant Christianity." Arguing that an "undirected individualism will no longer satisfy," in the age of "Fascism, Nazi-ism and Communism," he called forcefully for effective ecumenical effort.

Every member of the Church is called into this world-wide fellowship in Christ, and every missionary goes out into the world as its exponent. When by God's grace through Christ, the ideal is fully visualized and the soul of the individual thrills to it, he discovers that as a Christian he has more in common with Christians of other nations than he has with fellow nationalists who do not recognize the Christian ideal. When the Church, true to its divine Lord, and in expression of its inherent faith, is ready to show that Christianity is love which transcends all national and class divisions, then the world will be compelled to face the fact that brotherhood can be a living reality.

⁵⁵ For Sisco's ecumenism in the mid-1930s, which included attacks on Orangism, see "Towards Unity and Freedom."

"Then, and only then," he concluded "will such scourges of war and the persecution of racial minority groups pass from the earth."⁵⁶

Clearly, this call for widespread, international missionary activity was not based on some perceived failure of the church in Canada. Though some Canadian Christians were likely attempting to counter losses at home through gains abroad, Sisco and many others who supported international ecumenical missionary activity in the late 1930s did so out of sincere concern for the future of humankind. Bringing the world into one Christian church was fundamental to the continuing health of humankind generally. Entirely unlike the supporters and missionaries who, David Marshall has argued, were by the turn of the century, "unsure about the legitimacy of the traditional missionary task of proselytizing Christianity," many influential churchpeople in the 1930s remained convinced that only through united proselytization could the world be truly saved -- not only in the limited sense of converting individuals, but also in the larger sense of creating a common and peaceful global brotherhood.⁵⁷ So deep was Gordon Sisco's belief in the promise of this ecumenical missionary work that he noted excitedly the successful 1937 meetings that initiated the establishment of the World Council of Churches and the "spirit of union" that was "abroad in the foreign mission fields, and is reacting strongly on the parent churches." These demonstrations of the ecumenical spirit indicated an "increasing unity of the Churches and the translation into fact of the ideal of one Holy Catholic and

⁵⁶ Gordon Sisco, *The Universal Church* (Toronto: United Church of Canada Board of Evangelism and Social Service, 1939) 5-7. Sisco shared the language and the sentiment of the international missionary emphasis. See Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918 - 1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 247 and 230-247.

⁵⁷ David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) chapter four, esp. 125-126.

Apostolic Church." Such a church would open the way for the proclamation of "the good news of the gospel to our own day and age," and, thereby, the creation of a universal Christian brotherhood.⁵⁸

In calling for evangelistic effort on the part of church people in Canada and in the world, however, Sisco was careful to make his moderate theological position clear. Elected in a time of sharp theological division that saw congregations and conferences split over questions of how best to approach the symptoms and the causes of the economic crisis, Sisco was acutely conscious of the tensions in the denomination he administrated.⁵⁹ When he preached for more missionary zeal, therefore, the General Secretary was quick to declare that "I am not pleading for any particular form of utterance or any precise manner of statement." And then, as if to make his position unmistakably clear, he claimed "I am not a reactionary fundamentalist: neither am I an arid liberal. I cling to the message of evangelism."⁶⁰ It is tempting to attribute such mediating thought to political expediency, particularly in a time of theological polarity. As General Secretary, Sisco was expected not only to guide the church's bureaucracy, but also, and especially in practical matters, to be one of its national voices. Though much of his activity as General Secretary of General Council was office work, he nonetheless continued to preach quite regularly and often made public proclamations on matters of politics, faith and economy. When he did so his comments, perhaps more than almost any other United Church minister's, were considered official opinion. As such, it was in his and the church's best

⁵⁸ Sisco, *The Universal Church*, 10.

⁵⁹ On the divisions in the church, see Mutchmor, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor*, 84.

⁶⁰ Sisco, "The Gospel of the Burning Heart," 7. See also his earlier sermon, "Towards Unity and Freedom" for a similar perspective.

interest that he not be seen to be a member of any rigid theological party. In the late 1930s, separating oneself from both “liberals” and “fundamentalists” was the most effective way to assume such a middle, perhaps appropriately amorphous position.

Political expediency was not, however, Gordon Sisco's *modus operandi*; his theological position in the 1930s was the result of thought developed during a ministerial career shaped by a series of national and international crises. His move from the social gospel milieu of his upbringing and education to a post-liberal, evangelistically based faith in under three decades, followed the intellectual trajectories of many clergymen who were forced by war and economic crisis to mitigate their social perspective.⁶¹ The practical faith that was often the result, and which was certainly a central feature of Sisco's ecclesiology, allowed these churchmen to mix seemingly disparate emphases. For Gordon Sisco, that meant an almost effortless, modernistic acceptance of the findings of both biological science and biblical criticism as well as an abiding concern for the conversion of individuals. Recognizing that modern science could not be denied, and certain that its findings do not “alter the missionary impulse of Christianity one iota,” he was genuinely open to, though sometimes critical of its discoveries.⁶² Like his Methodist predecessor Nathanael Burwash, who was a professor of both natural science and systematic theology at Victoria college at the turn of the century, Sisco was able to mix seamlessly his own changing intellectual world

⁶¹ Wright, “The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945,” 178-181.

⁶² Sisco, “The Propulsive Power of Christianity,” 1. In this sermon, Sisco made this assertion about the findings of biblical form criticism specifically, but it was an opinion that he communicated about other varieties of “new” knowledge in other writings. For his acceptance of evolution and other scientific findings, see UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 20, “Journeys Out and Home,” 3-4, and *ibid.*, file 21, “Our Ground of Confidence,” 2 and 4. For his critique of biblical criticism, see “Our Ground of Confidence,” 3-4 and Chapter Nine.

and his belief in the biblical imperatives of evangelical Christianity.⁶³ And he was certain that this accommodating but faithful theology was, in fact, the majority position. Indeed, he claimed in the mid-1930s, divisions between “modernism” and “fundamentalism,” were becoming irrelevant – the future of Christianity did not lie with either of these “archaic” or “arid” options, but with “an ever growing number of people in all Protestant Churches who believe that God has supremely revealed Himself to men in Jesus Christ and that the great findings of scholarship and science are not incompatible with that revelation.”⁶⁴ This accommodating position was, of course, central to the still developing United Church theology of the whole gospel.

The mediating and complex features of Sisco’s faith were, therefore, demonstrated by, and not denied in his emphasis on missionary activity in the late years of the Depression. By the end of the 1930s, as Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau have argued recently, this call for an evangelism which emphasized the conversion of individuals was becoming a common United Church position. This emphasis on “personal evangelism” was evinced by an increase in interest and activity associated with the winning of converts to the church. The Oxford Group Movement and the United Church’s various efforts to “Evangelize” and “Christianize” the nation between 1932 and 1939 exposed and encouraged a popular interest in traditional evangelical experience.⁶⁵ Even given Sisco’s increasing calls for “Grace” over “action” in this era, it is only partly correct to argue, then, as Christie and Gauvreau do,

⁶³ On Burwash’s ability to accommodate his evangelical faith to the findings of scientific investigation, see Marguerite Van Die, *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989) 95-113. On the ability of one of Sisco’s contemporaries to do so, see Gidney, “Richard Roberts,” 51.

⁶⁴ Sisco, “Towards Unity and Freedom,” 8. See also, Knowles, “Preached by Invitation in a Quebec Catholic Pulpit.”

⁶⁵ For a description of these various evangelistic efforts, see Chapter Four.

that “the United Church of the late 1930s identified Christianity with personal conversion and missionary work and not with reform of the social order.”⁶⁶ To draw such a radical distinction between these two sides of the whole gospel equation misses the theological nuance of the predominant United Church understanding of salvation and its influence on progress in the social order. Much like George Pidgeon and Hugh Dobson, Sisco understood “personal evangelism” as an important but nonetheless preliminary step in the work towards building the Kingdom of God in Canada. It is certainly true that Sisco, like Dobson and Pidgeon, came to believe that the necessity of individual regeneration had become understated, a conviction that was demonstrated by their calls for more evangelistic effort during the Depression. Nevertheless, it would not have occurred to these leaders to *replace* their sincere concern for the reform of the social order with missionary zeal. These twin concerns of the whole gospel were bound closely and intimately, and emphasizing one was meant to augment, and never to supplant, the other. Building the Kingdom, making Canada a Christian nation “from sea to sea,” was the impetus behind critiques of capitalism, calls for temperance, and preaching for a verdict, all of which together composed the national gospel of the national church and its leadership. By 1939, the tempering of denominational differences and the alignment of practical priorities within the church had progressed to a point where the liberal evangelicalism of the whole gospel was a widely accepted, if liberally interpreted, denominational theology.

The whole gospel was not enough, however, for Gordon Sisco. He certainly believed that the work of social reform, of working towards the ideal

⁶⁶ Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 242. The argument that the United Church revived emphasis on conversion during the Depression is made on pp. 224-243.

of the Kingdom in Canada, was most effective when it was inspired by the “burning heart” of a Christian. But where the General Secretary differed from some of the ministers in the church, and some influential leaders, was his powerful belief that it was the church’s role to lead and challenge culture on all fronts. This did not mean, of course, that he agreed with the radical separationist thinking of some fundamentalists; such “archaic” reductionism was alien to his academic character, his activist nature, and his denominational inheritance. Nor did he accept the revolutionary ideas of those Christians who would overthrow the economic and social systems of Canadian life. Increasingly throughout the 1930s, however, he came to believe, and to preach, that the close identification of the Christian church with the *status quo* had forced its passive complicity with the tragedies of war and economic Depression. For Sisco, then, simply converting people to “Christianity” was not enough; even encouraging active work for the building of the Kingdom did not go far enough. These were, of course, worthy endeavors for both the church and its members. Nonetheless, by the last years of the 1930s, under the influence of his own understanding of the “drift” of secular culture, the counter-cultural teachings of post-liberal and Christian Realist thought, and radical Christians in his own denomination, Sisco had come to believe that true Christian witness required sincere questioning of the prevailing culture. More than tinkering with the excesses of vice, this type of Christianity required a committed Christian skepticism about all received structures, institutions, laws and systems. This was, however, a particularly difficult position to maintain as General Secretary of The United Church of Canada. The self-proclaimed “national church,” which Gordon Sisco administrated and often represented, was in the paradoxical position of working to maintain a paramount place in Canadian society while

simultaneously pointing out, criticizing and attempting to correct its multitudinous flaws. As Sisco learned during the Second World War, holding the middle ground between criticism and relevance, between authority and defiance, was becoming a near impossibility as the church, and particularly as the nation, matured.

Chapter Nine

"A Temper more Radical and Discerning:" The Middle Kingdom of Gordon Sisco

When the history of the United Church of Canada comes to be written, there can be no doubt that a very large place will have to be given to the work of Gordon Sisco. In what have been the most formative years of our Church he kept his hands on the wheel and steered us through many eddies and cross-currents, and brought us out to the position we now occupy.¹

After the difficulties associated with its complicity and boosterism during the First World War, Canada's Protestant mainstream was cautious about its approach to the Second. In the early years of German aggression in the 1930s, and even as war was declared, the United Church was in a particularly careful mood. The majority of the Methodists and Presbyterians who now constituted the church had been enthusiastic in endorsing, and supporting in all ways possible, the Canadian war effort from 1914 to 1918. Memories of the unabashedly patriotic and "recruitment" preaching that emanated from many pulpits in the First War were still fresh.² As a second world war became increasingly likely throughout the 1930s, therefore, United Church resistance to war increased and was expressed in a series of official condemnations of war.³ Though this and other church-based pronouncements were powerful

¹ "He Lives in the Church He Loved," *United Church Observer*, 15:22 (January 15, 1954): 5.

² The domestic role played by the Canadian churches in the First World War has been well documented. See David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) 156-180, and J. Michael Bliss, "The Methodist Church and World War I," *Canadian Historical Review* 44 (1968); Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Chaplains of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994). The extent of the mainstream "measures of support," and the practice of recruiting from the pulpit are summarized in John W. Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era* (updated and expanded) (Burlington: Welch Publishing Company, 1988) 113-114.

³ The content and context of the strong pronouncements against war from the Seventh (1936) and Eighth (1938) General Councils is explained in Victor Huard, "Armageddon

criticisms of state-supported mechanized conflict, the church's injunctions against warfare reflected in many ways sentiments abroad in the culture generally.⁴ When war was finally declared, and Canada's young men were sent to Europe to fight, support for peace waned both in the nation and in the United Church. The ambiguities exposed by the conflict that became popularly interpreted as a war for Christian civilization, and which necessarily entailed a role for Canada's self-proclaimed "national church," had profound effects on the developing character and influence of the church.⁵ The experiences of the nation and of the self-proclaimed "national church" during the Second World War were significant, and, in the end, altered significantly their relationship with each other.

Those United Church people charged with leading the denomination through these complicated and tragic times were set a troubling task. The place of the Protestant churches in English Canada was changing subtly as the Depression, the War and continuing social transformation altered the national, and international landscape. In these different circumstances, men who were reared and trained as Canada's nineteenth century extended into its twentieth were challenged to find theological, social, and ecumenical positions that made sense of, and in, a changing nation. And they ventured to do so in a church that was still experiencing growing pains. Put in the perplexing position of leading the church out of old ways of thinking and

Reconsidered: Shifting Attitudes towards Peace in English Canada, 1936-1953," (Ph.D. Thesis: Queen's University, 1996) 209-210.

⁴ *Ibid.* The popularity of pacifism in Canada between the wars is described in Thomas P. Socknat, *Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

⁵ The role of the churches in the Second World War, and particularly the argument that their support was based on the belief that the allies were protecting "Christian civilization" is presented in Charles Thompson Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization: The Churches and Canada's War Effort," (Ph.D. Thesis: University of Chicago, 1975).

acting while the new ways were developing, and asked to chart the course of an old institution in increasingly unsettled and unknown circumstances, the leadership of The United Church of Canada in the war and post-war years was confronted with unprecedented challenges and opportunities.

The General Secretary of the church's General Council approached this difficult work from a unique position. Gordon Sisco confronted the task of guiding the United Church through the complicated years of the war armed with a pragmatic, questioning church theology developed from the influences old and new that he had encountered during his first twenty-five years in the ministry. In the crucible of war, earlier influences from teachers, post-liberal and realist thinkers, Christian radicals and the exigencies of administrative necessity were forged into a defined, original and pragmatic United Church perspective. This intellectual approach which accepted the basic assumptions of the whole gospel tradition, but which was open to more radical, even controversial interpretations of the role of the "national" church, allowed Sisco to articulate some challenging and ultimately novel positions for The United Church of Canada.

I

Given the strength, and the fluidity of the whole gospel in the 1930s, any change in the basis of the United Church's theology would have entailed more than a shift in emphasis in the priority of individual or social "salvation." Significant change would require a re-interpretation of the vision of the Kingdom of God and, therefore, a reinterpretation of the character and responsibility of the "national church." In the decades after church union was consummated, such novel interpretation had been encouraged slowly by the radical adjustments in popular, governmental and ecclesiastical thought which began in the years following the Great War, and

which were further established during and after the Second World War. For Gordon Sisco, who was still defining his role as the General Secretary when war was declared in 1939, the experience of another crisis, and particularly of a second war, served to strengthen and to sharpen his understanding of the church's task in the nation and the world. Like so many of his colleagues from his generation and earlier who believed that the pulpit required more than experiential and biblical knowledge, Sisco continued to use his academic skills to interpret shifting ecclesiastical, political and economic realities. By the time that war against Hitler had been declared, Sisco's continued and continuous evaluation of his theological and ecclesiastical priorities had encouraged a novel, and typically moderate understanding of his and his denomination's faith. His encounter with post-liberal Protestant thinkers, counter-cultural Christian radicals and his own passage through the latter years of progressive idealism had led him to reject as insufficient some of the beliefs and assumptions he had previously held central. In a war-time sermon, delivered in a time when "orthodoxy" was enjoying a revival in Canada, he expressed this new, mature theological perspective clearly.⁶

In "Our Ground of Confidence," Sisco outlined his current theological perspective. In this examination of the development of theology, in which he called for a return to the "cosmic," Sisco considered the importance of "modernism" in the first decades of the century. He conceded that modernism had been "a helpful and constructive movement," and that he continued to subscribe to much of it. And, though he admitted that "Modernism has had a good many severe critics in our day" he nonetheless defended it, claiming that "it was a necessary phase in the process of clarifying

⁶ On the vogue of theology in the war years see Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 152-153.

Christian thought at a time when the advance of knowledge had made inroads upon some of our traditional religious beliefs." In particular, he said, "it helped some of us to reconcile the views of religion with the spirit and findings of modern science." Then, reflecting the neo-orthodox and Christian Realist influences that had begun to modify his faith in the 1930s, he argued that modernism "went on finally to adopt some unfortunate assumptions."

It fell in with a too optimistic view of man and his ability to progress. It assumed that you could set forth Jesus as an example, as a way of living to be copied, without going on to ask profound questions as to the ultimate meaning of his person. It assumed that Christian people --once the ideal seized them-- would go out into all the world to practice a spirit of good will in business and national life and all human relationships, without any deep faith as to what made good will basal to the universe. So instead of doctrine we went in for religious education trying to present the Jesus way of life apart from any emphasis on the vast and Godward side of his personality.

"But," he concluded in this war-time sermon, a faith like that "is an inadequate religion for stern days like these."⁷

Like many other Canadian clergymen, Sisco had come to believe that the failure to avoid and then to deal effectively with economic problems and war now made earlier assumptions about the possibility of indefinite improvement of humankind and its world seem increasingly frivolous.⁸ In the United Church, this questioning led to the codification of a clear and carefully traditional theology in a "Statement of Faith" which was originally

⁷ United Church of Canada Central Archives [UCCA], Gordon Alfred Sisco Papers [GSP], box 1, file 21, "Our Ground of Confidence," 5-6. William R. Hutchison discusses the same process among theological liberals in the United States in, "Epilogue: The Decline of Cultural Faith," in *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) 288-311..

⁸ Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 153 and Robert A. Wright, "The Canadian Protestant Tradition 1914-1945," in G.A. Rawlyk (ed.) *The Canadian Protestant Experience 1760-1990* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press, 1990) 189.

presented to General Council in 1940, and then independently interpreted in John Dow's *This is Our Faith*, which was published in 1943. These works conspicuously avoided Fundamentalist and literalist interpretations, but affirmed biblical and historic Protestant creeds concerning Christ, Sin, and redemption.⁹ Sisco was very much in favour of this "return to the great doctrines of the Church," an opinion that was reflected in his reconsideration of some established "liberal" orthodoxies.¹⁰ His retreat from "modernism" to a more chastened liberal evangelicalism during the tragic days of depression and war led him to reject what he saw as over-simplistic interpretations of the Kingdom of God. He was unable and unwilling, of course, to abandon hope in the coming Kingdom. Nonetheless, his own theological and practical development led him away from the humanistic and perfectionist Kingdom on earth that had been so central to some social gospel interpretations of the Christian imperative. Though he believed passionately in the need for Christian leadership in social reform, by the last years of the Depression he had concluded that such effort and the establishment of the Kingdom were not so intimately linked as earlier proponents of the social gospel had taught. Unable to accept the human-based perfectionism of a Kingdom "built" by human effort, but equally unable to reject the promise of a coming Kingdom, Sisco maintained his "neither liberal nor fundamentalist" stance by arguing for a more nuanced ideal that was at once neither and both. "We must remember," he said in the early years of the war, "that the Kingdom of God is

⁹ John Dow, *This is Our Faith: An Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The Board of Evangelism and Social Service of the United Church of Canada, 1943). See N. Keith Clifford analysis of these theological statements in "The United Church of Canada and Doctrinal Confession." *Touchstone* 2:2 (May, 1984): 11-15.

¹⁰ UCCA, General Council Collection, Series III -- Correspondence [GCC-III], box 41, file 73, Sisco to Dear Mrs. Walker, May 16, 1944.

always immanent in the historical process as a never ending struggle for righteousness and yet transcendent to the process as something above and beyond any goal which we poor mortals can reach." This was both an eminently practical and fundamentally spiritual interpretation of the Kingdom, a view which he argued, forced Christians "to accept approximate results while keeping our eyes fixed on ultimate goals."¹¹ Though this understanding of the Kingdom continued to allow for human effort, it also emphasized the centrality, and sovereignty, of God's Grace. It was an almost perfectly mediating position; it allowed Sisco to maintain his faith in the need for the church to struggle for righteousness, while simultaneously freeing the church from the impossibilities of perfectionism and thereby making its goals, and its tools, more earthly and more ethereal. This was the Kingdom of the whole gospel, but unlike earlier manifestations, it was based more on "a vision of hope than a plan for society."¹²

Though his was a more spiritual, more evangelistic interpretation than the pure postmillennialism of the social gospel, it nonetheless encouraged a more vigorous and more practical vision. Sisco was less certain than others that Christian activism would establish the rule of Christ on earth, but he was more certain than ever that the nation and the world needed Christian guidance. As he surveyed the world heading out of economic collapse and into a second international war, his belief that only Christianity had the answers the world needed became more powerful. Faced with the flawed totalitarian and secular collectivism over-running Europe in the form of

¹¹ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, "The Crisis of Opportunity," 10.

¹² Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 139. This particular interpretation became standard in the church after the war. See, for example, Angus James MacQueen, *The Christian Interpretation of History* (United Church of Canada: Board of Evangelism and Social Service, 1956) 8-15.

communism and fascism, and still reeling from the collapse of the individualistic totalitarianism of laissez-faire capitalism in North America, Sisco preached that the only acceptable rule was "Christian totalitarianism."¹³ Arguing from the twin compulsions of the whole gospel, the General Secretary of the United Church maintained that the extremes of nationalism, the failures of democracy and the challenge of disarmament all "call for a conversion of the human heart and the infusion of a new spirit into the world."

And so, though the church was certainly correct to give guidance to the world and the nation on questions of peace and economics, Sisco was clear that "the world will not be saved by the mere proclamation of ideals or by the painting of pictures of what human life should be like." Visions and programmes do not move people. Rather, he preached, it "is only as men as individuals and citizens of a nation and of the world come to see that God is one who has stooped to serve the lowliest of his creatures by submitting to all the tragedy of human shame and death on Calvary and rose triumphant that they move into the realm of dynamic action."¹⁴ The world of collapsing economies, freedoms and international relations needed, more than anything else, the spiritual pulse of Christianity. The world needed, therefore, missionaries. But Sisco's was not the missionary imperative of an earlier generation which "quite sincerely sent missionaries ... in honest fear that if

¹³ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, "The Propulsive Power of Christianity," 9-10. The language of "totalitarianism" was becoming current among Anglo-American Protestants throughout the 1930s; Sisco's argument here reflects similar arguments being made by others in the church, including E.M. Howse, who would later replace Pidgeon at Bloor Street and Jesse Arnup, at the time the Secretary of the United Church Foreign Mission Board. See Robert Wright, *A World Mission: Canadian Protestantism and the Quest for a New International Order, 1918 - 1939* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 241-243.

¹⁴ Sisco, "The Crisis of Opportunity," 10-11. Many of these same ideas were articulated in UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 19, "The Ecumenical Mission of the Church To-day."

they neglected their responsibilities souls without number might pass through the gates of death into a state of everlasting torment." The motive for missionary activity in the middle of the twentieth century was, like the man who called for them, much more pragmatic. Reflecting in part a return to traditional evangelical concerns that were becoming widespread in the Anglo-American Protestantism of the late 1930s, but tempering that Victorian evangelicalism with more modern concerns, Sisco declared that the church *must* pursue missionary work at home and abroad.¹⁵ Not, however, out of concern that "men will be lost in some world beyond our knowledge," but, rather, "in real and honest fear of what will happen in this world, and on this side of the grave, if men do not, and that speedily, come within sight of a common spiritual ideal which rebukes and restrains them all."¹⁶ Though characterized by a familiar urgency, this was not an evangelism intended to save humankind from eternal damnation, but from itself. This was a goal which became even more urgent as Canada and the world embarked on a second war in 1939.

For Sisco, then, as for the majority of Protestants in Canada, the Second World War was far more than simply a war to "oust Hitler"; it was, as Tom Sinclair-Faulkner has demonstrated, a war against the system of life the dictator personified, carried out to protect "Christian civilization."¹⁷ Though English Canadian church people were less likely than in the First War to support the national effort enthusiastically, the majority nonetheless supported the state's military endeavors in the Second. They did so because they believed that fascism, and particularly Nazism, were fundamental

¹⁵ Wright, *A World Mission*, 233-246.

¹⁶ Sisco, "The Crisis of Opportunity," 11-12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

threats to the continued development of a "noble Christian civilization." This was the position of the majority of United Church people, including the General Secretary of the General Council, who argued that if "Hitler and his legions" were not stopped, Christianity would be forced underground. He saw the war, therefore, as a moral issue; "it is a struggle to maintain if possible an order of society which promises free course to the gospel of Christ and holds out renewed hope for an international order based on the sanctity of law and approximating justice. It is for that reason that the Christian churches of Canada have given their moral support to the Canadian government."¹⁸ Though others in the denomination, and particularly some key members of the FCSO believed that engaging in war was itself contrary to building the Kingdom of God,¹⁹ the majority, which had come to accept that Christianity, democracy and freedom were linked, accepted the war as "a distasteful but necessary burden."²⁰

Sisco's support was not, however, unqualified. He had, of course, come to believe that the Protestant association with the extremes of liberal and laissez-faire individualism was harmful to the development of the Kingdom of God in Canada. As the nation entered the war, his essential critique of the obvious connections between Protestant individualism and capitalism did not change. Sinclair-Faulkner suggests that many churchpeople supported the war because of their powerful belief in the spiritual truths of Anglo-American "democracy" and "freedom." Sisco was not one of them. In the early years of

¹⁸ Sisco, "The Ecumenical Mission of the Church," 4. Keith Clifford argued that this justification of the war indicated that Sisco was a "hawk." See N. Keith Clifford, "Charles Clayton Morrison and the United Church of Canada," *Canadian Journal of Theology* XV:2 (April, 1969): 85.

¹⁹ Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization," 52-53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38 and 127-132 and Wright, *A World Mission*, 248. John Webster Grant has made a similar argument in *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 151.

the Allied war against Hitler, he was unconvinced that the prevailing interpretations of "democracy" and "freedom" were "Christian" truths in need of defence. He argued, in fact, that in many important ways, and for many people, they had yet to be established.

This was a position that was typically contrary to widespread and accepted assumptions about the superiority of Anglo-American social and political development. Sisco maintained the current belief that democracy and its individual freedoms were fostered and protected by the fundamentals of Protestant theology and action. And he was proud enough of his and his denomination's heritage, and majority racial and national composition, that he allowed that Protestantism had in fact encouraged "the development of the English speaking race in the art of self-government." He was certain also that the "emphasis of Protestantism on the universal priesthood of all believers has contained within itself the germs of democracies and republics with their fruitage of widening personal liberty." Nevertheless, though he believed that in North America this Protestant inspired parliamentary democracy "has embraced a synthetic population with a great diversity of culture and has federated two halves of a single continent," he was less appreciative of what democracy and freedom had become. As he surveyed the North American experiment in the early years of the Second World War, he lamented that "democracy which ideally is a way of life governed by a respect for the dignity of man as a child of God has been separated from its original term of reference."²¹ Though based originally in Protestant ideals, Sisco

²¹ Sisco, "The Ecumenical Mission of the Church To-Day," 2. This position is in contrast to Robert Wright's assessment that the assumptions upon which many Canadian church people continued to base their understanding of world events were the "essentially Victorian ideas of the inherent superiority of Protestant Christianity, political democracy and the Anglo-Saxon race...." See Wright, *A World Mission*, 251.

contended, democracy was becoming increasingly separated from Christianity as the world became more mechanistic and more material. In the twentieth-century reality of "profit-driven society," democracy and freedom, instead of enshrining Christian altruism, came "to mean the right to follow the way of enlightened self-interest." This was a state of affairs that had necessarily collapsed, he preached, when the machine driven democracies were no longer profitable and freedom from political tyranny became economic bondage. The resulting Depression fostered a generation of men who were left disgruntled and angry by the injustices of unemployment and poverty. In their war against dictators, therefore, the parliamentary democracies were calling on "young men who are now physically and mentally unfit to serve democracy in its struggle against fascist totalitarianism." Indeed, many of the very men chosen to protect it had been "made physically unfit by the incompetence of democracy."²² As the war effort increased, and even as the General Council condoned the Canadian involvement in it, Sisco was satisfied that the war was being waged *against* Hitler to maintain "freedom." But, unlike many others, he was not so certain that the allies were fighting *for* Christian "democracy;" "If we denegate[sic] in faith," he said in 1941, "our form of government denegrates also."²³

The tragedies of the 1930s were fundamental to Sisco's understanding of the war. The collapse of capitalism and its devastating effects at home and abroad had convinced him that there were grave problems with so-called

²² Sisco, "The Ecumenical Mission of the Church To-Day," 3. This talk was delivered to the North American Ecumenical Conference, which was held in Toronto in June, 1941. See Clifford, "Charles Clayton Morrison and the United Church of Canada," 85.

²³ This was theme upon which he preached during the Anniversary Services of Port Hope United Church in April, 1942. This reserved and qualified opinion of "Democracy" was reported in "Special Anniversary Services At United Church; Rev. Gordon Sisco is Preacher," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

“Christian civilization.” In a sermon on “Repentance in a Modern Setting,” Sisco wondered if the “chaos and frustration and strife” of war “may be God’s way ... of pointing out to us the discrepancies that persist between the values brought to light in the person of Christ and the values that have actuated our civilization as a whole.” He reproached the Protestant church for its complicity in perpetuating values that were, in the end, contrary to Christ. When, under the influence of the Anglo-American evangelicalism, Protestantism became erroneously and singularly consumed with the passion for “saving” individuals it became “ethically short-sighted and morally feeble.” Indicting himself, his audience and all of Anglo-American Protestantism, he observed that “We are part of a movement in history which gave rise to the structure of absolute nationalism and the application of laissez-faire to industrialism.” And, in the process, “we surrendered all too easily to our cultural environment instead of challenging its motives in the name of Christ.”²⁴ The continuing and increasing need to challenge a culture that solved its problems through destructive warfare and cared for its citizens with Depressions, remained a common and consistent theme of Sisco’s war-time perspective.

II

When sermonizing, Sisco used this more theological and emotional medium to rail against the complacent and ultimately disastrous Protestant acceptance of “unchristian” political and economic arrangements. As General Secretary of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination during the national crisis of the Second World War, however, his official activities were centred less on preaching and more on practical church business. In this too, and in very

²⁴ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 21, “Repentance in a Modern Setting,” 3.

practical ways, Sisco's thought and action were informed by the tragedies of the 1930s. The economic problems of the decade had fostered, of course, a great deal of sermonizing across the country about the influence of uncontrolled capitalism on the population. These same problems also had inspired hand-wringing at headquarters, not only because of concern for under-privileged Canadians, but also because of the desperate fiscal circumstance of the denomination. As mentioned above, when Sisco had assumed office, the church was well into a period of over-spending encouraged by the necessity of maintaining its obligations even as contributions fell dramatically. At the beginning of the war this debt had grown to almost two million dollars. To those who led the church, and to those who supported it, this was an unacceptable burden. Therefore, even as they were challenged with finding an appropriate and representative denominational stance towards a second world war, the leaders of the church were forced to grapple with the necessity of continuing the denominational mission while simultaneously reducing the United Church's debts. For Gordon Sisco, who was usually successful in mixing the practical demands of his administrative responsibilities with the philosophical and theological under-pinning of his faith, the challenge of the debt forced him and the denomination into a difficult position. For, ironically, the war, and particularly the national war effort to defend the economic and political *status quo*, presented Sisco's "complacent" church with a solution to the problem.

War is expensive. This was a reality that was clear to both the national government and the national church as they sought in their different ways to support the soldiers and the families under their care. Of course, the national government had more ways of raising money than did the church, and one of the most lucrative of the state's ventures was the selling of war savings

certificates and stamps to its citizens. In order to sell these interest-bearing securities to the population the government advertised clearly, sometimes sensationally, that the money raised was to be used to support its military activities; war bonds were sold and bought to finance the state's military endeavors. They were also bought, of course, because they were widely accepted as a patriotic and safe investment for those who had money to spare. On one level, therefore, it is not surprising that the leadership of The United Church of Canada saw the government's need to raise money during the war as a patriotic and safe means of reducing the denominational debt. In June of 1940 this plan occurred to Denzil Ridout, then Assistant Secretary of the Missionary and Maintenance Committee. In a letter sent to both Sisco and the Moderator, J.W. Woodside, Ridout suggested that if members of the church could be encouraged to purchase war savings certificates in the name of The United Church of Canada "the Church would receive \$5.00 for every \$4.00 invested," when the certificates matured. This amount, Ridout explained, could "be applied to the liquidating of our deficit." If every family could be encouraged to invest \$3.00 in the name of the church, Ridout calculated, the amount at maturation "would provide the total required for this purpose."²⁵ It seemed to the many bureaucrats consulted that the plan was an efficient, patriotic and safe way for the church both to throw its support behind the national war effort and to retire its debt.²⁶ Ridout's suggestion was so popular at headquarters, in fact, that the idea was discussed and action on it approved

²⁵ UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 55, Denzil G. Ridout to My Dear Dr. Woodside, June 18, 1940. See also, the proposal submitted to and adopted by the General Council in *Record of Proceedings of the Ninth General Council* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 1940) 122 and 51; UCCA, "Records of the United Church of Canada Committee for Liquidation of the Deficit;" *ibid.*, GSP, box 1, file 15; and Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization," 163-169 provides useful summary and interpretation.

²⁶ The support of "Dr. Endicott and Mr. Arnup of the Treasurer's Department" is indicated in Ridout's letter.

by the General Council of 1940, and by December of that year arrangements had been made, a church "War Savings Committee" had been formed, government approval had been secured and a motto defined.²⁷ Under the slogan "My Loan to My Country and My Gift to My Church," the campaign to invest the money of church members for the liquidation of the debt, and the support of the state, was initiated.

Almost before the War Savings Plan was begun, however, opposition to its implications for church and state relations in Canada were raised. Even as they supported their nation as Canada entered and became fully engaged in the Second World War, many Canadians were unwilling to allow their churches again to walk so closely with the state as they had under similar circumstances only twenty-five years earlier. In January of 1941, after ministers were sent a "circular" encouraging them to support and publicize the Plan, Sisco and the editor of the *United Church Observer*, A. J. Wilson, began receiving angry and pointed letters from ministers and lay-people who, for very similar reasons, opposed the War Savings Plan. The majority, like Basil W. Thompson of Kingston, approved of the national war effort, endorsed the government's sale of saving certificates to support military activity, and deemed the goal of liquidating the denominational debt worthy. Their concern was that all these activities, honorable in their respective spheres, were being conducted together, and under the auspices of the United Church. Thompson wondered why, in "an hour when every effort should be made by the Church to exalt and emphasise the values of righteousness," "her leaders" were being turned into "salesmen for the war stamps." He

²⁷ UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 56, J.J. Gibson to Dear Dr. Sisco, December 13, 1940. The government's approval of the Church's plan was received during the General Council meeting in September. See *Proceedings of the Ninth General Council*, 41.

concluded his disapproving letter by noting to the General Secretary that "We will rightly deserve the criticism of capitalizing on a war psychology or situation to pay our debts."²⁸ Others were equally critical of the church's association with the business of the state, and, asking its leaders to "Let the Church be the Church" wondered if the Plan could be reconsidered or made less offensive. Ernest Marshall Howse, later a Moderator, but then minister of Westminster Church, Winnipeg, worried that "the Church is tying itself to the war effort of the State in a manner which will make difficult the maintaining of that power of independent criticism the Church ought to possess."²⁹ And H.T. Allen of Sardis, British Columbia, who was proud to have War Savings Certificates in his home, worried that the Plan "puts the church in the position of government agent for the financing of the war," and thereby "breaks with the traditional position of the Free Churches in the separation of the Church and State." The result of this complicity was, Allen said, further to connect the church to a corrupt economic system; "The Church is sufficiently tied up with what we ourselves have called an unchristian financial system," he reminded the Editor of *The Observer*, "not to be more deeply involved in it in this wholesale way."³⁰ For the majority of those who wrote to the church about the proposed Plan, therefore, government money-raising for military endeavors was not the problem;

²⁸ UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 57, Basil W. Thompson to My dear friend Sisco, January 15, 1941.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Ernest Marshall Howse to Dear Sir, January 24, 1941. Howse was so much in favour of supporting the war that he recommended that, at maturation, the church not collect the interest income, but only the principle originally pledged.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, H.T. Allen to Dear Dr. Wilson, January 27, 1941. For a similar critique, see *ibid.*, T.W. Edwards to E.W. Mackay, February 9, 1941. Many of the letters that were sent to Wilson were forwarded to Sisco, and some were communicated to the sub-executive of the General Council.

United Church association with that effort, and with the prevailing culture and economy, was.

Though the criticisms that Sisco received about the War Savings campaign reflected almost identically his own concerns about the ideological and material connections between the church, the state and the economy, he supported the Plan. In his response to the criticisms of Basil Thompson, Sisco recognized the depth of the concern about the campaign; "I could attempt to answer your criticisms point by point and we could have a merry debate," he said to his friend. But, "in the end," he conceded, "you would not be convinced by my arguments."³¹ Sisco did not wish to debate the merits of the Plan, nor was he willing to alter its method or goals. Even when confronted with criticism from outside of the denomination, and indeed the country, the campaign continued. In February, 1941 the notoriety of the Plan was raised significantly when the American liberal paper, *The Christian Century* published a very critical review of the United Church's debt-reduction measures. The editorial written by Charles Clayton Morrison noted that "At a time such as this one would not want to express a criticism which would seem unsympathetic either with the patriotic motive of this plan or with the church's need of some method of taking care of its debt." And then, notwithstanding this qualification, continued, noting critically "the intimate connection thus established between the church, as a church, and the war program in which the government and the nation are involved." It went on to imply that the United Church, through its War Saving Plan, was, once again, becoming "a recruiting office."³² The disapproving and pointed

³¹ *Ibid.*, Sisco to My dear Basil, January 17, 1941.

³² *Ibid.*, copy of "Canadian War Bonds for the Church," from *The Christian Century*, February 5, 1941. The Plan, the response of *The Christian Century* to it, and the controversy it spawned are discussed in depth in N. Keith Clifford, "Charles Clayton

language of the review caught the eyes of not only Canadian churchpeople, many of whom disagreed vehemently with its opinion, but also of the Canadian Press censors.³³ Ironically substantiating *The Christian Century's* and other critics' concerns about the close links between the church and state in Canada, the Censorship Co-ordination Committee wrote to Sisco about the article. With typical war-time zeal, the censors worried that, though the editorial was "couched in unoffending and sympathetic language," it might nevertheless "deter contributions to the United Church plan and therefore indirectly affect Canada's war effort."³⁴

The purpose of the Press Censors' communication was to seek the church executive's opinion about whether the article, and indeed the magazine should be considered for censorship. Sisco took the question seriously, but felt personally that action against the publication was not warranted.³⁵ He had no hesitation, however, in both expressing an opinion and forwarding the matter to the executive. He did not find it at all irregular that the government would request that he and the executive of General

Morrison and the United Church of Canada," and Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization," 161-167.

³³ Clifford, "Charles Clayton Morrison," 83-85. Sisco was among many who were upset by the anti-war and isolationist perspective of *The Christian Century*, an opinion revealed when he endorsed Reinhold Niebuhr's *Christianity and Crisis*, which was promoted as a more reasonable alternative to *The Christian Century*. Citing deep concern "over the confused leadership given by certain liberals in the Christian Churches in the United States," less than one month after *The Christian Century's* editorial, Sisco wrote to the ministers of the church encouraging their subscription to *Christianity and Crisis*. See UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 58, Sisco To the Ministers of the United Church of Canada, March 4, 1941.

³⁴ UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 57, F. Charpentier and W. Eggleston to Dear Dr. Sisco, February 26, 1941. These concerns may have been well-placed. The Plan was not a success, and required far longer to raise the desired sum than had been expected. See Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization," 164-165.

³⁵ UCCA, GCC-III, box 40, file 58, Sisco to Messrs. F. Charpentier and W. Eggleston, March 3, 1941. Inaction was also the decision taken by the Sub-executive of General Council, to whom Sisco referred the Censor's letters. See Clifford, "Charles Clayton Morrison," 83-84.

Council should, technically, become consultants to the state's agencies. Clearly, however, these close ties between the church and the government were not so inoffensive to others, nor were they in keeping with his views he had stated earlier. In the decades preceding his election to the General Secretaryship, and even in sermons delivered during the war, Sisco had been obvious about his disdain for associations between the church and culture, even arguing in the mid-1930s that complacency about the injustices of laissez-faire put the church "too much at the mercy of governments and states." Now in the leadership of the church, the accusation of complicity was one that was, ironically, leveled directly at the War Saving's Plan, and indirectly at Sisco and others who supported it. When the General Council's acceptance of the War Savings Plan became widely known, criticism about this shift from its almost pacifistic statements in the late 1930s to its clear and active financial support of the State's military endeavors early in the war began to appear. These criticisms, many of which Sisco was required to field personally, were deflected by the simple argument that the General Council of 1940 was different in membership and opinion from its predecessors.³⁶ Though this argument from the political structure of the denomination was reasonable, the inconsistencies in the church's official pronouncements in the 1930s and 1940s were due to more than personality changes in leadership. Sisco's own vacillations on the relationship of the denomination to the culture in which it operated indicate a deep dissonance about the developing and continuing role of the "national church."

³⁶ *Ibid.*, box 40, file 60, Sisco to Dear Mr. MacKay, June 10, 1941. Sisco argued that a difference of opinion between different General Council's was to be expected because, as the executive stated directly to the Vancouver Presbytery, which Mr. MacKay represented, "The Executive cannot too strongly emphasize the fact that declarations by the General Council are the expressions of the opinion of that Council."

The issue at stake was the relationship between the church and the state. With the election of a new generation of young denominational leaders in 1936, there had begun a re-alignment of the understanding of the United Church's place in the society. These new leaders, exemplified by the activist and often unpopular Gordon Sisco and J.R. Mutchmor, had absorbed much from the intellectual currents of their generation, and they had become separated from those of their older colleagues who were more likely to see the interests of the church and the state intimately, if not legally connected.³⁷ But as much as the new leadership was different from the previous generation, they were also a part of it; they were not made of entirely different intellectual stuff. Sisco's vacillations and seeming inconsistencies about how closely the church should walk with the culture, the economy and the state, expose, therefore, the middle theological ground he was trying to maintain. Keith Clifford has noted how, by the 1930s, the once unifying dream of building God's Dominion in Canada had begun to "collapse." Under the pressure of a population diversifying faster than it could be "Canadianized," the growing rejection of the "homogenous" and Anglo-Saxon Protestant national ideal, the questioning of "progressive" and "perfectionist" assumptions, and a new "post-Protestant" interpretation of national development, Victorian expectations were withering.³⁸ And so too were the ranks of churchmen who continued to subscribe to them.

Sisco's rejection of perfectionism and other social gospel essentials in the early years of the war indicate his own movement beyond the central

³⁷ See Introduction and Mary Vipond, "Canadian National Consciousness and the Formation of the United Church of Canada," in Mark McGowan and David Marshall, (eds.), *Prophets, Priests and Prodigals: Readings in Canadian Religious History, 1608 to Present* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992).

³⁸ N. Keith Clifford, "His Dominion: A Vision in Crisis," *Studies in Religion* II:4 (1973): 322-324.

ideas of "His Dominion." His willingness to link the interests of the church with the military activity of the state demonstrates, however, that he had not abandoned his essential belief in the mission of his denomination to be Canada's "national church." The quandary of being at once both a national institution and a critic of the nation, of being the nation's conscience as well its patriotic ally, exposed how difficult consistency had become in the changing circumstance of the middle of the twentieth century. Sisco and many of his contemporaries may appear in hindsight to be at least ambiguous, even duplicitous in this period because they fell "between the times." As Clifford notes, there was indeed a changing of the intellectual guard in the 1930s and 1940s, a change which he presumes clearly divided one style of churchmanship from another.

The Social Gospellers who reacted against social injustice and the alliance of cultural Protestantism with industrial capitalism failed on the whole to react with equal vigour against Protestantism's other cultural alliances. It was not until the 1930s, when Neo-Orthodoxy began to dissect Protestantism's identification with the idea of progress, middle class culture, and nationalistic pretensions as a whole, that the theological framework supporting the vision of Canada as 'His Dominion' began to dissolve completely.³⁹

Contrary to the assumption of a clear split, however, Sisco's own development, and the timing of his intellectual and theological maturity, put him in the unfortunate, often confounding position of standing with, and between, the old and the new. On this shifting theological ground, the ideas of the "national church" and "His Dominion" were occasionally out of focus, but they were not dissolving completely.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

III

The campaign to reduce the debt of the church by financing the war of the state was, eventually, successful. "Liquidating the deficit" through the War Saving's Plan required much more time and effort than its proponents had originally projected.⁴⁰ More importantly, the controversial financial effort had exposed some troubling institutional inconsistencies and disagreements about the "national" role of The United Church of Canada, many of which were embodied in the chief executive. Tied still to some classical social gospel ideals, but influenced at the same time by thinking that turned him against that movement, and its national "pretensions," Sisco moved between positions that looked contradictory, but were nonetheless justified within his own complicated theological position. Whatever the appearances, he was not a capricious leader. He was a practical one. His opinions and perspective could change, therefore, as the circumstances demanded, but he was able to justify these sometimes conflicting positions with the various pieces of his theological and ecclesiastical constitution.

This ability to function from and in two worlds at one time was demonstrated again during the war. In the very early months and years of the Second World War, it became fashionable for Protestant churches around the world to contribute to the war effort by prognosticating about what they could do after its conclusion. That they were doing so at all, and especially during the darkest years of Nazi victory and expansion, demonstrated, on one level, unwarranted over-confidence. On another, more contrite level, however, the effort to diagnose and cure the world's problems, made sense. Requested to do so by the General Council of 1940, The United Church of Canada began in

⁴⁰ Sinclair-Faulkner, "For Christian Civilization," 164-165.

1941 to make its own contribution to these efforts to avoid repeating the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles, and to mitigate the economic, political and social chaos it was believed would necessarily follow this international conflict. Like similar efforts that were initiated by the Churches of England and Scotland in Britain and by the Federal Council of Churches in the United States, the United Church sought Christian solutions to the human problems in the countries of the world. Its central concern remained, however, the prospects for the betterment of Canadian society in the years after the war. In his position as General Secretary, and because of his continuing personal interest in the "Christianization of Canadian Life," Sisco was involved with the United Church's Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order from the beginning.⁴¹

The idea for a commission to study the role of the church in the period of reconstruction after the war was originally raised at the ninth General Council of 1940. The Board of Evangelism and Social Service very quickly established such a commission in the late months of that year. After receiving several requests from various departments of the church, the tenth General Council of 1942 called for the creation of a broad and representative commission composed of leading ministerial and lay thinkers from across the country.⁴² Though Sisco preached during the war that "the world will not be saved by the mere proclamation of ideals or by the painting of pictures of

⁴¹ For Sisco's early understanding of these church based efforts at social and political reconstruction after the war, see UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, "The Audacity of Faith," 11. The precedent and simultaneous commissions and reports upon which the United Church effort was largely based are detailed in UCCA, Records of the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order [CNW], box 1, file 2, "Memorandum A -- Synopsis of Address given by Prof. R.B.Y. Scott-- A Survey on the Antecedents of the Commission on Church, Nation and World Order."

⁴² For the history of the Commission, see "Foreword" to *Report of the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order* (United Church of Canada, 1944) in UCCA, CNW, box 1, file 6; for minutes of early meetings and membership see, *ibid.*, box 1, file 2.

what human life should be like," this was precisely what the Commission was created to do. Under his guidance as Secretary, those chosen to sit on the commission were asked to speculate about the church's responsibility in the post-war years, and to devise political, economic and social solutions to the problems that many assumed would follow the conflict. In his sermons Sisco cautioned against "the error of thinking that we are fighting this war to establish a new and better world order." Wars, he said, "are not fought to construct new things. They are fought to prevent worse things from coming about." Like many others around the world, however, he believed that the circumstances of the twenty-five years before 1939, and the war that resulted from them, demonstrated that the *status quo* was not acceptable. Though the war itself could not do so, Sisco and many others in the church believed that, for the sake of humankind, new national and world orders must be established. And Christianity was the only reasonable means of accomplishing such a monumental task. "If the conflict is to be won in the truest sense of the word," he declared, "it must open up the way for a new and passionate emphasis on the appeal and proposal of Jesus to the whole world." As noted above, Sisco believed that this emphasis on Christianization was necessary "not only because of the sanctions and blessings which will come to the race under the benediction of Christ," but also, and more importantly, because he feared for the future of humankind "if the human race cannot be brought within sight of a common spiritual ideal which rebukes and restrains us all."⁴³

This triumphalistic belief in the need for a common, world Christianity was, of course, the impetus behind his call for renewed

⁴³ Sisco, "Audacity of Faith," 5; UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 22, "The Holy Catholic Church," 2.

missionary emphasis, and the essence of his Christian ecumenism. But the more practically-oriented Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order was also a major component of this effort. The original mandate of the commission was, therefore, to "investigate" the "spiritual issues" and effects of war, and "the spiritual condition of the Church, and the effectiveness of its organization for moral leadership in the period of reconstruction." It was also expected to contemplate "the direction which present and post-war economic and social development in the national and world order should take in the light of the democratic tradition and of the Christian doctrine of man."⁴⁴ Perhaps because the original "Terms of Reference" were composed by Professor R.B.Y. Scott, a leading member of the FCSO, the emphasis in them was distinctly practical as well as spiritual. The church was contemplating the post-war era because churchpeople saw the issues involved as spiritual; international and national problems were, they believed, essentially the result of the inadequacies of the spiritual life, and fixing them fell, therefore, to those institutions entrusted with propagating spiritual truth. The spiritual and practical essentials of this post-war vision were explained clearly by the Secretary of the Commission. "We are saved by hope," Sisco said;

not the hope that any particular order we can help to achieve will be the kingdom of God in its fulness – but hope that by an ever increasing infusion of the spirit of Christ men may move more surely and with quickened pace to a solution of the problem of living together in an inter-dependent world without destroying one another; hope that we can have a larger measure of social controls without losing our essential freedoms; hope that men may not stand frightened and frustrated in the face of the productivity of complex machines and hope that by securing for men a basis of material security they may press on to fuller realization of their spiritual destiny.

⁴⁴ See R.B.Y. Scott, "Suggested Terms of Reference," (1941) in UCCA, CNW, box 1, file 2.

"The future is open to the realization of that hope," he concluded, "to those who repent."⁴⁵ Unlike others who believed that repentance and conversion in themselves would open the door to a better world, Sisco's vision was becoming more earthly even as he became more "orthodox." Repentance was necessary, of course, but in Sisco's church it was increasingly seen as a tool for the redemption of humankind "on this side of the grave." This was an ultimately pragmatic vision that influenced the United Church's developing sense of its mission in the world and in the nation.

Given the practical theological direction of the Commission's Secretary, and the influence of members of the executive like R.B.Y. Scott, the eventual form of the final *Report of the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order* was not surprising. Though it did begin and end with sections devoted specifically to spiritual and ecclesiastical questions, the majority of the final *Report* was devoted to specific recommendations about governmental and economic policy. Sections with titles like "Domestic Political Reforms," "Labour and Capital," "Social Insurance and Security" and "Public and Private Ownership" exposed the worldly concerns and the scope of the Commission.⁴⁶ One of the consistent concerns of the members who expressed an opinion about the *Report* as it approached completion was, not surprisingly, the sense that the church was overstepping its natural boundaries. Professor A.R.M. Lower of United College, Winnipeg, who was a consultative member of the Commission, was pleased that the *Report* contained "a proper and orthodox statement of the Christian position," but worried that the "social manifesto" that followed could "well be the programme of an advanced left-wing party." Though he found nothing

⁴⁵ Sisco, "Repentance in a Modern Setting," 4.

⁴⁶ The topics covered are summarized on pp. 6-11 of the *Report*.

objectionable in this alone, he doubted very much that "it is the business of the Church to take its stand on too specific a social programme."⁴⁷ His greatest concern, however, was that the *Report* had a tone that was "idealistic and Utopian." Reflecting Sisco's own sentiments about facile utopianism, Lower argued that "all history cries aloud against perfectionist hopes. Our creed is founded," he continued, "upon a Man of Sorrows and I suspect that in the future as in the past man will be born to trouble as the sparks fly upward."⁴⁸ Lower was not alone in his criticisms. Even the chairman of the Commission, Gershom Mason, wrote to Sisco outlining a number of concerns about the *Report*. While wondering about how the expensive social security recommended by the Commission would be supported financially, he asked Sisco if the Commission was "justified in putting forward a report which is a composite from the platforms of our political parties." Though his "natural sentiment" did not disagree "with a great part of the report as drafted," he was worried about its impact. He wondered, in fact, if its tone and political alignment might upset much of the church's constituency and "instead of accomplishing a service for our people we may be doing much harm to the Church."⁴⁹

When the *Report* was finally submitted to and received by the Eleventh General Council of 1944, its contents had changed little, even with the criticisms of some of the Commission's most important members. And these criticisms were shared by some who received the *Report* outside the church. An economic and social prescription from a large Canadian church,

⁴⁷ UCCA, CNW, box 1, file 10, A.R.M. Lower Re the Basic Memorandum, August 9, 1943, 1.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, box 1, file 8, Gershom Mason to Dr. Sisco, June 28, 1943. Some of the very same concerns were raised by another member of the Commission. See *ibid.*, H.H. Wolfenden to Dear Dr. Sisco, September 2, 1943.

even twenty years earlier, would have been seen as a normal, if controversial part of its activities. At the end of the Second World War, however, Canadians seemed less willing to listen to the social pronouncements of the "national church." Noting the clear practical bias of *Church, Nation and World Order*, at least one astute editorialist commented, as Lower and Mason had feared, that the report bore "a strong resemblance" to the platform of "a national political party." That the *Report* was filled with recommendations "that have no exclusive application on their face to church organization," led the writer to conclude that it represented a "paternalism which trespasses on the field of social service."⁵⁰ This opinion, that church declarations should not infringe on the social realm, was becoming so widespread that the *Report* noted the "underlying hostility on the part of prominent laymen towards the pronouncements of Church Courts in the economic and social field."⁵¹ Given the strength of this opinion, it is not surprising that, even with the church's efforts to disseminate the Commission's recommendations by sending the *Report* to every minister, students in theological colleges, members of the House of Commons and Senate, and members of the Legislative Assemblies, it had little direct impact.⁵² Many of its recommendations eventually did, of course, become central pillars of the Canadian welfare state. But the Commission's dependence on "social policy" analysis already done or in progress in the "secular" realm indicates that the legislation establishing national pensions and family allowances had little to

⁵⁰ UCCA, CNW, box 2, file 17, "A Programme for the United Church," editorial, *The Quebec Chronicle Telegraph*, May 9, 1944.

⁵¹ *Report of the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order*, 11 and H.H. Walsh, *The Christian Church in Canada* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956) 339.

⁵² The United Church of Canada, *Record of Proceedings of the Eleventh General Council* (1944) 38.

do with this direct ecclesiastical input.⁵³ The report and its reception revealed, in fact, that the effort to create a more just and equitable society, once the almost exclusive preserve of those who wished to Christianize the nation, had become publicly associated almost exclusively with non-ecclesiastical social service agencies. As the editorialist from Quebec made clear, many Canadians had come to see social service as the proper sphere of secular, governmental agencies and had dissociated it from the true “spiritual” work of the church; in the public mind social service had become separated from evangelism.⁵⁴

This divorce of social service from the realms of the spiritual was not, however, so obvious to the leaders of the United Church. Indeed, for Gordon Sisco, the assumption that true reform of national and international systems and relations could take place without direct Christian involvement was nonsensical. The whole gospel foundations of the United Church had inspired, indeed demanded strong missionary as well as social welfare activity

⁵³ This separation of the “secular” and “sacred” realms in this period is somewhat anachronistic and artificial. Influential secular social reformers of the era, including Tommy Douglas and Leonard Marsh, drew much of their understanding of social welfare from their Christian faith. So, though the *Report* drew from governmental and other secular sources, in so doing it was tapping into thought that was very much its own. The example of Leonard Marsh is instructive. His widely-read “Social Security Report” (1943) was not connected to the church, but his understanding of social security was no doubt influenced deeply by his association with the FCSO and the United Church. This argument is made clearly in Roger Hutchinson, “The Public Faith of a Democratic Socialist,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21:2 (Summer, 1986). For the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order’s use of outside sources, see UCCA, CNW, box 2, file 20, “Material re: Rowell-Sirois Report.” For analysis of the churches’ impact on social policy and action in the twentieth-century, see Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ “A Programme for the United Church.” On Governmental interest in and action on social welfare during the war see Doug Owram, *The Government Generation: Canadian Intellectuals and the State 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986) 287-292 and Dennis Guest, “World War II and the Welfare State in Canada,” in Allan Moscovitch and Jim Albert, (eds.), *The Benevolent State: The Growth of Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: Garland Press, 1987) 205-221.

in both its domestic and international work. As the influential social reformer and policy advisor Leonard Marsh noted, however, the tragedies of the 1930s, and the simultaneous expansion of the responsibilities of government, encouraged the belief by 1940 that social security was a national and an international goal.⁵⁵ At the same time, national governments were expanding their roles in the social and economic lives of their citizens and fostering the notion that direct welfare of the populace was the domain of the state.⁵⁶ In Canada, where the circumstances of the Second World War allowed the administration of Prime Minister W.L. McKenzie King to expand greatly the power of the federal government in the running of the nation, this notion was accepted quickly.⁵⁷ This move to centralization and expansion of the state's influence in the social and economic functioning of the nation was not limited, of course, to Canada. It was a function of modernization that was taking place to some extent in almost all the industrialized nations of the western world. And it was a progressive move for which churchpeople like Gordon Sisco had been calling for years. Though he recognized the possible implications for individual liberty, in the early years of the war, Sisco believed "that we are entering upon an era where there will be more and not less of government planning and directing in the field of industry."⁵⁸ Some of his colleagues worried that such a bureaucratic state, managed by "some young, inexperienced, visionary class-room 'reformer'"

⁵⁵ Leonard Marsh, from "An Introduction," *Report on Social Security for Canada* (1943; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975) as quoted in Hutchinson, "The Public Faith," 28.

⁵⁶ See Owram, *Government Generation*, esp. 333.

⁵⁷ On the expanded economic intervention and power of the government during the Second World War, see Kenneth Norrie and Douglas Owsram, *A History of the Canadian Economy* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Canada, 1991) 515-524.

⁵⁸ Sisco, "Crisis of Opportunity," 7.

would remove the necessity of individual responsibility and duty⁵⁹ – a separation of individualism from living, and a loss of “backbone” that A.R.M. Lower felt would damage Protestantism.⁶⁰ But, as the final form of the *Report* demonstrated, the majority of people on the Commission, and likely the majority of those they represented, agreed that increased governmental involvement in the social and economic realms was a necessary political evolution.

Sisco certainly agreed. The expansion of the state to mitigate the obviously destructive tendencies of unregulated capitalism was, he believed, a necessary bulwark against another depression. He felt just as strongly, however, that Christianity must act as a brake on these increased state powers. A society which gives greater power to the state is precisely “where Christianity must bear its witness, giving guidance and inspiration within the society it is called upon to save.”⁶¹ In such a society vigilant scrutiny of the *status quo* remained a key component of the church’s missionary mandate, and solidified the need for a truly “Free Church.” In the years following the end of the Second World War, as the expansion of the state in Canada and elsewhere accelerated, Sisco continued to preach and lecture on the necessity of awakening the complacent Protestant majority to the various threats offered by the state and culture in which they lived. In the immediate post-war era, then, the very concerns that had guided Sisco’s faith and activity before the war were amplified and solidified by the intrusions of modernity.

⁵⁹ Wolfenden to Sisco, September 2, 1943, 2.

⁶⁰ UCCA, CNW, box 1, file 7, A.R.M. Lower to Dear Doctor Sisco, March 25, 1943.

⁶¹ Sisco, “Crisis of Opportunity,” 7.

IV

The strength of Christianity at home and world-wide remained a paramount concern, particularly as he and Protestants all over the world were confronted with signs of spiritual weakness. Not surprisingly, therefore, Sisco's faith in the power of ecumenism remained strong and increased after the war. The powerful sort of Christianity required to keep peace among humans, the type of unified and effective "common spirituality" for which he called throughout the war, required a united Christian church. The limited but nonetheless effective work of the still nascent World Council of Churches [WCC] during the war encouraged international ecumenists in their efforts to establish a strong and unified Christian body at the end of the conflict. Sisco had been involved enthusiastically in the efforts to found the WCC in the 1930s, and continued that effort for ecumenical cooperation during and after the war.⁶² After 1945, motivated by the successful formation of the Canadian Council of Churches in 1944 and by his close work with the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America [FCC] during the war, Sisco directed much of his time towards the formation of an effective World Council.⁶³ When the international situation did eventually allow the formal organization of the WCC in 1948, Sisco's high profile within the international ecumenical movement allowed him the opportunity to be the only Canadian to address the First Assembly in Amsterdam.⁶⁴ The formation of the WCC was

⁶² UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 11, "The Fellowship of the Church Universal."

⁶³ Sisco was a good friend of John Foster Dulles, who was a long-time leader in the Federal Council of Churches, chair of its Commission on a Just and Durable Peace and secretary of state under President Eisenhower. Sisco's association with Dulles and the FCC influenced strongly the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order's perspective on international relations. Some communication between the two men can be found in UCCA, CNW, box 1, files 7-9.

⁶⁴ "Toronto Pastor Sails for Geneva" and "The Canadian Voice," in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco."

extremely satisfying for Sisco, who told reporters that "the most important thing was not what the World Council said or did, but that it came into existence."⁶⁵ Unity, of course, was a means to the ends of international justice and peace, but the cooperation of international Christian bodies was an important first step to these goals. As he had before and during the war, Sisco saw one of the greatest threats of the post-war era in what he called the dominance of the state. Internationally, the expansion of communism and the continuing threat of capitalism made a strong Christian bulwark against these threats increasingly necessary, and, therefore, a unified international body was more important than ever.⁶⁶ In his report on the meeting to the General Council, Sisco said it "is the mission of the Church to press for social reform, to raise its voice when men are victims of terror, or when governments use terror to override men's consciences." Like the WCC, Sisco was unable to endorse either communism or capitalism, and therefore reminded his audience that the "Church must press on by every peaceful means" and "seek solutions of our social and economic ills in the light of the Christian revelation."⁶⁷ For this mission to be successful the widespread cooperation of Christians around the world was, more than ever, a fundamental requirement.

What was true in the international community was just as true at home. Though he and his church had supported the Canadian war effort, Sisco continued throughout the war and the post-war era to criticize the unfettered individualism of the free, capitalistic system the Allies had fought

⁶⁵ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 25, "Religious News Service: United Church hears Report on Amsterdam Assembly," September 23, 1948, 1.

⁶⁶ Concerns about the expansion of the "absolute state" and its challenge to Christianity became common themes in Sisco's post-war preaching and writing. See, for example, UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 11, "On the Peril of Being a Churchman," 9-10.

⁶⁷ "Religious News Service," 2.

to defend. He was concerned, like others, that if capitalism was not controlled another devastating depression would follow quickly on the heels of peace.⁶⁸ Even more strongly than during the Depression, Sisco attacked unharnessed laissez-faire and called on the Canadian churches to challenge the continuing power of industry and business. He noted enthusiastically that the "period of Utopianism in religious outlook, which characterized the Churches during the years immediately following the first world war, has given way to a temper more radical and discerning."⁶⁹ But he remained convinced that the Canadian churches were threatened by a variety of forces and believed that disunity weakened them collectively. He continued, therefore, to encourage further ecumenism: "It is the policy of the United Church to foster a spirit of unity in the hope that this sentiment of unity may in due time, as far as Canada is concerned, take shape in a Church which might be described as national and free." In this effort to create a broader "national" church, Sisco and others in The United Church of Canada continued to pursue unity with the Church of England in Canada, in the hope that this "would open the door to co-operative unity in the task of evangelizing the non-Roman Catholic peoples of Canada."⁷⁰ Creating a truly national Protestant church through continued unions and the evangelization of those who were not yet members of the country's largest denominations remained a vibrant dream for many United Church people even into the 1950s and beyond. Clearly the ideal of "His Dominion" still informed Sisco's understanding of the church's

⁶⁸ The concern that another economic depression might follow the war was widespread among all classes of Canadian society. See Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics, and Provincialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981) 64-65.

⁶⁹ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 1, "The United Church of Canada," 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3. See also "Dr. Sisco Says Quebec May Not Win Canada Via 'Battle of Cradle,'" in UCCA, Biographical Files Collection, "Gordon Alfred Sisco.;" UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 10, "Dr. Sisco Reports: United Church, C. of E. Accept Union as Goal."

mission; the imperative that the United Church be a “uniting” church remained a powerful motivator behind his ecumenical faith and action.⁷¹

Though the dream of truly “national” church continued to inspire, Sisco was just as motivated by the possibility of creating a truly “free” church. With over ten years at the administrative helm of The United Church of Canada, and approaching sixty years of age, Sisco grew even more radical in his critique of Protestant complicity and complacency. Perhaps because he was less sure than in younger days that a truly Christian society could be achieved, after 1945 he stepped up his attacks on those within the church, and even on the institution itself, whenever he felt that a blind eye was turned to injustice and tragedy. Sisco worried more than ever that Canadian Protestants had become too worldly, too comfortable and, therefore, too attached to the *status quo* and its maintenance. During the events and years that led to the cold war, and even as the majority in the west was basking in the material fruits of its thriving capitalist economies and condemning the evils of communism, Sisco remained fearful of both systems. “Whatever may be the difference between our system and the Russian system,” he said often, “each rests back upon a common worship of the ‘economic man’, upon secularistic humanism, upon a concentration upon man’s life here below, where material interests are uppermost and material prosperity the supreme good.”⁷² Like Hugh Dobson, who was expressing similar concerns about the Christian spirit in the post-war world, Sisco was not encouraged by the apparent expansion of Christianity in the late 1940s.⁷³ In official reports, he was pleased to announce “a marked increase in the numbers of persons

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Gordon Sisco, “The United Church As a Uniting Church: The Story of Conversations with the Church of England in Canada.”

⁷² *Ibid.*, box 1, file 22, “Where Do We Go From Here?” 3.

⁷³ See Chapter Seven.

received into membership on profession of faith.”⁷⁴ He was concerned, however, about the spiritual state of the church generally, and decried what he saw as destructive trends. He feared that “Jesus in the minds of so many people is a meek and mild type of person, pictured as such on stained-glass windows and popularised by hymns that are often more sentimental than discriminating. And so it comes about,” he continued, “that men will praise religion, identify themselves with its institutions and praise its programmes as long as it doesn’t upset anything.” Sisco worried that such feeble Christianity was easily made respectable and impotent by those who are “agitated when religion begins to threaten vested interests or dislocates even so slightly the flow of money into this or that particular till.”⁷⁵ This sentimental, diluted Christianity was simply not strong enough to face the challenges of the modern world.

Sisco longed, therefore, for a radicalization of the Protestant message. Even as “evangelism” became the byword of the post-war era, he confronted the mainstream who, in his opinion, had come to believe that “being saved” meant “being safe,” and challenged “those who are always ready to evangelize Canadian life provided it doesn’t upset anybody.”⁷⁶ These were not, of course, new criticisms. After 1944, however, this message against complacency and complicity in the face of inequity grew more pointed. Canadians had, he felt, lost the Christian moral judgment that was so essential to vital, active and effective Christian witness. “The more we see of what Christ’s spirit implies,” he preached in the late 1940s, the “more sensitive becomes our moral discernment and the less possible it is for us to acquiesce to those injustices

⁷⁴ Sisco, “The United Church of Canada.”

⁷⁵ Sisco, “On the Peril of Being a Churchman,” 8.

⁷⁶ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 24, “Luke 2/ 34, 35,” 4-5.

and social maladjustments to which our fathers may have too easily acquiesced.”⁷⁷ Separating the church of his generation from that of an earlier time allowed Sisco to preach for and expect “a temper more radical and discerning” to influence the direction of the church. He was unwilling to allow the United Church to fall into the easy habit of allowing the discomforts of the Christian message to be buried under the demands of institutional continuation. He asked church members never to forget “that an ideal must be embodied in an institution but by that very act the ideal loses some of its potency -- the institution cramps and hinders it.” And a strong church in a strong economy in an increasingly abundant society was in particular danger. As the denomination built new churches and invested its pensions he saw it to be giving “hostages to the business world which has to pay for all these undertakings.”⁷⁸ His fear was, that in so tying itself to the world, the church would become too “prudent and wise,” and, therefore, “postpone playing on certain notes of the Christian Gospel until a more convenient season.”⁷⁹ Such a church, could not, of course, be “free.”

The issues of “freedom,” and the “tensions” of institutional existence and “security” were hardly new concerns for the General Secretary. Years before he had assumed office, Sisco had warned about the dangers of those “moral equivalents of establishment,” institutions and property. In his 1932 Master of Arts thesis, Sisco had already demonstrated particular clairvoyance about the kind of questions that he and the United Church would be forced to

⁷⁷ Sisco, “On the Peril of Being a Churchman,” 8.

⁷⁸ As chief executive in the church, Sisco understood, perhaps better than any other United Church person, the complexities of pensions and church expansion. In the “boom” years after 1945, as church attendance and, therefore, church building grew dramatically, these were increasingly important aspects of his work. See Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 160-161.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

engage at the end of the war. In the early 1930s he had observed that the “capacity of a Church to function freely and courageously at its highest level in this present age is always imperiled when it seeks the social security that is always associated with property and institutions.” This tension, he said “is there and needs to be keenly felt.”⁸⁰ Now, in the post-war period, he was calling for the creation of a more united, more radical church; a denomination that was truly “national and free.” But he was confronted with this very tension between the security of a strong and visible social position and his insistence that the church “function freely and courageously.” In the context of a widening religious spectrum encouraged by divisions in North American Protestantism and by more varied and vigorous immigration, in the decade after the conclusion of the Second World War, the executive of the General Council of the United Church continued to expect the privileges and influence of a “national church.” Notwithstanding the public pronouncements of the General Secretary, Sisco’s and the church’s experience and actions in the post-war years exposed the limits of “unity” and “freedom” for which he was calling.

The years immediately following the conclusion of the Second World War revealed the growing fear of the leaders of the United Church that their hold on the nation, and therefore the dream of the “national church,” was fading. In this circumstance, where the paradoxical connections between The United Church of Canada and the prevailing culture of the nation were exposed, the church was forced to evaluate its goals, its position in the society and, therefore, its very character. During the war, the willingness of the church to follow cultural trends, or, more precisely, its inability to break from

⁸⁰ Gordon Alfred Sisco, “The Hincks-Morin Ministry 1851-1854,” (M.A. Thesis: Queen’s University, 1932) 261.

them had been exposed by its plans for selling government war-savings certificates and its apparent flip-flops on its stance towards war.⁸¹ The abiding notion that the United Church, though certainly not the State church, was somehow the representative Church of Canada had allowed leaders and laypeople to assume, often without obvious difficulty, seemingly contradictory attitudes towards the issues of the day. As the church and the nation rushed into the new relationships engendered by the modernization of both, the United Church and its members were caught in the almost impossible situation of maintaining old relationships and self-understanding in the face of rapid, confounding social change. The process of modernization, whereby the increasingly industrialized and mechanized state very quickly assumed new, less rigid social relations, improved educational structures and expanded social services, had been ongoing for many years. In the excited "boom" years of the decades after the Second World War, however, this push to modernity was accelerated as Canada's increasing and continuing industrialization encouraged a more urban and, therefore, more consumeristic society.⁸² This radical social change, which unfolded relatively quickly in English Canada, forced reappraisal of the role of religion in national life. The increasing separation in the popular mind of the churches from the structure, the care, and therefore, the moral assumptions of the culture and society ultimately forced them into a defensive position. The

⁸¹ Victor Huard has demonstrated how attitudes about war in the United Church, which was "easily the most pro-active pacifist Church in the country" in the 1930s, under-went "a sea-change" which was exposed by its acceptance of peace through military enforcement in the 1944 *Report of the Commission on the Church, Nation and World Order*. "Peace through force" became a prevailing view of international relations during and after the war. See Huard, "Armageddon Reconsidered," 210-212.

⁸² Grant, *The Church in the Canadian Era*, 165-167 and Doug Owsram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

impact of this shift in the public perception of the church was not felt keenly until the 1960s. Nonetheless in the 30 years following the end of the war, and especially after 1960, The United Church of Canada, with its presumptions of inherited "national" representation and influence, suffered the most as the institutions and society it sought to save became increasingly indifferent to its redemptive activities in the individual and the social realms.⁸³

The efforts to evangelize the inactive Christians of English Canada after the war, epitomized most obviously by the United Church inspired "Crusade for Christ and His Kingdom," exposed the denomination's abiding faith in its mission. But the lackluster results of this and other efforts continued to raise doubts about the power of the "national church" to influence the nation. These fears of declining cultural power were augmented by a sense of decreasing representation on the national stage. This concern was exposed in the early fifties during the visit to Canada of Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh. The self-understanding of the United Church was assaulted in the early part of this tour when the Moderator of the church was not invited to the Prime Minister's state dinner in honour of the Princess and Prince. Unlike the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church and the Bishop of the Anglican Church, the Moderator of the United Church was excluded from the dinner and invited instead to a less formal, and more crowded reception afterwards. Though this exclusion was due to a bureaucratic oversight which was quickly corrected, some significant people in the church, including the Editor of the *United Church Observer* and a

⁸³ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1992) 548 discusses the deeper impact of these changes on the denomination with aspirations "to a quasiofficial role as the nation's church."

former Moderator chose to see this slight as deliberate.⁸⁴ Many churchpeople probably wondered, as one minister put it, why her Highness visits the Church of Scotland when in that country, but “not The Church of Canada” when in Canada.⁸⁵ In hindsight, the decision of Sisco and the Moderator to pursue a meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss the oversight may seem intemperate, but the hint of jealousy in the communications surrounding this dispute suggest that these leaders were defending far more than their right to eat with royalty. The insecurity evident in the belief that because the United Church was “the Largest Protestant Denomination here the undue publicity given to the Anglican Church” was unfair, indicates that for some the stakes in this particular misunderstanding were very high.⁸⁶

Much of The United Church of Canada’s mission was, of course, bound-up with its self-understanding as a “national church.” In the post-war era, as that foundational belief began to unravel both in and out of the church, the fight to protect it became increasingly intense, even as the battle looked increasingly hopeless. In the aftermath of his exclusion from the state dinner in honour of British royalty, however, the Moderator of the church seemed willing to accept defeat. When explaining the incident to Sisco, the churchman who had suffered the “humiliation,” Clarence MacKinnon Nicholson, stated his opinion that “either this Church should be recognized for what it is in the Canadian situation, or we should undertake to remain

⁸⁴ UCCA, GCC-III, box 44, file 118, John Woodside to Gordon Sisco, October 17, 1951.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Albert E. Millen to Dear Dr. Sisco, October 21, 1951. Sisco made a similar point when he wrote to the Prime Minister’s Office to formally complain. See *ibid.*, box 45, file 119, Sisco to J.W. Pickersgill, November 26, 1951.

⁸⁶ Millen to Sisco, October 21, 1951. On the meeting with the Prime Minister, see UCCA, GCC-III, box 45, file 119, J.W. Pickersgill to Sisco, November 30, 1951.

away from gatherings of this kind."⁸⁷ In so stating the denomination's options, he exposed the precarious and confusing position of the "national church" in the early 1950s. The decision he was proposing was not simply whether or not United Church representatives should attend official functions -- a question that would have been unthinkable only years earlier. Rather, in suggesting that the "president of the Canadian Council of Churches" go instead, he was accepting the reality that the United Church had become just one of the "multitude of sects and denominations" that now composed Canadian Christianity. In this "multitude," continued faith in the preeminence of the "national church," and particularly the idea of the "Church of Canada," was becoming an insupportable conceit.

V

Gordon Sisco was under no illusions about what was happening to The United Church of Canada. Disputes in the denomination before the war had tended to focus on the appropriate balance between the dual priorities of evangelism and social service, or on the extent to which "radical" counter-cultural thinking would influence the church's programmes. After 1945, and in a period when Christian social action was increasingly regarded as inappropriate, earlier concerns about the correct voice for the church to assume were replaced by grave fears about the very future of Christianity in Canada and the world. Even as Sisco was surrounded by supposedly encouraging signs of institutional renewal, therefore, he worried deeply about the impact that the United Church was having on the nature and course of Canadian society. As families returned to some normalcy after the war, Sisco worried about the rise in materialism; as increasing numbers of families

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, box 44, file 118, Clarence MacKinnon Nicholson to Dear Dr. Sisco, October 17, 1951.

included regular church attendance in their lifestyle, Sisco spoke of creeping secularism; and as United Church members across the country celebrated the opening of new churches to accommodate this return of the spirit, Sisco lamented the unwillingness of young people to join the ministry.⁸⁸ Perhaps because of his increasing ill-health after 1950, or perhaps because he was assuming the cynicism of an aging man, Sisco grew more pessimistic about the future of the church as the years passed, even giving addresses on "The Crisis of Western Civilization." But his advancing age did not quell his essentially radical spirit. He continued to preach that the world, often protected by the political and economic *status quo*, was the true enemy; that the true calling of the church was to affect positive change in the world -- to increase justice where it was found wanting, and to spread the will of Christ where it had been displaced, at home and abroad.

Evangelism, therefore, remained central. He countered the "feeling abroad" in the early 1950s that "the overseas missionary enterprise has reached its peak and must, of necessity, decline during the years that lie ahead," by continuing to argue that "the real evangelistic task, in many lands, has only begun."⁸⁹ And he encouraged congregations to avoid becoming "exclusive centres of worship, with some admixture of social activities," and rather to acknowledge that "the true end of Christianity is evangelistic activity and missionary devotion -- a movement into the highways and hedges where men live, and on the roads that lead to the remotest outposts of

⁸⁸ On Sisco's fears about dangers of materialism and the triumph of secularism, see UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 16, "The Church in the Present International Situation." On his concerns about the lack of recruits for the United Church ministry, see *ibid.*, box 1, file 6, "The Call for Full-Time Service." The shortage of ministers after the war was a pressing concern, and, dealing with its consequences for rural churches, occupied much of Sisco's time. On the post-war social habits of Canadian families see Owrarn, *Born at the Right Time*, 3-30 and 103-109.

⁸⁹ Sisco, "The Call for Full-Time Service," 1.

human habitation.”⁹⁰ But evangelistic enterprise was only the start of what he saw as the continuing challenge “to bring our world under the sovereign rule of Christ.”⁹¹ When much of the prevailing culture was teaching otherwise, Sisco emphasized the socially active Christianity that had always been central to his interpretation of the Christian mission, and which had been a fundamental aspect of United Church self-understanding. In a world now filled with neo-orthodox thought, Sisco worried that the theological pendulum has swung too far the other way, and he retreated from his earlier denunciation of the “get busy” Gospel. In an age characterized by widespread evangelistic effort, and a rising interest in apocalyptic theologies, Sisco restated what was important in the post-war world.⁹² Regardless of what was happening theologically elsewhere, Sisco argued that North Americans still believed “that Christ is Lord in every realm of life and that it should be our common concern to bring all social and political arrangements into obedience to his will for all mankind.” Then, against the encroachments of less socially concerned theologies, he defended the successes of socially active Protestantism:

In our effort to follow Christ into the market place, the factory, the banking house and the halls of government, we have done some frontier work in Christian witness. It is cheap criticism to dub us “activist”. It may be that at times our theology of the social gospel has been thin and that our methods have been at fault, but in wrestling with problems of economic justice, inter-racial brotherhood and world order the Christian Churches on this side of the Atlantic [and Britain] have at least demonstrated that they are sensitive to the prophetic spirit that keeps on

⁹⁰ Sisco, “The Church in the Present International Situation,” 14-15.

⁹¹ Sisco, “The Call for Full-Time Service,” 2.

⁹² The development of “an uncannily high degree of consensus” in North American Protestantism that favoured a more conservative theology and a renewed emphasis on mass evangelism through “religious rallies” is described in Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 16 and 138-145.

believing that righteousness may come more fully into our world.⁹³

As he approached the end of his career as a minister of the church, and after studying, criticizing and often absorbing the many theological influences of the decades following the Great War, Sisco settled, finally, on a theological and practical stance that shared much with the Methodism within which he had been raised and educated before 1914.⁹⁴

But his theology did not end there. For, while he continued to emphasize the twin bases of the whole gospel, he continued to play a significant role as one of a generation of church leaders who had, in a relatively short period of time, augmented the theological and practical assumptions upon which the mission of The United Church of Canada was based. From the denomination's beginning, an openness to innovation as well as a respect for tradition had characterized its theological development. As Sisco's experience indicates, this liberality towards the impress of new ways of interpreting the world and the church had a profound effect on the direction of this theology during the "years of crisis." Sisco's selective, sometimes ambiguous appropriation of parts of the radical, counter-cultural and anti-liberal tendencies of the Protestant world in which his theology matured during the 1930s and 1940s, reflected the uncertainties of the Canadian Protestant mainstream in this period. The proactive response of the United Church to the insecurity of the Depression and war years did much to

⁹³ UCCA, GSP, box 1, file 18, "Theological Tensions -- World Council of Churches," 3.

⁹⁴ This emphasis on regaining the activist spirit was widespread, and the threat of its declining influence widely recognized. C. Douglas Jay, a professor at the United Church's Emmanuel College, lamented in 1961 that "the theological emphasis that has prevailed during the war and post-war years has not issued in significant social concern." See, "Foreword," to Stewart Crysdale, *The Industrial Struggle and Protestant Ethics in Canada: A Survey of Changing Power Structures and Christian Social Ethics* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1961) v.

crystallize the place of the denomination in the national culture. But during these same years, the changes in the demographic, material and social character of Canada raised many difficult questions for the denomination that endeavored to be the national church, even before it had decided what such an aspiration meant. And when Gordon Sisco died suddenly, and still in office, just before Christmas, 1953, these questions remained unanswered. Indeed, they were more complicated than ever in the denomination's short history.

Paramount among these problems of self-definition was the relationship of the United Church to the society it had charged itself with redeeming. This complicated riddle had, of course, never been resolved by Gordon Sisco, either for himself or for his church. In the 1930s, when the United Church enjoyed a certain, assumed social and intellectual priority, its leaders were able to criticize the society even as their denomination found its position exalted with it. In this time, when social reform and welfare were widely understood to be the responsibility of the churches, and of the United Church in particular, it was relatively easy for the denomination to be critical of the society -- to encourage it in new, often unpopular directions -- while simultaneously maintaining a central place in its establishment. This was a middle ground that it could successfully maintain as long as its moral vision was essentially the same as the nation's. But after the war, as Gordon Sisco knew, the modernization of Canada's political, economic and social infrastructure made traditional United Church concerns seem increasingly irrelevant. It was with much displeasure and some horror, therefore, that many in the "old guard" realized that, "in a day of growing permissiveness," their rails against the consumption of alcohol and gambling were being

ignored.⁹⁵ This radical re-alignment of accepted English Canadian norms, forced the United Church to re-evaluate aggressively its place in Canadian society. In the decades after Sisco's death, therefore, the question of the church's relationship to prevailing culture, and its "national church" aspirations became central preoccupations.⁹⁶ Though The United Church of Canada chose in some ways to follow modern trends, most obviously in its loosening of "moral standards" for members, it nonetheless became increasingly comfortable in a critical position, separate from the complacent and conservative culture. This was a stance towards mainstream culture which had been gleaned from the margins and, perhaps hesitantly, planted in the middle by a new generation of leaders. Foremost among these was Gordon Sisco who, almost despite himself, helped to establish the previously "radical" indictment of the conservative *status quo* at the centre of ecclesiastical power. Though he had straddled successfully the widening chasm between the culture of the national church and the culture of the nation, his own pragmatic, mediating interpretation of the whole gospel was not, in the end, his legacy. By helping to legitimize previously marginal thought in the mainstream, Sisco played a significant part in leading the United Church to the margins of national life, where, in the decades following his death, the church came to see "itself not as a part of the Canadian establishment, but as part of that establishment's sometimes loyal

⁹⁵ This "old guard" reaction is expressed very well by the former Secretary of the Board of Evangelism and Social Service, James Mutchmor in his 1965 autobiography, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965) 120-133.

⁹⁶ Clifford, "Charles Clayton Morrison," 92. In this 1969 article, Clifford noted that the aspirations associated with the national mission of the national church are "still with the Church."

opposition."⁹⁷ Given his misgivings about the direction of western society after the war, it is unlikely that this circumstance would have displeased him.

⁹⁷ David Lochhead, "The United Church of Canada and the Conscience of the Nation," in R.E. Vandervennen (ed.), *Church and Canadian Culture* (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1991) 33.

Conclusion

The Cultures of Tradition and Change

If we are to preserve the values of the past as we move into the future, the new must grow out of the old. Not a break with the past, but the development of the past.

– George C. Pidgeon, Moderator of the
United Church of Canada, 1925-1926

It is my view that the old, including much of the traditional, must give way to the new. The new will come not from the old, nor as part of the old, but rather from the death of the old.

– James R. Mutchmor, Moderator of the
United Church of Canada, 1962-1964¹

In 1966, Ray Hord, the Secretary of the United Church's Board of Evangelism and Social Service, was asked to explain his lack of enthusiasm for "projects of mass evangelism," and particularly his negative opinion of Billy Graham. In the middle of this decade, when the biblically critical "New Curriculum" was being introduced to congregations across the country, and when a new, "radical" spirit was becoming obvious in the leadership of the denomination, Hord replied that he did not agree with Billy Graham's understanding of either evangelism or social service.² Though Hord declared that he was "not negative to mass evangelism as such," he was nevertheless unwilling to believe that the theology of The United Church of Canada would be

¹ United Church of Canada Central Archives, George Campbell Pidgeon Papers, box 55, file 3050, "Saved by Grace" (1958), 12; James R. Mutchmor, *Mutchmor: The Memoirs of James Ralph Mutchmor* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1965) 236.

² On the rise and establishment of a new, forward looking, historically disconnected, and increasingly subjective "radical" spirit among denomination leadership in the 1960s, see John Webster Grant, "Unauthoritative Reflections on the United Church's Story," *Touchstone* 12:2 (January, 1994): 7-10 and John Grant, "Roots and Wings," Theme Address to the Annual General Meeting of the United Church of Canada Division of Ministry Personnel and Education, February 16-18, 1989.

represented by Graham's evangelistic efforts. Of greater concern to Hord, however, was the American evangelist's "approach to social issues," a conservative social and political agenda about which this Secretary of Evangelism and Social Service had "serious misgivings." At a time when he was helping to direct the settlement of American "draft-dodgers" in Canada, Hord was especially critical of Graham's close association with the political establishment of the United States, and his public support for the war in Vietnam. Billy Graham and his evangelistic campaign could not represent the interests of The United Church of Canada, Hord concluded, precisely because Graham was "an arm of the status quo."³

Such a negative interpretation of the United Church's connection both with traditional evangelism and the prevailing culture would have seemed alien to a number of the leaders who preceded Hord in the offices of leadership. In the four decades of United Church activity before 1965, the questions of the United Church's relationship with evangelism and the *status quo* had been central to the evolution of the denomination's self perception. In these years the promotion of evangelism was in fact tied intimately to the extension and protection of the values, institutions and cultural assumptions of the *status quo*. During much of the United Church's first quarter century, the emphasis had been on spreading a whole gospel of evangelism and social service. In real terms, and for most of the church's early history, this whole gospel approach meant an abiding concern for both the conversion of individual sinners, and the shaping of the nation within the well-established, and widely accepted molds of English Canada's Anglo-Saxon middle-class majority. The two emphases of this national mission were generally

³ Kenneth Bagnell, "What's All This So-Called New Evangelism?" *United Church Observer* (April 15, 1966): 16.

understood to be intimately and necessarily connected – the impetus to “save this society now” was grounded in the prerequisite concern to “save this person now.”

I

George Pidgeon was the foremost exponent of his generation of the individual, experiential emphases of the United Church’s whole gospel theology. He may very well have been the most influential and outspoken proponent of traditional evangelical concerns of any generation of United Churchpeople. His abiding attachment to the moral and social concerns of the late-Victorian years during which he was raised and educated, kept these concerns at the forefront of his, and of the United Church’s Canadian agenda. This work for the proper development of the nation was based in his constant and, for many years, unshakable faith in the righteousness of the morality of the businesspeople and professionals who composed Canada’s broad middle class. But his equally constant faith in the transforming power of the individual Christian experience of new birth was the wellspring of his life’s work. Pidgeon believed that the most effective means of protecting and spreading the cultural, moral and religious assumptions of the nation’s Anglo-Saxon majority was evangelism. Though he devoted much of his church career to raising, supporting, leading and promoting a wide variety of national evangelistic campaigns, Pidgeon believed that evangelism was most effective when it was a central and constant aspect of every preacher’s sermonizing. For that reason, at least until 1948, entreaties to “decide for Christ,” to accept the free offer of grace, to undergo the experience of new birth, were regular features of sermons at Toronto’s influential Bloor Street United Church. Pidgeon’s predictable exhortations on the necessity of conversion, and the moral purpose of the new life, ensured that for the first

half of the twentieth century, the imperatives of nineteenth-century evangelicalism were a fixture of at least one central United Church pulpit.

The people who filled the pews of Pidgeon's church were obviously not the only Canadians open to evangelical preaching. The continuing faith of many mainstream Protestants in the power and the necessity of individual religious experience was demonstrated by the popularity of various evangelistic campaigns conducted between 1925 and 1950. Though campaigns like the "Evangelization of Canadian Life," the Oxford Group Movement and the post-war "Crusade for Christ and his Kingdom" were not as successful as Pidgeon had hoped, they did nonetheless show evidence of a popular longing for individual religious experience. Though this remnant of the cultural evangelicalism of nineteenth century was becoming less appealing among the United Church constituency throughout Pidgeon's long career, the evidence suggests that this was not due to lack of effort on the part of the church. Rather, the denominational association with national evangelistic campaigns well into the 1950s suggests strongly that the clergy of The United Church of Canada remained committed to traditional conversionism for far longer than many historians have assumed.

The conversionism of George Pidgeon's whole gospel was not peculiar to ministers who were originally Presbyterians or to ministers active in central Canada. The varied western career of the former Methodist Hugh Dobson indicates that the whole gospel of evangelism and social service was just as central to United Church ministries in western Canada. Dobson's dedicated efforts to "Christianize" and "Canadianize" the diverse peoples and social structures of the West, and thereby to further the establishment of the Kingdom of God, were based in his faith in the truths of the whole gospel. The variety of work that fell under the rubric of Dobson's western mission

from 1913 to 1950 was, of course, based in the imperatives of evangelism and social service. Though Dobson was more likely to focus on the urgency of social and moral reform work, he was nevertheless convinced that the regeneration of individuals was a primary foundation of this practical Christian expression. Very much like Pidgeon, however, Dobson sought throughout his career to maintain a balance in what he believed were the priorities of the whole gospel.

For this reason, his thought at times may appear capricious, and his approach to church work schizophrenic. They were neither. Because he believed that an appropriately balanced gospel of evangelism and social service was essential to effective prosecution of the United Church mission to the nation, Dobson would often adjust the content of his message to suit the circumstances and the ideas he encountered on the prairie. When he believed, therefore, that the conversionist imperative was widely accepted among the mainstream, he emphasized the importance of work for social and moral regeneration. When, however, he encountered what he perceived as a lack of emphasis on individual conversion, he called for increased attention to the necessity of "preaching for a verdict" and greater concern about the "burden of souls." This emphasis on one or the other parts of the whole gospel at different times should not be interpreted as fluctuation between theological and practical poles. The combined gospel of evangelism *and* social service was always the basis of Dobson's action. Though at times he emphasized one part over the other, both were a constant feature of his national and Kingdom ideal.

The importance of Dobson's western circumstance should not be overlooked. The character of his church work was always directed in some respects by the character of the people and the society he encountered on his

extensive tours of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Through his regular contact with western ministers and laypeople alike, Dobson was forced to mix appropriately the theological and practical emphases of his central Canadian and traditional upbringing, and the new ideas and situations he found on the prairie. Dobson's practical evangelical faith was not simply a product of his education at Wesley College or of his traditional Methodist background. While his theology was certainly influenced by educational and family experiences, it ultimately blossomed in the context of regular contact with the realities and peculiarities of western life. That his prairie inspired faith was not the radicalism of Salem Bland and William Ivens indicates that interpretations of mainstream church work in the west cannot be conducted within the parameters of either "prairie radicalism" or central Canadian parochialism. Hugh Dobson's experience indicates that his whole gospel, though its emphases shared much with those of his eastern colleagues, was a product of, and well suited for, his western work.

The peculiarities of Gordon Sisco's circumstance also affected the nature and course of his church work. Because he was younger than both George Pidgeon and Hugh Dobson, the cultural and national assumptions of the late nineteenth century were not so prominent in Sisco's theological and practical perspective. Educated in a time of increasing denominational unity in Canada, Sisco learned the lessons of ecumenism well and applied them consistently to his church work at home and abroad. The theological basis of all of his work was, like that of his elder colleagues, the whole gospel. Due, however, to a critical, scholastic mindset, and a willingness to listen to a variety of theological voices, Sisco's whole gospel was ultimately more inclusive, more critical and more open to change.

From early in his ministerial career, Sisco was wary of the United Church connection with prevailing middle-class culture. Unlike his Toronto colleague Pidgeon, Sisco was not at all convinced that the future of Canada lay with the extension and protection of middle class morality. He worried, in fact, that it was precisely these values that encouraged the destructive tendencies to conservatism and complacency that he saw in the United Church. He longed, therefore, for a more radical Christian approach which emphasized continuous examination of the ideas and institutions that were Canada's *status quo*.

This innate skepticism about received knowledge and social structures attracted Sisco to the new thinking of the radical Christians in his own denomination, and also to the realist and neo-orthodox interpretations of those outside of it. His moderate theological and intellectual disposition did not allow him to accept in complete form any of the ideas and solutions offered. Because he was both a product and a critic of the original national assumptions of the United Church, Sisco was often caught straddling the widening valley that separated the culture of the church from the culture of nation. But the impress from the margins was deep enough that he did encourage new thinking about old assumptions, and thereby planted the seeds of a critical re-examination of the United Church's national mission, that bore abundant fruit in the decades following his death in 1953.

II

The complexities of the stories about each of these influential leaders notwithstanding, the major arguments suggested in this study are quite simple. First, the evidence about the thought of these three men suggests strongly that the conversionist and social reform imperatives of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, suitably adjusted to changing political, economic,

demographic and cultural circumstances, remained powerful bases of United Church thought into the 1960s. Though this conversionist emphasis has more recently fallen out of fashion in the denomination, it was clearly a compelling, and sometimes urgent motivator behind United Church work until after the Second World War. Second, because The United Church of Canada's national mission was tied intimately to the racial, linguistic and moral assumptions of the evangelical Protestant vision for Canada, when those assumptions no longer made sense, and then were rejected, much of the church's original theological and practical self-understanding had to be rejected, or rethought, as well. As Gordon Sisco's experience demonstrates, this re-examination was a process that was begun in the 1940s and 1950s. It was, however, a process of change that took place almost entirely in years after 1960.

Finally, given the first and second arguments, the widespread assumption that the mainstream Protestant churches, due mainly to a break with traditional evangelical ideas, became increasingly marginal to Canadian society throughout the first half of the twentieth century, requires serious reconsideration. Other historians have begun to establish the important role of the mainstream Protestant denominations in the development of English Canadian Society before the Second World War.⁴ The present study suggests that this societal and cultural influence was maintained through an abiding attachment to, and faithful adjustment of, the central ideas of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. From 1900 to 1960, therefore, change did not come from a break with the past, but rather from the imperatives of tradition.

⁴ See Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).

Those who want to understand the course of Canadian mainstream Protestantism since 1945 should, therefore, direct their attention less at the fortunes of traditional faith, and more at the impact of changing demographic and social realities. This study suggests that the seeds of marginalization were not planted in the gardens of theology; rather, they were sown in the crowded beds of a nineteenth-century ecclesiastical and national vision. As the various assumptions of that vision slowly withered in the climate of the twentieth century, the roots of irrelevancy were given room to grow.

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