



How should we respond to the abuses at residential schools?  
July 11, 2021 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

This morning I am excited to launch into another round of “Q’s from the pews” with you. This is actually the fifth summer we’ve done Q’s from the Pews – can you believe that?! Five years! – and all the past Q’s are online if you want to catch up on any that have been asked in the past. There’s still time to get more in, so you can submit them online or just email me.

Today though we are going to address an issue that is very much at the front and centre of our national consciousness right now –

As Christians, how should we respond to the revelation of abuses at residential schools, especially given that many of them were run by churches?

That’s a great question and one that’s well worth talking about.

Just in the last few weeks, 751 (Marieval school, Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan) unmarked graves were found at one residential school site, 215 more (Kamloops) and then another 182 were found at a third (St. Eugene’s Mission school near Cranbrook).

This represents a tremendous loss of life and even worse, a terrible injustice, given that these children’s parents may never have even known what happened to them. And to top it all off, many of these schools where the abuses took place were run by churches, acting in Jesus’ name.

How do we respond to that? How do we make sense of the injustice done at Canadian residential schools and how do we act towards our First Nations neighbours?

In preparing for this, I saw an answer a couple times over that I think give us a good place to start. I was thinking about something like this in my head, but then I came across a statement by former Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt who put it very succinctly. He said that the answer is not ‘forgive and forget, but remember and change.’ And then Tom Mulcair, leader of the NDP at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation reports, said ‘Let’s recognize the harm that’s been done and let’s change our attitudes.’

‘Remember and change/recognize the harm, change our attitudes;’ that’s good place to start, but for a truly CHRISTIAN answer, I think we need to say this.

How do we respond to the revelation of abuses at residential schools? We need to lament the abuses and partner with Jesus in reconciliation. We need to lament the abuses and partner with Jesus in reconciliation.

That’s going to be the outline for my answer, but first, let me say something about residential schools and where they came from in the first place.

To put it generously, residential schools were a part of the government’s answer to the question ‘What do we do with the Native peoples of Canada?’ The government of Canada felt some obligation to provide for them, given that they were displacing them, but at the same time, many people in power thought of First Nations peoples as culturally inferior people. They believed that the white, European

way of living was superior to really all other ways of living and so they decided that the best way to deal with Native Canadians was to take the 'native' part away and just make them 'Canadians.'

Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott told a parliamentary committee in 1920 that the goal was to make it so that there was... "...not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic."<sup>i</sup> The logic was that "...if every Aboriginal person had been "absorbed into the body politic," there would be no reserves, no Treaties, and no Aboriginal rights."<sup>ii</sup> They wanted to eliminate Indigenous culture in Canada.

First Nations adults though were not willing to abandon their culture and so government officials began to think that maybe they could start earlier and reach the children instead. Many churches had set up missionary outreach schools where they would host children for the day to give them education and Christian teaching; government officials began to think that if this could be systematized and made into boarding schools to get Native children out of their native cultures, it could be an effective way of gradually integrating Native people into the larger Canadian culture.

J. S. Dennis, deputy minister of the Interior, wrote:

"One or two such schools, established at convenient points in the Territories, where a certain number of young Indians and half-breeds, intelligent and willing, selected from the different tribes or bands, would be taught some practical farming; some the care of stock, and others the various more useful trades— would prove most powerful aids to the Government, both morally and materially, in their efforts to improve the condition of those people, and to gradually lead them to a state of civilization." (quoted in Truth and Reconciliation, *Canada's Residential Schools*, 154).<sup>iii</sup>

Over time, over a hundred (139) of these boarding schools were established, paid for with government funds and many of them, run by church denominations (about half Catholic, and the rest Anglican, United and Presbyterian). More than 150 000 indigenous children were forced to attend these residential schools.

Sadly, there was never enough government funding, and behind it all was the racist assumption that European Christian culture was superior to Native culture. This then led, in many cases, to abuse and neglect.

The Truth and Reconciliation committee report says – "For children, life in the schools was lonely and alien. Supervision was limited, life was highly regimented, and buildings were poorly located, poorly built, and poorly maintained. The staff was limited in numbers, often poorly trained, and not adequately supervised. The schools often were poorly heated and poorly ventilated, the diet was meagre and of poor quality, and the discipline was harsh. Aboriginal culture was disdained and languages were suppressed" (162).<sup>iv</sup>

Mortality rates were high and tuberculosis was especially deadly and yet school administrators insisted that the children were better off with them than with their parents. That's the impulse, I think, that probably led to the burial of hundreds of children in unmarked graves – the people in charge simply undervalued native children and parents and felt no obligation to report the deaths to people who cared. I'm sure that there were exceptions who deeply cared for the children, but by and large, the system led to tragic abuses.

So... how do we as Christians, a century later, respond to these abuses?

Well, first off, we lament them. As Christians, we don't just remember them; we don't just recognize the harm done; we lament that they even happened in the first place. We mourn the loss of life and identity and we lament the fact that our forefathers abused the power and trust that they had been given.

Every one of those children was made in the image of God. Back in Genesis 1, at the very beginning, God says 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over all of Creation' (28). That gives every person who lives inherent value because they are made in the image of God. We are made in God's image; First Nations people are made in God's image; that means that they are inherently just as valuable before God as we are. They should never have been treated as second class citizens, people whose identity needed to be wiped out before they could be valuable members of society. They were, in God's eyes, just as valuable as the people making the decisions at the top. They were just as capable and competent as the white people calling the shots.

Which should really prompt us to ask whether or not residential schools were a good thing in the first place. There is a bitter irony in reading documents from the time where white men say 'we need to take these children away from their parents so that they can become civilized.' What kind of a civilization takes children away from their parents? The so-called 'civilized people' were doing a pretty barbaric thing, attempting to strip these people of their family and culture and identity.

And frankly, they may have been acting in Jesus' name but they certainly weren't acting in Jesus' way. They were living according to their own white, European values that said that they as 'civilized people' were superior to everyone else. And that led them to treat the First Nations people the very same way that the Israelites treated the Samaritans – as half-breeds and inferiors. These people may have known the Gospel but they certainly weren't applying it and that led to all sorts of abuse.

We need to lament that. We need to acknowledge that it happened and not sweep it under the rug. We can't make excuses for it but we need to hold it up to the light to say 'This was wrong.' This was a sinful abuse of power that is wholly inconsistent with the character of God.

And so we need to lament the abuses that took place.

We need to lament the abuses but we can't stop there. We need to partner with Jesus in reconciliation.

See, when Jesus came to earth, He came to repair relationships. 2 Corinthians 5:19 says that God reconciled the world to Himself in Christ Jesus, forgiving our sins and making us into new creations. All of us - when we turn from sin and turn to God - we are brought back into relationship with Him and renewed completely. We no longer live according to the values of the world but according to the values of the Kingdom of God.<sup>v</sup> And God values reconciliation.

Jesus came to restore God to man but He also came to reconcile people to each other. Ephesians 2:14-16 says that Jesus tore down the dividing walls that separated people by ethnicity in order to establish a new people, united by grace as the people of God. That means that we are reconciled to God and then God invites us to partner with Him in reconciliation. In fact, twice in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, Paul says "God... reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission doesn't have the corner on the market. We are called to partner with Jesus in reconciliation too.

Jesus calls us to see First Nations people the way He sees them; as people made in the image of God whom He has died to redeem. They are just as valuable to Him as we are and we need to treat them that way. The 'Christians' who run the residential schools show us that it's not enough to know the Gospel; you have to actually apply it in the nitty gritty details of life, in the relationships that we have with people around us.

That means that we need to treat Indigenous people with humility and respect, not attempting to impose our values on them, but valuing who they are as unique peoples in and of themselves. We need to resist the stereotypes and preconceptions that many of us grew up with in order to treat them the way that Jesus would. (Are there bad apples in the bunch? Sure there are, but there are bad white apples to and that can't stop us from treating them like Jesus would).

And where we have opportunity, we need to listen to their stories and stand up for their well-being. It really is a shame that clean drinking water is not a given in every community in Canada. There is work to be done. But know this, Jesus is already at work, reconciling God to man and people to each other. We just need to partner with Him in that ministry of reconciliation. We need lament the abuses and partner with Jesus in reconciliation.

Now, just to close, I want to bring us back to the beginning. Remember, Bernard Valcourt and Tom Mulcair? When asked 'how do we respond to these abuses?' they said 'we remember and change' or 'we recognize the abuse and change our actions.' Now that's good, but from a Christian perspective, there's another step that has to happen first. It's not just that we change our attitudes but that Jesus changes our hearts. He takes our hearts of stone and gives us hearts of flesh so that we can have empathy and compassion and a desire for justice. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you have that heart within you. Let it lead in your interactions with First Nations people. Lament the abuses and partner with Jesus in reconciliation.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*. (2015) pg. 4. [https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Volume\\_1\\_History\\_Part\\_1\\_English\\_Web.pdf](https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Volume_1_History_Part_1_English_Web.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> *Canada's Residential Schools*, pg. 4.

<sup>iii</sup> *Canada's Residential Schools*, pg. 154.

<sup>iv</sup> *Canada's Residential Schools*, pg 162.

<sup>v</sup> 16 So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. (2Cor 5:16 NIV).

<sup>vi</sup> For further reading - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/june-web-only/kamloops-residential-school-canada-first-nations-church.html>