

**An Address to the  
Calgary Leadership Prayer Breakfast  
“Drawing Upon Our Spiritual Heritage”  
Preston Manning  
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**Introduction**

I want to begin by thanking each of you for being here and by thanking the organizers for the invitation to address this 49<sup>th</sup> Calgary Leadership Prayer Breakfast.

Some of you have come to these breakfasts before but for some of you this is the first time. You may even feel some trepidation about attending a “prayer breakfast”. But I remind us that human beings have been praying since the dawn of time – seeking to communicate with God in one way or another however God may be conceptualized. So by meeting with **prayer and spiritual relationships as the focus** we are actually participating in one of the oldest practices and traditions of the human race – nothing to be embarrassed, apologetic, or apprehensive about. So welcome, and please relax.

By way of full disclosure, I should mention that I have a **Baptist background** and Baptists are capable of holding and expressing strong opinions. For example, in the very early days of the west there were two Baptist families who met for church in the one room school house near their homesteads. One Sunday they got into a heated discussion on what you should do if a band of outlaws showed up at your cabin and you had hidden your wife and children in the cellar for safety. If the outlaws asked “Where are your wife and children?” should you tell the truth and endanger them, or lie to protect them. And wouldn’t you know it, by the next Sunday there were now two Baptist churches in the community – the Truthful Baptists and the Lying Baptists. Now since I have been involved in politics you might suspect that I am one of

the Lying Baptists but let me assure you at the outset that I am squarely on the Truthful side.

## **Our Spiritual Heritage**

2017 is Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a nation. It is therefore an appropriate time to remember and celebrate our heritage, including **our spiritual heritage**. So what I'd like to do this morning is briefly rehearse some of **Calgary's spiritual heritage** and draw some conclusions from it which I hope will be meaningful and helpful to you – particularly those of us who may be experiencing the stress and worry of these uncertain times in which we live.

The stories I will tell are **drawn mainly from the Protestant tradition** with which I am most familiar. But hopefully they will resonate with you and be relevant to your lives, whatever your personal background and beliefs may be.

## **Two Streams**

Let me start by referencing two great rivers of religious thought that cut across the Canadian prairies during the first part of the last century – namely, **the *evangelical stream* and the *social gospel stream***.

**According to the social gospel perspective**, the primary purpose of the Christian religion is to heal and strengthen relationships between people – to reconcile conflicts among people, **to achieve *social justice* and *societal peace***. The Jesus story that most appeals to social gospel folk is the one read this morning from Luke's Gospel – the **story of the Good Samaritan**, the man who loved his neighbor as himself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Luke 10:25–37

**According to evangelicals**, and I come from this tradition, the primary purpose of the Christian faith is to establish right relations between individuals and God, to reconcile sinful human beings to a righteous God, **to achieve *personal salvation and personal peace***. The favorite New Testament passage of evangelicals is the one read this morning from John’s Gospel – **the story of the religious leader Nicodemus** who was told by Jesus that he had to be “born again spiritually” from within before he could enter or serve in the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most significant thing about these two perspectives is that ***reconciliation is the principal concern of both***. Which is as it should be, since the reconciliation of people to God and people to each other was and is at the very heart of the mission and public work of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **The William Aberhart Story**

Now here in Calgary in the 1920’s and 30’s, one of the most prominent proponents of the evangelical perspective was the principal of Crescent Heights High School, **William Aberhart**. Aberhart pioneered religious and later political radio broadcasting in western Canada over the original CFCN radio station here in Calgary.

In the 1920’s he opened a **training school for ministers** on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Streets SW with funds raised from his radio listeners. My father, **Ernest Manning**, who was raised on a homestead in Saskatchewan, heard Aberhart’s broadcast over a crystal radio set which he and his brother had assembled, and enrolled as a student at that institute.

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<sup>2</sup> See John 3:1–21

As the Great Depression of the 1930's hit western Canada and drought destroyed Alberta's agricultural economy, Aberhart added a social dimension to his work when he opened a **soup kitchen for the unemployed** at his institute. There he began to see in the long lines of young people at that kitchen, former students whom he had sent off to be teachers and lawyers and doctors, now riding the CPR rails from Vancouver to Winnipeg searching vainly for work.

This experience compelled Aberhart to search for the causes of the Depression and led him to found a political party called the **Social Credit Party** which contested and won the provincial election of 1935. So Aberhart, this evangelical layman – reluctantly, because he always thought of himself as an educator not a politician – became Alberta's 7<sup>th</sup> Premier. And my father, who had come to Alberta to become a Minister of the Gospel, was elected to the legislature in that same year and became a Minister of the Crown instead. When Aberhart died in 1943, my father succeeded him as Premier and served in that office until 1968 when he retired undefeated.

### **Personal Story – Accepting Jesus as Personal Savior**

And so I was raised in a political home and a religious home where I was taught you need to make a decision at some point as to whether to follow Jesus of Nazareth or not – follow him in particular by admitting you were separated from God by sin, by believing that Jesus came to mediate the conflict between yourself and a righteous God through his sacrificial life and death, and by accepting Jesus as your personal reconciler or savior.

As a teenager I went through a period of trying to decide whether this was something I wanted to do, or was it simply something my family and church wanted me to do. In the end, I decided that it really was something I wanted to do and did so – asking Jesus into my life as my personal reconciler.

I tell you this story as part of my own spiritual heritage, but also because **this evangelical perspective is a part of the broader spiritual heritage of Calgary and Alberta.** And it raises the question, is it a heritage that should be ignored and abandoned, or should it be **reconsidered and revived** as still relevant to people today suffering from inner fears, anxieties, and a multitude of insecurities ultimately rooted – from the evangelical perspective - in our separation from God as the ultimate source of our being?

**Have YOU ever considered the need to seek a personal relationship with God through what Jesus said and did?** Or should you? It's a question I'll return to in a moment, but let me hurry on.

### **The J. S Woodsworth Story**

**J. S. Woodsworth** was a Methodist minister based in Winnipeg at a time of great social and political unrest following the first World War which provoked riots by unemployed workers and the Great Winnipeg Strike of 1919.

During this time, Woodsworth left the Methodist church over its emphasis on individual salvation while neglecting, in his judgment, the deplorable social and economic circumstances in which so many of those individuals lived. He became one of the foremost proponents of the so-called **social gospel** – that the essence of the Christian faith was on establishing right relations among people – **social justice.**

During **the Winnipeg strike**, which became quite violent, Woodsworth was charged with seditious libel for a speech he wrote and published using verses from the book of Isaiah: “Woe unto them that ... turn aside the needy from judgment, and take away the right from the poor of my people ...” (Isaiah 10:1–2).

Some time later, like Aberhart in Alberta, and together with Tommy Douglas, a Baptist minister from Saskatchewan, Woodsworth helped to form a political party, **the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF)**, which later became the present-day **New Democratic Party (NDP)**. Although the initial platform of that party was proclaimed at a convention in Regina, its founding convention was organized and held – guess where? - here in Calgary in 1932,

I tell you this social gospel story because it too **is an important part of the spiritual heritage of Calgary and Western Canada**. And it raises the question, is it a heritage that should be ignored and abandoned, or should it be **reconsidered and revived** as still relevant to people and social conditions today?

**Have YOU ever considered the need to investigate what the life and words of Jesus have to teach us about our personal and collective obligations – from a spiritual perspective - to the injured neighbor by the side of the road?** The one who may say, “I will believe you are truly concerned about my spiritual and eternal well being when I see that you are also concerned about my physical and economic well being today.”

Should our social service and charitable activities include a **spiritual dimension and motivation, or is a purely humanistic motivation sufficient to guide and empower our provision of services to the poor, the sick, and the oppressed?** Again, relevant questions arising out of our spiritual heritage as Calgarians and western Canadians.

### **Searching for Balance**

As I mentioned earlier you can find these two spiritual elements - the

personal and internal, the social and external – not only in the Protestant tradition but in the Catholic tradition and other faith traditions as well. And it should be pointed out that **if you put the vertical shaft of personal spiritual wellbeing and the horizontal crossbar of social justice together, you have the cross**—the great symbol of the Christian faith writ large and a reminder that Jesus of Nazareth came to teach, practice, and achieve **reconciliation in both dimensions**.

### **Three Challenges**

So what is the relevance and application of these important aspects of Calgary’s spiritual heritage for us today? Let me identify **three challenges** which these perspectives present.

#### **Challenge to Evangelicals**

First, **if we come from or identify in some way with the evangelical tradition** – or its equivalent in other faith traditions – a tradition that says the essence of faith is largely personal, internal, and vertical. If our favorite teaching from Jesus of Nazareth is the Nicodemus story about the necessity of a spiritual new birth, **could it be that we need to more conscientiously add the crossbar of social service and social justice to that perspective?**

Heaven knows there is enough work to be done in that area, as we are long passed the point where reliance solely on governments and agencies of the welfare state is sufficient to adequately address the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the homeless, and the addicted in our City and Province.

Perhaps this morning we evangelicals need to pray: “Heavenly Father, show me specific individuals or groups by the side of the road who have

been physically, socially or economically injured in some way, especially in these times of economic contraction here in Calgary, people with whom you, God, would have me share my time, my resources, my ability to help, and my own dependence on you.”

## **Personal Story**

I should say that part of my own maturing in the Christian faith has been adding this horizontal dimension to the vertical shaft of my evangelical upbringing.

I have come to believe, as Jesus taught, that God is at work in this world in reconciling people to himself and to each other in a unique way – **the Jesus way**. In resolving conflicts and the suffering that arises from them – not by the application of law and judgment and going to court, but by positioning mediators after the example of Jesus who identify with both sides of a conflict, who communicate with both sides, and who are willing to **themselves** bear the cost and pay the price of bringing the conflicted parties together rather than demanding that it be paid by the offending party.

There is opportunity to practice this approach to reconciliation in the political arena because, at the end of the day, democratic governance is ultimately about the reconciliation of conflicting interests by non-coercive means. And as a management consultant in the 1970's and '80's I became particularly involved in trying to resolve conflicts between oil companies and Indigenous people applying this Jesus way, suitably disguised of course so as not to unduly alarm my secular friends and clients.

Now is not the time to get into that in any detail but let me tell you quickly one adventure I had with reconciliation in the oil patch which was rather amusing as well as instructive.

One of our clients had a heavy oil pilot plant in north central Alberta near an Indigenous band with 3,000 members. Relations between the company and the band were becoming increasingly strained, and it was decided that the company needed to hire someone to act as an intermediary to improve relations and resolve some of the conflicts between them.

The man in charge of this process was a hard-boiled petroleum engineer whom I shall refer to as Joe. I greatly respected and admired Joe except for one trait. He swore like a trooper at almost any provocation, his most frequent utterance on such occasions being “Jesus Christ!”

Joe asked a number of us – including his company’s legal and public affairs departments - to put forward our suggestions as to what type of a person he should be looking for to play this **mediatorial role** between the company and the band.

I suggested “someone who incorporates the perspectives and values of both sides, the oil patch and Indigenous community, who can live and operate in both worlds, and who will have or be given the resources to cover the costs (all of them) of bringing the company and the community together.” I actually had someone in mind, a Metis businessman who lived in the area, who had successfully done business with the oil company for years, and who also hunted, fished, and lived with members of the band in question.

Eventually the day came when Joe announced, in his usually colorful manner, his decision. He says:

“Our legal beagles think we should hire a lawyer of some sort who is familiar with the treaty rights of the band and all the legal aspects of our relationship with it. The PR people want me to hire some pretty face who will look good and convincing on TV explaining our positions if and when we get into disputes with the band. And Manning here ...

## **Manning wants us to hire Jesus Christ!”**

Someone else then suggested, tongue firmly in cheek, that perhaps the company should take all the candidates for the position down to the Athabasca River (which bisects north central Alberta) and hire the first one who could walk across on top of the water.

It was all said in jest, but I found it significant that somehow that hard-boiled petroleum engineer seemed to recognize in a job description calling for “someone who incorporates the perspectives and values of both sides ... who can live and operate in both worlds ... and who could and would bear the responsibility and costs of bringing two alienated parties together”, a likeness to Jesus Christ. Joe was a lot closer to the truth about what you need to achieve genuine reconciliation in such circumstances than perhaps he knew.

## **Challenge to Social Activists**

But let me hurry on. Perhaps you come from or identify in some way with the social gospel tradition or its equivalents in the work of civil society organizations and governmental services.

**Could it be that you need to add to your life that vertical shaft of a personal relationship with our Creator so that you can draw wisdom and inner strength from Him for your own life and in your reconciling work?**

Perhaps you need to pray: “Heavenly Father, I acknowledge that I have no such relationship with you; that I and most of those I work with are separated from you by things in our lives and society of which you disapprove. But Father, I’m willing to believe you sent Jesus as the mediator to reconcile me to you and to believe that somehow his sacrificial life and death on the cross makes that reconciliation possible. I accept him today as my personal reconciler.”

## **Why might we feel the necessity of praying such a prayer? Two reasons:**

First, because if we're honest we may well be feeling the necessity of an inner spiritual transformation **to meet deep needs for healing and conflict resolution within our own lives or in the lives of our own families and loved ones.** How can we resolve conflicts and suffering among others and in society if we are internally conflicted and unresolved ourselves?

But secondly, perhaps we want to pray this prayer because we are feeling that the **needs for healing and conflict resolution in our City are so numerous and so vast** that we need resources to cope with them beyond what we can provide in our own strength or secure from governments. These are the kinds of feelings that drove many of the people of this City and Province to seek a stronger personal relationship with God during the Great Depression.

We have seen the stress created on many of our fellow Calgarians and the social services of this City and Province when the economy has contracted by 2-3% due to low oil prices. Can you imagine the stress and despair that was created when Alberta's provincial income fell by 56% as it did in the Depression?

I think of my mother, Muriel Manning. She was the single child of a single mother, a Protestant child raised in Catholic residential schools, first in a convent in Prince Albert, and later at the Sacred Heart convent right here in Calgary. She said it was a disciplined upbringing but one of the great things the sisters did for her was teach her to play the piano – so well that she graduated from the Toronto Conservatory of Music and was an accomplished concert pianist by the age of 16.

William Aberhart once heard her play and was so impressed he invited her to become the musical director of his radio program.

In the midst of the Depression when there were virtually no government safety nets, it was the churches and related institutions that sent their people out to do what they could to try to alleviate the suffering created by mass unemployment and crop failures year after year.

My mother told stories of visiting farm homes where the only meat the family had to eat was gopher stew, and where the children were clad in clothes made from the burlap sacking that binder twine used to come in.

By that time my father was a Minister in the provincial government which was in desperate financial shape itself. In 1938, the budget of the Province of Alberta was \$17 million, \$9 million of it absorbed by debt service charges. So you tried to run the government of Alberta on \$8 million. There wasn't enough money to fund the civil service payroll and the province had to default on its debts so then it could no longer borrow to fund essential services.

The needs were so overwhelming that those involved in meeting them exhausted themselves and the few resources they had. No wonder they came to the conclusion that they needed divine aid (if there was such a thing) and a personal relationship to God (if there was such a thing) to sustain their own morale and ability under such circumstances to keep serving others in desperate need.

Conditions today are not so drastic, yet the social needs of this City are still daunting. The increasing numbers at the food banks, the increasing numbers of homeless, the increasing numbers addicted to pornography, alcohol, and barbiturates – the list goes on and on.

So perhaps if we are here this morning and our concerns – religious or otherwise – have been primarily focused on this horizontal dimension – on the overwhelming social and economic needs that abound all around us - maybe what we need to add to our lives is that vertical shaft of a personal relationship with that Father God which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about – A God who cares, and loves, and gives beyond measure to those who seek his aid.

### **The Challenge to “Do Something”**

In closing, I think by now you have got the idea that I am a big fan of Jesus of Nazareth and of his life and teachings. If I’d been around in his day and he’d agreed to become politically involved as he was urged to do – to become the Honorable Member from Galilee and lead a revolt against Caesar’s taxes – I would have happily volunteered to be his campaign manager.

I admire him, not only as a spiritual leader but for the astounding impact of his very short public life on people in all sorts of different circumstances down through the ages. I know of no other figure in history whose public life lasted only 36 months but who 2000 years later has over a billion human beings who profess to be influenced and guided in some way or other by his life and teachings.

One of the keys I believe to his lasting influence and his influence in my own life is that he ended almost all his discourses – public and private – with an appeal, direct or indirect, for those who had heard his words to **“Do Something”**.

He once rebuked his own initial followers by saying “Why do you call me Master and Teacher and **do** not the things that I say?”

Jesus did not engage with Nicodemus simply for the purpose of having a stimulating theological debate. He wanted Nicodemus to “Do Something” – **to believe** such that he, a religious leader, would experience a spiritual new birth within that would radically change and empower his relationships with God and others.

Jesus did not tell the story of the Good Samaritan to merely stimulate “endless discussion” on the Jerusalem talk shows of the needs of the poor and the injured. He concludes that story – not by urging his hearers to write or talk or blog or tweet about it – but by urging his hearers to go and “do something practical to help someone in need” – **Go and Do!**

So in that spirit and with that example before us, let us resolve to leave this prayer breakfast together to “**Do Something**”:

- To rediscover and recover the spiritual heritage of this City
- To add the cross bar of social action to our vertical shaft if we are evangelically oriented
- To add the vertical shaft of a personal relationship with Jesus to our social action crossbar if we are social justice oriented
- And, whatever our perspective may be, to pray daily, as he taught us to pray, “Thy will be done as it is in heaven – in Canada, in Alberta, in Calgary and in our own lives.”

May God bless you all.