

# Is The Salvation Army *Really* A Holiness Movement?

*Alan Harley*

It is not uncommon to hear The Salvation Army defined as “a holiness movement.” To be precise, the Holiness Movement is a family of denominations sharing a common theological heritage, of which the Army is part. Nazarenes, Wesleyans and Free Methodists are major bodies within that movement. In North America that family relationship is made visible by the existence of the Wesleyan Holiness Consortium (which grew out of the Wesleyan Holiness Study Project), of which the Army, the denominations referred to above and some others, are members.

To define the Army as a “holiness movement” within that wider family is appropriate, given its clear commitment to what is termed “the doctrine of holiness” – which in turn could be termed “the doctrine of the possibility of holy living.” What makes a denomination a “holiness movement” is, however, more than subscription to a doctrine. Holiness is the standard to be observed by the members of that movement. More, it is an experience known in their lives.

## **Defining a Denomination**

Every Christian tradition has its own ethos. This is not the product of any one feature of the tradition, but a combination of factors, and the major ones are:

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## 1. Its theology

In this connection Salvationists have a clearly spelled out theological position.<sup>1</sup> It reflects a nuanced, ecumenical, evangelical and biblical understanding of the Christian faith. Within its official doctrines can be traced the influences of Nicea, Chalcedon, the Reformation and the Wesleyan Revival.

The Wesleyan component finds expression in the statements having to do with regeneration, the inner witness of the Spirit, and entire sanctification. It is the latter that places the Army within the holiness tradition. Whereas other traditions see sanctification as *part* of their understanding of the Christian life,<sup>2</sup> the Army and the other “holiness churches” place it at the center of their soteriology. They speak of a “full salvation” in which God does much more than justify and regenerate the sinner. Salvation is seen as being applied to every part of the life of the believer. It is thus “full” or “entire”. While sharing much in common with Christians of other traditions, the people of the Holiness Movement differ at key points on the understanding of sanctification set forth by Keswick teaching, Catholic spirituality, the Reformed tradition and the Pentecostal movement.

*The Handbook of Doctrine* has, in its several forms, varied a little in its holiness emphasis. This probably reflects the fact that the doctrine of holiness within The Salvation Army and the wider Holiness Movement has been influenced by two streams – that of American teachers such as Phoebe Palmer, B.T. Roberts and Samuel Logan Brengle with their emphasis on the “baptism of the Spirit” which cleanses and empowers, and that of the Wesleys, W.E. Sangster and F.L. Coutts, rooted in the tradition of the *Book of Common Prayer* and English Wesleyanism, with a primary emphasis on purity and love. Thus, the 1923 edition of the *Handbook* reflected a period when the emphasis was on the eradication of the “roots of bitterness” as the initial sanctifying work. During that period the “second blessing” was widely understood as the “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” These concepts are less prominent in the subsequent edition of the *Handbook of Doctrine* and in *Salvation Story*. Too much can be made of this development. It can be traced within the other holiness denominations as well. Indeed, whenever a doctrine is directly linked to an experience we witness an attempt to understand that which has been believed and experienced. (*fides quaerens intellectum*).<sup>3</sup> Theologically, then, Salvationism stands within the holiness tradition. Unlike some other churches in the same tradition, however, its

doctrinal statement and official teaching are sufficiently open-ended to provide for differences of thought. It is no theological strait-jacket.

## **2. Its worship**

In a sense the worship or liturgical life of a particular communion does as much if not more than anything else to develop its ethos and create its distinctive character. Catholicism, Quakerism and Presbyterianism are striking examples, speaking respectively, as they do, of worship that is open to the Spirit, worship that is sacrament-centered and worship that is focused on the Word of God.

In its infancy Salvationism developed a distinctive style of worship. Songs were written with a “holiness” emphasis not seen since the days of Charles Wesley. The Sunday morning “service” was styled the Holiness Meeting. No denomination previously had used that term. The main furnishings were not a sacramental altar or a Communion Table but a mercy seat and a Holiness Table. An earlier generation of Wesleyans had made use of ‘the mourner’s bench’ for sinners seeking God, but the Holiness Table was unique to the Army. This innovation reflected the fact that here was the first religious body to actually dedicate its morning worship to the teaching of the doctrine of holiness and the developing of a holy people. Just as the altar at the center of a Catholic church makes it clear that the Mass is at that movement’s heart, and in the same way the large central pulpit in the older Reformed churches testified that God’s Word was at the center of their worship and witness, so the Holiness Table was the early Salvationists’ way of saying, “holiness of life is central to all we do and are.”

## **3. Its ministry**

The ministry of a Christian movement is to be understood in more than one sense. The term speaks of the overall mission of that body, of the corporate witness of its people, and of the role filled by those called to leadership and pastoral care.

Whereas many denominations have benevolent ministries, Salvationists embraced ‘social work’ as integral to what they did and what they were as a people. They did not see themselves as a denomination with a social welfare department but as a people called to follow the example of Christ who ministered to the total person. This holistic understanding has actually been strengthened in past decades by the breaking down of the division between social work and field

work. The inspiration for such a ministry was the experience of Entire Sanctification, which, in Wesley's understanding filled God's people with holy love, a 'social love', as he termed it, which laboured for the bodies and souls of men and women.<sup>4</sup>

So also the evangelistic fervor of Salvationism. As soon as it was born the young movement took to the streets. Its people were "moved with compassion" to tell the world about the Saviour. Holiness for them meant to be filled with God's love – the type of love that drove them to "go into the highways and the byways" and to travel the world – often at great cost – to spread the gospel message.

Its commissioned leaders and pastors, *i.e.* its officers, were to embody the holiness doctrine. William Booth, in a letter to his officers on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, wrote: "Officers must be fully sanctified. Are you?" This standard was spelled out in the official writings of the Movement. The 1923 Handbook of Doctrine states:

In Salvation Army officers the fruits of sanctification are specially manifest in the way they fulfil their duties and responsibilities; in fact, it is impossible to be a really efficient officer without this Blessing. In particular:

- (a.) Sanctified officers take an interest in their work in a way that is possible only to those who do what is customary with their whole heart
- (b.) They show a careful, earnest love to all their people without partiality or respect of persons
- (c.) They are full of brotherly love to their comrade officers, esteeming others better than themselves, and willing that others should be honoured equally with, or more than, themselves
- (d.) They put the interests of God's kingdom and the Army before their own ease and advantage, and are, therefore, always to be relied upon to carry out instructions heartily
- (e.) They calmly trust in God and fight on for victory amidst difficulties of every kind, and remain humble amidst the greatest success
- (f.) Their private lives as well as their public lives prove that they are living for God alone, their spirit and testimony tending to draw those

around them nearer to God and to self-sacrifice for Him.<sup>5</sup>

Again, whereas other traditions may produce a code of ethics for their clergy, Salvationists made it clear that the leadership they sought was to be composed of holy people. This is not meant to imply that in other traditions ordained persons lack this quality but to say that this new branch of the Christian Church set the holiness standard as non-negotiable for its spiritual leaders.

#### **4. Its requirements for membership**

Methodism and its offspring, including Salvationism, represent a unique stream within Christianity. The doctrine of Christian Perfection, or Holiness, was enshrined in their doctrinal statements. It was expected that its pastoral leaders would know the experience to which that doctrine pointed. It was also set forth as the standard for *all* its people. Thus this Wesley tradition did all within its power to assure that its people would be holy. Early Methodists and early Salvationists wrote rules to guide their people – something not done by churches outside the Wesleyan/Salvationist tradition. In this sense they resembled the religious orders of old – with the exception that *all* God’s people were expected to accept “the rule” – not just the cloistered minority.

But standards are one thing; conformity to the standards is another. The question must be asked, against the backdrop of all that has been said thus far,

#### **Is the Army *Really* a Holiness Movement?**

A negative response to the question would not be the correct one. At the same time it is difficult to give an unqualified affirmative response. The framework is certainly in place. The doctrines are unchanged. And around the world there are many who seek, teach and live holy lives. But alongside these facts, some observations must be made.

Holiness denominations are, in a real sense, confessional churches.<sup>6</sup> They understand their doctrines and how those doctrines make them distinctive. Further, they see themselves as existing for the purpose of spreading the doctrine of Christian Holiness - this is their reason for being. Wesley claimed that God had raised up his movement “to spread scriptural holiness throughout these lands.” In such churches the members understand that they are “holiness” people. Their pastors are expected to preach the doctrine.

It would be interesting to poll Salvationists worldwide to determine their

understanding of their theology. My observation is that, compared to Christians in those other “holiness” movements, Salvationists often do not seem to be aware that the doctrine of Entire Sanctification is central to the beliefs of their movement, or, indeed, that it is part of those beliefs.

Many of us who are baby boomers and older were introduced to soldier-ship with little or no teaching of this doctrine. Indeed, examples abound of soldier-ship embarked upon solely in order to qualify to play in the band! This was at a time when Salvationist music was at its pinnacle. It was also a time when training colleges in many places seemed no longer to give a significant place to the teaching of Christian holiness. The old songs were sung, but the singing of those songs often contributed to a corporate piety out of proportion to personal devotion and discipleship.

### **Where Are We Now?**

My purpose is not to deplore decline. In significant ways Salvationism has in recent years experienced renewal and is more spiritually healthy today than a half century ago, particularly within the ranks of its young people. We may not have as many brilliant bands and songster brigades, but there is a genuine awakening amongst Salvationists, and in many places a desire to see the doctrine of holiness taught.

At the same time, the spiritual life of the movement is being led in different directions. There are in some quarters worship expressions and teachings on “spirituality” which trace to Catholicism. This is not in itself a bad thing. Wesleyan theology traces its roots not to the Reformation of Calvin but back through the Methodist, Pietist, Anglican, Catholic and early eastern theological traditions, a fact which has assumed special significance in Wesley studies ever since Albert Outler and others traced Wesley’s doctrine of holiness, or Perfect Love, to the influence of the 4<sup>th</sup> century homilies of Macarius.

We have much to learn from the great spiritual teachers of the historic church of both the West and the East. Just as Wesley’s doctrine of the Christian life was shaped to a significant degree by those rich traditions, so reference to them can be found in early Salvationist writings.<sup>7</sup> However, Salvationism is not Roman Catholic in its theology and the latter’s mystical and ascetical theology cannot be a substitute for a Scripture-based understanding of spirituality which

reflects the Wesleyan-Salvationist tradition, i.e. holiness of life in the power of the Spirit.

At the other extreme there is, in many places, an embracing of things Pentecostal. Even as God's people must be willing to learn from the great saints of the past, so they must be open to all that his Spirit seeks to do in their lives and in their worship and witness. But at the same time it is largely due to a lack of solid teaching that causes many a young Christian to see no difference between the early Army's understanding of the "baptism of the Spirit" and that of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. In simple terms, the former has to do primarily with cleansing and purity of life, the latter with spiritual gifts and power. Along with this doctrinal shift there is the new expression of worship which has, by and large, replaced the hymnody of holiness with lyrics which, on the whole, have a different emphasis.<sup>8</sup>

### **Reasons for Doctrinal Uncertainty**

One reason why the lament is so often heard "We don't hear holiness preached nowadays" is not merely because new terminology is employed to convey the old message. The problem goes deeper.

a. There are those who do not preach it because they are not convinced it is truly biblical. Indeed, it is possible to question some of the older exegesis. Some earlier "holiness" writings amassed a substantial amount of proof texts, but these were not infrequently employed in a manner not intended by the original writers. Verses having to do with regeneration were at times used to teach a second blessing. Some "holiness" teachers, seeking to bring a level of exegetical sophistication to their message, made much of such things as the Greek aorist tense, suggesting that it invariably referred to a crisis experience (which it didn't).

b. Some who preach and teach were not taught the doctrine in an adequate manner. Training colleges are sometimes blamed for not providing solid teaching on the subject and at times the criticism can be sustained.

c. Salvationism's rich tradition, arguably the most attractive and colorful expression of Protestantism, has at times provided a safe haven *from* the challenge of holy living. Commitment to musical sections and corps busyness – and even the demands of officership – have at times become for some a substitute for

that deeper level of commitment which is essential to holy living.

The list could be extended. But what must be recognized is that the doctrine of holiness is an unusual one. It is one of the few doctrines which require more than mental assent. It cannot be divorced from experience. It reflects the distinctive nature of Wesleyanism, *viz.* it is a theology of Christian experience and it does not work unless it is tied to a warm-hearted knowledge of a God who justifies, witnesses by his Spirit to our salvation, and sanctifies our lives. In this it is virtually unique among the various theological systems. Thus, to assure that the doctrine has a future, close attention must be paid to assuring that the people of the movement enjoy the experience – something that must begin within the Schools for Officer Training.

As an aside, the recognition that this doctrine is the reflection of a distinctive theological tradition requires that in the training of cadets our colleges' textbooks reflect that tradition. The majority of evangelical textbooks in theology are of Reformed origin, which frequently creates cognitive dissonance in the classroom and beyond. The soteriology of Calvinism is not the same as that of non-Calvinism. Similarly, if the movement sees itself as standing within that tradition, it will be reflected in the materials provided in the Trade Departments (by whatever name they are known). Popular evangelical writings will take second place to those written within the tradition of which we are part.

We are witnessing a renaissance of Wesleyan writing and scholarship.<sup>9</sup> This should, I feel, be seen on the bookshelves of our stores and college libraries and will require clear 'headquarters' leadership for such to take place. In other words, The Salvation Army won't simply drift back into the full tide of the holiness stream; such a move will be intentional and will be viewed as imperative. Brengle wrote:

... it is this Holiness – the doctrine, the experience, the action – that we Salvationists must maintain, otherwise we shall betray our trust; we shall lose our birthright; we shall cease to be a spiritual power in the earth; we shall have a name to live, and yet be dead; our glory will depart; and we, like Samson shorn of his locks, shall become as other men; the souls with whom we are entrusted will grope in darkness or go elsewhere for soul-nourishment and guidance; and while we may still



have titles and ranks, which will have become vainglorious, to bestow upon our children, we shall have no heritage to bequeath them or martyr-like sacrifice, or spiritual power, or dare-devil-faith, of pure, deep joy, of burning love, of holy triumph.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Application of the “Holiness” Message**

The successors of John Wesley were criticized for not developing their leader’s doctrine of Christian Perfection, or Perfect Love. For example, the Congregationalist, R.W. Dale, delivered an address to leaders and people of the British Free Churches on July 27, 1879, in which he asserted:

There was one doctrine of John Wesley’s – the doctrine of perfect sanctification – which ought to have led to a great and original ethical development; but the doctrine has not grown; it seems to remain just where John Wesley left it. There has been a want of the genius or the courage to attempt the solution of the immense practical questions which the doctrine suggests. The questions have not been raised – much less solved. To have raised them effectively, indeed – would have been to originate an ethical revolution which would have had a far deeper effect on the thought and life – first of England, and then on the rest of Christendom – than was produced by the Reformation of the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

What was needed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the criticisms were levelled, and what is needed today, is a bigger picture of Full Salvation. Indeed, Dale’s statement with its suggestion that a right application of the doctrine of holiness would have a greater effect on our world than did the Reformation, needs to be carefully pondered by any denomination which believes that it is “called unto holiness”.

What was traditionally called the “blessing of holiness” was rightly seen as the applying of God’s sanctifying grace to the totality of one’s personality – the obverse, if you will, of total depravity. And rightly understood it has also to do with a salvation which is ‘full’ in the sense of having application to every area of human existence. Wesley defined Christian Perfection as “love labouring for the

bodies and souls of men". It is not pietistic individualism (although at times it has been seen as such). It is "full salvation" in which Christians, filled with the sanctifying Spirit of God, apply the salvation message to the whole of life. William Booth affirmed this position. Roger Green notes that:

In his later theology (he) began to understand his doctrine of sanctification in corporate images and categories as well as personal ones. It became clear in his later theology exactly why he interpreted sanctification in this wider dimension ... sanctification was the final answer to the problem of evil. By allying sanctification with the ultimate conquest of the world and of evil, Booth destroyed any concept of the finality of evil.<sup>12</sup>

This Full Salvation doctrine is the most positive understanding of the gospel to be found anywhere. It sees Christ's saving work and his Spirit's sanctifying power as being applicable to every part of the human personality, and the motivation for a gospel which addresses every form of human need. It has application to the whole of society. Social justice, Fair Trade, the environment, the arts, industry, economics and the like are the focus of a sanctified people because they see the redeeming work of Christ as having application to the whole of life. Whereas some forms of pietism flee such engagement with the world, a people whose holiness takes its cue from that of Christ and his Incarnation sees the whole of society as its field of mission.

This world-affirming theology represents a distinctive understanding within the evangelical community, different from that of Fundamentalism and Dispensationalism for whom "Rapture" out of this world is seen as the answer to life's ills. Salvationism and Wesleyanism have, of all the evangelical movements, shown the least interest in "end times" while possessing a keen interest in applying the message of salvation to suffering humanity. The one significant expression of eschatology within the Army was Booth's Post-Millennialism, which was essentially world-affirming. It prompted Salvationists to affirm, "Jesus shall conquer, lift up the strain, evil shall perish and righteousness shall reign."

Some interesting developments can be observed within worldwide Salvationism which suggest a renewing of its distinctive theology. First, there has emerged in recent times a strong social conscience which is seeking to address the issues of justice and fairness. At the same time there is a renewed interest in the doctrine of holiness—a life generally seen as Spirit-empowered Christ-likeness (which, incidentally, is how S. L. Brengle defined it). The challenge is to affirm and embrace the two, and to assure that they are fully integrated so that the experience of Perfect Love becomes the driving force for the social conscience.

Holiness without a social conscience becomes legalistic and harsh—that of Phariseism. A social conscience without an infusion of perfect love can become just one more expression of “welfare work”. But an experience, both personal and corporate, of inner cleansing and holy love which motivates a people to respond to the breadth of society’s needs and challenges is one which accords with Christ’s plan for his Church in the world, and is a very lovely thing to behold.

### **Being the People We Are Called To Be**

The Salvation Army is probably the largest denomination officially committed to the doctrine of Entire Sanctification. In Australia, where I live, it stands almost alone as the exponent of this doctrine.<sup>13</sup> This makes Salvationism the custodian of what Wesley called “the peculiar depositum committed to our trust.”

To be such requires continual spiritual renewal in the life of holiness, and the promotion of its message at every level of leadership, in every college, and to every congregation. Official publications must give it a prime position, and its worship must recapture its spirit. This will include some clear direction – probably in the training colleges – of what type of hymnody is appropriate for a holiness people.

Although we are discussing a doctrine which is inextricably tied to an experience, it is nevertheless imperative that we not content ourselves with an existentialist understanding of the Tenth Doctrine. Exegesis must provide the foundation for what we teach. Even the doctrinal statement itself will require careful exegetical study. It is the only one of the Eleven Doctrines actually based

on a scriptural quotation, but that quotation is from the King James Version and its wording is not reflected in newer versions. Will we be preserved blameless *unto* the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Doctrine and the KJV assert, or *at* his coming, as more recent texts have it, reflecting what probably is a more correct rendering of the Greek preposition. Is 1 Thess. 5:23 referring to a specific experience within the life of the believer, or, as some suggest, a benediction as the letter draws to its conclusion? There is, in my view, sufficient biblical support for the belief that God's desire is to completely sanctify us in this life, and then to keep us day by day from falling. Such a view must be developed by careful study of the scriptures, not just the exposition of one proof-text.

For a movement to maintain a distinctive doctrinal stance, it must have a firm commitment to that position. It must be taught as a "non-elective" to all future spiritual leaders and those leaders must be provided with the basic skills to be able accurately to exegete Holy Scripture. It must be presented in such a manner as to make it attractive to men and women seeking God's will for their lives. And this has particular resonance to the present age with its quest – often quite vague but nevertheless sincere – for 'spirituality.' Christian spirituality is an inner experience of the Spirit of God, which is what the doctrine of holiness is all about.

Such a commitment to this doctrine will provide God-given impetus for all of our social work, vitality in our worship, effectiveness in our witness to the world, and authenticity in the lives of God's people. Much of Methodism drifted from this its central doctrine shortly after the death of John Wesley. Salvationism could do the same. Or, it could reaffirm its commitment to its Founders' faith, and proclaim in a fresh way: "with our banners unfurled to the breeze, our motto shall holiness be."

## *Notes*

1. Cf. Roger Green's *War On Two Fronts-The Redemptive Theology of William Booth*, the two editions of *The Handbook of Doctrine*, and *Salvation Story*.
2. For example, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XIII
3. This is seen in the "holiness" writings within our sister denominations. The simple and

helpful works of people such as A.M.Hills were succeeded by those of people such as Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, which have, in turn, witnessed a generation of younger scholars ably defending the doctrine.

4. *Letters*: “To Dr Conyers Middleton” (II, 377)

5. *Handbook of Doctrine* 1923

6. A good example is that of the Church of the Nazarene. Its denominational paper is the *Herald of Holiness* and the “holiness” emphasis is strongly asserted in its many publications.

7. Cf. John M. Todd, *John Wesley and the Catholic Church*, Hodder and Stoughton 1958; S.T.Kimbrough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, St Vladimir’s Press. Christian Faragher, an officer in Melbourne, Australia, recently produced a thesis for the Melbourne College of Divinity, *The Hidden Stream: The Contemplative Tradition in the Spirituality of The Salvation Army*, in which she traces these influences in the writings of early Salvationists.

8. There are those who point to the type of unusual phenomena described in Bramwell Booth’s *Echoes and Memories* as proof that being “slain in the Spirit” and the like should be evidenced in contemporary Salvationism. This position fails to recognize that whereas for contemporary Charismatics such happenings are evidence of God’s blessing and are thus to be encouraged and sought, for early Salvationists the position was “seek not, forbid not”.

9. For example, the writings of Randy Maddox, Kenneth Collins, Paul Wesley Chilcote, *et al*

10. *Love Slaves*, Supplies and Purchasing Departments, USA, 1960, p.72

11. Quoted by W. E. Sangster in *The Path To Perfection*, Epworth, 1943, p.168

12. Green, *War on Two Fronts*, p. 59

13. In Australia Methodism merged with Presbyterians and Congregationalists in 1977 to form the Uniting Church in Australia. The Wesleyan and Church and the Church of the Nazarene have a combined membership of around three thousand members nation-wide.

The Salvation Army, international Christian religious and charitable movement organized and operated on a military pattern. In the early 21st century the Army was at work in more than 130 countries and other political entities. Its international headquarters are in London. The basic unit of the Army is the corps, commanded by an officer of a rank ranging from lieutenant to brigadier, who is responsible to a divisional headquarters. Divisions are grouped into territories (usually a territory is a country, except in the United States, where there are four territories). Get a Britannica Premium subscription and gain access to exclusive content. [Subscribe Now](#). Converts who desire to become soldiers in the Army are required to sign Articles of War and volunteer their services. Today, The Salvation Army is active in virtually every corner of the world and serves in over 100 countries, offering the message of God's healing and hope to all those in need. Our Founders. William Booth. Catherine Booth was known as the "Army Mother." In her world, women had few rights, no place in the professional sphere, and a minimal presence in church leadership. Yet in her marriage to William Booth, she became an evangelist, preacher, theologian, and co-founder of The Salvation Army. A truly passionate Christian, Catherine believed that loving God meant loving people through action. Her legacy of love, sacrifice, and service continues to shape The Salvation Army today. Evangeline Booth. The Salvation Army is a Christian church and an international charitable organisation. The organisation reports a worldwide membership of over 1.7 million, consisting of soldiers, officers and adherents collectively known as Salvationists. 25 views . My ministry works very closely with the Salvation Army. As such, I'm really in awe of their work with those less fortunate, and the scope of their ministry is much broader than I could imagine. The only beef I have with them is a very slow bureaucracy that makes doing anything new for them, or anything that involves collaboration with other agencies, an extremely slow process.