RESPONSIVE AND OBEDIENT

I will be responsive to the Holy Spirit’s work and obedient to his leading in my life, growing in grace through worship, prayer, service and the reading of the Bible.

Responsive and obedient – these two words have exercised my mind and my heart as I have contemplated the writing of this article. Just how responsive and obedient am I to the Holy Spirit’s work and leading in my life? And, am I growing in grace through worship, prayer, service and reading the Bible? Pondering these questions, I write from a personal testimony perspective.

At conversion, God’s Spirit comes into a life and, from that moment on, the believer becomes aware of the Holy Spirit’s work and guidance. With the seventh doctrine, each soldier attests:

‘We believe that repentance towards God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, are necessary to salvation.’

Did I really think deeply about these two questions when, in 1968 at the young age of 14, I signed my Soldier’s Covenant? Maybe I should go even further back to when I signed my Junior Soldier’s Pledge at the age of seven, promising, ‘I will be his loving and obedient child’.

What did I understand about such deep responses regarding covenant promises? It is my testimony that, on the day when I knelt at the mercy seat in the Lewisham Corps hall, UK, and signed my Junior Soldiers’ Pledge, I was sincere about keeping such promises. And, when I signed my articles of war at Hemel Hempstead Corps and was enrolled as a senior soldier by General Frederick Coutts, I was just as sincere. However, the question is not my sincerity then, but how have I progressed, grown in grace?

From where I stand now, I realise how much more responsive and obedient I need to be to the Holy Spirit. A line of 1 Samuel 15:22 comes to mind: ‘To obey is better than sacrifice.’ Perhaps, too often, Salvationists are just as likely as the people of the Old Testament to fall into the trap of thinking that ‘sacrificial service’ means doing the ‘right things’, usually equated with being at meetings, practices and other corps activities. Similarly, many officers fall into the trap of acting as if ‘sacrificial service’ is exemplified
by becoming overbusy with programme and, in the process, often ending up exhausted and less effective.

Each of the clauses in the Soldier's Covenant begins with the words, 'I will,' indicating the soldier's strong desire to be responsive and obedient. Reflecting on the second clause, 'I will' refers to being obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit in my life, growing in grace through worship, prayer, service and reading the Bible – not unlike the Junior Soldier's Promise, which also repeatedly states, 'I will,' and then reads, 'I promise to pray, to read my Bible and, by his help, to lead a life that is clean in thought, word and deed'.

In being responsive and obedient to the Holy Spirit it became apparent to me from an early age that I was being led towards becoming an officer. This growing conviction became evident through example, prayer and reading God's Word.

The Officer's Covenant, which I signed in 1983, does not supersede the Soldier's Covenant, for every officer remains a soldier. But rather, officership brings an added focus because I am called 'to maintain the doctrines and principles of The Salvation Army, and, by God's grace, to prove myself a worthy officer'. In other words, it is only by growing in grace that I can maintain and fulfil the promises within the covenants I have signed.

During the ensuing years I have had the privilege to serve in other cultures on different continents and observe how soldiers live out their covenant in diverse ways and contexts as far as worship, prayer, service and reading the Bible is concerned.

I have been challenged by many Africans and Asians who have shown by example how to grow in grace through these spiritual disciplines. It has been a joy to watch God praised through dance in worship without inhibition in Africa. Africans pray with great fervour and faith and, hearing Scripture, they would soak it up in a ravenous manner. It has challenged and encouraged me to want that same liberty in worship, fervour in prayer and delight in God's Word.

One of my current neighbours, who I regularly visit and give service to on a number of practical issues, is most appreciative of me praying and sharing Scripture with her because she has never been encouraged to read for herself and, evidently, delights in hearing the Word of God.

Signing the Soldier's Covenant, the soldier states: 'I now by God's grace enter into a sacred covenant.' Therefore, I would also suggest that, by God's grace, as I worship, pray, serve and read the Bible I should grow in grace if I apply these spiritual disciplines.
One of my granddaughters is called Grace and she has taught me many things about the Christian life of faith. I have learned a lot about grace as I watch and listen to my grandchildren and their sincere, if simple, expression of faith.

This series of articles continues to explore right behaviour (orthopraxy) – how we should act in obedience to God. As suggested within Lieut-Colonel Karen Shakespeare’s initial article, we should undertake a ‘periodic examination of our behaviour and lifestyle, measured against the promises we have made’, because in order to identify whether we are growing in grace we would need to evidence these changes in our living – thinking, speaking and acting differently.

How can one fulfil this part of the Soldier’s Covenant – being responsive and obedient through worship, prayer, service and the reading of the Bible?

In *When the Holy Ghost Is Come*, Samuel Logan Brengle tells us how we can receive guidance from the Holy Spirit for our lives by:

- Opening our minds to the sanctifying truths of the Bible
- The circumstances and surroundings of our daily life
- The counsel of others
- Deep inward conviction, which increases as we wait upon him in prayer and readiness to obey.

During corporate and individual worship we have opportunity to make a particular connection with God, the Holy Spirit. For private devotions, we should endeavour to find a quiet place – a holy sanctuary, a God-filled space free from distraction – so that we can concentrate on, listen to, sense and be aware of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and reading God’s Word bring us into the holy presence of God where the Holy Spirit can reach and bless us with the love of God (Jude vv 20-21).

Reading the Bible is essential in order to understand God’s will and purpose, to test every decision we make against Scripture and be obedient to his perfect will.

For me, worship takes on many forms that fit with my personality and interests; for example, quiet reflection or praise in music. Prayer has been equally varied. When serving overseas, I experienced the longing to pray with family, friends and colleagues who went through difficult times. Not having the opportunity to be with them in person, I would write my prayers and send these by email, SMS or letter. From time to time I received confirmation that this intercession was beneficial to those on my heart. It was when I received such affirmation that I grew in grace as I saw the result of such intercessory prayer.
I am aware that it is only by God’s grace – a phrase often heard whilst my husband and I served in Africa – that I have been able to keep this part of my Soldier’s Covenant and not by my own effort or ability. I am conscious that I need to constantly work at keeping the promise that ‘I will be responsive ... and obedient’.

General John Gowans penned the words: ‘Who is it tells me what to do and helps me to obey? That’s the Spirit of the Lord in me!’ Let us be challenged by the Spirit and not only claim to be responsive, but also ‘get out of the boat’ and obey God’s leading.

For reflection:

- How responsive and obedient am I to the Holy Spirit’s work and leading in my life?
- How do you identify your growth in grace through worship, prayer, service and reading the Bible?
- How can we ensure that these disciplines are constant and effective as we continue on our Christian journey?

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