A REFLECTION OF GOD’S LOVE
LIVING BY FAITH TODAY
SERIES: A SOLDIER’S COVENANT (7)

I will uphold the sanctity of marriage and family life.

On Sunday 10 September 1989 Salvation Army soldiers throughout the world were invited to renew their covenant with God by signing a revised edition of the articles of war, including the simple phrase, ‘I will uphold the sanctity of marriage and family life’.

During the second half of the 20th century, cultural assumptions relating to human relationships and sexuality had been questioned and there were those in the Church who felt that changes in society threatened the deep Christian roots of marriage and the family. The Church, including The Salvation Army, had to face up to the reality of living in a new age; an age in which its traditions and values would be examined, and sometimes superseded, by secular norms.

At the same time as the Church throughout the world examined the interaction between the traditions of society and Christian faith, it became evident that, in different ways for different cultures, accepted values and customs were not necessarily consistent with Christian standards of marriage and family life.

The process of change has continued into the 21st century as the Church seeks to find ways to evaluate and respond to cultures in ways that reflect the values of the Kingdom of God, offering grace and hospitality to all.

How is Christian holiness expressed in the many different contexts in which the Army operates? What are the values and practices that we share? When can we celebrate and affirm our differences? These questions have relevance to marriage and family life.

Our faith is rooted in our relationship with God and is expressed in relationship with other people, including family and marital relationships. Who we are in Christ shapes our interactions and reactions. Each of us lives in a web of relationships, which are meant to fulfil our desire for friendship, support and intimacy. Through our connections with God and other people we find fulfilment, security and are able to flourish as human beings.

For some people, marriage will contribute to this process as we enter into an exclusive relationship with another human being. As Salvationists we regard marriage as a divine gift, which gives expression to the principle of mutual love, enriching and empowering each partner, and diminishing neither. It is a sharing of life marked by personal consent,
mutual respect and fidelity, reciprocal service and equality, and is the most appropriate context for sexual intimacy.

Marriage is both a reflection of God's love for humanity and the self-giving love between Christ and the Church. William Booth wrote: 'It is a union of body, of mind and of soul, involving obligations and privileges on both sides. God's plan is that the two human beings thus united shall grow, more and more, into each other, as the years go by, until they are one.'

Christian marriage is a covenant and calling, a relationship between two people, which is lived in the presence of God and shaped by divine purposes. The marriage thus becomes a space for formation and transformation, for each individual and as a couple.

At the same time, our understanding of marriage and family life will inevitably be influenced by personal experience and by the culture in which we live. For people whose family life, or marriage, has been difficult or abusive this may provoke painful memories and may require careful, sensitive exploration and re-education. Partner violence of any kind (physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual) is never acceptable in a Christian context.

We acknowledge the need for grace in a broken and wounded world in which the ideal is not always achievable and where marriages do not always reflect the values of Christ. The complexity of human interaction can result in a marriage that is threatened or damaged. Where no resolution is possible annulment or divorce may follow. At such times a skilled and compassionate pastoral response is vital.

In some cultures the decision to marry, or not, will be the responsibility and choice of the two individuals concerned, and although the marriage ceremony may be celebrated with family and friends, they may have little direct involvement in the process or the couple's subsequent life together. In other cultures, the extended family may arrange a marriage, with a possible expectation that married life will be lived in the context of the wider family and according to predetermined traditions. For Christians, in these and a range of other scenarios, the recognition and affirmation of marriage as a gift from God remains, and the requirement for personal consent and mutual respect must not be compromised.

This particular article of faith assumes that a God-honouring marriage will create a secure foundation for family life. The family should provide a place where children are nurtured and given space to grow and develop as individuals who are known and loved by God. Christian values and healthy mutual relationships can be taught and modelled as part of family life. As with marriage, the way in which this happens may vary, but the principles remain. Some children will grow in a large extended family, in which the 'parenting' is shared by a number of people; others will live and grow only with parents,
and possibly siblings. In any circumstance, the expectations of society and the patterns of tradition must be critiqued and challenged by our commitment to Christ, and by God’s desire that all human beings should find their fulfilment in relationship with God and with other people.

The Salvation Army articles of marriage state: ‘We promise to make our home a place where all shall be aware of the abiding presence of God, and where those under our influence shall be taught the truths of the gospel, encouraged to seek Christ as Saviour, and supported in the commitment of their lives to the service of God.’ While not restricted to the nurturing of children, this promise nevertheless provides a good foundation for family life.

It may be suggested that the promise to uphold the sanctity of marriage and family life is relevant only to those who are married, or who are an integral part of a family at that time, excluding the unmarried or the childless, but this is not the intention or the meaning. All Salvationists, whether single or married, are called to affirm and to live in ways that are consistent with Christian principles, such as the sanctity of marriage and family life, recognising them as God’s gift and part of his plan for human flourishing.

FOR RELECTION

➢ What attitudes and assumptions in your culture may challenge the values of Christian marriage?
➢ How does your experience of marriage and family affect your understanding of this promise?
➢ How can a congregation ensure that any focus on marriage and family life in language, worship and programme does not exclude or marginalize non-married people?

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1 Letters to Salvationists on Love, Marriage, and Home, 1902, also known as Volume II of Religion for Every Day (more recent editions are available from Amazon or, as a download, from www.forgottenbooks.com)