DOCTRINE FOR TODAY
SERIES: THE ARMY’S ELEVEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

Commissioner Robert Street
CHAIRMAN OF THE INTERNATIONAL DOCTRINE COUNCIL

TWO thousand years ago, when there were no newspapers, televisions, radios, mobile phones, websites, electronic media, or other means of global communication, Jesus said something that may have seemed to some an unrealistic boast. He said: ‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will pass never pass away’ (Matthew 24:35). He was utterly confident of the eternal quality of the truth he declared. He knew it would endure because, ultimately, it is the standard by which all other truth must be measured.

His words are still with us. Through the centuries people have lived by them and looked to them for guidance. They still do. Practically anywhere in the world today, we are able to read or hear the essence of what Jesus taught, did and said. His words – as recorded in Scripture – are available in countless languages and dialects. They are relevant to cultural settings of all kinds. They speak to all situations. We find them in the Bible.

The Bible provides us with other words too. Its truths are presented in many forms. Its messages, in Old and New Testaments, have been written by a variety of people from many walks of life. Its pages are filled with the recorded experiences of men and women of faith over many centuries. Its divinely inspired teaching enriches our hearts and feeds our souls.

Because God gave humans a part to play within his creation, we are given insights into their understanding of faith and the world in which they lived. We see the development of human understanding of God from early days – when faith in one God, the living God, was new in concept and definition (Deuteronomy 6:4) – to a later time when a wider knowledge of the nature and loving purposes of the Creator were revealed supremely in and by Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, the different ways in which individuals, groups and cultures have interpreted Scripture through the centuries has meant that division, condemnation of others, violence and even murder have taken place at the hands of those who have used the name of Jesus to justify their actions. At times people’s convictions have loomed large and grown out of proportion. The chaos and damage caused to the Church has been shameful and tragically unchristlike.

At first, the earliest Christians simply acknowledged one another in the basic confession: ‘Jesus is Lord’ (1 Corinthians 12:3). At the time it seemed to be all that was needed in the way of creed, but as the Church grew and divisions in belief emerged, it became necessary to formulate agreed statements of faith. It could be said that doctrine is needed to refute error as much as to state the truth about God and his will – and today, with the multiplicity of languages involved in translating doctrine, the task of defining or redefining eternal truth in words that can be globally embraced, demands great care.

In some ways it is an impossible task because of the unknowable greatness of Almighty God (Romans 11:33-36). We do well to remember when writing doctrine, that no one actually has the capacity to fully express the truth of God in words – and no one life, apart from that of Christ himself, can manage to worthyly show it.

In a world of varied intellects, mixed motives and different cultural backgrounds, it isn’t surprising that differing interpretations and misinterpretations still occur, bringing dissent and confusion. So it is important to provide a means by which members of a church – especially an international church – can express their basic, united understanding of the faith in ways which honour God. In 1878, when The Salvation Army took its name, its eleven Articles of Faith were written and verified. These beliefs can be found in The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine or any Salvation Army song book. We call them ‘The Doctrines’. They are similar to those of the Methodist New Connexion (1838), the church in which William Booth learned his doctrine, and are accepted as being in the mainstream of Christian belief. Language changes, ways of expressing truths differ, and the translation of words is not an exact science. There is not always a direct parallel among languages for key words and it is wise to remember that every translation of the Bible is precisely that – a translation. But while these and other difficulties make the ‘updating’ of any doctrines problematic, they also indicate that the explanation of doctrine in contemporary terms is essential.

The Salvation Army has kept its doctrines comparatively concise. They express the personal faith of Salvationists, whilst sharing a common emphasis with other Christian traditions. They represent the teaching of the Church in general, and play a positive and wholesome part in the life of an Army that promotes, preaches and practises a gospel of love. They are meant to inspire holy living – and ultimately to point us to Jesus.

When John described Jesus as the Word (John 1:1, 2), he was holding him up as the ultimate, eternal standard of truth. John also records Jesus as announcing himself as the Truth (John 14:6): “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The Pharisees refused to acknowledge the validity of Jesus’ testimony and wanted evidence from elsewhere (John 8:13). But Jesus knew his own validity. He knew the strength and eternal nature of his words. He knew what he taught and he acted upon. He had no false standards, just as he had no false words. His teaching would stand the test of time, having a completeness and integrity that is unmatched anywhere. It always will.

Without an eternal standard of truth humankind has nowhere to turn for ratification of what is right or wrong, good or evil. In the sacrificial death of Jesus – who spoke the word with his life – we find good and evil in stark, defining contrast. Whilst it seemed to those around that goodness had been humiliated and vanished by a corrupt and overpowering evil force, the reverse was the case.

It is possible to deny the truth, to exaggerate it, to ignore, suppress, misunderstand or hide the truth, but we can never destroy the truth. Truth will always be true. God will always be God. The One who is the Truth is the only one to whom we can look for guidance and are ultimately required to answer. To accept the truth he shares with us about ourselves is to embrace the grace he offers (John 1:12). Whenever doctrine helps us understand this better – and welcome the Word of God to the centre of our lives – it achieves its purpose.

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