

**The Salvation Army**  
**2014 USA Salvation Army Conference for Social Work and Emergency Disaster Services**  
**25 to 28 March 2014, Orlando, Florida**

**GLOBAL CONVERSATION SESSION 2A**

**Can we “save souls” while “serving suffering humanity”?**

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Language drives the way we actualize what we discern to be God’s movement in the world. Some are undoubtedly hearing this paper in a language that is not native to them. Conceptualizing the theme for this conference “The Power of One Army ... Transforming Our World” means that we not only have to work to understand one language but also to recognize my cultural perspective as a Salvation Army officer in the USA South. This paper seeks to answer the question, “Can we ‘save souls’ while ‘serving suffering humanity?’” I will approach this question from a historical and theological perspective with the aim of recovering an ancient biblical practice that can refresh Salvation Army ministry. Despite the barriers of language and different perspectives I want to give an unequivocally clear answer to the given question. My answer to the question above is an exuberant Yes!

The answer to this question seems simple, but the fact that it necessitates discussion reveals a tension that exists with Salvation Army theological praxis. Navigating this tension is essential to actualizing God’s kingdom through the ministry of the Army.

**The Theological Engine of the Salvation War**

In July 1865 in London’s East End an opportunity came for Rev. William Booth to preach a series of revival meetings, which marks the genesis of what we know today as The Salvation Army.

Booth’s heart ached for the people of this area. He illustrated this passion:

In every direction were multitudes totally ignorant of gospel, and given up to all kinds of wickedness ... A voice seemed to sound in my ears, ‘Why go ... anywhere else, to find souls that need the Gospel? Here they are, tens of thousands at your very door. Preach to them, the unsearchable riches of Christ. I will help you — your need shall be supplied.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Booth, *East London Evangelist*, October 1868, 3. Quoted in Pamela J. Walker, *Pulling the Devil’s Kingdom Down: The Salvation Army in Victorian Britain* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 41-42.

The people of their mission field, particularly London's East End<sup>2</sup> were ravished by extreme poverty. Due to this, the Salvationist movement was bound to respond to the greater social problems on its battlefield. Reflecting on this historical movement that embraced a holistic<sup>3</sup> theology of ministry, it seems that eschatology, both personal and universal, was the theological engine of The Salvation Army. All the work of the Salvation Army was done in light of the final end (*eschaton*). To achieve its desired end (i.e. the salvation of souls and the imminence of Christ's millennial reign) the Salvation Army had to dramatically engage in the culture that surrounded it. They could not possibly work in the midst of a people who were struggling within poverty and social oppression for long with a singular focus on "souls," without recognizing the necessity that social and physical problems needed salvation as well. The Salvation Army operated more functionally or pragmatically than theoretically. The great goal of the Salvationist's mission is an eschatological aspiration; Booth and the early Army desired, with the help of God, to save the soul of every person in the world. This primary desire to "save souls" is an eschatological concern.

Before the Army institutionally organized a global strike against social evils, such ministry was anticipated in the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> This movement found its theological climax not in William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, but in his article "Salvation for Both Worlds."<sup>5</sup> This famous article, published in 1889, is the articulation of a conclusion that Booth had reached, resulting from his recognition of the necessity of holistic ministry. This proclamation was not an overnight decision. It is rather a mature theological expression that understood social and spiritual aspects of the Christian message. This holistic theological development was articulated in 1890 with the establishment of the "Social Wing,"<sup>6</sup> a division of Salvation Army ministry that sought to implement the "scheme" expressed in *In Darkest England and the Way Out*.<sup>7</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> See the excellent, and unprecedented, discussion within Salvation Army studies concerning the social condition of the people in London's East End in Ann M. Woodall, *What Price the Poor?: William Booth, Karl Marx and the London Residuum* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 61-67.

<sup>3</sup> The term "holistic" is used throughout this project to identify an effective balance in mission between personal and corporate, spiritual and physical aspects of ministry.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this "prelude" see Jenty Fairbanks, *Booth's Boots: Social Service Beginnings in The Salvation Army* (London: The Salvation Army, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> William Booth, "Salvation for Both Worlds," *All The World*, 6 (January, 1889).

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Sandall, *The History of The Salvation Army*. 7 vols. (London: The Salvation Army, 1947-1966. vols. 1-3 by Sandall, vols. 4-5 by Arch Wiggins, vol. 6 by Fredrick Coutts, vol. 7 by Henry Gariepy), 3:101ff.

<sup>7</sup> William Booth *In Darkest England and The Way Out* (Atlanta: The Salvation Army, 1984). The "scheme" consisted of three proposals. First, the City Colony (102-135) where ragged, poor, hungry men and women from the city could be housed, trained, and helped upwards to honorable and useful lives. The second proposal was the Farm Colony (136-153), a place where those who sought assistance in agricultural work could be provided with appropriate training. The final proposal was the Over-Seas Colony (154-165) that was to be a self-supported group of people working from various countries assisting each other. Other ideas were offered toward social relief (pg.

*Darkest England* explicitly supported and institutionally expanded the existing social ministries of The Salvation Army that had been operating since 1884.

It is hard to ascertain if the same theological foundation has accompanied the Salvation Army after the death of William Booth. Professor Edward H. McKinley, a perceptive historian of the Salvation Army, suggests this of the rank and file workers of the Salvation Army:

[They] were little concerned with theories of social justice, they knew only that their Heavenly Commander had ordered His soldiers to take in strangers, visit the sick and imprisoned, and offer drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry. They also knew that there were souls dying all around and that the first step in saving some of them was to lift them up so they could hear that such a thing as salvation existed.<sup>8</sup>

What was impressed upon The Salvation Army by William Booth was a holistic theology that was developed by his own eschatological vision and the way he felt God was using his Army in that process. It is unlikely that one would hear a contemporary Salvationist articulate an eschatological theology for holistic ministry in The Salvation Army. What one would likely hear is a consistent approach toward a missional theology that values God's ability to redeem every part of the world and the soldier's responsibility in the "great salvation war."

William Booth's eschatology produced a passionate care for individuals, a dynamic millennial spirit, a missional ecclesiology, a powerful social ethic, and a clear doctrinal basis for these beliefs. The impact of this ecclesiology is felt today in the way The Salvation Army lives out its mission in particular social and spiritual contexts. The driving force of William Booth's theology — his eschatological vision — is a fitting example and reminder to the Christian church and the contemporary Army of its eschatological task — that is to work with God to redeem the world. It is this theology that has produced practical arms of service throughout the 126 countries the Army serves. It is this biblical and pragmatic theology which encourages soldiers to fight for those who are seemingly lost to society. One of William Booth's hymns, known in the Salvation Army as the "Founder's Song," embodies this eschatological task: "O boundless salvation! deep ocean of love,... the *whole* world redeeming, so rich and so free, Now flowing for *all* men, come, roll over me!"<sup>9</sup>

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166-245). Booth concluded by showing how the structure of the Salvation Army is well suited to accomplish this "social scheme" (249-287).

<sup>8</sup> Edward H. McKinley, *Marching to Glory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1994), 68.

<sup>9</sup> William Booth, "O Boundless Salvation!" *The Song Book of The Salvation Army* (London: The Salvation Army International Headquarters, 1987), 82.

## A Refreshing Alternative to “Social Work”

Maybe our bifurcating nomenclature of spiritual and social work is the source of the tension revealed in our question. I propose an alternative paradigm to refresh the holistic ministry of The Salvation Army—Christian Hospitality. In Greek, the word for hospitality (*philoxenos*) is an invented word. It combines the word for brotherly love, *phileos* (as in Philadelphia), and the word for stranger, *xenos*. Therefore, *hospitality* means “Love of stranger.”

The practice of hospitality finds its source and highest expression in the nature of the Triune God who continually welcomes humanity into the eternal fellowship of the Godhead. Such welcome is clearly exhibited through Jesus’ sacrificial welcome in His passion. Receiving the welcome that Jesus offers necessitates participation in the fellowship of God’s trinitarian nature. The tradition of hospitality incorporates more than bringing desserts to a potluck and prosaic conversation among friends and family. It is not a spiritual gift for those who like to bake. On the contrary, throughout church history hospitality has been concerned with the interaction between “others” and the practice of welcoming “strangers.” Scripture is filled with the imagery of hospitality. In Romans 12:13, the Apostle Paul gives this two-word command: “practice hospitality.” It is hard to effectively translate the force of this command in its original language. In Greek, it is as if Paul underlined, emboldened, italicized, and enlarged the font saying, “***You must practice hospitality.***” Or it could be translated, “pursue hospitality,” as one would use pursue to describe a hunt or a vigorous pursuit. The word hospitality has come to be associated with the hospitality industry or conversation over coffee at someone’s house. Until the last three hundred years the word hospitality was specifically understood as a Christian practice. So the root of the word *hosp*—can be seen in the words hospital, hostel, hospice, etc. The idea was that Christians had a duty to make room for strangers.

The significance of naming the tradition is important to William Booth’s connection with the overarching social ethical tradition of Christianity. The language provides the means whereby a Christian can understand his or her social responsibility within the realm of theological, historical, and moral reflection. This understanding is specifically significant for contemporary practitioners of hospitality because hospitality enables their service to move beyond the realm of “duty”, “social services” or “social work”. Hospitality then becomes not just something we do, but a way of life for individuals and communities to express welcome as an outgrowth of their identity as a Christian body. Christian ethicist Christine Pohl shares, “reclaiming hospitality is an attempt to bring back the relational dimension to social service, and to highlight concerns for empowerment and partnership with those who need assistance.”<sup>10</sup> Any Christian movement

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<sup>10</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 162.

that takes seriously the exhortation to “welcome one another” (Romans 15:7) can benefit from viewing this welcome through the lens of hospitality.

The biblical/theological tradition of hospitality can serve as a refreshing theoretical paradigm for Salvation Army ministries. One can argue that The Salvation Army has had the most consistent Christian social witness in the past 150 years; however, acknowledging, naming, and refocusing this social witness as “hospitality” will connect the Salvation Army’s work with the theological history of the church. Theological reflection has often been a secondary concern for the pragmatic Salvation Army; therefore, it has admittedly lacked an explicit theological foundation for its practices. The theological heritage supplied by the tradition of hospitality can provide a vibrant foundation for the existing social ministries of the Army. In this way hospitality can further connect and unite the progression of William Booth’s theology in a way that does not tend toward bifurcation of the spiritual and social ministries.

Everywhere the Army flag flies, a localized presence of the Army’s mission has inherited the fruits of William Booth’s eschatologically focused theology, and if the Army looks at the coming kingdom of God as the template by which the kingdom of God is now a reality, then an eschatological ethic is advantageous for the Army today.<sup>11</sup> Dichotomizing this mission into distinct categories of spiritual and social mission often debilitates the Army from recognizing this holistic heritage. “Social Service” as a paradigm has perpetuated this dichotomy.

A shift in theoretical paradigms is an answer to this problem. The historical, biblical, theological, and moral tradition of hospitality can serve as an antidote to a sometimes-bifurcated Salvation Army.

### **Practical Applications**

I am suggesting that we fully sanctify all aspects of our ministry by refreshing our approach to “serving suffering humanity” through the lens of hospitality, which empowers our service to suffering humanity to save souls. A community of Salvationist employees, officers, soldiers, and the guests we serve can be engaged if we are not separated and we actualize the vision and power of “one army ... transforming the world.” Practically we then focus our ministry around our large task of proclaiming the good news of God’s reign and our opportunity to live under it by following Jesus and anticipating the holistic consequences of His kingdom.

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<sup>11</sup> The millennialism of Booth has left the Army with a wonderful heritage of the role of personal agency in making the themes of God’s kingdom realized “on earth as it is in heaven.” The Army should be careful not to take this postmillennialism to an extreme form that understands social reasonability as causal in bringing about the millennium and the return of Christ.

A few practical conclusions can be drawn from this:

1. Alter our language—‘social services’ misses the mark of the broad dimensions of our hospitable heritage. In my last appointment, the corps changed the name of our shelter manager to Minister of Hospitality. We ceased referring to people in our shelter as clients and began calling them our guests. These changes happened as we considered our hospitable heritage.
2. Resist funding streams that call for separation.
3. Challenge officer appointments titles and administrative structures that systemically limit one’s work to the bifurcated jargon of “social,” “field,” “staff,” or “spiritual.”
4. Engage all groups (soldiers, employees, officers, advisory organizations, and those we serve) with a holistic image that consistently calls us toward an integrated mission. This task seems overwhelming, but so does winning lost souls. The difficulty of this task should not discourage us from undertaking it; it should encourage us to undertake it with the power of the Holy Spirit. A helpful place to start is to bring members of all these various groups together to present a unified vision.
5. Make opportunities for sharing the gospel a common occurrence that goes “hand in hand” with all of our activity. When you open the door for someone to hear the Holy Spirit’s prompting you are practicing hospitality.

Commissioner George Scott Railton, one of our early practitioners of hospitality challenged us to let the gospel sound throughout the world:

Through the world resounding.  
Let the gospel sounding.  
Summon all, at Jesus’ call,  
His glorious cross surrounding.  
Sons of God, earth’s trifles leaving.  
Be not faithless but believing;  
To your conquering captain cleaving,  
Forward to the Fight.<sup>12</sup>

Salvation Army hospitality is a missional hospitality that is connected to God’s plan to redeem the world. For the Salvationist this plan is understood through the imagery of the battle and it calls soldiers to compassionately move “forward to the fight.”

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<sup>12</sup> George Scott Railton, “Soldier’s Rouse Thee,” *The Song Book of The Salvation Army* (London: The Salvation Army International Headquarters, 1987), 190.