

The Salvation Army International Positional Statement

ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

STATEMENT OF POSITION

There is a wide range of cultural understandings of the relationship to ancestors. The Salvation Army upholds that God alone is to be worshipped. The Salvation Army believes that God – Father, Son and Spirit – is fully able to protect, bless and comfort. Jesus Christ is our mediator. Christians can put their complete trust in God. Therefore, The Salvation Army maintains that it is unacceptable to give offerings and sacrifices of any kind to appease the dead, to offer worship to ancestors or to invoke their help as mediator or protector.

This positional statement focuses on the practices of people seeking to find solutions through ancestral worship. We recognise grieving for the dead is a natural process. However, when practices become a worship of the ancestors they are unacceptable. Salvationists will understandably demonstrate gratitude and honour to God for the lives of those who have gone before us.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Ancestor worship is found in many cultures all across the world. This may involve:

- The belief that ancestral spirits have the power to influence the future, to bring good fortune and protect living relatives and future generations if they are worshipped with gifts, offerings and sacrifices
- The belief that ancestral spirits are mediators between the living and the Creator
- The belief that if the ancestors are not worshipped there will be bad consequences
- A belief that the dead may also bring misfortune to those who fail to appease them
- Prayers to the ancestors
- Human sacrifices to the spirits of dead relatives
- Offerings
- Worship to appease the ancestors' spirits in the belief that their spirits influence the natural world
- Divination and consultation with sorcerers about the wishes of the dead.

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE SALVATION ARMY'S POSITION

The Salvation Army's response to ancestor worship is based on the following scriptural principles:

- 1.** The Salvation Army believes God is the only proper object of religious worship¹. The Bible commands us not to worship other gods apart from the Lord God². If we give our

¹ *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* 2010 (London: The Salvation Army), p.xv.

² See especially Exodus 20:3-6 and Matthew 4:10 (= Luke 4:8).

ancestors reverence that is due to God, or if we look to our ancestors to provide us with something that only God can give, we are in conflict with biblical teaching.

2. The Salvation Army believes that Jesus Christ alone is the mediator between God and humanity and that his sacrifice is sufficient to bridge the gap between them. 'For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2:5 *NIV*)³. The dead cannot be mediators between the living and God.
3. While culture informs and enriches the human experience, cultural practices and values should not take precedence over Scripture. Salvationists have a mandate to challenge practices that are not in harmony with the principles of Scripture.⁴
4. Belief in the ancestors' capacity to intervene in the living world is not acceptable for Salvationists. Nor is there a need to appease the dead or to fear what may happen if they are not appeased⁵. 'I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 8:38-39 *NIV*).

PRACTICAL RESPONSES

The Salvation Army calls on all Salvationists to:

1. Recognise that ancestral worship is not consistent with Christian life and teaching.
2. Acknowledge that remembering with fondness the life of the deceased person poses no conflict to biblical teaching provided that the deceased is not regarded as an object of worship.
3. Realise that our identity is to be found in Christ and that the gospel of Jesus Christ, as affirmed in the Bible, sets us free from our fears, superstitions, false beliefs and false hopes.
4. Teach that bringing gifts to the dead is of no value. However, we affirm the importance of giving practical support to grieving families; remembering and celebrating past generations with gratitude; and reminding younger generations of their lineage.
5. Teach others that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is sufficient and that he is the only mediator between God and humanity.
6. Encourage dialogue and provide counsel to Salvationists involved in ancestral worship.
7. Help those involved in ancestral worship understand that, whatever happens, people who have a personal relationship with Christ and live in obedient faith need not live in fear.
8. Not ostracise those involved in ancestral worship. Salvationists are called to show love, grace, care and correction to all involved and to encourage reconciliation.

The Salvation Army realises that when people dissociate themselves from the practice of ancestral worship they may be ostracised or even harmed. The Salvation Army will support people who make a stand in honouring God, and face the cost of that witness.

³ See also Hebrews 7:24-25 and Hebrews 9:11-15.

⁴ *The Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine* 2010 (London: The Salvation Army), p.125. See also 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

⁵ See, for instance, Ecclesiastes 9:10, Isaiah 8:19, Deuteronomy 18:10-11, Psalm 27:1 and Isaiah 41:13.

For Further Study

'What does the Bible say about ancestor worship?' <https://www.gotquestions.org/ancestor-worship.html#ixzz3TgtfhGCK>

Approved by the General, January 2017

The views expressed in this international positional statement constitute the official position of The Salvation Army on the issue addressed, and they may not be modified or adapted in any way without the express written permission of International Headquarters