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

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Introduction

Can we "save souls" while "serving suffering humanity"? I believe we serve suffering humanity because we love the souls that Christ has died for – and NOT because of saving sake. Only God can save souls. We are mere instruments. Let us look at Luke 17: 11-19 and the account of Jesus healing ten lepers. Did Jesus heal the 10 lepers because he was evangelizing?

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

This was not evangelism. This was compassion. A soul was saved as a result of compassion. When we serve suffering humanity it must be the result of compassion. Love for people needs to be rooted in the master's love for humanity. There is danger if we de-link souls from humanity.

In this paper I will look at the three key words "Serving Suffering Humanity" from the context of my ministry in Singapore.

Suffering humanity – the Singapore context

Singapore was estimated to have a GDP per capita of US\$56,532 in 2010.¹ Using this measure as a basis, Singapore residents emerge as the richest people in the world. In an

¹ According to a report by Knight Frank and Citi Private Wealth measured by purchasing power parity

island-state of 3.6m population, an estimated 157,000² (or 1 in 20) of them are millionaires. Today, Singapore is commonly referred to as the Switzerland of the east.

Geographically, Singapore is blessed with no natural calamities albeit mild tremors coming from Indonesia. Its common grouch is the annual haze drifting from Sumatra. The ruling party has been governing the country since Independence in 1965. There are no riots in the streets. While homeland security is tight, there had been no incidence of violent terrorism in the island. Crime rates are so low that the police force ran campaigns with the tagline “low crime does not mean no crime”. Lush green landscaping permeates throughout the island. Home ownership is one of the highest in the world.

Other measurements on lifestyles point to a growing sophistication. There are more smartphones in Singapore than people and the proportion of these device owners having mobile broadband subscriptions happens to be the highest in the world as well. This begs the question – amidst the growing wealth and affluence, where are “suffering humanity” in Singapore?

In truth, Singapore is no paradise and the clues are telling. Despite its status as a rich nation, income equality is the highest compared to OECD countries³. The income gap is not only wide between the rich and the poor but is puzzlingly wide even between the richer and the rich. Hence, even millionaires in Singapore probably do not perceive themselves much of a big shot amidst their neighbours who own hundreds of millions in assets. Low income earners grapple to make sense of a city bustling with retail outlets displaying items of opulence. Singaporeans are one of the fastest walkers in this planet⁴ – a reflection of the pace of life.

The fertility rate in Singapore is 1.20 – lower than Japan’s 1.39 and significantly below the self-replacing rate of 2.1. Divorce rates are on the rise. More marriages are now being postponed and there are a growing number of single people. Compelling evidence of Singapore’s woes is found in Gallup research⁵ which showed Singapore to be the most emotionless and unhappy society in the world. Popular culture in Singapore⁶ is deeply inspired by cynicism – a reflection of perpetual and consistent unhappiness in the community.

² Source: <http://sg.finance.yahoo.com/news/singapore-ranks-10th-in-the-world-in-number-of-millionaires--report-114234326.html>

³ Source: <http://thehearttruths.com/2013/02/21/singapore-has-the-highest-income-inequality-compared-to-the-oecd-countries/>

⁴ Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/europe/05/02/walking.speeds/index.html>

⁵ Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158882/singapore-ranks-least-emotional-country-world.aspx>

⁶ Such as those expressed in local websites www.sgag.sg

While the island is populated with 5.5 million people, only 3.6 million comprise of citizens and permanent residents. A minority portion of the other 1.9 million is made up of professionals and high income earners. The majority includes domestic helpers, construction and manufacturing workers as well as retail service staff. Many of these migrant workers to Singapore are lured by the prospect of good income and would even surrender their entire fortune to pay for passage and work through shrewd and profiteering agents.

A spiritual perspective

How is it possible that a country deemed to be prosperous (with no risks of violence and crime) would end up being the unhappiest? Being a country with no natural resources, Singapore was early to recognize that manpower was its only resource. Meritocracy was quickly adopted as the key principle and philosophy in the way Singapore organizes itself. Naturally, Singapore is more than eager to benchmark its performance against those of its neighbouring countries across different aspects of development and using all possible indicators. (This is evident given the abundance of statistics comparing Singapore and the rest of the world as quoted in this paper!)

The hierarchical nature of Singapore is apparent in every aspects of living. Public housing is segmented by flats with different number of rooms built within each flat. Higher income earners would live in 5-room flats. The lowest income earners are 2-room flat renters.

For the longest time, schools were publicly ranked based on academic performances and students are streamed early in life based on their English, Mathematics, Sciences and mother tongue language scores. Military service is mandatory in Singapore and in the 2 years of service, soldiers in their late teens are ranked and sorted by different military vocations.

Cars are the most expensive in the world and any car purchase is made possible only with a successful bid for a certificate of entitlement (“COE”) which often amounts to tens of thousands of dollars and dictate the size of the car’s engine. Society can judge the net worth of an individual simply based on engine size of a car!

Covertly covetous

The strongest temptation that befalls a successful and hierarchically structured society is covetousness. The tenth commandment⁷ states that “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.” Ironically, this tenth commandment is probably the least preached about in Singapore. Sadly, Christianity is too often associated

⁷ Exodus 20:17

with popular prosperity-gospel churches and too often linked to newsworthy financial scandals.

In land-scarce, high-people density Singapore, competing against another for a certificate to own a car, to secure a vacancy in a reputable school, to being considered marriageable against other male suitors based on perceived net-worth induces an endless state of coveting.

Scripture has long prophesied⁸ that: “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and **pierced themselves with many griefs.**”

How does The Salvation Army serve suffering humanity in Singapore?

Fifty years ago, Singapore was poor in economic terms and the total population was much smaller. The Salvation Army, led by foreign officers and inspired local ones, was committed to meeting the needs in whatever ways possible. To meet needs, The Salvation Army in Singapore established residential homes for children- in-need and the aged. Its community programmes were targeted to reach out to the lower income groups. Today, Singapore’s population is much more complex and The Salvation Army has earned a respectable history and reputation for its social contributions.

Against the backdrop of a sophisticated economy is the support of a structured public service sector. The role of government influences wide areas. For example, each tree in Singapore is tagged with a serial number and is monitored for diseases and its growth is monitored and regulated. It is thus unsurprising that the authorities in Singapore asserts its influence on the social services sector, requiring institutions such as The Salvation Army to become more accountable for the use of public donations.

Yet, as a church, The Salvation Army neither grew in strength nor in influence. This has implications to its social programmes. A small soldiery base would imply smaller number of officers recruited. Over time, native Singapore officers aged and retired. Some existing officers resigned and the number of newly commissioned officers was so low that the School For Officers Training (“SFOT”) eventually closed its doors for a number of years. The soldiery too had aged over time and in almost all of the corps today, the youths make up the minority of the corps folk.

With a shortage of new officers and a stagnated soldiery base, the running of The Salvation Army social programs is now largely dependent on employees, many of whom are non-

⁸ 1 Timothy 6:9-10

salvationists. Thus, the notion of serving suffering humanity is understood and interpreted differently by these employees and not necessarily in the same vein as understood based on the values and context of salvationism.

With the growing influence of non-Salvation Army values guiding the social programmes, the dwindling count of Salvation Army officers and the higher accountability imposed by the state, The Salvation Army in Singapore eventually settled on its legacy structures and network of centres with key operational decision-making functions left to the interpretations of non-salvationist professionals and workers.

Today, the programmes of The Salvation Army in Singapore address the issues of a small segment of the resident population with several outreach programmes catered to foreign nurses. While the plight of those ministered by The Salvation Army in Singapore seems to suggest a state of suffering given their relatively difficult economic and social circumstances, their plight is not representative of the magnitude of the suffering faced by the community-at-large.

As I have explained, Singapore society is pierced with many grief, riddled with anxieties, hardened with cynicisms and confronted with self-seeking peer pressures. The Salvation Army, given its long tradition in addressing the needs of the economic poor, is less adapt to the work of exposing the spiritual bondages of affluence and preaching a gospel that promises spiritual freedom. At the core, the suffering of Singapore is a spiritual.

Serving – what it ought to be...

Service is core to the heartbeat of The Salvation Army's movement. While most large, contemporary churches strive to appeal to its congregation in a fashion aligned with consumerism – feel-good experiences, bright lights and sounds, emotional sermons, great music, etc – The Salvation Army has a culture rooted on salvationism; which is an 'ism', a way of life, a community culture and value system. Salvationists were taught at the onset that they were saved-to-serve. Serving (not consuming) is how a Salvationist should grow to be like Jesus.

This attitude must include our social services. A sense of ownership of the social services ministry ought to exist to those who vowed to defend Salvationism and what The Salvation Army stands for. In short, serving suffering humanity is first a spiritual burden of the soldiers of The Salvation Army. It is possibly the professional burden of employees – but the spiritual ownership has to be with the soldiery.

By soldiery, it should not be limited to soldiers of a particular corps that is tied to specific programs of a social services centre. Rather, the burden should be borne by a general sense

of ownership of all social services ministry by all soldiers. Having such a stakeholder model will require respective Salvation Army headquarters to ensure all corps to regularly arrange visits and engagements of corps folks in various social services centres. Serving is a church culture of The Salvation Army movement.

Reverend Timothy Keller of Redeemer City church describes⁹ a movement as one marked by an attractive, clear, unifying vision for the future. It is held together with a strong set of values or beliefs. The content of the vision must be compelling and clear so that others can grasp it readily. It must not be difficult that only a handful of people can articulate it. Instead, it must be something that all members of the movement can understand and passed virally to others. By contrast, "institutionalized" organizations are held together by rules, regulations, and procedures, not by a shared vision.

A soul loving Army

Despite the challenges and difficulties faced by The Salvation Army in Singapore, the question of Jesus to John remains: "Do you love me?" If so, "feed my lambs". No soldier can claim that he has the power to save souls. Only God saves. We are but the bearer of good news.

In this respect, I believe that having souls saved is not in question but to re-orientate soldier's attitude and understanding in serving suffering humanity. To hold the Word of God by their thoughts, words and deeds, so that people may be drawn to Christ by their exemplary character. Amongst others, they should live out the two greatest commandments of God: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind" and "love your neighbour as yourself." Deuteronomy 6:4, Luke 10:27

Yes, it is imperative that we love our Almighty God wholeheartedly, unreservedly and completely. Our love for our creator must correspond with God-given task to love souls as indicated by this second commandment.

When we realise truly and internalise fully the extent of Christ's sacrificial and redemptive love for souls, we will be most willing to be effective in serving, for the good of humanity. I strongly conclude that the foregoing are not merely quotations but they are theological truths which are tested and proven again and again. Surely we can read or hear testimonies of amazing conversions of men and women who repented and found new hope and purpose in Christ!

⁹ Source: http://redeemercitycity.com/blog/view.jsp?Blog_param=203