Exploring Moral and Social Issues through a “Kingdom Lens”

James E. Read

The Soldier’s Covenant is divided into two major parts: in the first part soldiers affirm The Salvation Army’s doctrines; in the second part they make a set of pledges about how they will live. The first of these pledges says, “I will make the values of the Kingdom of God and not the values of the world the standard for my life.” It’s a great thing to promise, but what is really meant by “the values of the Kingdom”? What is it to view life through a “Kingdom lens” rather than a “world lens”?

Most of the presentations in this symposium will answer that question by drawing our attention to issues, issues that are current or that are just over the horizon in the future, issues that—unlike the still-relevant issues of drug misuse and pornography—are critical social issues that are not specifically mentioned in the Soldier’s Covenant. This is essential work. Christian ethics must grapple with concrete realities and not satisfy itself with abstract generalities.

And yet, there is also something to be said for attending to generalities. It is worth asking whether there is a set of general values that, like a set of corrective eyeglass lenses, can focus the way Christians ought to think and behave, whatever the presenting issue. And if there are general values, what are they?

In one way, the Christian answer should be simple: there is one value, which, if not the only value, is the supreme value—namely, love. Consider the prominence that love has in the New Testament values scheme. John 3:16 says God loved the world so much he sent his Son into it to save it. Jesus identified the command to love as the greatest, and he said that all the law and prophets hang on the command to love God and love neighbor (Matthew 22:38-40). Echoing Jesus, the Apostle Paul said all the law could be summed up in the command to love the neighbor as oneself (Galatians 5:6), and furthermore that the only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:14). In the Fourth Gospel, the apostle John is called “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (e.g., John 13:23) and later, the leader of the community of the Beloved writes, “love one another as he [Jesus] commanded us” (1 John 3:23) adding that “whoever does not love their brother and sister…cannot love God.” (1 John 4:20)

So, in one way, the answer to the question what Kingdom values are to be the standard for one’s life should be simple. But in another way that simple, comprehensive answer, isn’t so simple; or so the theologians have said through the ages. The overview that follows makes that point, but I also offer the overview, selective as it is, to raise questions about how Salvationists and The Salvation Army understand love.

Augustine: Love as desire

As Augustine sees it, desire and attraction are part of human nature. One senses needs in oneself and believes that someone or something else can satisfy those needs. The attraction to that person or thing is love. In other words, love is grounded in the desire for something one lacks. However, says Augustine, there is only one object of love that is fully able to satisfy, and that is God. Human desiring is
restless until it finds its satisfaction in loving God whole-heartedly. Any other love, such as love for one’s neighbor or one’s spouse or any other love object, ought in some way to be oriented to God. Rightly ordered love is love that is either directly loving God or loving another as a way of (or as a means to) loving God. From an Augustinian perspective, loving the neighbor (or loving money or any other creation) for its own sake is misguided love. The ethical problem is not that people do not love; it’s that people get their loves out of order. So, for Salvationists, Augustine would ask whether we love rightly—is God the only one we love for himself? And (since love springs from need), do we know what need in us the neighbor is expected to satisfy? Do Salvationists love their neighbors so that we can better love God?

**Joseph Fletcher: Love as good deeds**

According to Joseph Fletcher as well, love is ultimately the sole moral value. However, Fletcher does not locate the value in the object of desire, but in the outcomes of action. Equating love with what results from one’s actions, Fletcher holds that there are no bad loves. As we know, behaviors that in one set of circumstances generate beneficial outcomes in another set of circumstances produce harm and heartache. As Fletcher sees things, the first behaviors are loving, the second are not. Irrespective of what one may have wanted or intended, it is the actual outcomes that determine whether one has acted lovingly or not. To apply the terminology of the Soldier’s Covenant to Fletcher: those who make the values of the Kingdom their measure will focus on results.

**John Wesley: Love as motivation and intention**

For John Wesley too, love is supreme among Christian values. Wesley locates love in the heart, however, not only in results. The inwardness of Wesley’s understanding of love is captured by General Albert Orsborn when he writes “Except I am moved with compassion, how dwelleth thy Spirit in me?” Wesley thinks that ethical maturity/perfection/holiness involves a transformation of human character, and that character is perfected when one’s will and emotions are wholly loving. Contrary to Fletcher, therefore, Wesley says one does not do something wrong when one makes an honest mistake and

---

1 “[Augustine] viewed human life as a quest for infinite satisfaction, fueled by a torrent of desire that cannot rest in anything less….The great danger that attends this quest, as Augustine sees it, is that we shall seek our infinite satisfaction, not in the invisible supreme Good, but in visible creatures that are by no means equipped to provide it.” (Adams 1999, 209)

2 “It is a question whether one person should be loved by another on his own account of for some other reason….In my opinion, he should be loved for another reason….A person who loves his neighbour properly should, in concert with him, aim to love God with all his heart, all his soul, and all his mind. In this way, loving him as he would himself, he relates his love of himself and his neighbour entirely to the love of God.” (Augustine 1999, Book One, XXII, 20)

3 “Love is the only universal. But love is not something we have or are, it is something we do. Our task is to act so that more good (i.e., loving-kindness) will occur than any possible alternatives.” (Fletcher 1966, 60-61)

4 “It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this, ‘The heaven of heavens is love.’ There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything more than love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way, and when you are asking others, ‘Have you received this or that blessings?’ if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent.” (Wesley 1968, 90)
inadvertently hurts the neighbor. The person and their action expresses love so long as the intention is pure and the motivation genuine.

Kinds of Love

Other Christian thinkers believe that there are fundamentally different kinds of love, and their question is which kind of love Jesus commands.

Kinds of Love: Søren Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard identifies Christian love as loving the neighbor as God has commanded. There are two parts to this assertion. First, says Kierkegaard, Christian love is the kind of love that can be commanded and done as a matter of duty, not of desire. Second, Kierkegaardian love is the completely impartial, indiscriminate love of the neighbor. “Anyone with whom I come in contact is my neighbor, and therefore I have a duty to love him or her.” Kierkegaardian love of neighbor is not a generalized love of humanity, however; love of neighbor is attachment to individuals in their particularity. This means it is not conditional on any particular facts about the neighbor or their situation. To drive home the point, Kierkegaard says “Men think that it is impossible for a human being to love his enemies, for enemies are hardly able to endure the sight of one another. Well, then, shut your eyes—and your enemy looks just like your neighbor.” Which is to say: as Kierkegaard sees it, Christians have a duty to love you as you, a unique person, but not because you are you. The love Christ commands is not blind to the differences between people, but it is not those differences that matter. If I express Kierkegaardian neighbor-love, it is not because you are lovable, but neither is it because you are unlovable; it is not because you are rich nor because you are poor; it is not because you live with privilege, but also not because you have been a victim of injustice. It strikes me that this may be different from the Salvation Army’s missional commitment to serve without discrimination. Would Kierkegaard applaud those Salvation Army officers who have made a vow to “love the unloved” (because in making the vow they recognize what they do as their duty), while at the same time questioning the implicit bias of a preferential option for loving the unloved?

Kinds of Love: Anders Nygren

Anders Nygren differentiates between agape and eros, and equates Christian love with agape. Although this is an oversimplification, we might see the heart of the difference in Nygren’s scheme as a difference

---

5 “The very mark of Christian love and its distinguishing characteristic is this, that it contains the apparent contradiction: to love is duty.” (Kierkegaard 1962, 40)
6 “Earthly love is qualified by its object [i.e., certain qualities in the beloved that attract one romantically], friendship is qualified by its object, love to one’s neighbor alone is qualified by love.” (Kierkegaard 1962, 77)
7 (Evans 2004)
8 “[neighbor-]love humbly turns itself outward, embracing all, yet loving everyone in particular (Kierkegaard 1962, 78)
9 (Kierkegaard 1962, 79)
10 https://bcm.salvationarmy.org.nz/officer-training/what-officer
between need-love (eros) and gift-love (agape). Human beings are not self-sufficient and find themselves drawn to things or to other people or God in order to fill up something they lack. The self is the centre of eros. The centre of God’s love, by contrast, is the other. God has no needs; God gets nothing from loving human beings; the divine love God extends to human beings is purely for their benefit. This, says Nygren, is agape. God in grace makes agape-love possible for human beings too. Perhaps it is not surprising to see in the Lutheran Anders Nygren echoes of Martin Luther himself who says: “the Apostle lays down this rule for a Christian life, that all our works should be directed to the advantage of others; since every Christian has such abundance through his faith, that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above, wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbor of spontaneous good will.” 11

Kinds of Love: C. S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis is another whose thinking explores different kinds of love in his book The Four Loves12. Like Nygren, Lewis names need-love and gift-love as two fundamental categories of love.13 Unlike Nygren, however, Lewis does not equate Christian love with gift-love and need-love with the human love. Human beings, in Lewis’s view, have a natural capacity for gift-love as well as need-love, and each is an element of human love for one’s family (which Lewis denominates “affection”), of one’s love of those who share interests (which he calls “friendship), and of one’s romantic love (which he calls “eros”). But, according to Lewis, when God graces these human loves with divine love (which he calls “charity”), they are transformed and are enabled to flourish. Divine love does not replace eros or friendship or affection—but saves them from themselves. Without divine love, family love, for instance, has the potential to envelop and consume idolatrously. Those who “live for their family” fall prey to affection’s demonic power14. Ditto for the other human loves. So to answer our opening question in Lewisian terms: making the values of the Kingdom of God the standard of our lives is not to give up romance or friendship or other natural loves as values of the world, but to discover how divine love (‘Charity’) enriches them and enables them to flourish.

Now, there is merit in all these perspectives. It would pay us to ask how they resonate with or creatively critique Salvation Army theory and lived experience. We note, for instance, that The Salvation Army has taught Wesleyan holy love as the transformation of the heart, but in a way that would please Fletcher it professes to “do the most good,” thus declaring results its metric. The Salvation Army has taught self-denying, non-discriminating service to “others” (which would perhaps draw admiration from

---

11 (Luther, lines 756-759)
12 a somewhat misleading title since the loves Lewis talks about number more than four.
13 (Lewis 1960, 11)To these Lewis adds appreciative-love, the sort of love distinctive of one who admires fine art. The admirer of the art admires it for its beauty, not for a need it satisfies in the admirer, nor for the gifts it can bring to the inanimate art. As Lewis sees it, the worship of God if it is truly worship is largely appreciative-love (Lewis 1960, 29-33).
14 “If Affection [of which love of family is the textbook example] is made the absolute sovereign of a human life the seeds will germinate. Love, having become a god, becomes a demon.” (Lewis 1960, 83)
Kierkegaard and Nygren), but would it disappoint Lewis and Augustine for neglecting the total devotion that is the worshipful love of God? In discussion we may pursue these questions.

Covenant Love: “full of grace and truth”; “abounding in love and faithfulness”

For the balance of this presentation, however, I would like to talk about what is either another kind of love, or if not another kind of love, other aspects of the love that is described when John’s gospel says of Jesus that he came, “full of grace and truth” and when Exodus reveals of Yahweh that he is “abounding in love and faithfulness.”15

The Greek word behind the English “grace” in John 1 is “charis” and behind “truth” is “aletheia.” These are themselves translations of the Hebrew “chesed” and “emeth.”16 and while I will begin by examining the words separately, they are frequently conjoined in the Bible.17 I will argue that the conjunction is important.

Covenant Love, part 1: chesed

So, first, chesed18. As Robert Adams notes, chesed draws two or three aspects of love to the surface:

1) chesed is a love that goes beyond what duty requires. “[Hesed] is used particularly often to speak of kindnesses (such as forgiveness) to which the agent is bound by not strict duty...If one does only one’s duty, narrowly construed, one may well have failed to show Hesed.”19

15 While this is an aside to my main interest here, a powerful commentary on John 1 notes that in using this phrase, John obliquely declares the divinity of Jesus. John 1 does so by saying that he is one with the God who disclosed himself to Moses as recorded in Exodus 34. “It is not surprising that the Evangelist takes this term [i.e. “full of grace and truth”] from the Old Testament; in the Prologue, not to mention the rest of the Gospel, there are several allusions to the Old Testament. John makes reference to the beginning and creation, and to Moses and the Law, as well as allusion to seeing God—or rather to the fact that no one has seen God at any time. When, therefore, John declares that the incarnate Word is full of grace and truth he is telling his readers to look for the meaning of this expression in the Old Testament, where it is descriptive of God.” (Kuyper 1964, 3)

16 I use the Greek and Hebrew words primarily to indicate the challenge there is in getting at what they signify. The challenge is made even clearer when we find experts debating the degree to which the NT Greek adequately translates the OT Hebrew.

17 Yahweh discloses himself as “abounding in chesed and emeth” in Exodus 34:6 (which is translated in John 1:14 as “full of charis and aletheia”). chesed and emeth are conjoined also in Psalm 25:10a and Psalm 89:14b; Gen 24:27; 32:10; 2 Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 3:6; Psalms 40:10-11; 57:10 61:7; 69:13; 85:10; 108:4; 115:1; 117:2; 138:2; Proverbs 3:3; 14:22; 16:6; 20:28; Isaiah 16:5; Hosea 4:1; Micah 7:20; Zechariah 7:9.

18 Chesed is transliterated “Hesed” by some authors (e.g., Robert Adams) and “hesed” by yet others (e.g., Glueck). It is hard for translators to find a single word in English that is chesed’s equivalent. In fact, finding no exact fit, Miles Coverdale coined the word “lovingkindness” for his 1535 translation of the Psalms. In the Old Testament chesed is primarily attributed to God; but it is used of inter-human relationships too (e.g., Genesis 24:14).

19 (Adams 1999, 172)
2) "Hesed is a loyal and dependable devotion...Hesed issues in particular acts of kindness, but they are done out of a commitment to a person whom one loves, or with whom one has, at least, a valued relationship."20 (Adams, p.171)

To these two we add a third.

3) “The type of commitment represented by Hesed is intimately connected with personhood or selfhood. In its ideal form it is extravagantly firm and open-ended, grounded in a non-comparative, unmeasured...valuing of the person”21 In other words, chesed is not only generous and committed love (points 1 and 2 above); especially in the Bible’s accounts, it is these things in the context of a covenanted relationship.22

What does this mean? We distinguish between two kinds of relationship. There are committed, dependable, even close, relationships that are contractual—relationships that exist for transactional purposes. And then there are covenantal relationships, which are more transformational than transactional. To illustrate: the relationship between house builders and house owners is contractual. The owners may or may not love the builders for the quality and timeliness of their work and may or may not engage their services in the future, but it is purely a transactional agreement, the exchange of money for services, that defines the relationship. Covenants, on the other hand, bind persons to each other in a way that alters their very identity. For instance, who I am as a person is husband to Laurie. Having now been married to Laurie for almost fifty years, I do not know who I would be other than that. From the moment of exchanging our wedding vows in covenant, the intention was that our identities would be changed. As the Bible puts it: “the two become one flesh.” To think our commitment to each other was purely for the exchange of “services” would be an insult and a mistake.

In the Bible, references to “the people of God” point to the identity of the people. Who they are (and who they have become) is inextricably bound up with the relationship they have with God. Entering into covenants, God’s identity has changed too. By covenant, God becomes the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob23; by a new covenant, the Lord Jesus becomes the Savior of the whole world. That’s God’s identity.

---

20 (Adams 1999, 171)
21 (Adams 1999, 172) As a paradigm example of this, we might note that Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is not because of their size or power or other winning qualities. See Deuteronomy 7:6-10.
22 Note that shortly after Yahweh’s self-disclosure in Exodus 34:6, Yahweh’s says to Moses, “I am making a covenant with you.” (Exodus 34:10)
23 Exodus 3:13-15: God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”
So, when the prologue to John’s gospel says that Jesus, the Word made flesh, came “full of grace” (i.e., full of *chesed*), we should interpret that as meaning that in Jesus there is a love that is a) generous, and b) dependable and c) personally transformative. *Chesed*-love, or that aspect of Christian love described by *chesed*, runs deep. “To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12) That is, the *chesed/charis* of which Jesus was “full” transforms the very identity of the people who are graced by it.24

Covenant Love, part 2: *emeth*

Now to turn to *emeth/aletheia*, the other term in John’s description of Jesus in John 1:14 and Yahweh’s self-description in Exodus 34:6. As many commentators say, to translate the Greek “aletheia” as “truth” is both accurate and misleading. Misleading if we think of truth as an attribute of propositions (as when we say “It’s true that 2 + 2 = 4.”) when it should first of all be thought of as an attribute of a relationship (as when in English we might say of someone that they are a “true friend”). Although the Hebrew “*emeth*” (of which *aletheia* is a translation in John 1:14) is sometimes translated “truth,”25 modern Bible translators believe that “faithfulness” gives its sense more accurately in contemporary English.26 So Glueck says “whenever ḫesed appears together with ḫemeth or ḫemunah, the quality of loyalty inherent in the concept of ḫesed is emphasised.”27 This may be very helpful in directing us in our reading of John 1:14. Our attention is drawn to the constancy, reliability, and faithfulness of the love of Jesus as he “move[s] into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, MSG).

And yet, if we understand *emeth or aletheia* simply as “faithfulness” we may overlook the importance of factual truth in covenantal love relationships. Veracity in love is very important. Relationships predicated on lies or on an “economical use of the truth” cannot be loving. The spouse or friend or political authority who withholds the truth betrays the other person(s) and betrays the relationship, even if withholding the truth is done for beneficial reasons, and even if the fact that truth has been withheld is never discovered.

Minimizing the importance of truth-telling as an ingredient of relationships is very old28. Genesis says the snake won by questioning whether God spoke truth to Eve and Adam, and thereby undermined the original divine-human relationship. Jesus called the devil the father of lies (John 8:44), and outed religious hypocrites (see, e.g., Matthew 23). When Pilate asked, “What is truth?” he was not posing a knarly epistemological question. Pilate was saying, “What has truth to do with it?” Although he had no true reason to find Jesus guilty when Jesus was before him for judgment, Pilate had lots of reason to seek a political victory. *And that* was the basis for sentencing Jesus. Pilate loved power and position

24 “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.” (1 Peter 2:10)

25 That, for example, is the way the KJV translates Exodus 34:6: “The LORD God,... abundant in goodness and *truth*”

26 Whereas the KJV translates all 37 appearances of *emeth* in the Psalms by “truth” or “true,” the NIV translates 21 of them by “faithful/ness”.


28 The Oxford Dictionary people were only catching up when they declared “post-truth” the word of the year for 2016.
over people, so truth could be sacrificed. Consequently, whatever relationship Pilate had with the people, caring little about truth, it could not be a love relationship.

The global COVID-19 pandemic is fraught with the tension over whether facts are important. Because the COVID virus is a new pathogen and because science is being discovered on the fly, it has been easy for those who desire power and popularity to play selectively with the truth. As a result I think we are in the midst of a real-life object lesson about the connection between truth-telling and covenant love, between emeth and chesed, between aletheia and charis. Those who want to make the values of the Kingdom rather than the values of the world their standard will resist the pressure to disconnect these two. It will not be done on earth as it is in heaven otherwise.

To sum up:

Whether love is the only Kingdom value or not, the Scriptures clearly teach the centrality of love.29 Not every kind of love, however. Exactly what kind of love is central, or exactly what comprise all the dimensions of that love is not as clear as the fact that love of some sort is central to Christian being and Christian doing. As I have said earlier, I believe there is merit in considering what Augustine and Wesley and Fletcher and Kierkegaard and Nygren and Lewis and myriad others have proposed for our better understanding. And not only for our better cognition, but for our better action as Salvationists and as a Salvation Army.

I have added a reflection on the love that is manifested in Jesus’ coming to the world “full of grace and truth,” as the NIV English translation of John 1:14 puts it. I have started to unpack the concepts of chesed and emeth as facets of what I have called “covenantal love” because I believe it to be a (if not “the”) value of the Kingdom. The chief reason for doing that in this context is to invite the participants in this symposium to consider whether using a lens of covenantal love could make a difference to Salvationists and The Salvation Army. Using that lens, I find myself asking whether our actions, while generous, are more transactional than transformational; whether The Salvation Army and Salvationists aspire to do the most good at the expense of long-term faithful relationships; whether we are moved by compassion but guard ourselves against a two-way transformation that would see our selves changed those on the receiving end of our compassion. To put it another way: when we sign the Soldier’s Covenant, do we understand what it is to covenant, and do we understand whom God calls us to covenant with?

29 One might question this claim. In their widely-used textbook Kingdom Ethics, Glen Stassen and David Gushee answer the kingdom values question by saying “seven marks of the kingdom were important to Jesus and should be important to his followers: deliverance/salvation, justice, peace, healing, restoration/rebuilding of community, joy, and the experience of God’s presence.” (Gushee and Stassen 2016, 10) “Love” does not appear as a “mark of the kingdom” until chapter 6 of Stassen and Gushee’s book. At that point, they say “Christlike love is one of the central virtues, one of the central convictions, in our version of Christian ethics.” (Gushee and Stassen 2016, 107; emphasis added)


