

**Theological options for an understanding of  
engagement with the poor  
and the marginalised  
as a sacrament in The Salvation Army**

For the examination of

**Master of Theology (Qualifying)**

**Student:** Jason Davies-Kildea

**Advisor:** Rev Dr Frank Rees

Evangelical Theological Association

31<sup>st</sup> August, 2004

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
<b>AN OVERVIEW OF SACRAMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
What is a Sacrament?	3
Christ as Sacrament	5
Church as Sacrament	6
The Poor as Sacrament	7
<b>SACRAMENTS IN THE SALVATION ARMY</b>	<b>7</b>
Historical Background	7
Ceasing the sacraments	8
Salvationist Sacramentalism	9
A Sacramental Way of Life	9
<b>THEOLOGICAL OPTIONS – SOME WAYS FORWARD</b>	<b>10</b>
The Sacrament of the Good Samaritan	10
Compassion for the Poor	11
A Sacramental Mission	12
Finding Christ in the Poor	13
Incarnation	13
A Christology of the Poor	15
Implications for Missiology	16
The Challenge of the Poor to the Church	17
The Sacrament of God In Us	18
Sketches of the Sacrament	19
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>22</b>

## Introduction

This essay will consider whether it is possible to construct an understanding of engagement with the poor and the marginalised as a sacrament. In order to guide the theological options which will form the basis for that understanding, it will first be necessary to establish a working definition of sacrament. From this point, it becomes feasible to begin to unpack how a particular idea of sacrament might be understood in relation to the specific ecclesial position of The Salvation Army and its engagement in mission with the poor.

This essay is *not* intended to be a comprehensive ‘sacramental theology’. Instead, it will explore the concept of sacrament as a key to understanding the interaction between God and humanity in the midst of mission. It is hoped that the results of this exploration may give Salvationists a useful framework for understanding their own denomination’s engagement in mission from a theological point of view. In addition, recognition of the sacramental character of The Salvation Army’s mission may be valuable to ecumenical dialogue in which the Army have sometimes been seen as sacramentally ‘poor’ or ‘deficient’.

The first section of the essay will briefly survey some ideas of sacrament including the notions that Christ, the Church and the poor can be understood as sacraments. The historical background of The Salvation Army with regard to sacramental observance will be discussed, as will the basis for the Salvationist understanding of “a sacramental way of life”. Finally, some foundations for understanding engagement with the poor and the marginalised as sacramental will be discussed through the complementary concepts of finding Christ in the poor and acting on God’s behalf as we help those in need.

For the purposes of this essay, the definition of ‘the poor’ will extend beyond those who are financially impoverished to include those who are poor because their access to the benefits afforded to the majority of society is significantly reduced. Jürgen Moltmann gives a useful definition when he says that the poor are those “who have nothing to live for and to whom life has nothing to offer. The poor are all who are at the mercy of others, and who live with empty and open hands”.<sup>1</sup> In addition to those suffering the direct effects of poverty, people on the margins of Australian society include, amongst others, intravenous drug users, sex workers, people with AIDS, people with mental health issues, ex-offenders, people with disabilities, the homeless, aboriginal people, and refugees. Consistent with Moltmann’s understanding of ‘the poor’, these are people who incur the effects of social marginalisation and are disenfranchised from conventional social structures.

## An Overview of Sacraments

### What is a Sacrament?

There are many discrepancies of opinion about the number and type of sacraments which are regarded as authentic in different parts of the church. There are, however, some common themes which repeatedly arise and while these may not be considered to represent a complete consensus, they will suffice for the purposes of this essay.

One of the uniting factors in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, which are shared by most churches, is that these are grounded in the example of Jesus. In the moment of participation in these sacraments, the believer is emulating an act of Jesus, if not carrying out an act of obedience to his

---

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SMC Press, 1977), 79.

command. For The Salvation Army, this motivation is no different. When we engage in mission with the poor and the marginalised, we also follow Jesus in both example and command.

The role of the Holy Spirit with regard to sacraments is also worthy of some discussion here. With regard to baptism, the New Testament speaks of both water baptism and a baptism of the Spirit. These are not to be taken either as identical or contingent but neither are they unrelated. Both speak of an entry into something new, a symbolic rebirth aligned with the resurrection. Both entail relationship with the community of faith. Similarly, the Eucharist and the Spirit share common meaning in mediating Christ's presence within that community.

A sacramental understanding of The Salvation Army's engagement with the poor and the marginalised must also demonstrate recognition of the role of the Spirit in this sacrament. One of the significant differences between this understanding and the commonly recognised sacraments is that the Salvationist sacrament will most often take place outside the confines of a church; it is not bound to working exclusively within the community of faith. From a pneumatological point of view, this acknowledges that the Spirit is not restricted solely to the church and may (and does) act outside the church. In this, we agree with John Taylor who says that "in any dialogue between the church and the world, or between Christians and men of other faiths, the Holy Spirit is speaking in *both* participants".<sup>2</sup>

Finally, on the role of the Holy Spirit, it must be acknowledged that it is this Spirit that drives us into the mission which is represented here sacramentally. Just as Jesus, after being baptised, was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, so are we driven to stand up for the poor and seek justice for the oppressed. Once again, it is Taylor who comments insightfully that "to live in the Spirit is to be agonizingly aware of the contrast between what is and what should be".<sup>3</sup> The Spirit nourishes that which is prophetic inside us, calling us to stand against oppressive powers and structures on behalf of the powerless and voiceless.

A helpful definition of sacrament is offered by John Macquarrie, who uses the traditional Anglican form from the *Book of Common Prayer* to describe it as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace".<sup>4</sup> This statement appears to gather together some of the more substantial elements of a common sacramental understanding.

For instance, a sacrament is certainly something visible. It is something tangible and definable. Its existence can be verified or measured in some way. What the sacrament represents is often a little more elusive – which is both reason and purpose for the sacrament's very existence. The visible and externally verifiable presence of the sacrament creates an important link to that which is invisible and therefore otherwise difficult to quantify. However, there is more to this link. Although the sacrament, for the most part, is not held to perform any magical function<sup>5</sup>, it may through its very visibility and corporeality open up the meaning of that which it represents in a vital way. The sacrament *points* to a greater reality than itself and also helps us to *participate* in that reality in some way. Marcello Azevedo comments on the significance of this link when he notes that "a sacrament is a sign of something really present, the visible form of an invisible grace. It is an efficacious sign, *producing or intensifying the reality it signifies* (italics mine). The sacraments,

---

<sup>2</sup> John Taylor *The Go Between God* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 181.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor *The Go Between God*, 96.

<sup>4</sup> John Macquarrie *A guide to the Sacraments* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 4.

<sup>5</sup> There are certainly instances where a sacrament has been considered to be capable of producing the miraculous, however these exceptions are not the focus of this essay.

then, contain the grace they signify, and confer the grace they contain.”<sup>6</sup> Macquarrie seems to agree that the link between the visible and the invisible is the key to the efficacy of the sacrament. He says that “It is in this living immersion in the sacrament by doing it that we penetrate its meaning and realize that it is a meaning that takes us beyond words, a meaning that puts us in touch with the reality of God.”<sup>7</sup>

This reality of God is not something otherworldly which invalidates or denigrates our experience in this world. It is not simply that through the sacramental experience we begin to touch a spiritual world which is better or more holy than our earthly realm. Rather, the sacrament calls us to recognise the reality of God in the world around us and in ourselves. Macquarrie importantly emphasizes this directional response when he says that “A true sacrament includes the *res* or inward reality. Indeed this is the very heart of the sacrament. A sacrament fulfils its intention when it effects its reality in the life of the believer”<sup>8</sup>. This makes it clear that the sacrament is not an end in itself, but rather the purpose of the sacrament is tied explicitly to its effect in a person’s life. The sacrament calls us to be changed by entering into God and through God into life in a new way.

It is through the sacrament that we begin to be able to touch the untouchable in the world around us and appreciate the significance of theological and Christological themes which, without this grounding in reality, continue to elude us. It is because of this that the Salvationist can say that “A sacrament is an event in which the truths of our faith move into something that is quite beyond theological formulation and our attempts at comprehension. It brings the Incarnation to our doorstep.”<sup>9</sup> This incarnational theme is fundamental to a Salvationist sacramental understanding. The sacrament is the place in which we meet with God; it is the vehicle of God’s perfect grace to us through the imperfect medium of the world we in which we live. When we say that engagement with the poor is sacramental, we are saying specifically that we encounter God’s presence in mission with the poor.

If a sacrament is a visible symbol of something which would otherwise be hidden, then there are two key concepts of sacrament which stand out amongst the others. The first is the idea of Christ as a sacrament and the second is the church as a sacrament. The continuity between these two is well summarised by Azevedo who states simply that “Christ is the sign and visible presence of the invisible God ... the Church is the sign and visible presence of Christ”.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these two, we will also discuss a third concept, the poor as sacrament.

## **Christ as Sacrament**

At one level, the idea of Christ as the primordial sacrament is encapsulated quite neatly in the theme of Incarnation: Christ is the visible, fleshly, tangible, human presence of the invisible, ethereal and intangible God. Yet, because the reality of Christ incorporates even more than the person of Jesus of Nazareth, it may be said uniquely of this sacrament, illustrated clearly by Karl Rahner when he says that “in his historical existence (Christ) is both reality and sign”.<sup>11</sup> So, while the primary understanding of Christ here regards the symbolic aspect of sacrament, it would be overly simplistic

---

<sup>6</sup> Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 216.

<sup>7</sup> Macquarrie, *A guide to the Sacraments*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Macquarrie, *A guide to the Sacraments*, 47.

<sup>9</sup> The Salvation Army *Salvation Story – Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine* (London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1995), 113.

<sup>10</sup> Azevedo *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil*, 216

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Kenan B. Osborne *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 85.

to suggest that Christ exists only as a sign which pointed to that which was greater than himself. At the same time, Christ is the reality being pointed to, that is, he points to himself as the incarnation of God.

Edward Schillebeeckx interprets the sacramental presence of Christ in a soteriological context so that he defines sacraments as “the face of redemption turned visibly towards us, so that in them we are truly able to encounter the living Christ. The heavenly saving activity, invisible to us, becomes visible in the sacraments”<sup>12</sup> and further that, “Because this divine power to save appears to us in visible form, the saving activity of Jesus is sacramental. For a sacrament is a divine bestowal of salvation in an outwardly perceptible form which makes the bestowal manifest; a bestowal of salvation in historical visibility.”<sup>13</sup> This link between sacrament and salvation is an important one, central to the idea of Christ as sacrament, but also applicable to other sacraments as will be discussed later.

It is important to note that the idea of Christ as sacrament is not something bound within the confines of past history, but rather Christ’s ongoing sacramental presence amongst us compels us to live differently in the here and now. Each moment is a potentially sacramental encounter with this Christ who as “the one, true, original Sacrament, invites us to the ordinary, the common stuff of human existence, invites us to where he entered the scene in a stable, ... to where he sat at a humble table with family and friends, sinners and outcasts”.<sup>14</sup> It is through the symbolic action of imitating Christ in reaching out to the marginalised and working to bring healing to those who are in pain and suffering that we in turn, as the Church, may also become sacramental in our everyday lives.

### **Church as Sacrament**

The next step beyond understanding Christ as a sacrament is recognising that which is sacramental in the church. Firstly, the church points to Christ, as Jesus points to the Father. The church continues to symbolise Christ long after the human form of Jesus ceased to walk this earth. Furthermore, just as Christ is the vehicle for God’s salvation, the church holds the capacity to be the vehicle for passing on this grace.

Clearly though, it is not every act of the church which is sacramental. Only in those actions which are consistent with the person of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom does the church become sacramental. So when Schillebeeckx says that “a sacrament is the saving action of Christ in the visible form of an ecclesial action”<sup>15</sup>, he also needs to clarify that the “validity of a sacrament is therefore simply its authenticity as an act of the Church as such”.<sup>16</sup> This authenticity is gained to the extent that the sacrament reflects the one toward whom it points as a sign.

The church takes the sacrament of Christ into itself and through his Spirit makes itself an ongoing, corporate presence of that sacrament. The church as a sacrament acts as a revelation of God within and to the community of faith and to the rest of the world: it is a witness to itself as it points to and participates in Christ.

---

<sup>12</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx *Christ the Sacrament of encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 52.

<sup>13</sup> Schillebeeckx *Christ the Sacrament of encounter with God*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> The Salvation Army *Salvation Story – Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine* (London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1995), 113.

<sup>15</sup> Schillebeeckx *Christ the Sacrament of encounter with God*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## The Poor as Sacrament

Just as Christ and the church represent examples of a special kind of sacrament, a human sacrament, Liberation theologians propose another instance of this particular classification – the poor as sacrament.

A sacramental understanding of the poor builds upon the idea of church as sacrament, giving it a specific focus rooted in a Christology of the poor and resulting in a missiological impetus to working with the poor. This call to stand with the poor is the essence of the outward sign of the sacrament, a sign which reflects the reality of the crucified Christ and finds hope in the resurrection. Pixley and Boff identify the missiological and soteriological significance of this sacrament when they say that, “In effect, faced with the poor, human beings are called to love, service, solidarity and justice. So receiving this sacrament is bitter to the taste. Yet it remains the only ‘sacrament’ absolutely necessary for salvation.”<sup>17</sup> The poor as a sacrament call us into mission with them and at the same time open a path to salvation.

The link between the poor and the church as sacrament is well expressed by Jon Sobrino when he says that:

Paraphrasing the terminology of sacramental theology, I might say that the Spirit is present in the poor *ex opera operato*, though this in no way means simply that with the poor as members the Church will come to exist as the authentic Church. What it does mean is that the Spirit manifests itself in the poor and that they are therefore structural channels for finding the truth of the Church and the direction and content of its mission.<sup>18</sup>

The poor, then, give specific content and direction to the church and validate the sacrament of the church by giving it authenticity and integrity as they tie the church’s mission today to the mission of Christ.

## Sacraments in The Salvation Army

We will now move on to consider the distinctive position of The Salvation Army with regard to sacraments. This will entail discussion of some of the reasons for initially deciding to eliminate the sacraments as regular components of corporate worship, as well as some of the alternative ideas of sacrament which have existed in The Salvation Army until now.

### Historical Background

Whilst there are differences in sacramental practice throughout the many parts of the Christian Church, The Salvation Army maintains a distinctly minority position (with the Quakers)<sup>19</sup> by not practicing the common sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. This ecclesiological position is not intended to create division with other churches, but arose from the specific context in which The Salvation Army originated. From this point forward, we will examine that position in its historical framework, along with the immediate implications and theological options for an alternate understanding of sacramentality within The Salvation Army.

---

<sup>17</sup> Clovovis Boff and George Pixley *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 114

<sup>18</sup> Jon Sobrino *The True Church and the Poor* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 95.

<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that the Quakers have different historical and theological reasons for not practicing the sacraments. For the Quakers, a mystical spirituality rejects any mediated access to God.

## Ceasing the sacraments

The decision by the founder of The Salvation Army, William Booth, to cease practicing the sacraments in 1883 has largely been explained in the negative. Because ‘no sacrament can rightly be seen as a condition of salvation’,<sup>20</sup> then to practice the sacraments only obfuscates the real meaning and path of salvation in Christ. Booth’s wife, Catherine, who was also a determined preacher and evangelist, shared a similar conclusion and was perhaps one of the key influences in Booth’s decision. Catherine “reasoned that all of life is a visible sign of God’s invisible grace and no particular observance was needed to have access to that free grace”.<sup>21</sup> There were, however, a number of secondary reasons which may have been just as important to Booth. The example and influence of the Society of Friends (Quakers) on the burgeoning movement gave precedence to a church which did not practice the sacraments. In addition, the observance of the sacraments was already seen to be a divisive issue within the wider Church on a number of levels. This was further complicated by the Army’s stance on the equality of women because there were some who would have refused to accept the sacrament from a female officer. Finally, the fact that many of The Salvation Army’s original converts were converted drunkards gave a real hesitation to any ceremony involving wine (even when it was substituted by grape juice).<sup>22</sup>

The decision was essentially to place the priority for the Salvationist on the inward experience of God’s grace, rather than on the outward ritual which symbolised it.

Salvationists share a concept of ‘assurance of salvation’, something common to expressions of the Holiness Movement. This is articulated in the eighth doctrine of The Salvation Army which says that “We believe that we are justified by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and *he that believeth hath the witness in himself*” (sic, italics mine). This internal assurance, while not a rejection of the symbolic nature of the sacrament, does firmly place the emphasis on personal experience rather than on any outward symbol.

Of course, in many ways The Salvation Army soon developed its own rituals which could be seen as replacements for the traditional sacraments. Norman Murdoch notes that “When the army ceased practicing sacraments, Booth invented rites performed only by officer-clergy, thus perpetuating a sacramental tradition after he had set aside the historical rites of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>23</sup> The dedication of children replaced infant christening, the swearing in of soldiers replaced adult baptism, the use of the mercy seat was a sacramental place of grace and even “the uniform was seen by William and Catherine Booth as sacramental”.<sup>24</sup> However, the overall aim of reducing the emphasis on ritual and ceremony held firm and the meaning of sacrament became for the Salvationist something significantly more dynamic and far reaching than any liturgical device could be seen to provide.

Where the ‘danger’ of ritual for the Salvationist might have been seen to lay in the potential for misunderstanding the priority of the inner experience over the outward symbolic action, the response was to find the sacramental potentiality inherent in life – particularly where that life stood alongside those who were suffering or in need.

---

<sup>20</sup> William Booth, 1883 quoted in Shaw Clifton *Who are these Salvationists? An analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Alexandria: Crest Books, 1999), 58.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Green “Facing History: Our Way Ahead for a Salvationist Theology” *Word and Deed* Vol 1, No.2 (1999): 30.

<sup>22</sup> See The Salvation Army *The Sacraments – The Salvationist’s Viewpoint* (London: Salvationist Publishing and Supplies, 1960) p.2ff

<sup>23</sup> Norman Murdoch *Origins of The Salvation Army* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 66.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Green “Facing History: Our Way Ahead for a Salvationist Theology”, 31.

## Salvationist Sacramentalism

Though The Salvation Army has been seen as non-sacramental and even anti-sacramental, some prominent Salvation Army theologians have strongly refuted this stance, maintaining The Salvation Army's historical position on withholding the ritual practice of traditional sacraments, but finding a deeper sacramentality elsewhere.

From a critical perspective, the Army's view recognises a risk in the ritual practice of sacraments which must not be allowed to distract from Christ's real presence among us. Further to this, Christ should not be allowed to be limited by sacramental observance. Salvationists bear continual witness to the reality of the Spirit's presence beyond the celebration of the traditional sacraments. Lars Lydholm builds upon Schillebeeckx' primordial sacrament language when he explains this:

The Army's view is really an 'ur-sakrament' theology. Jesus Christ is the primordial/original sacrament and at a time where the discussion of the two sacramental signs threatened to 'block the way' to the one true sacrament – Jesus Christ, the Army ceased practicing the two sacramental signs. The Salvation Army's theology can be seen as an attempt to formulate a 'primordial-sacrament' theology that wants to bear witness to the fact that the grace of God also reaches people 'outside' the two traditional sacramental signs.<sup>25</sup>

As discussed previously, the history of The Salvation Army shows several reasons why Booth chose to cease practising the traditional sacraments; however the result of this was to open up a range of new possibilities of sacramental understanding implicit in everyday life. Phil Needham gives a valuable description of this open sacramentality when he says "The true miracles are the sacramental moments where the bread and wine of the common life become the media of transcendence, the places where new creations come into being, the encounters where we share the deepest communion with God, or his family, or his world."<sup>26</sup> Here, again, we see highlighted the idea that the essence of sacramentality for the Salvationist is about finding God in the midst of life.

## A Sacramental Way of Life

In response to a World Council of Churches document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* which sought to draw out commonalities in sacramental understanding between churches, The Salvation Army was challenged to present its own viewpoint. The book *One Faith, One Church* details this viewpoint which is essentially "no other than an expression of Salvationist self-understanding, an explanation of The Salvation Army's scripturally based non-sacramental worship but sacramental way of life".<sup>27</sup> The distinction lies between the ritual practice of sacraments and an understanding of sacramentality which is potentially present in the whole of life. It is, as Shaw Clifton has observed, "a sacramentalism free from ritual, independent of formal outward observances and material elements".<sup>28</sup>

This class of sacrament, as a sign or symbol, begins with an attempt to follow the example of Jesus – particularly in compassionate response to those in need. Where other denominations established the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist as ordinances based upon either a mirroring of Christ's actions or a direct commandment from Scripture, The Salvation Army chose as the priority to

<sup>25</sup> Lars Lydholm "Theology of God the Son" *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002): 18-19.

<sup>26</sup> Phil Needham "Kingdom of the Risen Lord in a World Searching for a Future" *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002): 36.

<sup>27</sup> The Salvation Army *One Faith, One Church – An insight into The Salvation Army's response to World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No 111 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (London: The Salvation Army, 1990), 3.

<sup>28</sup> Shaw Clifton *Who are these Salvationists? An analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Alexandria: Crest Books, 1999), 59.

follow Christ in his teaching and actions towards the poor and the marginalised. Clifton illustrates this point of view well when he comments that, “At best a Christlike life would be seen as ‘sacramental’... It is the Army’s belief that such a life actually imparts and channels grace to others since, by the Holy Spirit, the real presence of Christ indwells the believer.”<sup>29</sup>

General Albert Orsborn picks up the theme of the sacramental life, particularly with reference to the Eucharist, in what has been called the ‘sacramental song of The Salvation Army’. These words are still sung regularly all around the world from *The Songbook of The Salvation Army*:

My life must be Christ’s broken bread,  
My love his outpoured wine,  
A cup o’erfilled, a table spread  
Beneath his name and sign,  
That other souls, refreshed and fed,  
May share his life through mine.<sup>30</sup>

## Theological Options – Some Ways Forward

In the preceding section, the idea of a sacramentalism potentially present in the midst of everyday life has been discussed. It is not helpful for explanation or for application, to leave this definition of Salvationist sacramentalism unnecessarily broad or vague. The next section will examine, in more detail, some theological options for an understanding of engagement with the poor and the marginalised as a sacrament in The Salvation Army. A few of these ideas, like ‘the sacrament of the Good Samaritan’, have their roots in the origins of The Salvation Army. Other ideas are inspired by more recent movements such as Liberation Theology. Together, these theological options identify The Salvation Army’s mission with the poor as sacramental.

### The Sacrament of the Good Samaritan

The specific understanding of sacramentalism that will be discussed here relates to engagement with the poor and the marginalised, which William Booth used to call ‘the sacrament of the Good Samaritan’. This was, according to Booth, “a sacrament in which God’s people could – and should – actively share.”<sup>31</sup>

Booth had served his apprenticeship with a pawnbroker and this only served to confirm for him the depths of human need. When he decided to become a full-time evangelist, he began in the poorest areas of East London amongst those who could never find a place in the respectable churches of his time. It did not take long for Booth to realise the difficulties of preaching the gospel to people who were hungry, homeless or drunk. “Gradually the idea of salvation and social reform marching hand in hand was beginning to dominate his life, even though he had no steady view about remedies for the poverty he had grown to hate.”<sup>32</sup> It is in this context that the debate about sacraments arose within the early Salvation Army and new ideas began to form about the meaning of sacrament.

If the potential for sacramentality could be seen to exist within the depths of everyday life, it was through service to ‘suffering humanity’ that Booth determined to plumb these depths. “Early

<sup>29</sup> Clifton *Who are these Salvationists?*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Orsborn in *The Song Book of The Salvation Army*, Song no. 512.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Coutts *No Discharge in This War: A one volume history of The Salvation Army* (London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1994), 120.

<sup>32</sup> Hattersley, Roy *Blood and Fire – William and Catherine Booth and Their Salvation Army* (Little, Brown and Co.: London, 1990), 161.

Salvationists ... were compelled to join (God) in the trenches of spiritual warfare among the dying wrecks of human society around the world, believing that in this radical incarnation which was still going on through them lay the divine power to save the world.”<sup>33</sup>

As representatives of Christ in the world, Salvationists had a duty to call attention to injustice and show compassion to the needy. “Booth sought to bring Jesus Christ to the poor, clothed in the flesh of every soldier and officer in The Salvation Army, that they may convey to the poor the ‘living bread’ of heaven.”<sup>34</sup> It was this incarnational understanding that held together the dual mission of The Salvation Army, symbolised by the motto ‘heart to God and hand to man’ (sic). The record of the International Social Council in 1921 offers the following comment from Florence Booth, wife of General Bramwell Booth and Superintendent to the ‘homes for fallen women’: “In each land, in opening up our Social operations, we set out to help and reach, so far as possible, all kinds of needy ones – the hungry people, all who lack ... Our effort is to give the touch that will reveal the power of Christ to the individual.”<sup>35</sup>

This theme has not ceased even up to the present day, as a more recent General, Paul Rader points out: “It is the nature of the holiness experience and the Army’s ethos of compassionate engagement with the sin and suffering of the world in the name and spirit of Christ, to make the whole of life a sacramental offering.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Compassion for the Poor**

To look only at the role of the Salvationist or the helper in the interaction with the poor and the marginalised, however, would be to miss a proper appreciation of the part which the assaulted traveller has to play in the Sacrament of the Good Samaritan. When we acknowledge God’s presence in missional engagement with the poor, we are saying that the person in need contributes to this sacramental encounter as much as the person in the helping role. This is why the engagement is *with* the poor and not *to* the poor. This is the significance of Christ’s presence *in* the poor. Both sides are drawn beyond themselves in a mutuality of giving and receiving.

It is in the context of this mutuality that we should understand Jesus’ words in Luke’s gospel: “Forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:37b-38). There is a correspondence between giving and receiving here which captures the reciprocal nature of the sacrament.

Yet it is not the reward of common giving and receiving which inspires anyone to enter into this sacrament. The spirit of compassionate response is bolstered by an appropriate understanding of the person in need. The record of *The International Social Council* once more shows the manner expected of those who would represent The Salvation Army:

In every Social Officer there should be manifest a love that keeps him (sic) in touch with those we seek to help; love that is willing to specialize on the particular class of people we cater for; love that concentrates...Love that ministers to the needs of the people, that seeks to know their condition – physical, mental,

---

<sup>33</sup> John Rhemick *A New People of God – A Study in Salvationism* (Des Plaines: The Salvation Army, 1984), 198.

<sup>34</sup> John Rhemick *A New People of God*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> The Salvation Army *The International Social Council 1921* (London: The Salvation Army, 1921), 89.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Rader “The Salvation Army and Missiology” *Word and Deed* Vol 3, No.2 (2001): 17.

spiritual. A love that understands. Nothing but the Divine nature will enable us to meet these requirements.<sup>37</sup>

The Salvation Army has a proud tradition of working with the most disadvantaged people in our society. Whilst this in part reflects a desire to imitate Christ's association with the poor and the marginalised, it also reflects a practical and theological presupposition about those whom we serve. When we help a person in need, we value human dignity in a way which surpasses philanthropic concern. Paul Bollwahn says of this service that "Serving people in need affirms our belief in the creation of humankind in the image and likeness of God."<sup>38</sup> In the midst of the helping encounter there is an engagement between God and humanity which reflects the very core of our created being. It is through this particular type of service that the Salvationist discovers the image of God in the person in need and by compassionate response to that person, they enter the sacrament of the Good Samaritan.

### **A Sacramental Mission**

In The Salvation Army, a meeting place may be found between the sacrament of the church and the sacrament of the poor. Founded as a church of the poor, the central mission of The Salvation Army is still tied inextricably to the most disadvantaged in our society. In mission with the poor, The Salvation Army find God as they strive to represent Christ to others. Needham illustrates this idea well when he says that:

God does not work within the dichotomy of sacred/secular – a dichotomy sometimes perpetuated by a false understanding of 'the sacrament' as a transformational miracle that only takes place within the precincts of a high altar. This is the reason Salvationists are pan-sacramentalists. This is the reason they pursue worldly holiness. A holy person is one who sees the hidden miracles and observes the sacraments of God at work in the world and in people's lives. In that sense, he communes more deeply with the world than anyone and is more worldly than anyone. The true miracles are in the common life, and the strategy of relentless hope is to expect them.<sup>39</sup>

Needham has usefully linked a Wesleyan concept of holiness, a social holiness which intentionally engages with the world for the kingdom's sake, and the sacramental experience, where the invisible God becomes visible through a common medium. For Needham, we experience the sacramental as we work to transform the world around us with a hope that is grounded in the experience of God.

One of the dangers of such a sacramental understanding in an activist organisation such as The Salvation Army is recognised by Lydholm who comments that "the argument of 'sacramental living – the sacrament of serving' places too much attention on 'our side' – the human agent. From a traditional view of the sacraments, the sacraments are first and foremost actions of God. God is the one at work. They are visible signs of God's grace."<sup>40</sup> Instead, the potential for meeting the sacramental in everyday life, though enhanced by well-directed mission, is still only ultimately realised by an encounter with God who is always the initiator of the encounter. Kenan Osborne

---

<sup>37</sup> Chief of Staff, The Salvation Army *The International Social Council 1921*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Bollwahn "Christian Social Responsibility: Do we need a new doctrinal statement?" *The Officer* (April 2001):

36.

<sup>39</sup> Phil Needham "Kingdom of the Risen Lord in a World Searching for a Future" *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002):

36.

<sup>40</sup> Lars Lydholm "Theology of God the Son" *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002): 17.

states this relationship specifically when he says that “Sacramentality ... is basically an action of God ... a blessing, and a subsequent human response.”<sup>41</sup>

### **Finding Christ in the Poor**

The theme of Christ’s presence in the poor has its strongest roots in the scene of the final judgement taken from Matthew 25:31-46. The idea has been pivotal for mission amongst the poor for hundreds of years and continues to play a significant theological role in the present time. John Chrysostom in less than 50 extant works makes nearly 400 references to the Matthean passage.<sup>42</sup> It is central to the theological and missiological understanding of St Vincent de Paul.<sup>43</sup> It was also an inspiration to co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day<sup>44</sup> and continues to feed the work of liberation theologians today.

The idea of God having an ‘option for the poor’ has been argued consistently<sup>45</sup>. It has abundant biblical support in both the Old and New Testaments. However, there are two significant variations to this theme which are being discussed here. Firstly, it is Christ explicitly who is being talked about and therefore we are speaking Christologically as well as theologically. Secondly, Christ is not just ‘on the side of the poor’, but actually ‘in the poor’ or some might even say that he ‘is the poor’. For instance, Dorothy Day states quite simply “The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him.”<sup>46</sup>

The literary background to Matthew’s judgement scene does appear to shed some light on the origins of the idea under discussion. For instance, some interesting parallels exist in Jewish Wisdom literature. Proverbs 19:17 reads “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full”. Not only does this mirror the idea that what we do to the poor we also do to the Lord, but the link to a judgement based on those actions is also explicit. Proverbs 14:31 suggests that “Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him.” Whilst this lacks the directness of the preceding example, again the treatment of the poor and the division of bad and good behaviour as a judgement by God is implicit. Whilst there are certainly elements of the incarnation in the poor theme presented in these and other biblical and extra-biblical texts, few reflect the fullness and directness of Matthew’s story.

In order, therefore, to adequately approach this topic we will need to discuss on what basis we can understand the Incarnation with reference to Christ’s presence in the poor. We will examine what a Christology of the poor reveals about Christ and about the poor themselves. Following this, we will discuss the missiological implications of this theme.

### **Incarnation**

For many, the Incarnation represents something which happened uniquely two thousand years ago when “the Word became flesh” as John’s gospel puts it. The idea that Christ is still present today is built upon this concept, but extends well beyond the boundaries of a single human being. Pixley and Boff use the Matthew 25 imagery well when they comment on this topic that:

<sup>41</sup> Kenan Osborne *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Sherman Gray, *The Least of My Brothers. Matthew 25:31-46 A History of Interpretation*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 50.

<sup>43</sup> See Frances Ryan and John Rybolt (eds) *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences and Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995)

<sup>44</sup> See Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999)

<sup>45</sup> See for instance Norbert Lohfink *Option for the Poor*, David Sheppard *Bias to the Poor*, and Donald Dorr *Option for the Poor*.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 33.

Though they are not to be confused, there is no separation or distance between Christ and the poor. It is not, therefore, a case of Christ referring us on to the poor, as though they were something outside him. No, we meet the poor in the Lord. The immediacy of the relationship needs to be appreciated: what we do to the poor, we do to Christ. The poor are the living mediation of the Lord, his real expression and not just an intermediary between us and him.<sup>47</sup>

Whether it is said that Christ is ‘in the poor’ or that Christ ‘is the poor’, there are clear implications for a broader understanding of what Incarnation means, than simply something which had to do with a single person, nearly two thousand years ago. The Incarnation in this context cannot be understood as purely a past event. Just as God once became incarnate in Jesus, so the Christ continues to become flesh today in the persons of the poor thus continuing the Incarnation.

Day sees this as a clear impetus to mission:

It is no use saying that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ...now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that He speaks, with the gaze of store clerks, factory workers, and children that He gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that He gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that He walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that He longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ<sup>48</sup>

The question may then be raised as to whether Christ is only present in the poor, or whether he is present in all of us in some way. Whilst it would be unwise to argue against the latter which has substantial biblical and theological support, it could be said that Christ is present in the poor in a special way.

Significantly, it may be said that the life of the poor now gives us a better understanding of who Jesus was and is today. Choan-Seng Song puts this quite explicitly when he says “To know Jesus, we must know people ...By ‘people’ I do not mean people in general ... By people I mean those men, women and children, in Jesus’ day, today, and in the days to come, economically exploited, politically oppressed, culturally and religiously alienated, sexually, racially, or class-wise discriminated against.”<sup>49</sup> That is, through the poor we receive genuine Christological revelations; God reveals who Christ is through the poor. We could also say that at the same time, Christ’s presence in the poor reveals something critical about the reality of God. God is with the poor through Christ.

Furthermore, the distinct nature of this divine presence is given content by the life, ministry and death of Jesus himself. If we say that through the Incarnation God is seen in the poor form of Jesus then presumably God can still be seen in some way in the poor now. This is more than a facile patterning of existence. Christ’s presence in the poor is more than a remembrance of the low social and economic position of Jesus of Nazareth. Though this may be a valid starting point for interpreting the message of Jesus, it does not suffice to explain the reality of Christ’s presence in the poor today.

---

<sup>47</sup> Boff and Pixley *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Day, *On Pilgrimage*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People*. (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 215-216.

Song comments on the reality of this presence for the poor when he says “God was recognized not only as with the suffering human beings, but God was the suffering human beings. God as Immanuel is not just God-with-Jesus, but God-is-Jesus. God as Immanuel is not only God-with-suffering-human-persons, but God is suffering human persons. This is the decisive meaning of the incarnation.”<sup>50</sup> If we can say that through the crucified form of Jesus we know God in human form, we can also say that the same God continues to be present through the Spirit of Christ in the suffering of the poor today and further that it is through the resurrection of that Christ that our hope for the salvation of the poor continues.

Moreover, it is not just the salvation of the poor that is relevant here. Indeed for those who are prepared to stand beside the poor, who will advocate for the oppressed and welcome the marginalised, there is further motivation; the sacrament of the Good Samaritan, like other sacraments, also has a soteriological aspect.

The example of the Good Samaritan suggests that firstly our definition of neighbour should be unconditional or unbounded and secondly that the appropriate response to the suffering of our neighbour begins with compassion above all else. This idea is not only enhanced by an understanding of God’s presence in the one who is suffering but also takes on a salvific importance. Leonardo Boff expresses this link well when he says that “Salvation comes by way of our neighbour. The purpose of religion is not to substitute for our neighbour, but to establish in us a permanent orientation to genuine love of the other – in whom, incognito, God is hidden.”<sup>51</sup> The soteriological theme represented here is also present in the Matthean judgement scene where it is clearly stated that we are directly rewarded based on how well we treat those in need, whether we recognise Christ’s presence in them or not.

So, whilst Christ’s presence in the poor is principally a Christological affirmation, the previous examples also show the salvific importance of compassionate response to our neighbours in need.

### **A Christology of the Poor**

The beginning of a Christology of the poor must be the recognition that Jesus was born poor, lived amongst the poor and the marginalised and died as a criminal. Jesus’ identity is therefore tied from beginning to end with the struggle of the poor. There is some consolation for the poor today to know that Jesus identifies with them in this way, as they do with him. Song declares on this matter that, “In Jesus who is in pain we perceive people in pain ... In the suffering Jesus we witness the suffering people. In Jesus crucified on the cross we behold the crucified people. And the reverse is also true. In the people in pain and suffering, in the people tortured and put to death, we witness Jesus tortured and nailed to the cross.”<sup>52</sup> This theme crosses the boundaries created by an egocentric, individualistic society to include the poor as a group and the church which lives in solidarity with the poor. It is only from this context that the mystery of Christ is properly revealed. Raul Vidales comments fittingly on this subject that “The concrete person of the poor, actually encountered as a social class exploited and in conflict, is the privileged place where Christ reveals the mystery of his own person.”<sup>53</sup> Thus the Spirit of Christ is found today, not just in individuals, but in the poor as a group as well.

To do Christology from outside this context is to risk creating a conquering messiah at the expense of the suffering servant. Song makes the point clear: “People are now clues to who the real Jesus is

<sup>50</sup> Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People*, 169.

<sup>51</sup> Leonardo Boff *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> Raul Vidales “How Should We Speak of Christ Today?” (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 145.

– people who are poor, outcast, and socially and politically oppressed. What Jesus has said and done is not comprehensible apart from men, women and children who suffer in body and spirit.”<sup>54</sup>

There is one further, interesting facet to Matthew’s story which draws together some threads presented later in his gospel. If the message of the judgement scene is indeed that Jesus is incarnate in the poor in some way, then we may draw new insight by putting together the text of Matt 26:11 “You will always have the poor with you” and the Immanuel title given to Jesus before his birth and declared in Matt 28:20 with the words “I am with you always”. The scene from Matthew 25 becomes the hermeneutic key which unlocks the Christological insight: Christ continues to be with us through his presence in the poor.

As discussed previously, Christ’s presence in the poor does not merely create a target for the distribution of welfare, but rather establishes an essential aspect of mutuality in working with the poor. As we work to alleviate the suffering of the poor, we receive from the poor as much as we give to them. From this perspective, it could be said that we are receiving the sacrament from Christ himself.

### Implications for Missiology

How does an understanding of Christ in the poor enable the church for mission? Needham demonstrates well the relationship between these ideas when he states boldly that:

Jesus once suggested that he was incarnate especially in the persons of the poor and oppressed and that the ministry of his true followers therefore related to these persons in a decisive way. (Matthew 25:31 ff). We are compelled to conclude that the mission of the Church is authentic only when the poor and oppressed are being ministered to. Ministry which by its very nature excludes the poor or is insensitive to their needs is no real ministry at all because it has lost the Gospel’s focus.<sup>55</sup>

There is little doubt that a direct impetus to missiological action exists in the recognition of Christ’s presence in the poor. Couplings such as this next one from Gutierrez also directly reflect the Matthean judgement scene. “We find the Lord in our encounters with men, especially the poor, marginated, and exploited ones. An act of love towards them is an act of love towards God.”<sup>56</sup> One could easily extrapolate from this kind of statement that to show love towards God, we are required to minister to the poor in some way.

The nature of the act which is required directly reflects the nature of the person’s need, as is made explicit in the passage; feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked. This is by no means an onerous task, for the incentive is clear: when we enter into another’s suffering, we will find God. Stephen Barton recognises the biblical tradition of hospitality in the Matthean scene, but even more importantly the mutual aspect when he says that “hospitality to the ‘little ones’ becomes a moment of revelation of the divine presence. As such it is a *sharing of the divine life and the economy of grace* (italics mine).”<sup>57</sup> Once again, the reciprocal nature of the sacrament becomes clear as we are reminded that through giving, we receive.

<sup>54</sup> Song, *Jesus, The Crucified People*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Phil Needham “Toward a Re-Integration of the Salvationist Mission” in John D. Waldron ed., *Creed and Deed*. (Canada and Bermuda: The Salvation Army, 1986), 127.

<sup>56</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 201.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Barton “Wisdom and Spirituality in Biblical Perspective” in Simon Hold and Gordon Preece (eds.) *The Bible and the Business of Life* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004), 22.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a crucial paradigm, illustrating our call to neighbourliness. Gutierrez recapitulates our theme when he writes, “It is not enough to say that love of God is inseparable from the love of one’s neighbour. It must be added that love for God is unavoidably expressed through love of one’s neighbour. Moreover, God is love in the neighbour.”<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, the Good Samaritan story in Luke functions as a necessary rejoinder to those who would interpret ‘the least of these’ in Matthew’s gospel as representing only Christians. Whether or not Matthew intended it that way, Jesus’ message about the Kingdom is an inclusive one. Luke’s correlative view of the inclusiveness of neighbour not only reaches beyond those who are like us, but in the Good Samaritan text again highlights those in direct, material need – the naked, those suffering physical pain or illness, those outcast or ignored by society.

In a further development of the Good Samaritan theme, we recognise that it is not just the poor that reveal Christ, but it is the actions of those who stand beside them to alleviate their poverty and free them from their oppressors which also become revelatory. Song states plainly that:

The real Jesus is the love of God that creates miracles of life in the world. He is the pain of God mingled with the pain of humanity. He is the hope of God that people manifest in the midst of despair. He is the eternal life of God that people live in spite of death. Jesus is, lives and becomes real when people, with unflagging faith in God, engage each other to bring about a new world out of the ruins of the old world.<sup>59</sup>

Song is clearly saying that it is our actions, inspired by love for the needy, that make the Incarnation a present reality today.

### **The Challenge of the Poor to the Church**

Though the sacrament which has been described is not limited to something which must occur inside a church building, life amongst the poor must have an impact upon the way we conduct worship within the church. It is reflected not only in our preaching, but in our prayers, our songs and our liturgy. John Robinson remarks that, “The test of worship is how far it makes us more sensitive to ‘the beyond in our midst’, to the Christ in the hungry, the naked, the homeless and the prisoner.”<sup>60</sup> Our churches must be places where the poor are welcomed and accepted, where they can find a real sense of belonging. If this becomes a reality, then we are in a new position to understand theology, Christology and the Scriptures. We are better prepared to accept the surprising revelation of God who always comes to us from the future, for as Julio de Santa Ana has said, “when the Church is open to the presence of Christ among the poor, to the meaning of his action in society and to his demands to satisfy their needs, it is also open to any other intervention by God in human life”.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, such mission is not without its inherent challenges, as Day so honestly reflects when she says, “Mental cases, mental illness, and physical illnesses, as well as poverty, are calls upon our compassion, because we must see Christ in them, but it is so hard to see Christ in anyone who is whining, resentful, self-indulgent, demanding, hating!”<sup>62</sup> There will undoubtedly be times when our ability to see Christ in others is diminished either by our own capacity for compassion or by some form of challenging behaviour which arises from those we intend to help. It is at this point

<sup>58</sup> Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 200.

<sup>59</sup> Song, *Jesus The Crucified People*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> John Robinson *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 90

<sup>61</sup> Julio De Santa Ana *Good News to the Poor* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), 21.

<sup>62</sup> Day, *On Pilgrimage*, 200

that it becomes necessary to remember that in Matthew's judgement scene, those who were judged well were not required to recognise Christ, simply to serve him.

Mission with the poor may act as a source of revelation about Christ, just as understanding Christ helps to understand the suffering of the poor. It is this revelation of Christ's presence in the poor that calls us in turn to further engagement to alleviate his suffering in them and validate his presence by our actions.

### **The Sacrament of God In Us**

Having identified some theological perspectives for an understanding of Christ's presence in the poor, the next significant task is to begin to look at the other side of the picture of engagement in mission. In this task, the position of the person directly working with the poor must be examined. In what ways can we understand God to be present in that person and how does this act of service demonstrate more about who God is?

An understanding of God's presence in those who are working to alleviate the suffering of others is helpful for those who are facing the inevitable questions of why God allows suffering. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this question was illustrated most frequently and poignantly by those reflecting upon the holocaust. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it became quickly identified with the question of "Where is God after September 11<sup>th</sup>?" Joseph May writing for The Salvation Army publication, *The Officer*, wrote this in reply:

When I was at the Pentagon serving the men and women trying to rescue and recover the victims of the plane crash, I saw God. I saw God in the firemen who were trying to rescue hurt people... I saw God in the men and women, Salvation Army volunteers, who were providing meals to recovery workers, offering them a cup of cold water in Jesus' name.<sup>63</sup>

The parallel with the Matthean material discussed earlier is clear, but there is a reversal or more accurately an extension of that incarnational theme here. Previously, as in Matthew, it is in the poor and the suffering that Christ is present, thereby inducing Christians to care for those in need. Here, God is present in the one doing the helping. If God is indeed the protector and ally of the poor, then to join with the poor is to join with God. As passages from the Hebrew Bible such as Jeremiah 22:16, "He judged the cause of the poor and the needy; Is not this to know me? Says the Lord", seem to suggest, the one who stands with the poor is the one who truly knows God. When we represent the poor against their oppressors, we are representing God.

It may be said that not only is God *present in the encounter* between the compassionate helper and a person in need, not only that God can be *seen* in the person reaching out to the poor, but that *God is in that person*. God continues to become incarnate in those who follow in Jesus' footsteps and share their lives with the poor and the marginalised. This is not a replacement for the previous metaphor, but an enhancement which allows us to see God meeting with God in an act of compassion.

Needham gives the following description as a theological reflection on what makes social work 'Christian': "At its heart, Christian social work is not helping deeds that the Christian carries out on behalf of others. Rather, it is primarily a recognition of God's healing presence with the person in need and His call to us to join Him at this place of need, followed by our allowing Him to work

---

<sup>63</sup> Joseph May "Where is God? In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attack" *The Officer* (Jan/Feb 2002): 24.

through us to bring healing and hope.”<sup>64</sup> The essence of why we should help those in need is therefore not just something based on morality or even justice; rather it is through this kind of action that we begin to really become ‘co-workers with God’ (1Cor3:9).

The idea that God should be revealed in and through our interaction with the world around us is not a new suggestion. The commonality between revelation and sacrament is the transition from that which is indiscernible or invisible to that which has become tangible or visible. It is the awareness of this potential for finding God inherent in everyday life which is being explicitly stated here. Schillebeeckx recognises this latent capacity for theological dialogue in a revelatory encounter with creation when he writes in this regard:

Nevertheless, life in this created world gains a new and deeper meaning when man lives in the world as one who has received this call from God in his inmost being. The world of creation then becomes an actual part of the inner yet still anonymous dialogue with God. If the God who wants to enter into a bond of personal relationship with us is the creator of heaven and earth, it implies that our being confronted with the world, existence in this world, is going to teach us more about the living God than the world alone can teach us, more than merely that God is the creator of all things. Life itself in the world then belongs to the very content of God’s inner word to us.<sup>65</sup>

This is not to say that everything about the world around us reveals God to us in a clear and equal manner. There are some symbols which are able to communicate more fully than others the reality of God’s presence amongst us. Christian theology gives distinct colour to God’s revelation through the crucified Christ. It is through the imitation of this Christ that the church, following in his footsteps, hopes to continue God’s revelation to the world. What is the evidence which shows this happening? Azevedo comments in this respect that “The church, then, is a grace-happening ... because in the life of believers we see unfolding and operating faith, hope, love, freedom, justice, peace, reconciliation, and everything else that establishes human intercommunion and humanity’s communion with God.”<sup>66</sup> These characteristics of the believers’ lives are the results of the sacrament which acts as a vehicle of grace *to and through* the church *and* the poor.

Furthermore, it is these qualities which reveal God through our engagement with the world around us and particularly our engagement in compassionate response to the situation of the poor and the marginalised. The sacramentality of this engagement is realised through the hidden God-encounter beneath the external response.

### **Sketches of the Sacrament**

There are three biblical paradigms which I believe help to illustrate this sacramental understanding accordingly. These paradigms build upon the themes already discussed earlier. Where the previous discussions give a theological framework for understanding the elements of this form of Salvationist sacramentality, what follows is an attempt to more closely define the boundaries of the sacrament and its application. Each paradigm will be discussed in turn. Firstly, the theme of *Incarnation* calls us to continue the physical embodiment of God which began in Christ. Secondly, *the Good Samaritan* calls us to compassionate response which crosses social and religious boundaries. Finally, the image of Christ *washing the disciples’ feet* calls us to humble service.

---

<sup>64</sup> Phil Needham “Toward a Re-Integration of the Salvationist Mission”, 149.

<sup>65</sup> Schillebeeckx *Christ the Sacrament of encounter with God*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Azevedo *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil*, 217.

*The Incarnation* exists as a dual challenge for mission, for Christ is recognised both as the physical and social healer who directly addresses the needs of the poor and as the suffering and persecuted victim of the oppressive powers of his day. For us to represent God in the world today holds the same challenges. It “means we must become incarnate (as God was incarnate in Jesus Christ), identifying ourselves with the victims of injustice, who hope for a better tomorrow.”<sup>67</sup>

It is possible that in making this identification, we will at some point also make the same transition that Jesus did – from healer to persecuted and crucified one. However, it is in these moments that our hope for resurrection becomes apparent. Cross and resurrection are always tied together as the hermeneutic keys to incarnation. When we enter into the sacrament, we enter the crucifixion, we hang on our own cross in the midst of the others who have been crucified and in this vulnerability, we share their pain. However, implicit in this entry into suffering are the beginnings of new life. The seeds of resurrection are planted in the ashes of that which has passed. The sacrament brings with it the promise of forgiveness, hope, new beginnings and fresh opportunity.

The incarnational paradigm calls us to represent God to others, to be God to those who feel that God has abandoned them. Specifically, it calls us to be with those who have been forgotten by the rest of the world. We are called to be with the poor, the marginalised, the homeless and the suffering and when we heed this call, we continue the incarnation of Jesus and enter into our new sacrament.

Our second paradigm, the parable of *the Good Samaritan*, “places emphasis upon the often neglected social dimension of holiness by providing an evocative image of Christian neighbourliness.”<sup>68</sup> The Samaritan story makes clear that there should be no boundaries to a truly compassionate response. This is a useful counterpoint to those who would interpret Christ’s admonitions to help those in need as only applying to helping Christians. So, the first condition to the performance of the sacrament that the Samaritan paradigm demonstrates is that there are no conditions, that there should be no barriers to the way we respond to a person in need. It is worthwhile recalling at this point that the international mission statement of The Salvation Army includes the charge to “help those in need without discrimination”.

The second element that the Good Samaritan story gives us is a model of helper who does not necessarily fit the religious views of the hearers either. This should also lay a challenge to those who might claim that God only works through Christians. God may in fact be revealed in those who respond to suffering and need, but God will not be limited by our own small-minded boundaries in doing so. When we speak of representing God as we work alongside the poor and the marginalised, this is in no way contingent upon recognition of that theological framework on behalf of that person. Neither do we claim in a patronising way that non-Christian staff of Salvation Army social services are “anonymous Christians”. Rather, we would simply say when those in need meet compassionate response in the name of The Salvation Army, that this response is also representative of the saviour of that Army.

The final image comes from John’s gospel where Jesus demonstrates the humility of a servant by *washing his disciples’ feet*. Ray Harris reflects on this image of basin and towel as a sacramental act of care when he says “I would contend that our pastoral care becomes sacramental – it actually conveys the grace of God – when it embodies the same posture and gesture.”<sup>69</sup> Whilst the blessing

<sup>67</sup> Santa Ana *Good News to the Poor*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Needham, “Toward a Re-Integration of the Salvationist Mission”, 150.

<sup>69</sup> Ray Harris “With Basin and Towel: A Corps Officers Approach to Pastoral Care” *Word and Deed* Vol 2, No.1 (1999): 45.

of the sacrament is always an action of God, there is a sense that on our behalf this sacramental act can only properly occur when the right attitude is present. Certainly, welfare provision that is patronising, humiliating or dehumanising will not represent God's presence in the encounter. Only an interaction that upholds the human dignity of the poor and that shows the humility of the servant which was embodied in Christ will adequately convey the grace of God and properly embody the true meaning of the sacrament.

The recognition of God's presence in those who minister to the poor and the marginalised complements the understanding of Christ's presence in those being ministered to. It is with this more complete representation that we can begin to comprehend the reality of God for the suffering, the oppressed and the marginalised and how God might be encountered as a sacramental presence in the midst of this life.

## Conclusions

A valid understanding of the concept of sacrament recognises commonalities such as Christological foundation, an active presence of the Spirit as well as a deep symbolic parallel between something visible and tangible and that which is invisible and as yet intangible. This does not preclude further theological reasoning which recognises authentic sacramentality outside of the traditional sacraments of the church. Modern theologians have noted the sacramental nature of Christ, the church and the poor as examples of this.

In the formative years of The Salvation Army, the decision to stop practicing the regular sacraments of baptism and Eucharist led to a number of important responses. From the recognition that no human ritual could deliver the grace of God which is freely available to all, came the movement towards recognition of the potential sacramentality in the whole of life. This potential is specifically drawn out in the way that we react and respond to those in need around us. For the Salvationist, the key concept of sacrament is that it is the means by which we encounter God's presence in the world. Such an understanding of sacrament includes both the imitation of Christ in the believer and the recognition of God's image in the person being ministered to. Participation in this sacrament calls us into participation in the very being of God. The sacrament, acting as a symbol, points away from itself to a deeper reality; yet by enacting this particular sacrament we partake directly in that reality. We take action on God's behalf as we reach out to God's presence in others. The Spirit of Christ is present here, not just in the act of compassion, but explicitly in those for whom participation in the sacrament enables them to be recipients of grace.

The ideas about sacramental significance in The Salvation Army which have been presented in this essay provide some useful seeds for further theological thought about the social mission of the Army. In addition, they also offer a potential framework for renewed ecumenical discussion about the meaning and place of the sacraments as an ecclesial function in The Salvation Army.

The Salvation Army's *Handbook of Doctrine* notes that "Every Salvationist is committed to this sacramental service. It was for this purpose that the Movement was formed. The call to sanctification involves a call to sacramental living."<sup>70</sup> Though failing to conform to conventional understandings of sacramentality, The Salvation Army can be recognised as deeply sacramental, with the roots of this sacramentality found in the history of its ongoing engagement with the poor and the marginalised.

---

<sup>70</sup> The Salvation Army *Handbook of Doctrine* (London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1969), 188.

## Bibliography

- Agbanou, Victor Kossi *Le Discours Eschatologique de Matthieu 24-25: Tradition et Redaction*. Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1983.
- Azevedo, Marcello de Carvalho *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil* Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987.
- Barton, Stephen C. "Wisdom and Spirituality in Biblical Perspective" in Simon Hold and Gordon Preece (eds.) *The Bible and the Business of Life: Essays in Honour of Robert J Banks's Sixty Fifth Birthday* Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004.
- Boff, Clovidis and Pixley, George *The Bible, the Church, and the Poor*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989.
- Boff, Leonardo *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World – The Facts, Their Interpretation, and Their Meaning Yesterday and Today*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987.
- Bollwahn, Paul "Christian Social Responsibility: Do we need a new doctrinal statement?" *The Officer* (April 2001): 36-38.
- Clifton, Shaw *Who are these Salvationists? An analysis for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* Alexandria: Crest Books, 1999.
- Coutts, Frederick *No Discharge in This War: A one volume history of The Salvation Army* London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1994.
- Day, Dorothy *On Pilgrimage*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999.
- De Santa Ana, Julio *Good News to the Poor – The Challenge of the Poor in the History of the Church*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977
- Dorr, Donald *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1983.
- Gariepy, Henry *Christianity in Action: The Salvation Army in the USA today* Wheaton: Victory Books, 1990.
- Gray, Sherman W. *The Least of My Brothers. Matthew 25:31-46 A History of Interpretation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.
- Green, Roger J. "Facing History: Our Way Ahead for a Salvationist Theology" *Word and Deed* Vol 1, No.2 (1999): 23-40
- Gutierrez, Gustavo *A Theology of Liberation – History, Politics and Salvation*. London: SCM Press, 1974.
- Harris, Ray "With Basin and Towel: A Corps Officers Approach to Pastoral Care" *Word and Deed* Vol 2, No.1 (1999): 35-47

Hattersley, Roy *Blood and Fire – William and Catherine Booth and Their Salvation Army* Little, Brown and Co.: London, 1990.

Lohfink, Norbert *Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* Berkeley: BIBAL Press, 1987

Lydholm, Lars “Theology of God the Son” *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002): 7-24

Macquarrie, John *A guide to the Sacraments* New York: Continuum, 1997.

May, Joseph “Where is God? In the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> Terrorist Attack” *The Officer* (Jan/Feb 2002): 23-24.

Moltmann, Jürgen *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* London: SMC Press, 1977.

Murdoch, Norman H. *Origins of The Salvation Army* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994.

Needham, Phil “Kingdom of the Risen Lord in a World Searching for a Future” *Word and Deed* Vol 4, No.2 (2002): 25-46.

Needham, Phil “Toward a Re-Integration of the Salvationist Mission” in John D. Waldron ed., *Creed and Deed – Toward a Christian theology of social services in The Salvation Army*. Canada and Bermuda: The Salvation Army, 1986.

Osborne, Kenan B. *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millenium* New York: Paulist Press, 1999.

Rader, Paul A “The Salvation Army and Missiology” *Word and Deed* Vol 3, No.2 (2001): 7-22.

Rhemick, John A *New People of God – A Study in Salvationism* Des Plaines: The Salvation Army, 1984.

Robinson, John *Honest to God* . London: SCM Press, 1963.

Ryan, Frances and Rybolt, John (eds) *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac: Rules, Conferences and Writings* New York: Paulist Press, 1995

Ryan, Geoff *Sowing Dragons – Essays in Neo-Salvationism* Toronto: The Salvation Army, 2001

Schillebeeckx, Edward *Christ the Sacrament of encounter with God* London: Sheed and Ward, 1963.

Sheppard, David *Bias to the Poor* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983.

Sobrinho, Jon *The True Church and the Poor* London: SCM Press, 1985

Song, Choan-Seng *Jesus, The Crucified People*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.

Taylor, John V. *The Go Between God* London: SCM Press, 1972.

The Salvation Army *Handbook of Doctrine* London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1969.

The Salvation Army *One Faith, One Church – An insight into The Salvation Army's response to World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper No 111 Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* London: The Salvation Army, 1990.

The Salvation Army *Salvation Story – Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine* London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1995.

The Salvation Army *The International Social Council 1921* London: The Salvation Army, 1921.

The Salvation Army *The Sacraments – The Salvationist's Viewpoint* London: Salvationist Publishing and Supplies, 1960.

The Salvation Army *The Song Book of The Salvation Army* London: The Salvation Army IHQ, 1986.

Vidales, Raul “How Should We Speak of Christ Today?” in Jose Miguez Bonino ed., *Faces of Jesus – Latin American Christologies* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984.