

Is the Salvation Army still a holiness movement?

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In what sense is the Army a holiness movement in terms of its teaching, testimony and practice? What have Salvationists understood by the terms “sanctification” and “holiness,” and how is this expressed in contemporary teaching and testimony?

Of course, this all hangs upon how we define and distinguish the term “holiness movement.” In experiential terms, the distinctive feature of the nineteenth-century holiness movement was its emphasis on the “second blessing.” In ecclesiological terms, it was the interpretation of the priesthood of all believers, which accommodated the possibility of female ministry (though there is a history of division over the issue). In missiological terms, it was the close relationship between the message of Christ-like love and the call to social action.

In *Who are the Evangelicals*, Derek Tidball cites the common nineteenth-century holiness movement’s contention that “in addition to conversion, a secondary blessing, which came to be called baptism in the Holy Spirit, was needed to make one holy, and deal with inbred sin. Holiness came not through struggle but simply by trusting.”

Tidball describes the influence that the American holiness teacher Phoebe Palmer had on William and Catherine Booth and others in the mid-nineteenth century, resulting in The Salvation Army becoming “a major holiness sect both in Britain and the United States.”

Palmer spent some years in London in the mid-nineteenth century, teaching Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification (as understood in North American holiness circles). The Booths were deeply impressed by her teaching, and also by the fact that as a woman she exercised an almost unique if slightly covert ministry. Palmer linked her holiness teaching with social action. Female ministry and social work—what Oswald Chambers later called “holiness socialism”—therefore became integral to the holiness movement as a whole and to The Salvation Army in particular.

The distinctive doctrinal position shared by traditional Wesleyans and mid-nineteenth century American revivalists was, as Norman H Murdoch puts it, “a two-step process of salvation—first, conversion as a remedy for basic human sinfulness, and, second, a perfecting and empowering experience that brought more godliness to human behaviour.”

Referring to the brand of Wesleyan teaching imported from the United States, the Anglican academic Dr Peter Toon has commented that “the quest for ‘Christian perfection’ has often been misunderstood and minimised through the presentation of ‘the second blessing,’ by which one enters into a state of perfect love and wholehearted commitment.”

Melvin Dieter places some of the responsibility for this on Phoebe Palmer’s teaching:

The emphasis that such teaching placed upon the moment of entire consecration and upon the crisis of complete moral adjustment of relationship tended to focus sanctification wholly on that single point of wholehearted commitment and to divorce it from the gradual sanctification of the heart that began in regeneration and from the continuing growth in grace that follows the instant of death to self and perfection in love. Thus the moment of the death to self and the birth to love readily became an end in itself—a goal rather than the establishment of a dynamic new relationship of freedom and love in the hearts of believers as the Holy Spirit led them on from grace to grace in the will of God.

From its very beginning, The Salvation Army has been committed to the doctrine of sanctification. William Booth's Methodist background, and the increasingly Armenian bias of the early Christian Mission, made this almost inevitable. In *Salvation Soldiery*, first published in 1880, William Booth wrote:

Holiness to the Lord is to us a fundamental truth; it stands in the front rank of our doctrines. We inscribe it on our banners. It is with us in no shape or form an open debatable question as to whether God can sanctify wholly, or whether Jesus does save his people from their sins. In the estimation of The Salvation Army that is settled forever.

In the nascent Salvation Army, the second blessing was firmly tied to the eradication of sin. At a Christian Mission conference in 1876, Railton and Garner successfully moved to issue accompanying definitions to Salvation Army doctrines 9 and 10:

We believe that after conversion there remain in the heart of a believer inclinations, evil or roots of bitterness, which unless overpowered by Divine Grace, produce actual sin, but that these evil tendencies can be entirely taken away by the Spirit of God, and the whole heart thus cleansed from everything contrary to the will of God, or entirely sanctified, will then produce the fruits of the Spirit only. And we believe that persons thus sanctified may by the power of God be kept unblameable and unprovable before Him.'

The Salvation Army Act of 1980 has included the eleven articles unchanged from the 1878 Deed Poll. Railton's definition was never given legal status, but can be said to be a statement of Salvation Army orthodoxy on the doctrine of sanctification for the first seventy years of its existence.

Notwithstanding Phoebe Palmer's influence on the young Booths, it is not they who became regarded at the Army's prime exponents of holiness; instead, it was the American Samuel Logan Brengle.

In the early twentieth century, Brengle was the Army's most prominent holiness teacher. He first met William Booth in 1886, a year after his own experience of sanctification. As a trainee minister in the Methodist Episcopalian Church in Indiana, he was well versed in the Wesleyan tradition and open to the influences of the American holiness movement. His attitude toward the second blessing can be found in *Helps to Holiness*:

Before the converted person has gone very far he will find his patience mixed up with some degree of impatience, his kindness mixed with anger (which is of the

heart and may not be seen of the world, but of which he is painfully conscious) his humility mixed with pride, his loyalty to Jesus mixed with a shame of the cross, and, in fact, the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh, in greater or lesser degree are all mixed up together.

But this will be done away when he gets a clean heart, and it will take a second work of grace, preceded by a wholehearted consecration and as definite an act of faith as preceded his conversion, to get it.

Brengle reckoned that the Apostles received the second blessing at Pentecost. For believers in later generations, according to Brengle, the life of holiness began at the moment of complete surrender in faith, a moment of crisis in which the grace and Spirit of God were poured out upon the seeker. This crisis and the receiving of the Holy Spirit were not, in Brengle's estimation, either validated or necessarily accompanied by any great feeling.

According to his biographers, Brengle would often ask, "Are the roots of bitterness gone?" and would observe that the clean heart and right spirit were the result of washing rather than growing, making the believer fit to live out his faith and his mission in the world.

General Frederick Coutts supervised the revision of the *Handbook of Doctrine* for republication in 1969. He was in agreement with Brengle that the ultimate expression of holiness is "Christ in you" and concluded that "so long as holiness is equated with growth in Christ-likeness, no seeker will go far astray." If he was deemed "unsound," it was because he shifted the emphasis from the crisis of sanctification to the outcome of growth.

Coutts was among those who recommended to General Albert Orsborn in 1949 that Railton and Garner's misleading footnote, based on Hebrews 12:14 and 15, should be expunged from the Articles of Faith. With it went much of the language of "the clean heart," "complete victory" and "full salvation." Notwithstanding the attempts to redefine these expressions in the 1998 handbook, it would be true to say that until recently they had almost completely disappeared from Salvationist preaching and testimony.

As with Wesley, Coutts' doctrine arose from his observation of the human condition, his understanding of human experience in relation to God, and his reading of the Scripture. He moved the Army's holiness agenda from "experience" to "outcome."

Coutts' position on the question of a second blessing is equivocal at best. Crisis and process are all of a piece, but one senses he is more drawn to the idea of growth in holiness than instantaneous sanctification: "There can be no experience without a beginning. In penitent faith I yield up a forgiven life. In faith believing I receive of his Spirit. That is the beginning, but not the end. This is the commencement of the life of holiness, but not its crown."

In *Life in the Spirit*, Bramwell Tillsley fully subscribes to the idea that sanctification involves process-crisis-process in his assertion that "before the crisis of personal crucifixion, there must be a growing period in which we become aware of our need (a

process).” However, there is a further process of maturation, or growing into perfection, and in this perfection is the potential for growth.

Tillsley’s “new twist” was an almost charismatic insistence that this growth is not about “getting more and more of God, but rather God getting more and more of us.” He employs the idea of *receiving* the Spirit to best effect when he invites the hearer to “open every chamber of the heart to God” (an expression frequently used by Tillsley in his altar calls). In this act of acknowledging, welcoming and allowing the Spirit freedom of access to ever greater portions of one’s life is the hint that if holiness is the *receiving* of the Spirit, it may be an ongoing process or series of events rather than a “crisis” or even, in Coutts’ words, “a beginning.” Tillsley focuses on the Holy Spirit as person, rather than source of power, and thereby he produces a relational model of sanctification rather than a generic second blessing:

What are some of the practical results of this experience? What is the evidence of the fullness of the Spirit? How can we know we are filled? We face the danger of trying to make everyone fit into a mould by suggesting that, if we don’t respond in a certain manner, we are not filled. But that is just not so. The Holy Spirit creates originals. Copies are unknown to him. God has a plan for every life, and the filling of the Spirit is to enable us to accomplish what he would have us do.

Tillsley regards the second blessing as subsidiary to the growing relationship.

Chick Yuill’s book *We Need Saints* represents the broadening Salvationist view of holiness in the 1980’s: “The holy life becomes a reality only insofar as we co-operate with the Spirit and reject our own sinful selfish desires.” This realisation of holiness then becomes a matter of continuance—continual co-operation with the Spirit, continuing renewal by the Spirit and continued growth in the Spirit.

Yuill takes Brengle to task “by a careful examination of the relevant New Testament passages on baptism in the Spirit.” The specific point that Yuill objects to relates to a passage in Brengle’s *When the Holy Ghost is Come*:

Every child of God, every truly converted person, has the Holy Spirit in some gracious manner and measure, else he would not be a child of God.

It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin. It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to true repentance and confession. It is he who assures us of the father’s favour.

But great and gracious as is this work, it is not the fiery pentecostal baptism with the Holy Spirit which is promised: it is not the fullness of the Holy Ghost to which we are exhorted.

It is perfect of its kind, but it is preparatory to another and fuller work.

The point of Yuill’s objection is that if Paul had exhorted his readers to be baptised in the Holy Spirit, “that would be like telling them to become Christians all over again.”

According to Yuill, “far from describing a second optional blessing, baptism in the Spirit is a figure of speech for the essential universal Christian experience of being reborn,

strengthened, and brought into union with Christ Jesus, all through the indwelling Holy Spirit.” The passages in Acts 2 relating to the day of Pentecost, the descent of the Spirit on the Samaritan believers in Acts 8, and the joyful reception of the Spirit by the Ephesian elders in Acts 19 are open to question as evidence of a second blessing. As Yuill puts it, “it would be unwise to erect a ‘second blessing’ theology from difficult passages which invite quite different interpretation on careful reading.”

In *Never the Same Again*, Shaw Clifton nevertheless defends the concept of a second blessing, echoing Frederick Coutts:

It is of vital importance to recognise that every process has a starting point.

So it is that the process of becoming holy must have a starting point. You say “But I started when I was saved.” That is true. Nevertheless, it has been, and is, the experience of the vast majority of Christians that their express and conscious desire to make a clear-cut, definite start toward the holy life has arisen subsequent to being saved.

So widespread has this been that some have called this a “second blessing.”

Notwithstanding the extravagant reference to “the vast majority of Christians,” there may well be an element of truth in what Clifton is saying. As for the “second blessing,” he goes on:

This is nothing but a convenient term for recognising that most Christians seem to need time, after being saved, to realise just how far-reaching a thing their new commitment is. Those who speak of a “second blessing” do not mean to imply that what God did for them when they were saved was somehow inadequate and in need of enhancement. They simply use the phrase in a natural way to express the sudden post-conversion awakening to the lovely possibilities for pure living and ongoing victory over temptation that Jesus offers us.

General John Larsson’s observations have led him to a completely different conclusion. In lectures to delegates at the International College for Officers, he posed the question, “Why a second blessing? Why not a third, or fourth, or a fifteenth?”

In effect, Larsson comes to the question of a second blessing by way of the *crisis or process* debate. Noting that “until 1969 the edition of the *Handbook of Doctrine* devoted about 7,000 words to the crisis experience and only about 200 to the process,” and that after 1969 the proportions are reversed, Larsson gives due credit to Frederick Coutts for the change in emphasis.

However, Larsson’s thesis in *Spiritual Breakthrough* seems to be that for many people, the “crisis” is actually a moment of intense religious experience which may or may not have its outcome in the long-term effects of “sanctification” in the Wesleyan sense. Nevertheless, for many people such intense experience fits into a pattern with which other believers can readily identify.

Larsson also asks the pertinent question as to whether the Wesleyan “blessing of sanctification” and the charismatic “baptism of the Spirit” may actually be windows into

the same truth, with a common vocabulary in expressions such as “liberty,” “infilling” and “release.” As Larsson concludes:

The way through would seem to be to consider these (post-conversion) experiences as *completing in experience* the fullness of the experience of “new birth,” of which the Scriptures speak in great detail using many and varied metaphors. If for *any* reason we have failed to have been filled at the heavenly banquet, we must come again—and if needs be, again and again.

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So how does all this debate impact on the worship and everyday life of Salvationists, if at all?

The evidence of the song book is that the Army is still a holiness movement, but one whose perceptions have undergone change into a more subtle interpretation of what many see as the Army’s most radical article of faith.

Much of the Army’s hymnody centres on the challenge of holiness, the cleansing power of Christ, the death of self, consecration to the service of God and purity of heart. Despite the gradual exclusion of many previously cherished songs of Charles Wesley, there remains a strong emphasis on sanctification, but with an increasing interest in the person and work of the Holy Spirit balancing the existing emphasis on the atoning work of Jesus as the source of sanctifying power.

The “second blessing,” “instantaneous sanctification” and “eradication of the sinful nature” has been replaced in the song book by an altogether less experience-centred theology and a more objective appreciation of the holiness of God. The desired outcome of the work of the Spirit is the Christ-like life. This shift in emphasis may simply be the sign of a maturing theology expressing itself with less hyperbole than the primitive movement might have employed. On the other hand, it may signify a more homogenous approach to religion, the product of an Army that is coming to terms with having become a church.

A major problem for the Army as a holiness movement is the relative rarity of people who are able to teach or preach the doctrine in a way that is accessible to Salvationist congregations. Whilst it is not always possible to make sense of religious experience, which by nature involves encounter with the transcendent, it must be possible to teach an essentially experiential doctrine that is within reach of the hearer. Any teaching on holiness has to take account of the human condition as well as the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit.

The absence of contemporary testimony must be a cause for concern to a movement with a strong holiness tradition. If Wesley was drawn to the doctrine of entire sanctification by observing the saintly lives and experience of others, then absence of such evidence undermines the theological and experiential foundations of the doctrine. It would be difficult to conceive of a holiness movement without a holiness testimony. “The privilege of all believers” becomes a contradiction when few, if any, believers are willing to lay public claim to it. Is this due to the antique language so often used to express the doctrine, or the fear of setting oneself up as “holier than others”?

There is another possibility altogether: the clear move away from the commodification of spiritual experience. The question “What is holiness, and have you got it?” that used to appear in candidates’ application forms would probably mystify today’s young people, who are more likely to speak of “becoming a Christian” or “coming to faith” than “getting saved.” The language of “getting” may well have characterised holiness and renewal movements from Wesley to Pentecostalism and Charismatic renewal to phenomena such as the Toronto blessing, but I would suggest it is remarkably absent in contemporary evangelical Christianity, which has become more relational in its understanding of God.

A third possibility is that we live in an age that puts more value on authenticity than on abstract ideas. The new holiness might well be measured by “being real” rather than by the ability to testify to a spiritual transaction that is shared in common with others. This was where Wesley began, with people whose lives were authentic testimonies in themselves.

The holiness table may still adorn halls and citadels, but it is seldom referred to in relation to “the blessing of sanctification” or any other religious experience. The revival of interest in love feasts and fellowship meals occasioned by the Spiritual Life Commission has yet to be consolidated in Army practice. The “holiness meeting” is fast disappearing from the diet of Army worship. Many of these changes could be put down to the passage of time and changes in language, some of it to the development of a less particular theology, a more objective approach to worship, and the broadening theological agenda of Salvationists as they come into contact with the wider church.

The rise of a prominent charismatic constituency is probably due more to external influence than internal renewal. Few Army leaders have officially recognised, encouraged or sought to validate the charismatic constituency as a leading influence for renewal or as the heirs of the Army’s “radical” holiness tradition. However, many would happily acknowledge the influence of the Roots Convention, which could itself fit neatly into the category that R.T. Kendal described as “the fourth wave,” *i.e.* the coming together of mildly charismatic worship styles and content with conservative evangelical preaching and teaching.

But to return to the question we set out to answer: is The Salvation Army still a holiness movement?

In terms of the Army’s heritage, theology, published teaching, worship and practice, the indications are that the Army is still fundamentally a movement committed to holy living in the power of the Spirit of God—hence, a holiness movement. In terms of written or oral testimony and public preaching, there is insufficient evidence to affirm or deny the Army’s position.

However, a number of issues hang upon the Army rediscovering its emphasis on holiness: the question of the Army’s identity, including its theological distinctives; the danger presented by a loss of focus in the Army’s worship, particularly in the content and function of believers’ meetings; and the impact of the loss of the holiness motif on the Army’s mission as a body of believers sanctified by God and motivated by love.