



Defining Salvation

It's in our name, but what exactly does it mean?

BY DONALD E. BURKE

We are The Salvation Army. But if we were to ask a random sample of Salvationists what the word “salvation” means, either in our name or on its own, I think we would have a wide range of responses, many of them quite muddled. To me, this confusion about the meaning of the most foundational word in our theological vocabulary—to say nothing of our name—is not just unfortunate; it is catastrophic for our identity and mission. Yet, this lack of clarity is understandable and longstanding.

On the one hand, the focus of “salvation” in our 11 doctrines is the preparation of individual persons for an afterlife with God in heaven. Consistent with our revivalist and Wesleyan heritage, a strong emphasis on conversion as well as holiness of heart and life is foundational. Total depravity, justification, regeneration, entire sanctification, judgment and eternal happiness as presented in the doctrines are all focused on the “salvation” of individuals.

But on the other hand, especially

since William Booth’s articulation of the mission of the Army as “salvation for both worlds” in 1890, our mission has expanded to include not only the deliverance of individual persons to heaven, but also the transformation of the conditions in which they live in this world. The co-founder, reflecting upon more than 40 years of ministry, said it this way: “As I came to look more closely into things, and gathered more experience of the ways of God to man, I discovered that the miseries from which I sought to save man in the next world were substantially the same as those from which I everywhere found him suffering in this, and that they proceeded from the same cause—that is, from his alienation from and his rebellion against God, and then from his own disordered dispositions and appetites.... But with this discovery there also came another, which has been growing and growing in clearness and intensity from that hour to this; which was that I had two gospels of deliverance to preach—one for each world, or rather, one gospel which applied alike to

both. I saw that when the Bible said, ‘He that believeth shall be saved,’ it meant not only saved from the miseries of the future world, but from the miseries of this [world] also. That it came from the promise of salvation here and now; from hell and sin and vice and crime and idleness and extravagance, and consequently very largely from poverty and disease, and the majority of kindred woes.” This statement is astonishing for both its clarity and expansive vision.

Expanding the Scope of the Doctrines

While our doctrines focus on the deliverance of individual persons to a heavenly reward, our mission as articulated by William Booth in 1890 evidences an expanded understanding of “salvation” that moves beyond individuals and our future in the world to come to include the conditions in which people live in this world. Increasingly, Booth recognized that salvation embraces both heaven and earth, both this world and the next.

Nevertheless, the underlying ten-

sion between salvation as focused on the deliverance of individuals to the heavenly realms and salvation as the transformation of the world to resemble the kingdom of God remains largely unresolved. I think that, in part, this is because while Booth expanded the scope of the mission of the Army, he did not follow through and expand the scope of our doctrines. But perhaps even more fundamentally, we have not articulated the biblical resources that are available to help us enlarge our understanding of salvation to include “salvation for both worlds.” Is there biblical and theological support for the broad mission of salvation for both worlds? I am convinced that there is, and that Booth got it right in 1890. With this in mind, I want to offer a few observations.

1. The doctrines as we have them, with their emphasis on the salvation of individuals for holy living in this life and preparation for the next, are foundational. Shaped as they are by the classic themes of Christian theology through the centuries, our emphasis upon human sinfulness which separates us from God and distorts our life together on the one hand and divine grace which delivers from sin and prepares us to live as God’s children on the other must remain central.
2. We must hear clearly the Bible’s repeated emphasis upon the renewal of all of creation as God brings to reality a new heaven and a new earth (see Revelation 21). The Christian gospel is comprehensive. It embraces not only the restoration of humanity to the fullness of our relationship with God, culminating in lives of holiness and eternal rest with God, but also the redemption of all of God’s creation to serve its intended purpose. This emphasis is embedded in the very structure of the Bible which opens in Genesis 1-2 with the creation of all that there is and concludes in Revelation with the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.
3. The central message of Jesus, which was focused upon the kingdom of

God, provides us with a more social understanding of Jesus’ mission. When the Gospels summarize the mission and message of Jesus, they do so by linking it to the kingdom of God. Thus we read in Mark 1:14-15, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’ ” (NRSV). A kingdom is not focused on a single individual or individuals as autonomous actors; a kingdom, by definition, is a society, a community of people who are joined together in allegiance to the “monarch,” in this case, God. Further, a kingdom should resemble or reflect the character of its king. For this reason, justice, holiness, mercy and compassion are united in the kingdom of God.

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4. The Bible’s central term for the social character of human society under God is the Hebrew term *shalom*, which is most often translated as “peace.” However, such a translation does not capture adequately the full range of meaning of this term. It describes much more than the absence of conflict. Some have attempted to express its meaning by describing it as “human flourishing.” But even this is an inadequate expression if it is focused exclusively on human life in this world. For the biblical vision

of peace embraces all of creation (see Isaiah 11:6-9), not just human beings. Just as God’s mission to save the world is comprehensive, so, too, is the vision of *shalom*.

Our Transforming Mission

So, what does the “salvation” in our name mean? It refers to the comprehensive mission of God to deliver the world from the distorting, debilitating and destructive forces of sin and to restore the world to its closest, most intimate relationship with God. It is the salvation of individual humans for lives of Christian holiness; but it is also a “full salvation” in the sense that it is a salvation for the world, for all of creation. This salvation includes the transformation of society, countering dehumanizing systems of injustice, and the construction of social structures for *shalom*. It is for this reason that Booth organized the Army’s social initiatives into the Social Reform Wing, emphasizing the transformative focus of our mission.

As The Salvation Army, we are called to this comprehensive salvific purpose of God; to lean forward into the kingdom of God; to live in anticipation of the glorious vision of a new heaven and a new earth that emerges in Revelation 21. We are called to create communities in which we live out the challenge of Galatians 3:28, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, that is no distinction or discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity; there is neither free nor slave, that is to stand against the injustices inherent in societies and places where economic and social oppression crush human lives and destroy the environment; and there is neither male nor female, that is to strive to ensure that every human person has the opportunity to reach their potential as a child of God. For we are all one in Jesus Christ.

As The Salvation Army, yes, we strive to save souls; we cannot compromise on this point. But we also strive to save communities and to reform the world so that it more closely resembles the kingdom of God. This is the “salvation for both worlds” of which William Booth wrote in 1890 and of which Scripture speaks. That—and nothing less—is the mission of The *Salvation Army*. ☺

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