



**THE SALVATION ARMY**  
INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COUNCIL

## **THEOLOGY OF THE ENVIRONMENT**



## SUSTAINING ABUNDANT LIFE SOME PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL THOUGHTS ON (AND WITHIN) GOD'S CREATION

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As followers of Jesus, Salvationists are called to continually explore and deepen their understanding of God and God's will through studying the Scriptures, prayer and the insight of the Holy Spirit. Along with this we are also called to deepen personal and shared understanding of our own context, our purpose and alignment to God's Kingdom within this world that God has created. Wherever we find ourselves in this complicated world, aiming to persistently seek and live in loving allegiance to God and share this through our words and actions, we can be sure that everything that we see, touch, smell and interact with is, and is contained within, God's creation.

### God seen through creation

In Romans 1:20 we read: 'For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.' This verse points to the idea that through the created order – the diverse plants, animals and ecosystems that have and continue to live throughout the earth – our understanding and recognition of God can be greatly enhanced. We can then say God's creation has inherent worth in and of itself apart from any value we may place on it for economic, physical or social reasons. What God has created has fundamental value to God separately from any usefulness to us as humans.

Christian scholar Johannes Luetz notes three important implications around discerning God's invisible qualities through creation. Firstly, if you want to know more about your Creator, learn more about God's creation! Secondly, if God's eternal power and divine nature can be known in part through what God has made, then looking after all that God has creatively and lovingly brought forth should naturally have a high priority for God's followers. Thirdly, as the degradation and

destruction of God's creation continues, God then becomes progressively less knowable and less 'clearly seen' through creation. If the abundant forms of life that make up different ecosystems around the world (some examples include the Great Barrier Reef near Australia, the forests of the Amazon, the savannahs of Africa, and the taiga forests in high northern latitudes) are continually damaged or degraded, then the glory, vibrancy, abundance and power of God becomes slightly less visible and harder to grasp.

Throughout the Scriptures we read of the harmonious relationships God originally intended for life on earth, and the tightly linked connections between God, people and creation. For example, God considered everything he created very good (Genesis 1:31); humanity is placed on earth to cultivate it and to care for it (Genesis 2:15); and Genesis 2:18 provides background for the importance of community and togetherness. Various principles within the Old Testament link holy living and sustainable living. There are also specific principles that move humanity towards keeping healthy and whole relationships with God, God's creation and fellow humans as an integral aspect of God's earth. Think of the scriptural calls to respect the 'Year of Restoration', giving the land time for rest and restoration for one year every seven years (Leviticus 25:2-6, 20-22); and the 'Year of Jubilee' where land ownership and property rights were to be recalibrated every 50 years, keeping in mind the fact that all things are from and belong to God (Leviticus 25:8-14).

Biblical passages emphasise the links between living holy, God-centred lives in community and living in safety and abundance in the land (e.g. Leviticus 25:17-19). Substantial issues and problems arise in the Scriptures when people ignore or do not consider their connection with God, with other people, and with the land. This fact is still of great significance to us today.



## Humanity's impacts on God's creation

Throughout all of human history, humanity has always impacted God's creation. Yet, it appears that humanity's impacts have and are continuing to increase significantly. To list some of the known changes to the earth, to God's creation, due to humanity is deeply concerning. There have been huge losses in biodiversity caused by human activities. Overfishing, habitat destruction, deforestation, overgrazing, desertification and increases in non-native invasive species have all been contributors. Decreases in air, water and soil quality have been observed; ozone depletion has occurred; oceans are becoming more acidic. There have been vast increases in light and noise pollution and chemical and nuclear contamination in both times of war and peace. Other alarming human-caused environmental issues include the existence of 'garbage patches' or 'trash vortices'

within all major oceans and that newborn babies can already test positive for a multiplicity of harmful and toxic chemicals and carcinogens.

The impact of environmental degradation and the potentialities of climate change on all people – particularly the poorest and most vulnerable – can be argued to sit squarely within the spheres of the work and mission of The Salvation Army. Indeed, we must note the internationalism of The Salvation Army – we are a worldwide community – and therefore any ways in which Salvationists heal or degrade God's creation in one area can potentially positively or negatively impact Salvationists in other areas around the world. Furthermore, The Salvation Army's mission flows from its emphasis on practical holiness, so let us now consider ideas around holiness in light of the idea and potential realities of the world we all live within.

## Holiness is holistic and encompasses all of life

As much has already been written by others on the theme of holiness, there is no need for an in-depth retracing of the background to the idea of holiness within this short paper. Rather, we will briefly consider writings on holiness that specifically intersect with practical action with a focus on what could be termed practical holiness – the quest to work through what the call for followers of Christ to be 'holy' as Christ is holy is, and what this looks like in one's local context. The Salvation Army's International Spiritual Life Commission (ISLC) acknowledged that this quest is far from complete:

We confess that at times we have failed to realise the practical consequences of the call to holiness within our relationships, within our communities and within our Movement.<sup>1</sup>

The ISLC further emphasised and supported the commitment to holiness:

We call Salvationists worldwide to restate and live out the doctrine of holiness in all its dimensions – personal, relational, social and political – in the context of our cultures and in the idioms of our day while allowing for, and indeed prizing, such diversity of experience and expression as is in accord with the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup>

However, to these stated dimensions we can argue that the ecological must also be added. Should we not also ask how we might have failed to realise

the practical ecological consequences of the call to holiness? The range of ecological issues briefly covered above are closely interrelated to personal, relational, social and political dimensions of holiness.

It must also be noted that in the process of considering the ecological aspects of holiness, there is definite need to reflect contextually. Even though there are constants for the international Salvation Army as a whole, and for Salvationists individually as a worldwide community of believers, what might be more ecologically and culturally appropriate in a particular country, territory, division, town or even local corps within the same city could be slightly different from another. One would expect that local corps and centres have, or are working towards, a much greater awareness of what practical holiness might look like in their ecosystems and social contexts and to find a balance of caring for people and place. This relies on us being aware of both our local ecosystems and larger global contexts. This is not necessarily a call to focus entirely or primarily on ecological issues – The Salvation Army is not placed to fix all the ecological issues stated above. Rather, by being aware of these concerns and aiming for holistic holiness in the everyday for individual Salvationists and the Army collectively, there is increased potential for defending and supporting the flourishing of all God's creation.

<sup>1</sup> Street, Robert. 2008. *Called To Be God's People: The International Spiritual Life Commission, its report, implications and challenges*. London, UK: Salvation Books: 79.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Continually deepening and grounding our ideas and the practical outworking of holiness includes considering earthy, sustainable, loving, practical holiness and its impact on our near neighbours, global neighbours (that includes our international Salvationist brothers and sisters!), future generations and God's creation. In this regard, Wesleyan scholars Thomas Oord and Michael Lodahl helpfully suggest that:

We are holy when we respond to [God's particular] call and work cooperatively with God to promote the well-being of others and of all creation, including ourselves. For God calls everyone to the work of love.<sup>3</sup>

We can see the effects of holy love towards all of God's creation in the experiences and writings of fellow Salvationists. For instance, reconsidering a well-known passage from Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle through a practical, ecologically-minded lens:

As I got out of bed and was reading some of the words of Jesus, he gave me such a blessing as I never had dreamed a man could have this side of Heaven. It was a heaven of love that came into my heart. I walked out over Boston Common before breakfast, weeping for joy and praising God. Oh, how I loved! In that hour I knew Jesus, and I loved him till it seemed my heart would break with love. I was filled with love for all his creatures. I heard the little sparrows chattering; I loved them. I saw a little worm wriggling across my path; I stepped over it; I didn't want to hurt any living thing. I loved the dogs, I loved the horses, I loved the little urchins on the street, I loved the strangers who hurried past me, I loved the heathen, I loved the whole world.<sup>4</sup>

Brengle's experience echoes strongly with the views of Catherine Booth. Catherine's love of animals has been noted in a number of writings. W.T. Stead wrote of Catherine:

...it is well to note with what passionate sympathy she regarded those who were suffering, whether they were drunkards or animals, so long as they were sentient beings.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, General William Booth spoke of his wife's whole soul being:

...full of tender, deep compassion. [William thought] that she suffered more in her lifetime through her compassion for poor...animals than some doctors of divinity suffer for the...wide world of sinning, sorrowing mortals!<sup>6</sup>

One assumes that it was Catherine's love for animals that was the basis for both the value placed upon vegetarianism within the Booth family and also the inclusion of a section within *The Salvation Army's Orders and Regulations for Soldiers*:

A soldier within the Salvation Army should be kind-hearted, and should manifest love and gentleness especially in their connection with the animal world. To inflict or to witness cruelty should be impossible. Not only should they avoid causing unnecessary hardship on animals, but should be willing to aid or relieve any suffering creature.<sup>7</sup>

Contextual practical holiness that resonates with Catherine Booth's compassion, the section from *Orders and Regulations* and Brengle's testimony where he 'didn't want to hurt any living thing' can be so precious and life-affirming in today's often uncaring and callous world. It is a radical and all-encompassing love that calls for and partners towards the flourishing of all people and all God's creatures from the 'little worm' to the largest of flora and fauna. All are valued, important and interconnected within the ecosystems that God has lovingly brought forth with the promise to redeem, renew and reconcile all things through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.



<sup>3</sup> Oord, T.J. and Lodahl, M. 2005. *Relational Holiness: Responding to the Call of Love*. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill: 133.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, C. 1978. *Samuel Logan Brengle: Portrait of a Prophet*. Atlanta, GA: Salvation Army Supplies, USA Southern: 52.

<sup>5</sup> Bramwell-Booth, C. 1970. *Catherine Booth: The Story of Her Loves*. London: Hodder and Stoughton: 21.

<sup>6</sup> Bramwell-Booth, *Catherine Booth*, 451.

<sup>7</sup> The Salvation Army. 1961. *Orders and Regulations for Soldiers*. London, UK: Chap 4, Sec 8.

## Love and community

Playing our part in caring for God's world conforms to calls in the Scriptures. As Wesleyan scholar Howard Snyder contends, caring for God's creation can be perceived as the first commission or call from God towards wholeness and holiness (Genesis 2:15).<sup>8</sup> There is also the scriptural call to love: 'Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.' (Romans 13:10), and in Matthew 22:36-39 we read that Jesus states the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. The second commandment Jesus affirms is that we are also to love others.

As Commissioner William Francis has stated: 'The life of Jesus makes holiness intelligible, understandable and desirable.'<sup>9</sup> In Christ we see a beauty that is good, perfect and most desirable.' How then might the life of Jesus be translated into today's societies, to cultures that are absorbed on accumulation, consumerism, materialism – within societies that continue along a trajectory of pollution and degradation?

If we as Salvationists are called to live holy, Spirit-filled lives, growing and developing Christ's character in our lives and living out pure love (aspects described by General Frederick Coutts, Commissioner Brengle and others) for God and all God's creation, it then follows that living in sustainable ways that minimise negative impacts on fellow humanity and the rest of God's loved creation is an integral part of holiness.

As a holy and a listening people, we must not only be open to the cries of suffering people, but also to the groans of creation around us. This of course will vary on our personal contexts, but can include aiming to live simply, reusing where possible, recycling, reducing unnecessary consumption, but also taking a 'bigger picture' view, such as evaluating the liveability and sustainability of our homes, our church buildings and our local communities and ecosystems. As followers of Christ, as Salvationists, as contributors to the healing of people and place, it is helpful to be aware of the conditions of life and death, of health and disease that surround us.

As Salvationists, can we also affirm along with the farmer and writer Wendell Berry that we can take 'literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world...[and] believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always towards wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.'



<sup>8</sup> Snyder, H. 2008. 'Holiness and the Five Calls of God: Holiness in Postmodernity' in Mannoia, K. and Thorsen, D. (eds.). 2008. *The Holiness Manifesto*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

<sup>9</sup> Francis, W. 2010. *Our Heritage Of Holiness - Biblical Foundations*. A paper presented at The Salvation Army's 3rd International Theology and Ethics Symposium, London, England, 6-10 October:4.



## Guarding against...

Before concluding, mention should also be made of characteristics of human life that work against flourishing and wholeness for all creation. We read in James 4:17: 'If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.' Therefore, if we know of good ways to live sustainably in today's world, but we do not do them, this can be considered sin. There are aspects that can be specifically listed for us to guard against in our personal lives, congregations and organisational structures:

- Greed and the love of money
- Selfishness and convenience
- Consumerism and materialism
- Apathy and the absence of compassion or love
- Unhealthy politics and structures.

It has only been in the past few decades that consumerism and the economic prosperity of the Western world has removed the need for such frugality and created the potential for great waste in terms of food, materials and energy. Sadly, our lack of responsible stewardship with the resources provided to us has seen major increases in the levels of waste from consumer goods, associated pollution and adverse impacts on God's earth. It is in this context that the concepts of reusing, recycling and reducing our consumption have taken on a new importance. The biblical principle we read in Deuteronomy 20:19-20 – paraphrased, 'do not waste or destroy' – is still relevant.

Indeed, what does living as Salvationists mean for each of us in our context, when much of the world is hooked on consumerism, materialism and greed, and where the pursuit of financial success is prioritised over the flourishing of life – life in all its fullness? What might Salvationism, considered particularly in terms practical love and practical holiness, bring to a world that is increasingly feeling the negative effects of humanity's destructive and harmful habits? What might radical Salvationist actions, grounded in love and practical holiness look like? How can those who have more

than enough learn to live generously? This is a substantial task for each Salvationist and each expression of The Salvation Army around the world to engage in within their community.

The scope for us as Salvationists is wide as we aim to live holy lives for Christ within the 'oikos' – or household of God. As Emily JoAnn Haynes has challenged: 'I dare you to name something that doesn't matter to God.'<sup>10</sup> That means there is no need to make distinctions between caring for people and caring for the planet in which we all live, breathe and have our being. God has brought forth a world that is interdependent and a world in which humanity is called to be wise stewards. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit gently nudges and encourages us to care more deeply about all of God's precious creation and to positively engage and encourage faith pathways to Christ with those who are already working towards a sustainable future.

To conclude this brief discussion paper, basic guiding values for individual or collective actions as Salvationists – which of course are based on the vision and commitment to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ – could be affirmed that disciples of Christ are to be ambassadors for salvation, healing and hope, sharing God's love and peace to each other, the Church, communities and ecosystems we live within and depend upon. We can broaden views of salvation from notions of purely personal spirituality and/or eternity in Heaven towards the healing, shalom and abundance for all life here right now within God's loved creation.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Haynes, E. 2015. 'Holiness: The Most Hipster Doctrine', in *Renovating Holiness* (Broward and Oord), Nampa, ID: SacraSage, 84.

<sup>11</sup> Seaman, M. 2016. 'Salvation, Hope and Apocalyptic'. In *Thought Matters: Rediscovering Salvation*. Journal of The Salvation Army Tri-territorial Theological Forum. Vol. 6: 68.

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