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ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

SERIES: TAKING A STAND

EXPLORING THE ARMY'S INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENTS

Members of the International Moral and Social Issues Council (IMASIC) reflect on The Salvation Army's International Positional Statements.

STATEMENT OF POSITION

There is a wide range of cultural understandings of the relationship to ancestors. The Salvation Army upholds that God alone is to be worshipped. The Salvation Army believes that God – Father, Son and Spirit – is fully able to protect, bless and comfort. Jesus Christ is our mediator. Christians can put their complete trust in God. Therefore, The Salvation Army maintains that it is unacceptable to give offerings and sacrifices of any kind to appease the dead, to offer worship to ancestors or to invoke their help as mediator or protector.

This positional statement focuses on the practices of people seeking to find solutions through ancestral worship. We recognise grieving for the dead is a natural process. However, when practices become a worship of the ancestors they are unacceptable. Salvationists will understandably demonstrate gratitude and honour to God for the lives of those who have gone before us.

Download the complete International Positional Statement on Ancestral Worship at salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

Even though ancestral worship is mostly associated with primitive civilisations, it is still prevalent in many countries around the world today, including some that are generally recognised as modern societies and economies.

In most parts of the world where ancestral worship has been or is being practised, its traces are evident in social functions and moral norms. The rituals that are associated qualify the practice as ancestral worship.

Ancestral worship plays a big role in African traditional religions because it is connected to African culture, customs and life in general. It is a means to tap into power from the spiritual world. This power phenomenon has been regarded as a strong pillar in African spirituality. Witch doctors, diviners, fortune tellers and many more are believed to connect with the spirits of ancestors in their dealings. They call upon the names of the ancestors and offer sacrifices as they present their petitions to the spirits of the ancestors. In many ways, these practices are direct acts of worship to the ancestors as they involve adoration, worship and praise. The ancestors are put in a position of having divine powers.

The concept of ancestral worship is more than just a myth among many Africans who believe that

FOR REFLECTION

- * Ancestral worship is not an issue of African people alone. What occult practices exist in my culture and what dangers do they pose to Christian faith?
- * How do I explain the biblical viewpoint to a person involved in ancestral worship (or other occult practices)?
- * While staying faithful to Scripture, how can I cultivate a loving memory of loved ones who have died?

when one dies, one is transferred from the world of the living to the world of the living dead. A record of people who have died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. There is a strong sense and belief of intimate and interdependent association between the dead and the living. Africans believe that they live in a space where the ancestral spirits are present everywhere and are watching over them day and night.

For example, in African culture, all deceased members of the family are believed to become part of the collective ancestral group that has the ability to influence the lives of their descendants for the better or the worse. When clan or family leaders die, they are believed to join other ancestors and become the life source of all descendants and the guarantor of their unity, community and existence. Like parents, they are responsible to continue loving, protecting and caring for those connected to them in the physical world. They are also responsible for curses as well as bringing misfortune in response to any act of disobedience or any wrongdoing among the offspring.

The relationship between the living and the dead is the cornerstone of ancestral worship. People need to work hard to appease the spirits. This belief is deeply ingrained in the mind of Africans and they have spent their

lives working to appease the spirits since long before Christianity was brought to the continent.

Before the coming of Christianity, Africans were already religious. Almost everybody in African society participated in ancestral worship in one way or another. They worshipped their ancestors during certain periods of the year such as the planting season, after harvest, when there was a drought or an outbreak of a disease. They would hold ceremonies accompanied by rituals in order to appease the spirits, while chanting as they called upon the names of their ancestral spirits. The elders of the community or specific individuals would lead the procession.

Statistics show that in sub-Saharan countries there are still more than 100 million followers who practise African traditional religions which, in many ways, have strong links with ancestral worship. The worrying figures are not only for the people who are entirely into ancestral worship, but for those who have converted to Christianity and are still holding on to some practices connected to ancestral worship. Here follow some examples to illustrate how ancestral worship is still very much part of modern-day life.

Use of charms: There is the belief that spirits can be used to attack someone or to bring good fortune.

As a result, many Africans live in fear. It is from such a background that people would make sure that they have some powers to protect them from evil, for example, by using charms. People believe that charms will either give them power, protection or fortune. In some cases, there are rituals that are performed or rules to be followed in order to tap into these powers from the spiritual world before charms are used. If the goal is achieved, the glory goes to the spirits.

Witchcraft: Among Africans, every problem can be explained and answered by witch doctors, diviners or spirit mediums. There is a belief that certain issues or problems could never be sorted out medically or scientifically, but only by witch doctors. The fear of witchcraft or the casting of spells results in people consulting witch doctors. Sadly, there are still many people who resort to help from witch doctors for healing, power, promotion at work or success in business.

Cleansing the spirits: Whenever any misfortune happens among Africans, it is believed that the spirits are not happy and have inflicted a curse on somebody or a property. Such a person or property becomes unclean until rituals are performed in order to cleanse them from the contamination by angry spirits. »

» **Fortune telling/diviners:** Many people are anxious about their personal lives, family, businesses and properties as well as their future due to multiple challenges they face, including fear, poverty and disease. Even if they go to church for spiritual guidance and blessing, some people have been looking for solutions elsewhere by consulting fortune tellers, mediums and diviners to predict or correct their future.

Rituals and sacrifices: To this very day, a few African communities are still offering human sacrifices. Children and people with albinism are being abducted and killed for their body parts. This is believed to bring powers or good fortune. Sadly, there are even some governing elites who have participated in such ungodly practices and rituals.

One would ask why someone living in the 21st century takes part in such practices. Most people compromise due to fear. Fear to lose ties with their relatives, fear to lose their roots, their traditions and culture and, above all, the fear of consequences that the ancestral spirits would inflict upon them and their family if they disobey. I like the words of this song by Gloria and Bill Gaither (SASB 219, chorus):

*Because he lives, I can face tomorrow;
Because he lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know he holds the future,
And life is worth the living just because he lives.*

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

There is nothing wrong to remember those whom we love and who have gone to be with the Lord. But it is wrong to think that they can influence our lives, or that we can change anything where they are. It is wrong to worship them, call upon them for help or to mediate our prayers.

The practices of ancestral worship and spiritism are not consistent with Christian teaching. The truth is that such powers do not come from God but from the devil. The Bible strongly forbids anything based on ungodly connections that lead to any form of idolatry.

The Bible has a negative view of any attempts to communicate with the spirits of the dead for whatever reason. All contact with the spirit world is expressly forbidden, irrespective of the nature of the spirits concerned. It expressly forbids consulting mediums or souls of the dead as well as certain practices associated with the dead. For example, Leviticus 19:26 warns, 'Do not practise divination or seek omens.' Verse 28 states: 'Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord,' and verse 31, 'Do not go for advice to people who consult the spirits of the dead people. If you do you will be ritually unclean. I am the Lord your God' (GNT). (See also Job 7:7-10; Isaiah 8:19-20).

The Bible states, 'Don't sacrifice your children in the fires on your altars; and don't let your people practice

divination or look for omens or use spells or charms, and don't let them consult the spirits of the dead. The Lord your God hates people who do these disgusting things' (Deuteronomy 18:10-12 GNT).

Jesus' teaching about the Rich Man and Lazarus, in Luke 16:19-31, answers the question about what happens when one dies. In this parable, Jesus teaches that it is impossible for the living to communicate with the dead. The rich man wanted Lazarus to warn his brothers against making the same mistakes he had made. However, we learn that there is no freedom for the dead to come and interact with the living.

Since the arrival of Christianity, most Africans have converted to this or other faiths. It is appalling to realise that, either knowingly or unknowingly, Christians (including some Salvationists) have held Christianity in one hand and ancestral worship in the other. They go to church and are prominent members but, at the same time, have partaken in certain acts and rituals held in their clan, tribe or village that do not honour God because they are related to ancestral worship.

Salvationists in places where ancestral worship is still evident need to watch out. They must understand the distinction between Christianity and ancestral worship so that they are able to avoid snares that will lead them astray. Ancestral worship rituals and practices can be mixed up in our cultural and traditional practices, which is

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confusing at times. Salvationists need to be alert. In cases where such cultural and traditional beliefs come in conflict with biblical teaching, Salvationists should embrace biblical truth, no matter who or what threatens them.

God wants us to worship him alone (Exodus 34:14). God created the universe and everything in it. He has revealed himself to us through his son Jesus Christ. We must accept absolutely no other god than him. Jesus is the only Saviour for humanity.

Paul wrote to the Galatians, 'Freedom is what we have – Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again' (Galatians 5:1). And to the Colossians, he wrote, 'You have died with Christ and are set free from the ruling spirits of the universe' (Colossians 2:20 GNT). As believers, we do not need to fear any evil spirit or the spirits of ancestors. On the Cross, Jesus conquered every evil power. All we need to do is claim the blood of Jesus' victory. The Bible states, 'Resist the Devil, and he will run away from you' (James 4:7).

As Christians and Salvationists, we have been called to be priests as Christ's representatives, offering spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God. We are to set ourselves apart, so we can be used by God for every good deed and proclaim God's love to others.

FOR FURTHER READING

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- Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes, UK, 1997.
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A NEW INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENT on Sexism has been approved and published.
It is available for download at salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

