

## **Are We Really a Holiness Movement**

by Major Alan Harley

A negative response to the question would not be the correct one. At the same time it is difficult to give an unqualified affirmative response. The framework is certainly in place. The doctrines are unchanged. And around the world there are many who seek, teach and live holy lives. But alongside these facts, some observations must be made.

Holiness denominations are, in a real sense, confessional churches.<sup>[1]</sup> They understand their doctrines and how those doctrines make them distinctive. Further, they see themselves as existing for the purpose of spreading the doctrine of Christian Holiness - this is their reason for being. Wesley claimed that God had raised up his movement 'to spread scriptural holiness throughout these lands'. In such churches the members understand that they are 'holiness' people. Their pastors are expected to preach the doctrine.

It would be interesting to poll Salvationists world-wide to determine their understanding of their theology. My observation is that, compared to Christians in those other 'holiness' movements, Salvationists often do not seem to be aware that the doctrine of Entire Sanctification is central to the beliefs of their movement, or, indeed, that it is part of those beliefs.

Many of us who are baby-boomers and older were introduced to soldiership with little or no teaching of this doctrine. Indeed, examples abound of soldiership embarked upon solely in order to qualify to play in the band! This was at a time when Salvationist music was at its pinnacle. It was also a time when training colleges in many places seemed no longer to give a significant place to the teaching of Christian holiness. The old songs were sung, but the singing of those songs often contributed to a corporate piety out of proportion to personal devotion and discipleship.

### **Where Are We Now?**

My purpose is not to deplore decline. In significant ways Salvationism has in recent years experienced renewal and is more spiritually healthy today than a half century ago, particularly within the ranks of its young people. We may not have as many brilliant bands and songster brigades, but there is a genuine awakening amongst Salvationists, and in many places a desire to see the doctrine of holiness taught.

At the same time, the spiritual life of the movement is being led in different directions. There are in some quarters worship expressions and teachings on 'spirituality' which trace to Catholicism. This is not in itself a bad thing. Wesleyan theology traces its roots not to the Reformation of Calvin but back through the Methodist, Pietist, Anglican, Catholic and early eastern theological traditions, a fact which has assumed special significance in Wesley studies ever since Albert Outler and others traced Wesley's doctrine of holiness, or Perfect Love, to the influence of the 4<sup>th</sup> century homilies of Macarius. We have much to learn from the great spiritual teachers of the historic

church of both the West and the East. Just as Wesley's doctrine of the Christian life was shaped to a significant degree by those rich traditions, so reference to them can be found in early Salvationist writings.<sup>[ii]</sup> However, Salvationism is not Roman Catholic in its theology and the latter's mystical and ascetical theology cannot be a substitute for a Scripture-based understanding of spirituality which reflects the Wesleyan-Salvationist tradition, i.e. holiness of life in the power of the Spirit. At the other extreme there is, in many places, an embracing of things Pentecostal. Even as God's people must be willing to learn from the great saints of the past, so they must be open to all that his Spirit seeks to do in their lives and in their worship and witness. But at the same time it is largely due to a lack of solid teaching that causes many a young Christian to see no difference between the early Army's understanding of 'the baptism of the Spirit' and that of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. In simple terms, the former has to do primarily with cleansing and purity of life, the latter with spiritual gifts and power. Along with this doctrinal shift there is the new expression of worship which has, by and large, replaced the hymnody of holiness with lyrics which, on the whole, have a different emphasis.<sup>[iii]</sup>

### Reasons for Doctrinal Uncertainty

One reason why the lament is so often heard "We don't hear holiness preached nowadays" is not merely because new terminology is employed to convey the old message. The problem goes deeper.

a. There are those who do not preach it because they are not convinced it is truly biblical. Indeed, it is possible to question some of the older exegesis. Some earlier 'holiness' writings amassed a substantial amount of proof texts, but these were not infrequently employed in a manner not intended by the original writers. Verses having to do with regeneration were at times used to teach a second blessing. Some 'holiness' teachers, seeking to bring a level of exegetical sophistication to their message, made much of such things as the Greek aorist tense, suggesting that it invariably referred to a crisis experience (which it didn't).

b. Some who preach and teach were not taught the doctrine in an adequate manner. Training colleges are sometimes blamed for not providing solid teaching on the subject and at times the criticism can be sustained.

c. Salvationism's rich tradition, arguably the most attractive and colorful expression of Protestantism, has at times provided a safe haven *from* the challenge of holy living. Commitment to musical sections and corps busy-ness – and even the demands of officership - have at times become for some a substitute for that deeper level of commitment which is essential to holy living.

The list could be extended. But what must be recognized is that the doctrine of Holiness is an unusual one. It is one of the few doctrines which require more than mental assent. It cannot be divorced from experience. It reflects the distinctive nature of Wesleyanism, *viz.* it is a theology of Christian experience and it does not work unless it is tied to a

warm hearted knowledge of a God who justifies, witnesses by his Spirit to our salvation, and sanctifies our lives. In this it is virtually unique amongst the various theological systems. Thus, to assure that the doctrine has a future, close attention must be paid to assuring that the people of the movement enjoy the experience – something that must begin within the schools for officer training.

As an aside, the recognition that this doctrine is the reflection of a distinctive theological tradition requires that in the training of cadets our colleges' textbooks reflect that tradition. The majority of evangelical textbooks in theology are of Reformed origin, which frequently creates cognitive dissonance in the classroom and beyond. The soteriology of Calvinism is not the same as that of non-Calvinism. Similarly, if the movement sees itself as standing within that tradition, it will be reflected in the materials provided in the Trade Departments (by whatever name they are known). Popular evangelical writings will take second place to those written within the tradition of which we are part. We are witnessing a renaissance of Wesleyan writing and scholarship.<sup>[iv]</sup> This should, I feel, be seen on the bookshelves of our stores and college libraries and will require clear 'headquarters' leadership for such to take place. In other words, The Salvation Army won't simply drift back into the full tide of the holiness stream; such a move will be intentional and will be viewed as imperative. Brengle wrote:

...it is this Holiness – the doctrine, the experience, the action – that we Salvationists must maintain, otherwise we shall betray our trust; we shall lose our birthright; we shall cease to be a spiritual power in the earth; we shall have a name to live, and yet be dead; our glory will depart; and we, like Sampson shorn of his locks, shall become as other men; the souls with whom we are entrusted will grope in darkness or go elsewhere for soul-nourishment and guidance; and while we may still have titles and ranks, which will have become vainglorious, to bestow upon our children, we shall have no heritage to bequeath them or martyr-like sacrifice, or spiritual power, or dare-devil-faith, of pure, deep joy, of burning love, of holy triumph.<sup>[v]</sup>

<sup>[ii]</sup> A good example is that of the Church of the Nazarene. Its denominational paper is *The Herald Of Holiness* and the 'holiness' emphasis is strongly asserted in its many publications.

<sup>[iii]</sup> Cf. John M. Todd, *John Wesley and the Catholic Church*, Hodder and Stoughton 1958; S.T.Kimbrough, *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, St Vladimir's Press. Christian Faragher, an officer in Melbourne, Australia, recently produced a thesis for the Melbourne College of Divinity, *The Hidden Stream: The Contemplative Tradition in the Spirituality of The Salvation Army*, in which she traces these influences in the writings of early Salvationists.

<sup>[iiii]</sup> There are those who point to the type of unusual phenomena described in Bramwell Booth's *Echoes and Memories* as proof that being 'slain in the Spirit' and the like should be evidenced in contemporary Salvationism. This position fails to recognize that whereas for contemporary Charismatics such happenings are evidence of God's blessing and are thus to be encouraged and sought, for early Salvationists the position was 'seek not, forbid not'.

<sup>[iv]</sup> For example, the writings of Randy Maddox, Kenneth Collins, Paul Wesley Chilcote, *et al*

<sup>[v]</sup> *Love Slaves*, Supplies and Purchasing Departments, USA, 1960, p.72