

A Glimpse from the Past - Compassion

In the very early days of The Salvation Army, those who were working among the poor soon realized that young women, many of whom were only girls, were being sold into prostitution. They were lured with promises of domestic work and ended up enslaved as prostitutes. As Salvation Army personnel sought to help, they discovered that the age of consent in England was only 13 years of age.

Horrified by this fact, Bramwell Booth convinced an influential newspaper editor, W.T. Stead, to interview some of the girls who had sought refuge with The Salvation Army. Distressed by their stories, Stead began campaigning to raise the age of consent from 13 to 16. It became evident, however, that these stories were not enough – the government and the public would not be moved to action without ‘proof’ that girls were being offered and bought for sexual purposes in Britain and elsewhere.

In what is now known as the ‘Maiden Tribute’, Stead ‘purchased’ thirteen year-old Eliza Armstrong from her mother for the meager price of £5. In July 1885, under the graphic headline “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon”, Stead exposed in graphic detail the entrapment, abduction and sale of young, underprivileged girls to London brothels. It was the first of a series of articles that shocked London society and was an international sensation. It became the impetus for a legal amendment that raised the age of consent from 13 to 16. Stead and several of his accomplices, including Bramwell Booth, were arrested and brought to trial for the unlawful methods used in their investigation. Stead ended up spending three months in prison.

Compassion runs deep in the wells of The Salvation Army and has been the motivation for acts of courage and love for over a century. As General Albert Orsborn penned these iconic words, he may well have been remembering these bold messengers of compassion and change.

*Except I am moved with compassion,
How dwelleth thy Spirit in me?
In word and in deed
Burning love is my need;
I know I can find this in thee.*

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