

The Salvation Army
Response

“The Nature and Mission of the Church”

A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement

Faith and Order Paper 198, World Council of Churches (WCC)

Preface

The Salvation Army, an international movement, is a worldwide evangelical Christian church. Its **message** is based on the Bible. Its **ministry** is motivated by the love of God. Its **mission** is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.

The Salvation Army is an integral part of the body of Christ on earth, having its own distinctive government and practice. The Army’s doctrine follows the mainstream of Christian belief and its articles of faith emphasise God’s saving purposes. Its objects are ‘the advancement of the Christian religion... of education, the relief of poverty, and other charitable objects beneficial to society or the community of mankind as a whole.’ (Salvation Army Act 1980)

The World Council of Churches and The Salvation Army

The Salvation Army has been associated with the ‘Faith and Order’ movement from its inception. It is thus natural that it was a founding member of the World Council of Churches in 1948. That relationship is now expressed through the Central Committee of the WCC – where The Salvation Army serves in an advisory capacity – and with representation on the Conference of Secretaries/Christian World Communions.

The Salvation Army is grateful for the invitation to respond to the seminal and important Faith and Order Paper 198 ‘*The Nature and Mission of the Church.*’ This continues our long-standing involvement in such ecumenical dialogue, as also expressed in the 1982 Faith and Order Paper 111, ‘*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.*’

The following outline reflects the exact sequential content of ‘*The Nature and Mission of the Church,*’ with Salvation Army affirmations and additional insights duly noted.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

Introduction

With reference to well-known WCC edict ‘the search for visible unity’ (§ 1) it is important to note that The Salvation Army does not adhere to the belief that the Church universal depends for its existence or validity upon any particular ecclesiastical structure, any particular form of worship, or any particular observance of ritual. Rather, The Salvation Army understands the Church universal is the whole of the worshipping, witnessing Christian community throughout the centuries comprised of whatever groupings, large or small, accepted or persecuted, wealthy or poor, into which her members may have been gathered in the past or in the present.

We trust this is helpful to note at the outset.

A. This Study

The Salvation Army would concur that in order for the universality of the gospel to be unhindered the Church must embrace wide-ranging diversity in the expression and nurture of faith. In so doing, acceptance of the gospel will not depend upon coincident acceptance of a particular culture or ecclesiastical tradition, thereby nullifying that universality. (§ 4)

B. Purpose and Method

The Salvation Army would endorse the suggestions to strengthen this text with greater emphasis on mission. We would add our voice to that number. (§ 7)

C. The Invitation

Please refer to the end of this paper for our response to these specific questions.

I. The Church of the Triune God

A. Nature of the Church

The Salvation Army affirms that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic (§ 12) – this is accentuated in The Apostles Creed which is included in the official Salvation Army Handbook of Doctrine.

The Salvation Army affirms that the New Testament “testifies to the compatibility of unity and diversity” (§ 16) – and therefore would by extension affirm that there should be diversity of insights into the nature and mission of the church.

This section refers to a wide variety of Biblical expressions to describe the nature and the mission of the Church. We are gratified that the document is prepared to accept that the *mission ecclesiology* of The Salvation Army is accepted as a New Testament expression of the church. (§ 16)

The Salvation Army affirms ‘the priesthood of all believers’ and emphasises the ‘commissioning’ of leaders. A significant part of this understanding means countering *passive membership*. It is anticipated that Salvationists will do more than belong on the rolls. Thus, we affirm that the energies of the Church are primarily for use beyond the confines of the Church. Consequently our use of the military metaphor is symbolic of this external purpose: mission in the world.

To the outlined Biblical Insights of the Church as ‘*People of God,*’ ‘*Body of Christ,*’ ‘*Temple of the Holy Spirit*’ and ‘*Koinonia/Communion*’ The Salvation Army would add the following for consideration:

Pilgrim People

The metaphor of the Church as a *Pilgrim People* corresponds to the nature of the Christian life. Because pilgrims are on a journey, they are not tied to the structures and *status quos* of the society in which their pilgrimage takes place. Always on the move, they value flexibility and tend not to invest their lives in structures that stifle spiritual creativity. They are always becoming.

Known or not, all Christians are part of the one host of God’s pilgrims through all ages and also of a particular band nurturing them in their contemporary journey. The Church is comprised, then, of bands of pilgrims who are called to move together from life which is captive to sin, to life which is captained by Christ and liberated by the Spirit; to move together from the kingdoms of this world to the Kingdom God. From first to last, the Church is in pilgrimage. Its calling is in danger when it stops.

We note with interest the thoughts of Hans Kung: “A church which pitches its tents, without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling ... [We must] play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.” (*The Church As The People Of God*)

An Army

Another biblical metaphor which captures both the mobility of the pilgrim Church and its focus on the world is that of the military, an *Army*. The concept of the soldier at war is a fitting analogy of the Christian who is committed to mission in the world and whose whole life is wrapped up in that mission.

The Church becomes a pilgrim people who beckon the world to free itself from despair and make pilgrimage toward God’s hopeful future. In doing so it faces the opposition of those forces which impede the progress of the Kingdom in human life. Thus, the Church in the New Testament is notably militant in its posture. Never in a position of rest or final triumph, it is always either doing battle or preparing for battle.

In Scripture the figure of the soldier is frequently used to describe the life of the Christian in the world. The decisive act of becoming a soldier in the Roman armies was called the *sacramentum*, or the military oath. The Church later adopted this same word to signify the decisive act of becoming a soldier of Christ. Baptism, and especially the vows taken at baptism, came to be called the *sacramentum*.

B. Mission of the Church

We have strong agreement with the following statement: ‘The church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalized’ (§ 40)

C. The Church as Sign and Instrument of God’s Intention and Plan for the World

The Salvation Army views the Church as comprising those who have received and give witness to the immediacy of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Additionally, the emphasis would be that all who enter God’s Kingdom of grace share one baptism of the Holy Spirit and one obedience to Jesus Christ.

II The Church in History

A. The Church in via

The Salvation Army does not ordinarily use the phrase ‘the church as sacrament.’ (Textbox § 48) We do hold to Christ being the ‘*Ur Sakrament*’ – the original sacrament – who by His Spirit dwells within us. As He dwells in each member of the one body (the church), individually and collectively, we become the outward and visible signs of His inward grace.

The Salvation Army believes it is a disservice to the gospel to insist that grace must be received through the mediation of a particular ritual or procedure, and concludes there is scant evidence in the New Testament from which a case can be held for such a view. Rather, The Salvation Army cleaves to the conviction that grace is immediate and accessible, and that the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to repossess the *sacramental life*. Whereas we are opposed to the idea of any formal sacrament as a means of salvation, we are deeply committed to the sacramental life as that which salvation through faith in Christ makes possible.

The Salvation Army understands the significance of *conversion* and *holiness* in the way this document understands the significance of Baptism and Holy Communion. We depict these essentials in the Mercy Seat and the Holiness Table. Parenthetically, this document can serve to remind us that the Mercy Seat and the Holiness Table are only signs, ones that represent two significant stages in the journey of a Christian – graces that we share with the Church around the world.

As such Salvationists hold the conviction that there can be no sacraments divorced from everyday life; there can only be the sacramental potential of each moment of everyday life. The Salvation

Army has traditionally used the word ‘holiness’ to describe the sacramental life, and ‘sanctification’ as the gracious act of God which makes holiness possible.

B. In Christ – But Not Yet in Full Communion

C. Communion and Diversity

We affirm the statement ‘authentic diversity in the life of the communion must not be stifled; authentic unity must not be surrendered.’ We also endorse the insight that ‘unity, particularly when it tends to be identified with uniformity, can be destructive of authentic diversity.’ (§ 62) Indeed, our identity as an Army leads us to rather specialize in this area – structural unity and missional diversity. Neither is mutually exclusive.

III. The Life of Communion in and for the World

A. Apostolic Faith

The Salvation Army affirms that churches need the ministry of all believers, the ministry of the ordained, and authentic leadership (§§ 90 – 97). In our view and experience, the continuity of ‘apostolic succession’ is exercised personally, communally and collegially – by women as well as men. Apostolic succession depends upon the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of Christians – in personal lives and in the fellowship of believers.

B. Baptism

The Salvation Army recognizes that water baptism was adopted by the New Testament Church as a rite which evoked suggestions of participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, a washing away of sin, a new birth, a clothing in Christ and a renewal by the Spirit. However, The Salvation Army also avers that neither Jesus nor the apostles intended to establish that particular rite as an *indispensable* part of true Spirit baptism, and that readings of scriptural references to ‘baptism’ as a spiritual experience, that see water baptism as a necessary component of the event, are not theologically sound.

Thus, Textbox (g) reflects the official stance of The Salvation Army – namely ‘those which do not celebrate baptism, yet understand themselves as sharing in the spiritual experience of life in Christ.’

C. Eucharist

This section is an example of the one area of the overall document which consistently appears to exclude Salvation Army thinking. There is an underlying assumption that the Lord’s Supper is a central tenet to all ecclesiology. There appears to be no acknowledgement of a ‘non-ritual’ expression of sacramental worship.

The Salvation Army recognizes that the great majority of Christian fellowships observe the Lord's Supper as a sacrament and that this observance is a means of grace whenever the believer partakes as an act of faith in the crucified Christ and as an anticipation of his Kingdom. The Salvation Army interprets the rituals of the Church – whether spontaneous or institutionalized – as a sign of spiritual events, celebrations of God's grace in human life, and witnesses to God's transforming presence. The divine reality behind the rite is always the emphasis. Salvationists are not anti-sacramental; they are simply non-sacramental.

D. Ministry of the Faithful

The Salvation Army endorses the statement that 'the idea of service is central to any biblical understanding of ministry.' (§ 82)

E. Ministry of the Ordained

The Salvation Army *commissions* and *ordains* its officers. These men and women covenant with God to 'love and serve Him supremely all my days, to live to win souls and make their salvation the first purpose of my life, to care for the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love the unlovable, and befriend those who have no friends, to maintain the doctrines and principles of The Salvation Army.' The emphasis is thus on mission, rather than 'a special responsibility for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.' (§ 86)

F. Oversight: Personal, Communal, Collegial

G. Conciliarity and Primacy

H. Authority

IV. In and for the World

The Salvation Army is in strong agreement with the essence of this concluding section. We would echo the thoughts as follows:

How the missionary Church fights its battles: evangelism and social action

The mission of the Church is based on the gospel. The gospel is the good news announcement of the new situation in Jesus Christ, the Kingdom which is now reality because of his life, death and resurrection.

The Church gives witness to the gospel primarily in two ways. These can be described as *evangelism* and *social action*. Both are concerned with facilitating the transformations which the reality of the Kingdom makes possible. Evangelism is concerned with transformation on the personal level, and social action on the socio-economic level. Evangelism is an announcement of the Kingdom's presence and an invitation to accept citizen status.

Social action is also an announcement of the Kingdom's presence, but in this case by supporting and participating in the social change for which that presence calls. Without both ways to witness, the proclamation of the gospel is hindered. Evangelism without social action is flight from the world and refusal to accept the reality of the Kingdom's transforming presence in the midst of this world which God loves. Social action without evangelism is flight from the personal depth of the gospel and refusal to take seriously Jesus' unmistakable command to his followers to become 'fishers of men'

The Nature and Mission of the Church’ invites the churches to respond to four questions, namely:

(1) *Does this study document correctly identify our common ecclesiological convictions, as well as the issues which continue to divide us?*

We accept that this study document does fundamentally identify Salvationist ecclesiological convictions, with the exception of repeated use of ‘sacramental’ language. In addition to the Eucharist and Baptism this is especially evident when speaking of the sacrament of ordination and the church as sacrament.

The Salvation Army does not regard church tradition and order as part of its key beliefs. We believe that The Salvation Army has been raised up by God as an instrument for spreading the gospel in the world. This does not mean that we believe that The Salvation Army has been given a special revelation by God which gives it a status above other churches. We see ourselves as a legitimate part of the Church universal – no less, but no more. Our ecclesiology arises out of the legitimacy of our mission. It is simple – being independent of outer structures and rituals; it is inclusive – acknowledging all Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ no matter which church they belong to.

(2) *Does this study document reflect an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church?*

The Salvation Army identifies with the church universal and also considers itself to be an integral part of the church and its mission of going into the world and making disciples. We believe that in so doing we challenge *classical ecclesiology* by embracing a mission essence as the foundation of our *mission ecclesiology*. In this sense, we would concur that the document reflects a convergence on the nature and mission of the church.

(3) *Are there significant matters in which the concerns of your church are not adequately addressed?*

In this document the significance of the sacrament – and particularly the Lord’s Supper – is constantly present. The thinking is established early and remains throughout the document. Note the following examples:

Article 10 *This divine Word is witnessed to and heard through Scripture. Incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Word is testified to by the Church and proclaimed in preaching, in Sacraments, and in service [...]* Because there is no earlier recognition of a ‘sacramental life’ approach to the Sacraments, this reference can only refer to the formal ceremonies of sacramental worship.

Article 11 *The Spirit incorporates human beings into the body of Christ through faith and baptism, enlivens and strengthens them as the body of Christ nourished and sustained in the Lord’s Supper, and leads them to the full accomplishment of their vocation.*

Dialogue Box (p. 5) “The Institutional Dimensions of the Church ...” *“All churches agree that God creates the Church and binds it to himself through the Holy Spirit by means of the living voice of the Gospel proclaimed in preaching and in the Sacraments”.*

Article 62 *Authentic diversity in the life of communion must not be stifled: authentic unity must not be surrendered. Each local church must be the place where two things are simultaneously guaranteed: the safeguarding of unity and the flourishing of a legitimate diversity ... through shared faith in Christ, expressed in the*

proclamation of the Word, celebration of the Sacraments and lives of service and witness, each local Christian community participates in the life and witness of all Christian communities in all places and all times.

Although the 'Nature and Mission of the Church' truly attempts to be inclusive, when it repeatedly includes strong statements on understanding the church through classical sacramental ecclesiology, it will marginalize The Salvation Army.

The following statement already appears in Faith & Order documents and it could be included in the concluding report of 'The Nature and Mission of the Church:'

It should be noted that there are those churches – such as The Salvation Army - whose vocation does not include the ministering of the outer sacraments, but who, nevertheless, see themselves as fully part of the Body of Christ and therefore included in the sacramental life of the Church.

(4) *Insofar as this study document provides a helpful framework for further ecclesiological discussions among the churches:*

- How can this study document help your church, together with others, take concrete steps towards unity?

We do not see differences in church structures, traditions, liturgy and rites as being 'issues that continue to divide us'. As long as churches do not use them as instruments of exclusion such items can be legitimate expressions of different aspects and interpretations of the Christian faith.

- What suggestions would you make for the future development of this text?

1. The Salvation Army humbly suggests the inclusion of *mission* ecclesiology into the description of the 'Nature and Mission of the Church' instead of the current emphasis on *classical* ecclesiology. The current text readily acknowledges diversity but appears to limit this diversity by an insistence on the Sacrament as a central tenet of the church. A *mission* ecclesiology on the other hand, focuses on the proclamation of the gospel and would enable The Salvation Army to be acknowledged on equal terms with all missional expressions of the church.

2. Maximum and concretized steps towards unity will necessitate understanding and involvement by parishioners. As it currently stands this is not an easily accessible paper for such people. While we recognize and accept that a formal and classical statement needs to be established as a source, without theological facility or comprehension of the history of the traditional churches the reader is greatly handicapped. We would recommend that efforts be eventually undertaken to make this document more accessible. In so doing concrete dialogue and steps towards unity can begin in earnest.

Bibliography

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