

## To Be or Not To Be

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

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*"God will not have His work manifest by cowards"*  
(Emerson)

I have sat through countless classes and seminars on evangelism. I have almost 30 different books in my library on evangelism. I have been told 'how' to do it (get someone saved and then disciple them- in Salvation Army parlance: "soul-saving and soldier-making") more than enough. And I've come to the conclusion that we (by "we" I mean the Army, as part of the evangelical church) have put the cart before the horse in this whole area of winning others. Why is this?

It is a more a matter of *who we are*, rather than *what we do*. We tend to focus our efforts on what we should be doing and how we should be doing it, before we have really settled who we want to be. In other words, it is not so much a matter of "what" and "how", but of "who". I realize that this is hardly a Damascus road revelation and not the first time this idea has been expressed, but let's push the idea a little further than it is usually pushed and focus not just on our identity as "Christians" and "Evangelicals", but specifically as "Salvationists."

The contention is that anyone who wishes to be an effective disciple and therefore reproducing disciple (getting others saved) needs to take seriously the question of his or her denominational identity and loyalty or be destined to fruitlessness and frustration. There is a correlation between the depth and intensity of one's Salvationism and the effectiveness of one's efforts in the area of evangelism. Personal experience in pioneering and church-planting brought this to my attention and the global picture confirms it- wherever in the world the Army is growing, that is where Salvationists take seriously their calling as Salvationists. They know who they are, who to be, and from that naturally follows what to do. The seminars and books are optional extras because the harvest of souls occurs as it always was intended to-

automatically, and inevitably, a sequential by-product of a passionately held belief and not, as we so often attempt to make it, an end in itself effected through formula and technique.

The problem in the West (as opposed to the East or the Third World) is that we're all slightly embarrassed by having to be Salvationists. The uniforms, the flags and bands and ranks and arcane terminology- the whole military metaphor seems so out of joint with the times and societies in which we live that we try to tone it down. We try to blend in with other denominations and make it easy for "the world" to understand and accept us- an apologetic Army, cap in hand to both prevailing cultures of which we are a part (the Canadian culture and within that the Evangelical subculture), seeking to entice people into our fold with innocuous deceptions ("We call ourselves an Army but really we are a church") with a "nudge-nudge, wink-wink" about all these Army euphemisms.

And herein lies the crux of this whole evangelical puzzle. Evangelism means bringing people into the Kingdom of God. To be a part of the Kingdom is to join the community of believers. We express that as members of one branch of this community- The Salvation Army. Evangelism, to be complete, entails discipleship and growth and constancy in the new believer. This takes place in the context of the community. Thus evangelism has not occurred unless the convert joins the Church and for our converts this means joining The Salvation Army by becoming a soldier (junior or senior) as recruits classes are our form of discipleship and the soldier's covenant is our form of baptism and membership. This cannot happen- and therefore by definition evangelism cannot happen - if people are not joining us because who we are is vaguely defined and apologetically presented by people who do not believe it, are not committed to it or simply don't understand.

You see, people will follow almost any person (no

matter how bad an example) and believe almost any teaching (no matter how crazy) as long as the presenter is passionately committed to what he or she lives and espouses. Most cults can assemble a greater number of followers on any given day than most Salvation Army Corps in our territory can on a Sunday morning. Why is this? We teach the truth, the Gospel of the living God, while they teach nonsense. Is something wrong with our message? Of course not. Therefore the conclusion is that something is wrong with our packaging or our presentation of the truth.

And what is wrong is not our denominational trappings (the packaging)- most of the cults, to continue the analogy, have weirder fashions and far more silly rituals than we do. The point is that their adherents (both leaders and followers) believe passionately in who they are. They present their identities with conviction, never apologetically; defiantly countercultural, they evangelize. In a world that lacks conviction, they convey deep conviction and a passionate belief in who they are. That is what people are looking for. As long as you believe in something you will be able to find people to follow you anywhere.

“Well, I do believe in something!” you say. “I am a Christian and that is the most important, the rest (i.e. denominational allegiance) is secondary and not really important. When I stand before the Lord it will be as a Christian and not in my Salvation Army uniform!” you say. Don’t be so sure. To state blandly that you are a Christian is not enough. I can state that I’m a “husband.” Does that therefore give me the right to join any family or no family, to lie with any woman who is similarly labelled a “wife,” to assume patriarchal authority over any smaller people labelled “children?” Of course not. I have my wife, my family.

Similarly, the Church is our family. There is the bigger family unit (the Church Universal) of which I have cousins and distant relatives that I see from time to time (Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, etc.). But my loyalty is to my immediate family, The Salvation Army. I was called into it and consequently I chose to become a soldier. It is a calling for me, and God always holds us accountable for our callings. He has never been happy with unfaithfulness in any form and that holds true for our denominational ties as much as it does for our duties in a biological family unit.

Therefore I believe that one day I will stand before the Lord in my “Army uniform” and that He will

inquire of me how faithful I have been to my calling as a Salvationist.

To state you are a “Christian”, and leave it at that, can be nebulous when presenting to the world (i.e. when evangelizing). What is a Christian? One hundred different things to 100 different people: from a polyester-clad TV preacher from Alabama to an incense-obscured Eastern Orthodox priest; from a cave-dwelling Coptic hermit in the hills of Eritrea to a machine-gun toting partisan in Beirut; from a charismatic tongue-fest in suburban Toronto to the Pope in Rome. People likely will not know what it means when you say Christian- they need more definition before their interest is piqued. Simply Christian is abstract- few people commit to abstracts. To say you are a soldier in The Salvation Army is concrete. It will define who you are and what you do, and will not obscure the Cross or the message. It will provide a framework within which inquirers can place themselves and their questions and, hopefully, their eventual commitment.

More than that, when passionately believed and properly lived, The Salvation Army becomes a powerful and irresistible ideal which excites and challenges and draws people. In its purest form, The Salvation Army embodies the heroic ideal- a concept that has never failed, and will never fail, to inspire people. The bottom line is that everyone wants to be a hero. It is as simple as that. The desire is deep inside each one of us and will never be washed away by fashion or time.

Christ’s call to follow is radically romantic and dangerously daunting and heroic. It is an ideal best exemplified in concrete terms by The Salvation Army. Sure, we’re odd and counterculture, confusing and easy targets for ridicule and misunderstanding, but so is everyone and everything that is passionate, independently unself-conscious, prophetic, and romantic- so were all the prophets, so was Jesus.

You see, The Salvation Army makes sense only if lived as an all-encompassing dynamic within which every other aspect of our lives is either given purpose or perspective- or discarded. This is what the Church is supposed to be like. Our structure and symbols facilitate it more easily than any other form of church organism. It was Paul who said, “Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs...” (2 Timothy 2:3,4a). In others words, “All or nothing”- passion wedded to purpose. This dynamic will intrigue and captivate people and then evangelism will occur. Not because of anything you have done or said- but because

of who and what you are.

This approach will meet with many objections from the naysayers in our ranks: “People do not feel comfortable with our militarism,”- “the uniform is a barrier to belonging,”- “people are embarrassed to join an Army of Salvation,”- “we’re out-of-date and out-of-fashion.” Maybe there is something to all this. If so, the question that has to be asked is whether there is something inherently wrong with the concept of The Salvation Army, or with those who represent The Salvation Army to the world? I contend it is the latter. The objections listed above, and 100 more besides, lie only on the surface like all cultural accretions, and are rarely matters of the heart. And make no mistake, it is the heart that we are after.

The battle for souls is always fought most fiercely in the minds and hearts of people. Life decisions, breakthroughs and breakdowns, dreams, hopes, goodness, and faith- all of these are hacked out inside people long before they ever show on the surface. And that is where we have an edge because, as stated earlier, everyone secretly wants to be a hero, and the Army’s essence is heroism.

Scratch an accountant and you’ll find an Indiana Jones; after office hours a dentist may well long for the open range and a loaded six-gun at his side. What a person may snicker at in the broad daylight as she passes an open-air meeting, she will think about late at night, alone in bed with her fears and insecurities, dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Only there will she admit to herself that she wishes she had the convictions, the belief, the guts to take part in something like that. Only in the secret places of people’s dreams and fears will the heroic imagery flare and flicker enough for the Holy Spirit to fan and feed it.

Everyone wants to be a hero and God knows that- it is one of the noblest impulses He placed in people. *“The word heroic makes us blush. The word seems to big, too romantic, too triumphal. But our embarrassment cannot conceal the truth that to strive to be a hero- to have one’s life rise above the mediocre, to really count for something extraordinary, to outshine death, to be capable of the highest generosity and self-sacrifice- is what we most deeply need and want.”* (1)

The Salvation Army is all about heroes and heroics. That’s why God thought us up. The vast majority of His Church was being ignored by three-quarters of the populace. The remaining quarter, it was boring to tears. It was boring Him. It certainly wasn’t exciting or igniting many, let alone saving them or bringing them into His

Kingdom. So He came up with us and, like all of God’s ideas, it worked magnificently, spreading like wildfire around the globe - no apologies, no compromises, no identity confusion.

We didn’t just talk about evangelism and read books on it. We kitted up and headed for the front and never stopped to inquire politely of people “would you like to join us?” We lived our heroic lives amid the everyday and people flocked to our colours. The only question we asked was “can you keep up?” We were heroes, to saints and sinners alike. Listen to the author of *Out Of Africa* (Isak Dinesen) writing home from Africa in 1911: *“For some it suffices to find adventure enough in learning to drive a car or attend Mrs. Zahl’s school, but there are others who must take a different road and lose themselves in a war, become explorers to the North Pole or join The Salvation Army. It is the destiny of some mothers that their children were fated to take such winding paths.”* (2)

So what has changed? No one and nothing but us, really. The cultural accretions, barely 100 years old, are all cosmetic and have not altered the fundamentals of people’s lives. The computer age does not penetrate the secret places, late at night, when solitude surrounds a person and they are left alone to wrestle with their demons and to dream of who they really want to be. No- sin is the same, evil is boringly the same, and most people lead *“lives of quiet desperation.”* (3)

Thankfully God’s call is the same. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer said (just before he died a hero’s death) “Jesus bids a man come and die,” he was paraphrasing Christ as recorded by Matthew. Why did evangelism occur in the Army 100 years ago- why does it occur now in some places? Because the Salvationists, like Christian revivalists of Thoreau’s generation, *“were seized by a vision that faithful people are called to extraordinary lives of kindness and service, and they were not ashamed to announce to people that God calls them not to blandness but to heroics.”* (4)

To me, that sounds oddly like the beating of a drum, the unsheathing of a tricoloured flag, and the rustle of dark blue serge. If we know who we are - Salvationists - and it’s a non-negotiable point with us, then our passionate commitment, the sheer joyful excitement and the heroic aspects of our identity will never lack in finding disciples. Don’t just think about evangelism, don’t just go to seminars on it, don’t just read books about it. Simply decide to be who you are called to be, a “Blood and Fire Salvationist” and live the life unapologetically, intensely, passionately, heroically.

1. Long, Thomas G. "Beavis and Butt-Head get Saved", Theology Today, vol 51, No. 2, July 1994.
2. Dinesan, Isak, Letters From Africa 1914-1931, Pheonix Fiction Services, Translated by Anne Born, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984.
3. Thoreau, Henry David, Walden, 1854. 4. Long, Thomas G.
4. Ibid.