

Introduction

ECCLESIOLOGY MUST SURELY HAVE at its heart an earnest and passionate interest in the true nature, form and mission of the Church, including a clear understanding of its unity and diversity, at a time when there has been an explosion of Christian endeavor, particularly in many of the developing nations of the world. There are more Christian denominations and expressions of Christian community than ever. Reporting to the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2006, the Moderator of the WCC Central Committee, Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, admits that “for many, unity is no longer an ecumenical priority but, rather, an academic topic or, at best, an eschatological goal.”¹ Recognizing that “a divided church cannot have a credible witness in a broken world” he calls for a renewed recognition that “being church” is “an ecumenical issue; it means challenging and helping the church to become an efficient and credible instrument of God’s transformation in a changing world.”² The Ninth Assembly, in its statement, *Called To Be The One Church*, urges churches to recognize their “mutual responsibility to one another” to “continue to facilitate deep conversations among various churches” and “to engage in the hard task of giving a candid account of the relation of their own faith and order to the faith and order of other churches.”³

This study is principally an examination of The Salvation Army and its emerging ecclesiological conviction and practise within an ecumenical context. Founded in London, England, in 1865 by William and Catherine Booth, it has emerged as an international Christian denomination, with a presence in 121 nations of the world.⁴ The last fifty years

1. Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, “Report of the Moderator,” 125.

2. Ibid., 118f.

3. The World Council of Churches, “Called To Be The One Church,” 259.

4. The Salvation Army, *The Salvation Army Year Book*, 2011, 27–28.

in particular have witnessed a significant shift in the denomination's self-understanding. In 1954 its sixth General, Albert Orsborn, informed Salvationists that whilst they were "part of the body of Christ called 'the Church militant,'" they were "not a Church," but "a permanent mission to the unconverted."⁵ The most recent ecclesiological statement, issued in 2008, informs Salvationists that they are "an international Christian church in permanent mission to the unconverted . . . an integral part of the Body of Christ like other Christian churches, and that the Army's local corps are local congregations like the local congregations of other Christian churches."⁶ Acknowledging this shift of emphasis John Larsson suggested in 2001 to the delegates of The Salvation Army's first International Theological Symposium, that "we are in a period of transition towards a fuller understanding of ourselves as a church—and theological concerns lie at the very heart of this process,"⁷ in which "a great deal of thinking has yet to be done."⁸

This study is in two parts. The first part is an examination of the historical development of The Salvation Army's ecclesiological understanding in three phases: its origins as a Christian Mission in the East End of London, its establishment as The Salvation Army and its contemporary ecclesiological conviction as an international denomination of the Church. Under particular examination is the military metaphor of an army. Chosen pragmatically within the context of holiness revivalism as an aggressive means of Christian mission, it became established as a kind of spiritual emergency service or quasi-missionary religious order within and alongside the Church and ultimately has evolved as the dominant metaphor that informs Salvationists of what it means to be the Church. This study aims to assess the extent to which Larsson's comments have been heeded, in terms of firstly, the depth of internal theological reflection that has been given to the metaphor of the Church as an army, and secondly, the extent to which The Salvation Army has engaged in dialogue with the convictions of other churches. It concludes that in both cases the reflection and dialogue have been limited. Inasmuch as the metaphor of an army was the sociological and pragmatic outcome of a largely individualistic and subjective approach to salvation, it does not

5. Orsborn, "The World Council of Churches," 74.

6. The Salvation Army, *The Salvation Army in the Body of Christ*, 10.

7. Larsson, "Salvationist Theology," 12.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.

adequately characterize the theological nature and form of the Christian community, and continues to afflict the Army's ecclesiology. In particular, this dominant metaphor presents a tangled cord of three separately identifiable ecclesial strands of mission, army and church.

In view of these findings, the second part of the study represents a dialogue with the ecclesiology of Karl Barth. Barth is chosen as a helpful discussion partner principally for the way in which, in the articulation of his ecclesiology and from his overall understanding of theological anthropology, he rejects both individualism and subjectivism, whilst strongly affirming The Salvation Army's own conviction about the priority of mission. Furthermore, his coherent Christological ecclesiology is able to assist The Salvation Army in addressing the tangled ecclesial cords of mission, army and church. His ecclesiology encourages Salvationists to examine their visible form from a deeper and more objective theological perspective.

Barth was himself intensely interested in Christian unity to which his recently re-published 1936 text, *The Church and the Churches*, delivered to the 1937 global Second World Conference on Faith and Order, in Edinburgh, clearly testifies. He believed that "the union of the churches is a thing which cannot be manufactured, but must be found and confessed, in subordination to that already accomplished oneness of the Church which is in Jesus Christ."⁹ For Barth, the union of the churches was nothing short of "one unanimous confession"¹⁰ without "taint of compromise, or of an assent to forms and formulae of union which would camouflage division without transcending it."¹¹ Barth encourages the churches, The Salvation Army included, to both deepen their internal theological reflection and engage in ecumenical discussion. He concludes that "only in our own church can we listen to Christ"¹² and "with humble but complete sincerity endorse the confession of our own church"¹³ in such a way that confessions come "into the open, over

9. Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 39.

10. Ibid. 41.

11. Ibid., 43.

12. Ibid., 49.

13. Ibid., 51.

against each other, in sharp and surprising contrast”¹⁴ and we allow “thesis and antithesis well thought out to meet each other face to face.”¹⁵

The highly pragmatic and activist nature of Salvation Army mission and service, has, from its founder William Booth’s example, generally undervalued theological reflection. Barth offers a challenge to the Army’s emerging ecclesiological conviction and practise, when he says that, “it is vital that once more in every church, in its own special atmosphere and thus with an ear attentive to Christ, real sober strict genuine theology should become active.”¹⁶ Ultimately therefore the aim of this study is, with the help of Barth, to demonstrate what it means for The Salvation Army to deepen theological reflection upon its identity and to engage wholeheartedly in an ecumenical journey with the churches, towards the goal of the visible unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

14. *Ibid.*, 57.

15. *Ibid.*, 58.

16. *Ibid.*, 59.