METHODISTS IN MILITARY GARB

The Salvation Army as a living expression of John Wesley's movement

by Alan R. Harley

Introduction

> I worshipped everything that bore the name of Methodist. To me there was one God, and Wesley was his prophet. I had devoured the story of his life. No human compositions seemed to me to be comparable to his writings, and to the hymns of his brother Charles, and all that was wanted, in my estimation, for the salvation of the world, was the faithful carrying out into practice of the letter and the spirit of his instructions.[1]

So said the young William Booth. Even though Booth's subsequent writings make scant reference to Wesley and things Methodist, these words, uttered when twenty years old, find an echo in all Booth did in his subsequent ministry.

Salvationist historians have called the early Salvation Army "old Time Methodism" and "a derivation of Methodism". The purpose of this paper is to ask if indeed there is such a relationship between Methodism and the Salvation Army. At the outset a difficulty is acknowledged. The younger movement has developed a strikingly distinctive identity, polity and ethos. These tend to make Salvationists feel self-contained rather than in continuity with a larger, older movement. It can be argued that in a significant number of instances these 'distinctives' represent the influence of the parent body.

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[1] F. De Latour Booth-Tucker, *The Life of Catherine Booth*, Vol.1 (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell, 1892) p.74.

The Things that Differ

Before arguing for any link between Salvationism and Methodism, differences between the two must be acknowledged. These are not numerous, but they are significant. In particular, the two movements appear to part company at the point of –

1. Methodism's Churchly Ethos

Methodists have always differed from other 'free' churches in that they have not seen themselves as dissenters. They did not seek to part from what John Wesley consistently termed "our Church", i.e. the Church of England and when they did, they took as many of its treasures as they could. William Booth and his followers, on the other hand, indicate little consciousness of being in continuity with the historic Church.

The Salvationist, who as Salvationist-scholar Roger Green has cogently argued, saw themselves as being in the vanguard of a great evangelistic thrust which would usher in Christ's return, spent little time worrying about ecclesiology. Thus when the young movement framed its Eleven Doctrines it made no reference to the doctrine of the Church (an omission also evident in the doctrines of the Methodist New Connexion from which Booth came).

Booth's movement was a soul-saving movement. Initially it had no other *raison d'etre*. By contrast, whereas Wesley claimed that his workers had 'nothing to do but save souls', he also built a church. In the matter of ordination he stayed 'within a hair's breath' of Anglicanism and set in motion a chain of events which led to the introduction in America of what was in essence an Alexandrian-style episcopacy.

It took him years to reach that point and even then, one gets the feeling that he did so 'very unwillingly' and that the arguments he employed were principally designed to convince himself! By contract, if Booth needed officers, he simply commissioned them himself. Validity was not an issue!

2. Methodism's Sacramental Practice

Neither John nor Charles Wesley abandoned their high view of the sacraments. Charles' eucharistic hymns are such that, in this country at least, they are sung with fervour by the Roman Catholics. John Wesley instructed his converts in "the Duty of Constant

Communion". He experienced great agony of soul over the matter of assuring that his converts at home and abroad regularly received the Lord's Supper and at the hands of a validly ordained celebrant. Booth, on the other hand, brought all sacramental practice to an abrupt end in his movement with a terse notice in the *War Cry*! The Salvation Army would eventually develop a more sophisticated sense of the sacramental, seeing the life of Christ's followers as Christ's broken bread and their love as his 'outpoured wine"....but that was later.

Toward a Resolving of the Differences

There is little doubt that Wesley would have been critical of a movement that purported to provide spiritual life and nurture for Christians and yet lacked a doctrine of the Church and a consciousness of being 'church', and which deprived its people of the sacraments. At the same time, when listing his differences from Quakers, Independents, Baptists and Presbyterians, he wrote:

> I ask not, therefore, of him with whom I would unite in love, are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God? I inquire not. Do you receive the supper of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do? Nor whether, in the administration of baptism...or the age of those to whom it should be administered. Nay, I ask not of you (as clear as I am in my own mind), whether you allow baptism and the Lord's Supper at all. Let all these things stand by; we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season; my only question is, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?"[2]

Whilst expressing the view that the Quakers were wrong in their rejection of the sacraments[3], he was equally critical of Calvinists and their theology, Baptists regarding their views on baptism, and the Independents and their polity. At the same time he affirmed spiritual oneness with each. He did not, as did others of a less catholic spirit, unchurch Quakers and Independents.

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[2] *Wesley Sermons*, II, 135-136.
[3] Wesley Letters, II, 125.

Wesley went through a similar transition in his thinking regarding ordination as did Booth regarding sacraments. Both moved away from something that had meant much to them and in which they believed. Both did so on the view that their responsibility to the souls of their hearers and converts was of first priority. Both did so in a somewhat arbitrary manner which was subject to much criticism. Perhaps this is part of the spirit of Wesleyanism – the willingness to sacrifice whatever stands in the way of accomplishing what is seen as a God-given task.

Similarities

1. Methodism and Salvationism were born in revival – a revival concerned with saving sinners and making saints out of converts. This made them different from virtually all other Protestant bodies. These all came into being over a theological dispute or disagreement over church government.

   It is sometimes forgotten that Booth's movement was as truly a Spirit-inspired revival as was the Evangelical Revival of the 18th century. The vast crowds, the multitude of converts, the establishing of vigorous companies of believers across the land to further the work, the violent opposition and persecution, these all resemble the revival of the previous century under the Wesleys and Whitefield.

2. Both introduced their converts to disciplined Christian living – Booth followed Wesley's example in preparing 'rules' for his converts and made them mandatory for membership – something done by few, if any, other Protestant bodies.

3. Both movements were born in song – and a particular type of song at that which drew attention to personal salvation, assurance and holiness of life and with an emphasis on piety and introspection not found in the hymnals of most other traditions. A study of *The Song Book of Salvation Army* reveals a high percentage of hymns by Charles Wesley and a substantial body of hymnody by Salvationist authors which reflects early Methodism's commitment to conversion, assurance and Christian perfection. What was expressed in hymnody finds a reflection in worship. Of all the denominations, the Salvation Army was virtually alone in formally embracing such Wesleyan institutions as the Love Feast, the Mourner's Bench.

4. Both subscribed to a warm-hearted gospel – which was experience-centred and which proclaimed "a free, full, and sure salvation", i.e. one that was *free* to all (or, as Wesley expressed it, "Free *for* all, free *in* all", *full*, in that it led on to Christian Perfection, and made *sure* by the inner witness of the Spirit which has prompted the view that "Salvation Army theology is a direct derivation of Methodist theological thought". To be sure, the strong emphasis upon personal holiness which was central to the faith and life of early Salvationism was of a more demonstrative nature than that of Methodism as a whole at the end of the 19th century. (Early Army annals tell of people swooning, fainting, crying out and so forth in much the same way as do early Methodist writings.) Nevertheless, continuity is there. John Kent notes that

> The Army's 'holiness meetings' revealed a strong surviving urban nostalgia for the methods and excitements of earlier Methodism, not least in its Primitive Methodist form; the undisciplined emotion of the social pursuit of Sanctification was its own sufficient guarantee of the divine presence.[4]

In some of the smaller branches of 19th century Methodism, it was the practice to maintain statistics of 'seekers', with separate columns for those seeking justification and those pursuing sanctification[5]. With some refinements, this practice still exists in the Army. Such an idea was unknown in the other denominations. The Methodists and their Salvationist offspring were alone in calling for seekers to experience two blessings – one to save and the other to sanctify.

In mid-20th century, this somewhat wooden approach to soteriology was addressed by Methodist leader W.E. Sangster and by Salvationist General F.L. Coutts, both of whom drew upon existing principles and, on the basis of exegetical study, presented a concept of sanctification which retained the spirit of Wesley's doctrine whilst moving away from the older interpretation. Even this is a development unique to Methodism and the Army. Prior to that point the Army's doctrine of Christian perfection had been shaped by S.L. Brengle, a 'convert' to the Army from the (American) Methodist Episcopal Church

[4] J. Kent, *Holding the Fort* (London: Epworth Press, 1978) p.310.
[5] *Ibid.*, p.312f.

with a strong commitment to revivalism and the 'holiness' teachings then popular in America.

This Wesleyan legacy is officially acknowledged in the Army's most recent handbook of doctrine. This factor reflects an important issue common to both movements:

5. Both fought the same theological battles – to reject Reformed theology hardly rates a mention today. A wide number of Pentecostal and other denominations affirming an Arminian posture have come into being over the past century. In addition, many within older bodies such as the Baptists have moved away from Calvinism. This was not the case when either Wesley or Booth were launching their respective ministries.

In Post-Reformation England, most Protestants – Baptist, Presbyterian, Independent – were Calvinists. The majority of evangelical Anglicans adopted a (usually moderate) form of Calvinism which is reflected in the Thirty Nine Articles. To reject Calvinism was to be considered unorthodox. Flying in the face of this, Wesley both rejected and denounced Calvinism and, in particular, the doctrine of predestination. His movement became identified with Arminianism, the position against which the Westminster Divines in general and the learned John Owen had taken such a strong stand in the previous century. Arminianism was associated not only with the Remonstrants of Holland who had been branded heretics but also the despised Archbishop Laud and the opponents and persecutors of English Protestantism. William Booth adopted an identical stance to that of Wesley, forbidding any of his soldiers to subscribe to the doctrine of final perseverance, on pain of expulsion.

In addition to opposing predestinarian Calvinism, both Wesley and Booth rejected quietism in favour of that robust faith "that laughs at impossibilities and cries, 'It shall be done'," and which heeds the call to "*go on* to perfection". They also opposed antinomianism. Their opposition was such that they both ran the risk of replacing antinomianism with a legalism based upon the regulations they set for their members. Nevertheless their followers knew exactly where their leader and their movement stood on a given issue (such as gambling, card-playing, drinking, etc.) and were left in no doubt as to what was expected of them. Further, they distanced themselves from the nascent Pentecostalism that was evidenced in their respective times.

Wesley had to respond to Thomas Maxfield's claim to dreams and visions. Booth's movement, particularly in Scandinavia, nearly split over what was then dubbed 'the Tongues Movement'. Indeed, early in the piece, members of the Booth family themselves identified with the Pentecostal movement. Neither responded, as have others in non-Wesleyan movements, by marshalling texts from the Bible to disprove the 'charismatics'. In typically Wesleyan style, both movements and their leaders responded at a practical level to make the point that such phenomena do little or nothing to deepen one's spiritual life and, to the contrary, can be counter-productive in the quest for holiness of life.

At this point it is appropriate to note that the Eleven Doctrines of the Salvation Army are, as the movement's handbook of doctrine avers, "clearly in the Wesleyan tradition"[6]. The doctrines of the Army bear a striking similarity in words and content to the doctrines of the Methodist New Connexion and the founders of the Christian Mission, later named the Salvation Army claimed their doctrines to be "those of Methodism, as taught by Mr. Wesley". Thus, it is claimed,

> Our doctrinal statement, then, derives from the teaching of John Wesley and the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While there was significant correspondence between evangelicals in the mid-nineteenth century....the distinctives of Salvation Army came from Methodism. Our strong emphasis of regeneration and sanctification, our conviction that the gospel is for the whosoever and our concern for humanity's free-will, all find their roots there.[7]

Although the Army did not embrace Wesley's view of the sacraments, they so affirmed his doctrine of Christian perfection they made *it* their central doctrine, as had Wesley, and set forth the idea of a holy life of a believer as being in itself a sacrament.

6. Both developed a form of government – which differs from the three classic forms of church polity – episcopal, presbyterial, congregational. The Salvation Army has, in its way, developed

[6] *Salvation Story* (1998) p.130.
[7] *Ibid,* 130f.

Wesley's system of autocracy and centralised government along the very lines Wesley would probably have chosen to go. Wesley's style was not conciliar. He, like Booth, ruled his movement as unquestioned leader and saw this as the best way for getting the task accomplished. Today, almost alone among the denominations, the Salvation Army maintains Wesley's idea of 'itinerancy'. All its officers are appointed to their posts. Consultation with either the officer or a local congregation is unknown. And, like early Methodist preachers, Army officers are noted for brevity of tenure in their appointments.

7. Both have similar short-comings – what Albert Outler said in a public lecture in Sydney in 1981 is true of the Salvation Army. In summary, he claimed that Methodists

   - Were not theologically serious or sophisticated
   - Had a notorious record of triumphalism in its own historical literature
   - Were marked by denominational narcissism – most academic studies have to do with the denomination; a hero-cult of founders and prominent leaders.[8]

8. Both movements are pragmatic – unlike other bodies, which make decisions on the basis of theology or ideology, Methodists and Salvationists have been driven by the need to get the job done. Both movements have based their various undertakings on the basis that "nothing succeeds like success". As Outler says, "[Methodists] seek for what works and then…proceed to produce a theory that fits the facts".[9] Methodism's pragmatism worked. In 1750 there were some 50,000 Methodists, by 1800 there were 200,000, and by 1900 some thirty million. The Handbook of the World Methodist Council now registers a number around double that of the 1900 figure (including an estimate figure for those united churches into which Methodists have entered). Whilst the Salvation Army has not produced such large figures, it has witnessed impressive growth from its humble origins in the east end of London in 1865 to an active presence in 107 countries in which it speaks 173 languages today.[10]

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[8] J. Udy, *Dig or Die* (Adelaide: Griffin Press, 1981) p.30f.
[9] *Ibid*, p.30.
[10] The Salvation Army *200 Year Book* (Heathfield) 1999.

9. Neither movements are truly dissenting bodies – because of their strong theological view the post-Reformation Dissenters separated from their former churches. Unlike these and most other Protestant churches, Methodists and Salvationists did not come into being in this way and thus their attitude toward the other churches, including their respective parent bodies, is different from the spirit of dissent. Wesley and Booth may be charged with being impatient with their superiors for hampering their ministry, but neither left the church of their nurture because they disagreed with its theology. In each case they affirmed it.

10. Both have a strong social conscience – the record of the Salvation Army in its philanthropic work requires no documentation. It reflects Wesley's practical approach to the Gospel (which included his "Primitive Physic") and his understanding of sanctification as love labouring for the bodies and souls of men and women. In the 18th century, Methodism tackled the issues of slaveholding, bribery in parliamentary elections, smuggling, the distilling of spiritous liquors, poverty, luxury and unemployment. In the 19th century in Victorian (and Dickensian) England, and then around the world, William Booth championed similar causes. The various branches of Methodism have produced impressive social ministries, one of the best examples of which is that of Australia's oldest Methodist Church (established 1812) now Sydney's Wesley Mission, which has some one hundred and twenty caring centres and over two thousand paid staff associated with its inner city parish.

Henry Carter notes that

> R.W. Dale's reference to the doctrine of Perfect Love was, in effect, a recognition that Wesley initiated its application to the social structure of his day, but that a generation that followed him stepped back rather than forward. Wesley's public statements on the just use of the franchise, on smuggling, on the manufacture and sale and use of spiritous liquors, on the causes and remedies of unemployment, and on Negro slavery are to the point.[11]

[11] H. Carter, *The Methodist* Heritage (London: Epworth Press, 1951) p.123.

The purpose of this paper is not to critique the perceived failures or successes of Methodism. I shall thus not comment on the words of this Methodist writer other than to say that if, indeed, Wesley's doctrine of Perfect Love ceased to be the prime motive for responding to the social ills of society, the principle was not lost on Booth and his followers. This doctrine was indeed "the peculiar depositum" of the fledgling Army. Wesley's Society Meetings became Booth's Holiness Meetings, a holy life became the sacramental expression of Salvationists – the outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace – and ministry to derelicts, criminals, the suffering and all other "sort and conditions" of 19th century humanity was motivated by "the love of God shed abroad" in the hearts of these soldier-evangelists.

11. Both are missionary movements – Methodism spread around the world at a remarkable rate at a time when world missions as now known barely exists. In its infancy the Army was sending workers to 'the uttermost parts of the earth' as the Wesleyan Methodist Society had done a century earlier.

The statement "the world is my parish", initially uttered when all other parishes were closed to Wesley, eventually became an expression of the Wesleyan vision for reaching the world with its message. All of the offspring of original Methodism (e.g. the various Methodist bodies which emerged in America in the 19th century, the Church of the Nazarene, the Salvation Army) all shared this missionary vision and have each been noted for the prominence given by them to the missionary enterprise. Whereas some communions have had no missionary commitment, and others have been limited in their vision because of a predestinarian doctrine, those movements which trace their roots to Wesley have from the outset had a firm commitment to the whole world.

"Methodists are one people in all the world" said Wesley. And the Salvation Army embraced Wesley's idea. Historian Robert Sandall writes:

> It is the *one Salvation Army* that leaping the seas has spread from country to country – it is indeed *native* to the whole wide world. In no country do Salvationists differ in spirit or practice from their comrades of other land. There is no

> Salvation Army missionary society; it is *The Salvation Army* on all its missionary fields as in the land of its birth.[12]

Wherever the movement has gone it has taken a message which is essentially Wesleyan, and carried out its work in a disciplined manner reminiscent of the early Wesleyans. Few movements have shared the energy, enthusiasm and joy of the early Methodists as have the Salvationists. They may not have adopted the name of Methodism, nor its particular view of the sacramental in worship, but their life as a people continues to be an expression of their deep roots in Wesleyanism.

Conclusion

Of those early Salvationist officers with previous religious experience, two-thirds were Methodists of Wesleyan or Primitive ideology. Booth was ordained by the Methodist New Connexion. This branch of Methodism had a statement of faith (something not true of most Methodist bodies) which was adapted for their purposes by the Salvationists. The doctrines of the two groups succeeded in capturing the essence of Wesley's teachings.

It must be said that Salvationism is not Methodism in the same sense that Methodism is not Anglicanism. Both retain something of their parent body while developing a culture and an ethos unique to themselves. Authentic Methodism is more than a system: evangelical without being fundamentalist, highly structured yet innovative, concerned with the heart as much as the head. It was capable of being reproduced in a seemingly disparate organisation which now shares each of these qualities and thus confirms the viewpoint of a Canadian Salvationist pamphlet (circa 1960), that "the Salvation Army is Methodism in military garb".

[12] R. Sandall, *The History of the Salvation Army* (New York: The Salvation Army, 1979) Vol.1, p.225.