

The Salvation Army

History, Beliefs, and Practices

Identity: An evangelical Christian denomination committed to the principle that the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be supplemented by social relief work. Its “Mission Statement” reads: “The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal 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.”¹ In popular perception, the organization is regarded more as a charitable than as a religious organization.

Founders: William (1829-1912) and Catherine (1829-1890) Booth

Statistics: 3500 officers (clergy), 60,000 employees, 113,000 soldiers (those who have signed a declaration of faith and practice called “A Soldiers’ Covenant” and worship at and serve a local corps), 430,000 adherents (individuals not enrolled as soldiers, but worship at the Salvation Army centers), and 3.5+ million volunteers. In 2005 the organization has reported mission efforts in more than 100 countries, with the Gospel preached by officers in more than 160 languages.

History: William Booth, a lay evangelist trained in Wesleyan Methodist teaching, began work in the slum neighborhoods of East London in 1865. Booth and his wife Catherine (called “The Army Mother”) founded the East London Christian Mission, reaching out to the non-churched masses of urban poor. A growing number of people responded to his evangelistic and relief efforts, necessitating the help of converts in managing and ministering to the needs of the poor and needy. In 1878 the “Christian Mission” changed its name to “The Salvation Army,” in keeping with Booth’s view that the salvation of the soul was the result of a spiritual warfare between the Devil and God. Partly as a result of disciplinary concerns, Booth organized the Salvation Army after a quasi-military pattern, along the lines of the British military. Its declaration of faith was renamed “The Articles of War.”² Military vocabulary was used in every aspect of the organization.³ A mission station became a “corps” and converts “soldiers,” after “basic training.” Evangelists were called “officers,” who graduated to the rank of lieutenants after at least a two-year training period. In the United States four schools train officers. Lieutenants graduate to Captain, then Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, and Commissioner. Booth was the first of successive Generals.

In 1880 George Scott Railton (1849-1913) and seven “Salvationists” (clergy and lay members) brought the organization to the United States, founding a Salvationist Outpost in Philadelphia and soon sending missionary parties to several countries throughout the world.

Today the Salvation Army provides and administers an array of social welfare services. These include personal counseling, family welfare, day care, summer camps, senior citizens’ residences, Christmas relief, assistance in times of national disaster, AIDS

¹See <http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/> (Beliefs)

²<http://www1.salvationarmy.org/heritage.nsf/1e66c5a3687a37638025692e00500ad4/fea4acf97c61102c80256a2200443120?OpenDocument&Highlight=0%2Cdoctrines>

³See <http://www.salvationarmy-bakersfield.org/glossary.htm>

education and residential services, shelters for battered women and children, vocational training, correction services, and residential programs for homeless alcoholics. The organization is divided nationally into four territories made up of smaller units called divisions (40 in the U.S., with corps centers for worship and service). Its national headquarters is located in Alexandria Virginia.

Texts: The Bible

Beliefs and Practices

The Salvation Army has posted the following statement titled “The Doctrines of the Salvation Army” on its official web site:

1. We believe that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and that only they constitute the Divine rule of Christian faith and practice.
2. We believe that there is only one God, who is infinitely perfect, the Creator, Preserver, and Governor of all things, and who is the only proper object of religious worship.
3. We believe that there are three persons in the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, undivided in essence and equal in power and glory.
4. We believe that in the person of Jesus Christ the Divine and human natures are united, so that He is truly and properly God and truly and properly man.
5. We believe that our first parents were created in a state of innocence, but by their disobedience, they lost their purity and happiness, and that in consequence of their fall, all men have become sinners, totally depraved, and as such are justly exposed to the wrath of God.
6. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ has by His suffering and death made an atonement for the whole world so that whosoever will believe may be saved.
7. We believe that repentance toward God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and regeneration by the Holy Spirit are necessary for salvation.
8. We believe that we are justified by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and he that believes has the witness in himself.
9. We believe that continuance in a state of salvation depends upon continued obedient faith in Christ.
10. We believe that it is the privilege of all believers to be wholly sanctified, and that their whole spirit and soul and body may be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
11. We believe in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body, in the general judgement at the end of the world, in the eternal happiness of the righteous, and in the endless punishment of the wicked.

A detailed explanation of the above doctrinal statements can be found in: *Salvation Story: Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine* (London: The Salvation Army International Headquarters, 1998).⁴ It is not possible in this brief evaluation to respond in detail to certain key doctrinal points in Salvation Army teaching. Not immediately evident from the above statements, but crucial from a Lutheran theological perspective are the following points:

- “The Salvation Army understands that all humanity is ‘totally depraved’ [see point 5 above] *in the sense that every aspect of each person is affected by sin*. However, the divine image is not totally eradicated. In what was described by John Wesley as ‘prevenient grace’, *the echo of original goodness remains, and enables human response*

⁴[http://www2.salvationarmy.org/webresources.nsf/0/d1f37845f2c40dd7802568ed004c669a/\\$FILE/sastory.pdf](http://www2.salvationarmy.org/webresources.nsf/0/d1f37845f2c40dd7802568ed004c669a/$FILE/sastory.pdf)

to the gracious divine initiative; an invitation to 'whomsoever'. In this, The Salvation Army sits comfortably within the Arminian tradition." [emphases added]⁵ Humans have a "moral sense" that, though imperfect because of ignorance and sin, "can act as a stimulus to spiritual awakening." All people possess "a measure of moral enlightenment" from God. God "bestows faith on those who desire it."⁶ Moreover, "all people...have been given free will and *can accept* or reject the new life that is offered to us."⁷ [emphasis added]

- The Salvation Army holds to a type of perfectionism present in holiness churches. "[We cannot] say that those who experience a fullness of God's sanctifying power inevitably, sooner or later, fall into sin. Those who insist on the **sinful imperfection** of all believers fail to acknowledge the full benefit and work of the atonement. When we are born again of the Spirit we are no longer in bondage to sin; we are set free. To insist that believers are necessarily sinful, or that they continue to be prone to personal sin, is to limit the power of the atonement to bring about a thorough change of character and comprehensive victory over sin [emphasis original]. We do not sin inevitably."⁸ [see point 10 above]
- The Salvation Army does not regard as necessary and therefore does not observe the sacraments of Baptism⁹ and the Lord's Supper. Christ is "the one, true, original Sacrament" and events where He is invited to be present are "sacraments" (a "sacrament" defined as "an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace").¹⁰
- The basis for assurance of salvation and the preservation of faith is obedience or faith understood as obedience.¹¹

A Lutheran Response

The Salvation Army's doctrinal statement reveals that it is a Christian denomination holding to fundamental Christian truths, including especially the person and work of Jesus Christ through whom we are saved. The worldwide efforts of thousands of workers and volunteers to help the needy with concrete deeds of kindness are to be admired and must be highly commended. Christians everywhere have much to learn from the organization about how the Christian faith is to be put into action.

Yet, Lutherans hold that certain teachings and emphases of the Salvation Army (which have their roots in Arminianism and Wesleyism¹²) are contrary to clear scriptural teaching. For example, the Scriptures teach that original sin inherited from Adam has so corrupted the human nature that it is impossible for the human will either to prepare for or to accept the grace of God, even in the smallest degree, until the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace (Word and sacraments) to convert a person (1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1; 4:17,18; 5:8; Matt. 13:13, 11; Rom. 3:11-12, etc.). The

⁵<http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/beliefs/holiness.asp> The Salvation Army's doctrinal handbook understands human depravity to mean that sin "impairs *our sense* of what is right and our ability to *discern* God's will." The expression of Paul in Ephesians 2:1 that human beings are "dead in the trespasses and sins" is understood to refer to "moral insensitivity" and "an awareness of God's will and the desire to do it" that can be recovered by the Gospel. See *Salvation Story*, 62.

⁶*Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁷*Salvation Story*, 72.

⁸*Ibid.*, 99. This reflects the teaching of John Wesley, who taught that entire sanctification means "a person is freed from the flaw in human nature that causes people to sin. We are capable of this perfection even though we dwell in a corruptible body marked by numerous defects arising from ignorance, infirmities, and other creaturely limitations. It is a process of loving God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and it results in the ability to live without conscious or deliberate sin" (Walter A. Elwell, *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House], 1991, 227).

⁹References to Baptism in the New Testament are understood to mean that Baptism is a spiritual experience called "Baptism of the Holy Spirit," not a divine, external rite instituted by God (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:5; see *Salvation Story*, 97, 114).

¹⁰*Salvation Story*, Appendix 9: "We observe the sacraments, not by limiting them to two or three or seven, but by inviting Christ to suppers, love feasts, birth celebrations, parties dedications, sick beds, weddings, anniversaries, commissionings, ordinations, retirements—and a host of other significant events—and, where he is truly received, watching him give a grace beyond our understanding." (114)

¹¹"Our salvation is assured as long as we continue to exercise faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith is expressed in obedience to his leadings, will and commands. Obedience as a free-will choice is a consequence of faith, and without it, faith dies." (85-86)

¹²See <http://www.salvationarmy.org.au/beliefs/holiness.asp>

image of God, according to which man was created holy, has been entirely lost. The will and intellect of human beings have lost the ability to know and please God (1 Cor. 2:14).

Lutherans further teach that believers are at one and the same time totally sinners and totally righteous. Even while God has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ (Rom 3:21-26) and has freed them from the bondage of sin and death (Rom. 5:12-21; 6:5-11), yet original sin still remains in them (Rom. 7:18-25). Through daily repentance they put to death the old Adam and a new person daily comes forth and arises. In the Christian's life of sanctification, the tension between the old sinful flesh and the new life in Christ remains throughout our earthly life (Romans 7; Colossians 3). That is, the Christian's journey through life is marked by daily repentance (sorrow over sin and faith in Christ's forgiveness), not by reaching moral purity or perfection.

In their spiritual journey, Christians find assurance in the comforting promises of the Gospel revealed in Holy Scripture, not in their own personal spiritual experience or obedience to the Law. Moreover, their faith is preserved not through a life of obedience, but through the precious means of grace—the Gospel and the Sacraments (1 Pet. 1:5; Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 2:13). As Martin Luther put it, “Therefore everything in this Christian community is so ordered that everyone may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and signs [sacraments] appointed to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live on earth.”¹³ Baptism and the Lord's Supper are divinely instituted means through which God conveys the precious gifts earned for us on the cross—the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Matt. 28:18-20). These sacraments are not human rites or works, but are divinely-given channels through which God imparts His Holy Spirit to create, nurture, strengthen, and preserve saving faith.

For Further Reading

Dictionary of Christianity in America. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990 (1043-44).
 McKinley, Edward H. *Marching to Glory: History of the Salvation Army in the United States*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980.
 J. Gordon Melton. *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999 (366-67).
Salvation Story: Salvationist Handbook of Doctrine. London: The Salvation Army International Headquarters, 1998.

Links and Websites

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvation_Army
[http://www2.salvationarmy.org/webresources.nsf/0/d1f37845f2c40dd7802568ed004c669a/\\$FILE/sastorv.pdf](http://www2.salvationarmy.org/webresources.nsf/0/d1f37845f2c40dd7802568ed004c669a/$FILE/sastorv.pdf)
<http://web.archive.org/web/20060907005952/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/re/move/>

¹³ Large Catechism, II, 55 (*The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 438.)