



## Making a Difference

I sensed a common theme in three items found in my in-basket one week this month. The items were: results of the Barna Research Group's survey of what Americans consider to be very desirable for their future; a report of a four-day conference titled "The Spiritual State of Black America;" and Professor R.G. Moyles's latest book, *The Salvation Army and the Public*. The common theme was: Christians making a difference.

According to the Barna research, in the year 2000 "born again Christians" are more likely than the population at large to have goals of making a difference in the world (58% vs. 47%) and influencing other people's lives (48% vs. 37%). The divergence of goals is statistically significant. But, says George Barna, "if Christians were truly focused on serving others, you'd expect to see much larger percentages of them committed to influencing other people and to making a difference in the world."

The conference on "The Spiritual State of Black America" was held in Atlanta in April. I found some data especially noteworthy—the growing appeal of Islam among African-American youth, for instance. (This development was attributed in part to a Muslim emphasis on family cohesion, and the need to restore a culture of marriage, family and father importance.)

I also noted the call for Christians to be different from the world and make a difference in the world. Bishop John Hurst Adams of the African Methodist Episcopal Church said that African-Americans have been "damaged by excessive assimilation" into

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the values of capitalist culture—individualism, materialism, and ethical relativism. To halt this he called black churches to reclaim their spiritual vitality and moral authority. Martin Luther King, Jr. was quoted: “This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. The saving of our world from pending doom will come not from the action of a conforming majority but from the creative maladjustment of a dedicated minority.”

What a great quote! I got more of that spirit when I cracked the covers of Moyles’s book, which is a history of the early-day Salvation Army as perceived by its non-Salvationist contemporaries. In those days the Army seems to have been comprised of nothing but non-conformists. Refusing to conform to the Establishment’s nonchalance about child prostitution, for example, they collaborated in the “Maiden Tribute Campaign.” In the end and under pressure, Britain raised the age of consent to sex and thereby lessened the abuse of girls.

Moyles recounts how England’s press and public viewed The Salvation Army in this “Campaign.” Significant “right-wing newspapers” were scathing. Why? Moyles says we’ll probably never know, but one reason seems to be a persistent misunderstanding of the motivation of people such as Bramwell Booth. The editors of the *St. James’s Gazette* charged that it was only an appearance of caring for youth, that in reality it was: “a fraud committed for the purpose of sustaining the system of sensationalism by which he [Booth] and his organization thrive. It is now pretty evident that the Salvation Army is at the bottom of the great scandal of the time.”

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If that's all it had been, a desire to make a splash, to get into the headlines, to draw attention to the Salvation Army, then William Booth and Bramwell and others might have succeeded in making a difference, but it wouldn't have been a difference worth making! This is something we need to remember. The Apostle Paul said, "It is fine to be zealous, *provided that the purpose is good.*" What *St. James's Gazette* and the other papers missed was the disgust at the tolerance of the exploitation of poor children that lay beneath the Army's sensationalistic tactics.

I'll have the privilege of being at the Millenium Congress at the end of June (another event that could be misunderstood as Salvationists simply wanting to make a sensation). While in Atlanta, I want to visit Ebenezer Baptist Church. I'll do it to pay homage to the memory of a Christian man who made a huge difference. It will be to ask God to use me too in a smaller way to make a difference. But it will also be to ask God for the discernment to know which of the issues of the day to focus on. To ask for wisdom in addressing them, and courage to persist though others might misunderstand or misrepresent my motives.

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