



We need ideas

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At our staff prayers yesterday, Sharon read a Pentecost hymn that describes the Holy Spirit as a “kaleidoscope of sevenfold light.” We had just said good-bye to the last of the guests who had been at the Ethics Centre for the Salvation Army’s first Theology and Ethics Symposium, and the image of the Holy Spirit as kaleidoscope really seemed to fit.

There are times when we need God to give us the very focused, single wavelength light of a laser, and there are other times when what we need is the variety, even the jumble and changing light, of the kaleidoscope. The Symposium was such a time. We had Salvationists here from all over the world, bringing with them their distinctive languages, cultures, and ideas—and God’s Spirit was clearly among us, encouraging us to enjoy the variety.

Let me share just a bit of what was said.

Commissioner John Larsson keyed the Symposium: “Any dichotomy between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ is quite false. Without the thinkers there are no doers. It is new thinking rather than new action that will stop the Army from running out of steam. [For example,] recalling the Army to its mission to serve the poor is not primarily about establishing better programs or getting new funding. It is primarily about re-discovering as

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a burning conviction that the relief of poverty is an essential and inescapable part of our mission.”

According to Lt. Colonel Trevor Tuck of South Africa, renewed thinking will have some hard implications for us Salvationists. He recounted the Army’s history in his own country, trying to explain why the Army had tolerated apartheid for so long. “There is no doubt that in South Africa we became captives of our own pietistic tradition which made us believe that it would somehow be sinful to challenge an earthly authority. So yes, I believe we failed, but the lesson is clear and it is not necessary to perpetuate our failure either in the new South Africa or in the international arena where in many places the Army’s voice and action is needed.”

The earthly authority that needs to be challenged may sometimes be the state and, Tuck added, it may sometimes be the church: “It is clear that an organizational structure which is fundamentally autocratic has the inherent danger of abusing the dignity of a person in the name of God who bestowed such dignity. Traditionalism is expendable, but human dignity is not!”

Christians may take it for granted that human dignity is not expendable, but we can’t assume that everybody believes it. Major Karen Shakespeare of England reminded us that “the relativistic pluralism of the twenty-first century will confront the church in every aspect of faith and life. The Christian story will be heard as one among many and the values of God’s kingdom will determine the moral judgments only of those who belong.” So Christians must *inform* themselves: “we must understand the prevailing worldviews and

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judge them in the light of the Christian gospel.” And we must choose the strategy by which we engage the plurality of values and views around us.

While cultural pluralism may be a fairly new phenomenon in England, it is very old in the Nigeria from which Major Edwin Okorougo came. Responding to Shakespeare, he said, “the uniqueness of Jesus’ ethic in our pluralist world lies in the manifestation of the eternal love of God which brought about the incarnation; the demonstration of the unending love of God in the activities and preaching of Jesus Christ. The message of the Son of God will be more meaningful if the Church maintains its prophetic voice as the mouthpiece of the oppressed, the down-trodden, the poor, the homeless, the hungry and proclaims peace in war-torn areas. The message must be followed by concrete examples in supplying these needs through our social services. Jesus the Son provides total liberation.”

The total liberation Jesus can bring to the poor and the war-ravaged who are not yet Christians, he wants to bring to those who are already Christians too, of course. That was the message Major John Merritt of the USA South wanted the Symposium to hear. Do we really understand the completeness of the salvation God offers?

The Salvation Army’s tenth article of faith cites 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which holds out the promise of our being made holy. “But,” asked Merritt, “what does Paul mean by the ‘holiness’ to which he refers in 1 Thessalonians? Drawing upon illustrations from his own life, the Apostle indicates that holiness involves an inward condition (2:1-8) which cannot be separated from outward behavior (2:9-12): an inner life which, by the grace of God alone, is structured in terms of sincerity of purpose, integrity of character, singleness

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of motive, and integration of personality around the dynamic of love. Because of who God is—He is holy—and because He wants the nature of His children to correspond with who He is—he wants them to be holy in this life—He wants it to happen *now* in a decisive manner.”

This is only a tidbit of what was shared at the Symposium. My hope is that it will make you want to hear more—and to say more. Because, as Commissioner Larsson said, The Salvation Army needs ideas. Not ivory tower ideas, but ideas that keep us faithful to God.

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