A SAMPLE CHAPTER

Grace Withheld

The Army That Feeds the Body but Starves the Soul

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CHAPTER FOUR

The Founding Statement

We are fortunate, as critics go, in our primary text. Movements often bury their decisive turns in committee minutes or leave them to be inferred from later practice, so that the historian must reconstruct from silence what was never plainly said. The Salvation Army's abandonment of the Sacraments is not like that. It has a date, an author, and a published text. In the first days of January 1883, William Booth stood before a council of his officers and told them that the Army would no longer observe baptism or the Lord's Supper. His address was printed for the whole movement to read in *The War Cry* of 17 January 1883. What he said there is the founding charter of a hundred and forty years of empty tables, and it repays the closest reading — because in it Booth, meaning only to justify a decision, instead sets out with unusual clarity the assumptions on which the decision rests, and every one of them the confessional church must contest.

It is worth pausing, before we contest anything, to grant Booth his situation. He was not a careless man, nor a flippant one. He led a young movement that was, by its own reckoning, at war — a force flung into the slums of industrial Britain to reach men and women whom the settled churches had long since stopped reaching. He had watched sacramental questions split congregations and consume in controversy energy he believed belonged to the saving of souls. His fear of a dead formalism was not imaginary; the Victorian church furnished him examples enough. When Booth looked at baptism and the Supper, he saw, or thought he saw, occasions for the very division and self-satisfied ritualism that he had given his life to escape. A fair critic will keep this in view. Booth was not indifferent to grace. He was afraid of a particular counterfeit of it, and in his fear he threw out the treasure with the counterfeit.

Here is the heart of what he told his officers:

> Now if the sacraments are not conditions of salvation, and if the introduction of them would create division of opinion and heart burning, and if we are not professing to be a church, not aiming at being one, but simply a force for aggressive salvation purposes, is it not wise for us to postpone any settlement of the question, to leave it over for some future day, when we shall have more light?

Read slowly, the sentence is a small anatomy of the whole error. It advances three premises and draws from them a conclusion; and the conclusion is a delay that would prove to be permanent. Take the premises in turn.

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The first is that the Sacraments are "not conditions of salvation." On its own terms this is unobjectionable, and no confessional Lutheran would object to it. We do not teach that a man is saved by the working of the water or the eating of the bread as by a meritorious act of his own. The Sacrament is not a wage the sinner earns by submitting to a rite. To that much Booth and the Augsburg Confession would say the same thing.

But watch what the premise is made to do. From the true observation that the Sacraments are not *conditions*, Booth slides to the conclusion that they are therefore *dispensable* — that a body may have them or lack them as strategy dictates. And that conclusion follows only if we have already accepted a hidden and false alternative: that the Sacraments are either meritorious works we perform to secure salvation, or else they are nothing much at all. Collapse "means" into "merit," reject the merit, and you may quietly discard the means. This is the sleight of hand on which the entire Salvationist position turns, and it appears already in the first clause of the founding text.

The confessional answer is to refuse the alternative. The Sacraments are neither conditions we meet nor ceremonies we may set aside; they are instruments through which God delivers what Christ has won. The Augsburg Confession is exact here: the Holy Spirit is given "through the Word and Sacraments as through instruments" (AC V). Baptism, the same Confession says without flinching, "is necessary to salvation, and through Baptism is offered the grace of God" (AC IX). The word *necessary* will alarm a Salvationist, but it means nothing Booth needs to fear on the score of merit. It does not mean that the water saves as a work, nor that God's hands are so tied that he cannot save the thief on the cross or the catechumen who dies before the font. It means that baptism is the ordinary appointed instrument by which God offers his grace, and that this instrument is not ours to despise. The necessity is the necessity of a gift freely given, not of a toll exacted. Booth has answered a claim no one confessing Christ has made, and used the answer to justify withholding a gift no one had the authority to recall.

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The second premise is that the introduction of the Sacraments "would create division of opinion and heart burning." Here Booth is on ground that feels, at first, more solid. Sac-

ramental controversy is real, and it has done real damage. Who would multiply strife in a movement already stretched thin?

But notice the logic of the move. Booth has made the peace of the movement the arbiter of what Christ commanded. The question is no longer *what did the Lord institute* but *what will keep our people from quarreling*, and the second question is permitted to overrule the first. This is not a small inversion. It is the substitution of prudence for obedience at precisely the point where obedience is least negotiable, for the Supper comes to us under the plainest of dominical commands — *this do*. A church may reason about many things; it may not reason its way out of an explicit instruction of its Lord because the instruction proves inconvenient to its unity.

And the irony cuts deeper still, for the Sacraments Booth set aside for the sake of unity were given by Christ as the very bonds of unity. There is one baptism into one body (Ephesians 4:4–5); there is one loaf of which the many partake and by partaking are made one (1 Corinthians 10:17). To abolish the Sacraments in order to preserve fellowship is to destroy the instrument for the sake of the thing the instrument was made to secure. It is to burn the rope to keep the climbers together. Wherever the Sacraments have divided Christians, the fault has lain not in the gifts but in our handling of them, and the remedy Scripture offers is never abolition but right teaching. Booth chose the one remedy the Lord never gave.

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The third premise is the load-bearing one, and it is the tell of the whole address: "we are not professing to be a church, not aiming at being one, but simply a force for aggressive salvation purposes." Everything else leans on this. If the Army is not a church, then perhaps the obligations that fall on churches — to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments — fall elsewhere, or nowhere, and the Army may go about its business unencumbered.

But the move is a category trick, and it does not survive inspection. What is a church? The Augsburg Confession answers in its seventh article: the church is the assembly of believers "in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered." These are the two marks — the Word and the Sacraments — by which the church is known. Now measure the Army against the first mark. It preaches Christ; it calls sinners to repentance; it disciples converts; it gathers them week by week for worship; it enrolls them as members; it commissions ministers to lead them; it holds and teaches a

confession of eleven articles. By every functional test that Scripture and the Confession know, the Army is doing what a church does. It has simply declined the name.

And a name declined is not a duty escaped. Booth's reasoning assumes that "church" is an optional institutional overlay — that beneath or above it there is a purer, freer thing, a "force for aggressive salvation purposes," to which the ordinary means need not apply. But the New Testament knows no such space. There is no tier of Spirit-Christianity that hovers above the church and is exempt from what Christ gave the church. The body of Christ is not one option among several; it is the thing itself, and to that body its Lord gave baptism and the Supper. By calling itself a force rather than a church, the Army did not ascend above the Sacraments; it only renamed the ground on which it stood while remaining, unmistakably, on it. One hears in that self-description — "a force for aggressive salvation purposes" — how thoroughly the military metaphor had by 1883 displaced the ecclesial one, until General and soldier and corps had crowded out pastor and communicant and congregation, and the displacement of the words had begun to license the displacement of the things.

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From these three premises Booth draws his conclusion: "is it not wise for us to postpone any settlement of the question, to leave it over for some future day, when we shall have more light?"

Set aside for a moment whether the premises are sound, and attend to the modesty of the conclusion, for the modesty is the most misleading thing in the whole address. Booth does not announce an abolition. He proposes a postponement. The question is not being closed; it is being held open, pending further light, in a posture of humility before a matter not yet clear. It sounds like the caution of a man who knows how much he does not know.

But a suspension held "until more light" is a strange thing to make permanent, and this one has now stood unlifted for the better part of a century and a half. The future day never came. No later council reopened what Booth left open; the provisional settlement calcified into a fixed doctrine, and the Army spent the following century not seeking the promised light but constructing a theology to prove that the dark was light after all — that the empty table was not a lack awaiting supply but a positive good to be defended. We will trace that hardening in the next chapter. Here it is enough to mark the gap between what Booth said and what Booth did. He said *postpone*; he did *abolish*. He framed a permanent decision as a temporary one, and the framing has let the Army

present as open-minded humility what has functioned, in every generation since, as settled refusal.

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There remains one sentence in the address more damaging to Booth's case than anything a critic could supply, and it is the sentence in which he thinks he is being generous. Having set the Sacraments aside, he hastens to reassure his officers that no one is being forbidden anything:

> Moreover we do not prohibit our own people . . . from taking the sacraments. We say, "If this is a matter of your conscience, by all means break bread. The churches and chapels around you will welcome you for this."

Read that once for its kindness, and then read it again for what it concedes, because it gives away the entire argument. Booth permits his people to receive the Supper — which means he grants that the Supper has real value, that it is a good worth wanting, that a Salvationist troubled in conscience for lack of it is not troubled over nothing. A man does not send his people out to obtain what he believes to be worthless. And in the same breath he tells them where to go to obtain it: to the churches and chapels around them. He sends the sheep to graze in another man's field because he has plowed under his own. The shepherd concedes that his flock needs the pasture; he concedes that his own ground no longer bears it; and he calls this arrangement a liberty.

It is here, from the founder's own mouth, that the title of this book is proven. *Grace withheld* is not a phrase we have pressed onto the Army from outside; it is the plain description of Booth's own settlement. His people need the bread; his halls will not break it; he directs them elsewhere for what he will not give at home. And the permission collapses the very premise it was meant to soften. If the Army is "not a church," and if the Sacraments belong to "the churches and chapels around you," then Booth has just admitted, in the act of granting the liberty, that his own people need what churches provide — that they must go find a church precisely because the Army has resolved not to be one where it counts. The concession undoes the excuse. A body whose members must leave it to be fed at the Lord's table has told the truth about itself, whatever it calls itself, and the truth is not flattering.

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Stand back from the four moves and a single assumption is visible beneath them all. Booth can treat the Sacraments as not-conditions-and-therefore-dispensable, can weigh them against the movement's peace and find them lighter, can exempt the Army by the bare declining of a name, and can send his people abroad for the Supper as though it were a private matter of individual conscience — he can do all of this only because he has already located the real transaction of grace somewhere else. Somewhere inward. If the decisive thing is the change wrought in the heart, then the water and the bread are, at most, outward helps that a wise general may deploy or withhold as the campaign requires. The founding address never states this assumption outright. It does not need to. The assumption is doing its work in every clause, and it is the assumption that the whole of Part Three will name for what the Reformers already named it: enthusiasm, the conviction that the Spirit comes to us apart from and before the external means, the relocation of grace from God's appointed instruments to the interior of the believer.

That naming can wait. For now it is enough to have read the charter and found, written into its own three premises and its one telling permission, the confession that Booth did not know he was making. He set out to justify putting away the Sacraments and instead documented that his people would still need them, that they would have to seek them elsewhere, and that the ground on which he stood to withhold them was a church in everything but the name it refused. The next chapter follows the century in which that provisional refusal was made permanent — and, worse, was made a doctrine.

This is where the sample ends. The rest of Grace Withheld is the invitation it opens onto.

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