The Strategy of a Missionary Evangelist: How William Booth Shaped the Salvation Army’s Earliest Work at Home and Abroad

Andrew M. Eason

When William Booth died, in 1912, a major newspaper in England remarked, “The world has lost its greatest missionary evangelist.” Although eulogies frequently border on hyperbole, there was truth to the paper’s assertion. Few of Booth’s Victorian contemporaries had done more to promote the cause of Christianity around the globe. Most notably, he had played the pivotal role in transforming a fledgling East London mission into an international religious empire that, at the time of his death, or “promotion to glory,” claimed a presence in fifty-eight countries and colonies. Consequently, the word “missionary” was a fitting adjective to place in front of “evangelist,” capturing the passion and essence of Booth’s life and ministry within Protestant evangelical circles. The development and expansion of the Salvation Army may have been a collective affair, involving the sacrifices of countless male and female Salvationists in Great Britain and many other lands, but there can be little doubt that the organization’s founding father was its foremost missionary.

In this capacity, William Booth proved to be an avid student of missionary methods. While lacking the formal training or extensive knowledge of a present-day missiologist, he was no unthinking combatant in the war against sin and human misery. On the contrary, Booth’s approach to missions reflected principles quite evidently mined from the Bible and borrowed from others. The Salvation Army’s first general was not an original thinker, but a discernible system lay behind his missionary activities, the substance of which was passed on to his own followers. George Scott Railton, a prominent early Salvationist, alluded to something of this methodology shortly after his leader’s death: “Each extension of The Army into foreign lands might be reported as a fresh achievement of the General, for, although he never, of course, himself went as leader, he invariably chose the leaders, and so wisely directed the . . . methods which were needed to adapt the work to various races and circumstances.” Little has been written about the details of this missionary framework, but at least Railton acknowledged the vital role that Booth had played in this area.

The same cannot be said for subsequent treatments of the Army’s founding father, which have paid surprisingly little attention to the principles governing Booth’s approach to missionary work. Non-Salvationist biographers from Harold Begbie to Frank Prochaska bear some of the blame for this neglect, since they have frequently portrayed Booth as an ill-educated man driven more by instinct and practicality than by theory or religious doctrine. Yet even academic works written by Salvationists themselves have generally failed to articulate Booth’s missionary tenets or the sources behind them, as is evident not only in the valuable books on the Army’s first leader by historian Roger Green, but also in the scholarly studies of Salvationist foreign missions by Paul Rader, David Rightmire, Brian Tuck, and Edward McKinley. I seek to address this shortcoming in the existing literature by arguing that Salvationist work at home and abroad was shaped profoundly by Booth’s missiology, which was formulated and expressed with considerable consistency between the mid-1860s and the late 1880s.

Principles of William Booth’s Missiology

At the heart of William Booth’s approach to missions were four important principles: evangelism, cultural adaptation, self-support, and self-propagation. These precepts, which clearly shaped and guided Booth’s earliest personal ministry, soon went on to frame the work of all Salvationists around the globe.

Evangelism. First and foremost, the Army’s founding father advocated a missionary strategy based solely upon evangelism. The conversion of the lost was the raison d’être of Booth’s work, and such a motivation only intensified as his inner-city mission was transformed into an army of salvation. As Booth exclaimed in 1879: “We publish what we have heard and seen and handled and experienced of the word of life and the power of God . . . soul saving is the great purpose and business of our lives.” In support of this conviction the Army’s leader went on to argue that only those engaged in the task of rescuing the souls of men and women from the fires of hell could be considered real missionaries. Critical of conventional missionary methods that wed the Gospel message to various aspects of Western culture, he advocated evangelism alone in the foreign field. The role of the missionary was

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simply to lead sinners to Christ, to convert people after the fashion of the apostles. Condemning the civilizing mission as costly, inefficient, destructive, and unbiblical, Booth argued that it was up to converts to “clothe and house and educate themselves.” At this stage in his life and ministry, he held stubbornly to the belief that the salvation of the soul was the only legitimate goal of foreign missions.

Refusing to separate the world into civilized and uncivilized regions, Booth urged the church to view the missionary task in more scriptural terms. Drawing inspiration from the apostle Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22–31) and plea for oneness recorded in Galatians 3:28, the Army’s founding father rejected the notion that a Westerner was fundamentally “vile and devilish” when alienated from God, each was “with the Apostle [Paul] all things to all men in order that you may win them to your Master.” For Booth, accommodation was a legitimate tactic when the end in view was redemption. An army of salvation was called upon to utilize all kinds of aggressive and sensational measures in its efforts to win the world for Christ. So long as a practice squared with the authoritative and infallible Word of God, it was viewed as acceptable.

Booth’s understanding of cultural adaptation also owed something to Charles Finney, whose transatlantic revivalist campaigns and influential books inspired many Christians in the English-speaking world during the nineteenth century. While there is no evidence that Booth ever met the famous American, he had taken the time to read Finney’s Lectures on Revivals of Religion (1835) while employed as a pawnbroker’s assistant in Nottingham. Interest in this revivalist text was shared by Booth’s wife, Catherine, who declared it to be “the most beautiful and common-sense work on the subject I ever read,” in one early letter to William. From Finney the Booths learned that Christians should not be slavishly bound to traditional forms of revivalism, which relied more on divine readiness than on human initiative and planning. Christians should employ innovative strategies to awaken those asleep in their sins, measures that might capture the attention of the unsaved. Claiming that God had set down no prescribed ways of reaching the spiritually lost, Finney urged experimentation and adaptation tailored to the specific audiences one wished to reach with the Gospel. This evangelistic and pragmatic mind-set, born of the Armenian desire to see all people won for Christ, not only guided the Booths’ adaptive efforts at home but also became an equally distinctive part of the Salvation Army’s modus operandi as it moved beyond Britain in the early 1880s.

Self-support. Adaptation was aided and abetted by a third aspect of Booth’s missiology. By this he meant that “a large proportion of the money required to maintain and carry on the [Army must be] supplied by its own members.” Such a policy, incidentally, had been characteristic of the home front even before the organization’s first missionaries arrived overseas. Possessing no guaranteed salaries, Booth’s evangelists (known as officers) were required to raise a significant portion of their income from fellow Salvationists and from the sale of Army literature to the public. While this arrangement ensured that mission stations (corps) in Britain were largely self-supporting, it was admittedly a real hardship for the average officer, who typically possessed little in the way of material possessions. Despite the challenges accompanying such personal sacrifice, Booth remained firm in the belief that self-support was critical to the success of the Salvation Army at home and abroad. Consequently, even before the first Salvationists set foot in Bombay in 1882, he was informing the Indian people that his missionaries would “depend for their daily bread upon the God who sends them.” Highly critical of the older missionary societies, which paid their Western personnel fairly generous stipends,
he instructed officers to live simply in the field, relying on the
native populace for most of their daily needs.25

Self-propagation. For many Victorian missionary strategists,
including Booth, the key to realizing some measure of financial
independence hinged upon the attainment of a fourth mis-
siological principle: self-propagation. In many respects this
notion had also characterized Booth’s organization from the
very beginning.26 New converts to his East London mission
were expected to accept the biblical duty to witness found in
Matthew 28:19–20 by winning one friend, acquaintance, or
family member to Christ each year, pursuing what was consid-
ered, rather optimistically, to be “a plan for the world’s speedy
conversion.”27 According to one religious newspaper, it was
Booth’s “employment of the poor as missionaries amongst the
poor” that helped to explain the success enjoyed by the inner-
city mission, which reported eight mission stations and 1,500
conversions by the end of 1868.28 Native agency was seen to
hold great promise, especially as the Salvation Army established
new bases in distant lands. There was, for instance, the obvi-
ous fact that locally raised personnel were less expensive than
foreigners, who incurred enormous costs in traveling from their
home countries to a distant mission field. And as Booth fully
appreciated, native agents possessed a superior knowledge of
local languages and cultures. Consequently, when given the
opportunity to reflect on the ideal missionary society of the
future, he believed that it would “most certainly seek to raise
up in every country, from the people among whom she labours,
the supplies of men necessary for its conquest.”29 While these
visionary words were surprising in their failure to mention
the equal need for supplies of women, who already played an
influential role in the nineteenth-century missionary movement,
they did convey the Army leader’s genuine commitment to the
principle of self-propagation.

Conclusion

Salvationist missions in their first quarter century clearly
owe a considerable debt to William Booth, who deserves to
be numbered among the leading missionary strategists of the
Victorian age. His principles of missiology not only guided
the Salvation Army’s initial work in Britain but also provided
a framework for its pioneering efforts overseas during the
1880s.30 Inspired by the biblical and revivalist convictions of
their founding father, Salvationist missionaries journeyed
to places as diverse as India and South Africa, where they
pursued a program of evangelism and cultural adaptation.

William Booth in South Africa

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Notes


2. The Salvation Army Year Book for 1913 (London: The Salvation Army Book Department, 1913), 9.


5. See Roger J. Green, The Life and Ministry of William Booth: Founder of the Salvation Army (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); and Green’s earlier work entitled War on Two Fronts: The Redemptive Theology of William Booth (Atlanta: The Salvation Army Supplies, 1989), While Green has done much to explore the theology behind Booth’s work, he has not addressed the founding father’s contributions to Salvationist missiology.


7. William Booth’s extensive involvement in social reform came only later, especially after the publication of his book In Darkest England and the Way Out, in late 1890. The extent to which this engagement altered the nature of Booth’s original missionary principles lies beyond the scope of this short article.


9. For more on Booth’s understanding of the word “missionary,” see his remarks cited in “Eighth French Anniversary,” The War Cry, March 23, 1889, p. 3.


13. One of the rare historians to recognize this fact was Albert E. Baggs, “Social Evangel as Nationalism: A Study of the Salvation Army in Japan, 1895–1940” (Ph.D. diss., State Univ. of New York at Buffalo, 1966), 10. Sadly, however, his dissertation has never appeared in published form.


21. William Booth’s general indebtedness to Charles Finney has been well acknowledged by historian Norman Murdoch in his Origins of the Salvation Army (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1994), 12–25. Murdoch, however, does not draw a clear connection between Finney’s revivalism and the Salvation Army’s program of cultural adaptation.


23. All about the Salvation Army (London: S. W. Partridge, 1882), 7–9.


30. For more on these themes see Andrew Mark Eason, “Christianity in a Colonial Age: Salvation Army Foreign Missions from Britain to India and South Africa, 1882–1929” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Calgary, 2005), 92–197.

31. Unpublished letter from William Booth to C. T. Studd, August 22, 1888, The Salvation Army International Heritage Centre, London. Studd was a member of the “Cambridge Seven,” the famous missionary party that had left England in 1885 to evangelize the Far East under the auspices of the China Inland Mission.


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