

Revivals And Church History :: [revival] MOST RADICAL MOVEMENT

[revival] MOST RADICAL MOVEMENT - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2006/6/9 13:53

The MOST RADICAL MOVEMENT

-by Andrew Strom.

The year 1878 saw the birth of one of the most outrageously radical, zealous and anointed Revival movements in the history of the church. I am speaking, of course, of the early Salvation Army, which for its first thirty years was one of the most extreme, unusual and effective Christian movements that the world has ever known. Made up mostly of young zealots and led by a spiritual dynamo named William Booth, this was God's answer when extreme measures were called for to combat the apathy and spiritual torpor of the times. And there can be little doubt that we live in such times again today.

Originally named simply the 'Christian Mission', Booth's organisation always had a 'Revival' feel about it. But it wasn't until they went military in 1878, with flags, battle songs, war uniforms, etc, that the whole thing exploded worldwide. Booth himself became the Army's first General. This was no longer simply home-missionary work. It was holy guerrilla warfare against darkness and the devil. Booth's motto was:- "Go for souls and go for the worst". It was nothing less than all-out war.

Within five years of becoming a military-style 'Army', Booth's fifty mission stations had become 634 corps (106 of them overseas). And his soldiers were some of the most innovative, daring and war-like disciples of Jesus that had ever walked the earth. There was much opposition. In the year 1882 alone in England, 669 Salvationists were physically assaulted, 56 Army buildings were wholly or partially wrecked, "skeleton armies" of local toughs were formed to attack the Salvationists, and 86 Salvation Army soldiers were thrown into prison for causing a disturbance on the streets. There were literally street-riots almost everywhere they went. And they were front-page news around the world. In the several years that followed, things only got wilder. In the year 1884 alone, no less than 600 Salvationists were arrested and imprisoned in England by the authorities.

The Army always maintained that it was a restriction of religious freedom to deny them the right to hold their marches and open-air meetings. And they would gladly go to jail in defense of the right to proclaim the gospel on the streets. In fact, they would usually refuse to pay even the smallest fines on principle, and so jail was inevitable. But they always held a huge, raucous march to and from the prison on behalf of the arrested soldiers. And, as a New Zealand Salvationist declared after one such occasion, "The whole town was stirred up. The Army got properly advertised, souls were saved, money rolled in, and God's name was glorified." An exasperated Court Judge once advised another contingent of arrested soldiers "to read and meditate on their Bibles a little more, to talk less, and to trust less to the hideous clamour of drums and brass instruments. Drums and trumpets were fit accompaniment for a circus, but out of place on Sunday in a quiet town like Milton." It has to be said that such advice had little noticeable

effect.

As I have said, the Salvationists were well-known for their rather raucous brass band music (which was the loudest street-music around at the time) and their anointed, fairly blunt and down-to-earth preaching on the streets. It was quite common for them to form brass bands out of instruments held together by bits of string, and with musicians who could hardly even play. One eyewitness described the noise emanating from one outfit as sounding "like a brass band that has gone out of its mind". They often used the popular drinking songs and pub songs of the day, changing the words to make them into battle hymns or worship songs. As William Booth said, "Why should the devil have all the best music?" (- A saying also credited to Martin Luther and John Wesley before him). The early Salvation Army were truly outrageous by the Victorian standards of the day - in fact by any standards. But while respectable church people were often scandalised, thousands upon thousands of sinners were converted, often from the lowest socio-economic sectors of society - the very people Jesus had ministered to.

Then as today, the Salvationists waged a war on poverty and hunger wherever they were found. Like the apostles, it was not just evangelism they were interested in, - it was transformation of the whole person - spirit, soul and body. The Salvation Army became known around the world for its practical help of the poor and needy, just like the early church.

With their yellow, red and blue "BLOOD AND FIRE" flags, and their uniforms similar to the war uniforms of the day, these were God's spiritual assault commandos - fearless and radical evangelists for Jesus. It was not uncommon for them to pray all night (- they called prayer "knee drill") and then preach all day.

In 1883, the Salvation Army arrived in my home country of New Zealand. The "invading force" consisted of Lieutenant Edward Wright aged 19 years and Captain George Pollard aged 20 years. That was it. General Booth's resources were stretched thin by the enormous demand for Salvationist officers across the globe. Despite this, in a very short time the Army was headline news across New Zealand, and their street meetings were thronged with people. Within nine months it is reported that the fledgling Army in this country had 5000 converts. This scenario was repeated around the world.

In many respects, the Salvation Army was a young person's crusade. Many of the officers were very young, yet extremely zealous. In many ways this youth proved to be a great advantage rather than any kind of disadvantage.

In New Zealand, like England, Salvationists were arrested in significant numbers in the early days. In fact, as the court cases went on, these arrests ultimately caused such a public outcry that the New Zealand Parliament passed special legislation preventing the local City Councils from prosecuting the Salvation Army. Thus the imprisonments eventually died out.

However, the Salvationists also had enormous trouble in the early days from the "Skeleton Armies" and also the violent mobs that sometimes formed to break up their meetings. There were literally riots on the streets in England and around the world when the Salvation Army held

their street-meetings and marches. At least one female officer in England was kicked to death by an angry mob, and many others were seriously injured. And amazingly it was not uncommon for the local Clergy to be involved in inciting these mobs. As often happens in Revivals, a large number of the church leaders of that time were bitterly opposed to this new move of God and it's innovative and radical features. There was, perhaps, a certain amount of jealousy involved also. Certainly, many of them were motivated by a snobbish desire to keep the faith high and "pure", and not allow it to descend to the gutters of the street, where the Salvationists seemed to dwell. Raucous music and loud preaching on the streets, indeed! It apparently mattered little to them that many sinners were finding Jesus and that God was being glorified.

In 1912, the old warrior General William Booth passed on to glory. It was truly the end of an era - an era that had seen some of the most radical, anointed and effective Christianity in the history of the church. But like many movements after the original founders die, the Salvation Army then slowly began to settle down - to become respectable. And it gradually lost the innovation and the radical, fighting edge that had made it what it was. Actually, this is not unusual with Revival movements, though it is always sad to see it occur. The movements of Luther and Wesley, and even the early church all gradually went the same way after the founding fathers died. Today, we find a Salvation Army that is known more as a kindly and harmless social-welfare institution than a band of fearless warrior evangelists. The old uniforms are still there but the guerilla warfare is largely a thing of the remote past. The shell remains, but the 'heart' has slowly ebbed away.

But the vision, the passion and the zeal of the early Salvationists will never die completely. For the early histories are still just as much an inspiration today as they were when they were written. And it is my belief that we are about to see a similar kind of street-movement arise in our day (because the times are just as desperate, if not more so, than they were then).

Re: [revival] MOST RADICAL MOVEMENT - posted by RobertW (), on: 2006/6/9 15:52

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Amen. These are desperate times indeed. This is a wonderful piece on the early Salvation Army.