

Genesis 15 – 17: How does God’s Covenant with Abraham and Sarah inform The Salvation Army’s use of the term ‘Covenant’?

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Abstract

‘Covenant’ is used for many Salvation Army commitments, including the ‘Articles of War’, known as ‘A Soldier’s Covenant’ since 1989. If covenant is essential to biblical narrative, this ought to be supported by a thorough theology of covenant. Using Genesis chapters 15 - 17, we examine God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah, its centrality for Christian belief, and the narrative’s features. We look at interpretations from different streams of Church, including Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology, and the covenant tradition of John Wesley, finally asking: is there a theology of covenant within The Salvation Army, and what might this look like?

The Salvation Army uses the term ‘covenant’ for many of its commitments, including since 1989 when a revision to the commitment signed to become a soldier, changed the ‘Articles of War’ to ‘A Soldier’s Covenant’ (The Salvation Army 1989:246). If the concept of covenant is essential to the whole arc of biblical narrative (Gentry and Wellum 2012:Ch.1), then our use of this term ought to be supported by a thorough theology of covenant. Using the example of God’s covenant, or covenants, with Abraham and Sarah, we seek to establish if this is the case. This begins by examining the Genesis account of God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah, its centrality for Christian belief, and features of the narrative. The name ‘Abraham’ will be used throughout rather than switching between Abram and Abraham, except when looking at the change of name. We will then look at how this is interpreted by different denominations and streams of Church through 2,000 years of primarily western, non-Roman Catholic Christianity. This includes Reformed Baptist Covenant Theology and the covenant tradition of John Wesley’s Methodism. Finally, this essay will look at what signs of a theology of covenant exist within The Salvation Army and what a Salvationist theology of covenant might look like.

The imaginative power of the patriarchal narratives has made agreeing how to read them complicated amongst biblical scholars (Moberley 2001:100). It might seem that there are two covenants between God and Abraham, in Genesis chapters 15 and 17. Brodie (2001:240)

states that these need not be separate covenants, seeing the second account as a deepening of the same covenant. Source theory suggests that these accounts have separate sources, the first having a Jahwist (J) source (Moberley 2001:112), from the united monarchical period of Solomon (Moberley 2001:138), with the second account from the Priestly (P) source (Moberley 2001:112), compiled in the early post-exilic period, emphasising priestly functions (Moberley 2001:139). This leaves the two accounts composed up to 600 years apart. This is not universally accepted, with arguments including that both originate during the exile (Wyatt 2009:407). If the second account is a P source, this would be the only priestly material in Genesis, but the only advantage to a definitive answer may be reinforcing the notion that such literature is inherently complex (Brueggemann 2007:44). Both accounts could be a pattern within Genesis and Exodus of covenant – disruption – covenant restated: Adam, the flood, then Noah; Abram, Hagar and Ishmael banished, Abraham; Moses, the golden calf and the remaking of the Mosaic covenant (Wyatt 2009:407-408).

Genesis 15 is set in a vision and is therefore open to overtly symbolic readings (Sailhamer 2008:168-169). This closely relates to the preceding chapter, with Brodie (2001:222) highlighting a continuing battle theme: ‘After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”’ (Genesis 15:1). That Eliezer of Damascus would have to be his heir could imply a redactor’s recognition of historical tensions between Israel and the Damascus Arameans (Thompson 2002:204). Verse three mentions a ‘slave’ being his heir, but this may be translated as ‘son of my house’, and it is not clear if this is Eliezer or his nephew, Lot (Turner 2000:73). One of the more quoted parts from New Testament writers is that it is not the act of covenant itself that makes Abraham righteous, but his faith (Sailhamer 2008:172). Sailhamer (2008:169), also suggests that an exilic dating for the formation of this book gives God’s words in Genesis 15:13-14 particular significance:

‘Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.”’

This could have increased meaning for Israel in exile, with its message that Israel’s being chosen does not mean immunity from the same trials as other nations, with patience being needed to wait for God’s timing to pass, such that it is only when the descent of the Amorites

is complete (Pardes 2011:193). The final part of this theophany is the vivid and bloody image of the animals split in two, with what is assumed to be God passing between the two halves, possibly symbolising God's presence with the people of Israel (Sailhamer 2008:173). Such blood-laden imagery of bisected animals would make sense to Abraham, being typical covenant signs, symbolising commitment to death if the covenant was broken (Brodie 2001:228-229). There is also some commonality between the 'smoking fire pot and a flaming torch' (Genesis 15:17) and the pillar of fire and cloud that led Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus (Brown 2012:18).

The second passage resembles the first, with differences including limited involvement by Abraham in chapter 15, to a cutting not of animals, but human flesh in chapter 17 (Brodie 2001:233). In 17:1 the author identifies the visitor as YHWH, despite God's words to Moses in Exodus 6:3: 'I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'The Lord' I did not make myself known to them.'. God's words: 'walk before me and be blameless' indicates a consequence rather than a command to Abraham (Sailhamer 2008:179). For most of the patriarchal narratives, the terms *Elohim* or *El-Shaddai* are used for God, as it was assumed that revelation of the name YHWH only came to Moses in Exodus, but Abraham is associated with YHWH here (Moberley 2001:108-109). From the outset Abraham, as a man of faith, forgoes his identity and security by changing his name in obedience to YHWH (Moberley 2001:110). This change in chapter 17 indicates publicly what had been previously promised in private (Turner 2000:81), with Abram meaning 'Exalted Father', and Abraham implying a 'multitude'. Sarai to Sarah has no obvious meaning, being versions of the same name, meaning 'princess', so it may be that the names are changed rather than to what they are changed (Provan 2015:131).

An often-overlooked vital part of this covenant is the role of women, particularly Sarah who had been barren before being miraculously blessed with a child (Brueggemann 2007:49). Isaiah 51:2 clarifies that Israel owes their inheritance to both:

'Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.'

The Hebrew word used in this passage, *meholet*, given a feminist reading implies that Sarah was both mother to the nation, and its revolutionary founder (Lederman Daniely 2018:30-31). An appealing prospect despite sounding far-fetched. Other feminist theologians highlight the inherent male centred nature of these stories, due in part to the prevailing assumption that the 'seed' was entirely male with the woman as mere incubator (Delaney 1998:141-142). Commentaries otherwise range from passing mentions, tending towards androcentric understandings (Motyer 1999:361-362), to omitting Sarah's part completely (Grogan 2008:789-790), or seeing chapter 17 simply as an expansion of the covenant (Arnold 2009:173). Sarah's name change may be further proof of her equally important part in God's covenant plan (Lederman Daniely 2018:34-35). Similarly downplayed are Hagar and Ishmael, with Hagar demonstrating God's fidelity to those outside of 'the family', keeping Israel open to 'the other' (Brueggemann 2007:50). Paradoxically, Hagar is both excluded and an example according to Paul in Galatians 4:21-41 (Brueggemann 2007:50), as is Ishmael's exclusion from the covenant people despite receiving the sign of the covenant in circumcision (Okoye 2007:170). Let us not forget that Israel's primary function in God's plan, as stated in Genesis 12:1-3 is to act as the conduit for God's blessing the nations of the world (Brueggemann 2007:46)

There are two signs of the covenant: the renaming of Sarah and Abraham, and the rite of circumcision, being alternative methods of marking the same covenant, demonstrating the fundamental nature of the covenantal relationship (Wyatt 2009:407). Abraham is told in 17:9 to keep the covenant, then to complete circumcision, which is not the covenant but a sign of the covenant (Turner 2000:82). By this sign the sons of Abraham purify themselves, marking their distinct identity from the rest of humanity (Kawashima 2011:58). This covenant was through Abraham but not exclusive, including slaves, servants and other men in his keep, and women insofar as their being members of households where men were circumcised (Brodie 2001:240-241). Circumcision was to be a visible sign of the covenant with Abraham (Brueggemann 1994:273), and how this might relate to other signs of covenant membership will be discussed later.

Looking at the theological implications of the covenant, it may help to look at to whom covenants apply. As an early covenant theology, replacement theology, or supersessionism, began with the initial spread of Gentile believers seeing themselves as the true, new, or only genuine Israel (Jacob 2010:28-29). At its worst it led to beliefs that Jewish people were Christ killers or curse bearers (Jacob 2010:29), thus ripping out the Jewish heart of Christianity

(Jacob 2010:31), This led to antisemitism and an instinctive disregard for the Old Testament (McKenzie 2000:84). Novak (2019:27) insists that supersessionism is a core Christian belief whilst differentiating between hard and soft supersessionism. 'Hard' supersessionism, replaces Israel with the Church in God's covenant, preventing any dialogue between faiths, while some Jewish theologians do likewise by claiming that Christianity restates the pre-covenant pagan ideas, such that Israel replaces the Church (Novak 2019:28). In this view, 'soft' supersessionism sees Jews not as displaced, but on a lower level than attained by following Jesus (Novak 2019:29). Novak (2019:31) also claims that: 'Theological relativism cannot be the way forward, which is why supersessionism cannot be avoided in good faith. It can only be disciplined and nuanced.'

Other approaches include two covenant theology, in which God deals differently with Jews and Christians: Jews through their Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, and Christians through the new covenant in Christ (Jacob 2010:35). There is some dissent on this: from Jews who see that there will always be significant differences which cannot easily be overcome, and from Christians as it appears to reduce the centrality of Christ (Jacob 2010:42-43). An alternative would be Enlargement Theology, which acknowledges the covenant with Israel as eternal but not static, with Gentiles admitted through enlargement of the same covenant through Jesus (Jacob 2010:181). This could be embraced by Jews, Messianic Jews and Gentiles alike, in each community, with potential to include a trinitarian understanding (Jacob 2010:181).

Classical Covenant Theology, sometimes referred to as Federal Theology, is based on two covenants: the covenant of works with Adam and of grace made through Christ (Griffiths 2016:Ch.2). Federal theology was developed by William Perkins' appeal to biblical narrative, accenting on both human obligation and divine initiative (Wallace 2008:210). There is a marked difference between covenants made by sinful humanity and those which God has elected to enter with us (Griffiths 2016:Ch.2). The new covenant establishes the arrangement which was in place before the foundation of the world by the triune Godhead, being deduced rather than overtly mentioned in scripture (Griffiths 2016:Ch.3). In its blessings, the 'new' covenant preceded whilst running parallel to the old (Griffiths 2016:Ch.12), with the way of salvation always being by exercising faith in Christ, either after his completed work in the atonement or in the promise of his appearance (Griffiths 2016:Ch.17). Covenant Theology is therefore essentially supersessionist.

Dispensationalism divides redemption-history into distinct periods, or dispensations, with all varieties seeing Israel as a national or ethnic group, therefore not ascribing to ideas of the Church replacing Israel in God's salvation plan (Gentry 2012:Ch.2). It more convincingly argues that the founding covenant of scripture is with Abraham rather than Adam (Gentry 2012:Ch.2). While premillennialists and dispensationalists hold Abrahamic covenants as unconditional, therefore non-revocable. Covenant theologians disagree, seeing Israel as set aside (Dean 2014:282).

John D. Meade in Gentry (2012:Ch.8) makes the connection between the rite of circumcision for all male descendants of Abraham with their closeness to Egypt, highlighting the whole nation's closeness and belonging to God because:

'Circumcision in Egypt means affiliation or identification with the deity and consecration to his service. The rite was obligatory for all priests to the deity, while the evidence suggests that circumcision was not forced upon the laity.'

This marks the people out as not just belonging to God, but representing him, as Genesis 17:1 expresses it: 'walk before me, and be blameless' (Gentry 2012:Ch.8). Meredith Kline suggests darker significance to circumcision, comparing animal sacrifices in chapter 15, symbolising willingness to die in the same manner if the covenant was broken, with removal of the foreskin representing willingness to be cut off from descendants (Gentry 2012:Ch.8). Abraham, in his marking of the covenant, becomes the only one for whom this rite would follow justification rather than being a condition of it (Griffiths 2016:Ch.8). The Christian equivalence of circumcision has also produced some debate. For paedobaptists, believing that baptism as an infant would have the same meritorious effect as circumcision for Jews, the equivalent would most obviously be baptism (Griffiths 2016:Ch.9). This would make birth right or ownership the criteria for salvation. Credobaptists insist that a personal profession of faith is essential (Griffiths 2016:Ch.9). Early Puritan settlements in New England raised the question of justifying allowing children of childhood-baptised church members and taking Eucharist, as there was a need to keep people in Church (Hall 2008:145-146). A 1657 inter-colonial gathering, later ratified by a 'synod' in 1662, concluded that such adult children were genuine members based on the 'external' Abrahamic covenant which still applied (Hall 2008:146). This led to the concept of covenant renewal as a spur to holy living, as an integral part of Puritan worship and practice (Hall 2008:151).

Observing most of the writing on covenant, it appears to be a primarily Calvinist pursuit, and therefore to harder to align with Salvationist theology, but this is not exclusively true. John Wesley does not address the matter of covenant directly in his theology, but for him it is a given (Rodes 2014:Ch.1). He encountered covenant theology through Puritans such as William Perkins, through the Westminster Confession, and other non-Calvinist voices in covenantal theology to which Wesley was exposed, helping him see beyond issues with the Puritans theology of predestination (Rodes 2014:Ch.2). With differences between Wesley's evangelical Arminianism and the idea of predestination in covenant theology, some adaptation would be necessary, making an Arminian adaptation of covenant theology vitally important (Rodes 2014:Ch.3). Despite influences from puritans such as Perkins, John Wesley's belief in covenant theology was drawn primarily from scripture (Rodes 2014:Ch.4). According to Frazier (2009:40) the clearest example of his teaching on his covenant theology can be found in a sermon from 1746, *The Righteousness of Faith*, based on Romans 10:5-8:

‘The Apostle does not here oppose the covenant given by Moses, to the covenant given by Christ [...] But it is the covenant of grace [...] which St. Paul here opposes to the covenant of works, made with Adam while in Paradise’ (Wesley 2012:133)

Wesley was content to talk of dispensations, which emphasises God's administering of salvation, although his preference was to look at covenants, which spoke more of the relationship between God and humanity (Frazier 2009:51).

Wesley also took the concept of covenant renewal from Puritan influences which, in keeping with Borowitz's (1996:223) assertion that the interests of covenant people exceed concern for individual members, were formed into communal rather than individual acts of worship. The first service appeared in 1755 (Rack 2002:413). Covenant renewal services were held at various times of the year, settling as a New Year custom over time (Rack 2002:412), consisting of an exhortation on the meaning of covenant renewal and covenant prayer, the first full service being published in 1882 (Cracknell 2005:186-187). In the current 'Methodist Worship' book (1999:281), the introduction to the covenant service tells us: 'The emphasis of the whole service is on God's readiness to enfold us in generous love, not depending on our deserving.' Emphasis is made that this is not an individual act, but an act of the whole congregation and faith community (Methodist Worship 1999:281-282). Its liturgy reminds the congregation of critical points of covenant:

- God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation [...]
- The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ [...] in his life, work, death and resurrection
- In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ [...] we live no longer for ourselves
- We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us, to renew the covenant which binds them and binds us to God

(Methodist Worship 1999:285)

This emphasis on community as a body, and as a person belonging to God continues in liturgical prayers:

'I am no longer my own but yours
Put me to what you will,
Rank me with whom you will' (Methodist Worship 1999:290)

Similarly, on the issue of clergy within Methodism, a recent report likened the more focussed covenant of spiritual leadership to the taking of holy orders, becoming a covenant community (Celiz et al. 2013), which has also been suggested as a potential way forward for viewing officer covenants within The Salvation Army (Daniels 2019; Harris 2013).

To find a Salvationist theology of covenant of significant depth is not easy, with many references to covenant, but only one brief description in The Salvation Army's current Handbook of Doctrine:

'a binding agreement between two parties; in Scripture, the agreement 'offered to humanity by God of loving faithfulness in return for complete devotion. (2010:345).

One might assume, given its Methodist roots, that such covenantal practices are rooted in Methodist practice (Read 1995:108). The Salvation Army's Handbook of Doctrine (2010:28-29), in its discussion on the doctrine of God as perfect creator and governor, says: 'His love reaches out to all, whether responsive or impenitent: a covenant love, confirmed by promise and perseverance.' Covenant is mentioned in several discussions on the 11 doctrines: on the

fall of humanity expressing a trinitarian reflection on relationships, manifesting itself in love between family and Church, based on the making and keeping of covenants (The Salvation Army 2010:111). Abraham's covenant is seen as beginning in Genesis 12, with the near-sacrifice of Isaac, and the covenant with Israel in marking Passover (The Salvation Army 2010:120). On the seventh doctrine on faith, repentance and regeneration, we see the new covenant, as predicted by Jeremiah 31:31-34, focussing on inward renewal in order to maintain covenant (The Salvation Army 2010:154). In 2007 General Shaw Clifton, sent out regular pastoral letters to encourage Salvationists worldwide, in one of which he discussed covenant:

'He chooses to make us his co-workers, if we are willing. He is not obliged to do this. He wants to do it, and therefore he does it [...] How then does he do this? One of the main ways he chooses is the way of covenant. He reveals to us repeatedly in Scripture his readiness to enter into sacred covenant with us. How gracious he is!' (Clifton 2007).

He then goes on to remind people of covenants taken such as marriage, soldiership, and officership, with an encouragement to keep and renew our covenants.

A more obvious places to see a theology of covenant in operation within The Salvation Army, as a Holiness movement, could be in its theology of holiness. It is no surprise then that in this section of The Salvation Army's Handbook of Doctrine (2010:191-222), it states:

'Since God is a covenant-making and a covenant-keeping God, our relationships should be characterised by the requirements of covenant responsibility.' (2010:196)

It goes on to say: 'Righteousness is understood as faithfulness in covenant relationships.' (The Salvation Army 2010:206). A comparison of Salvationist holiness teaching and covenant might align with the Mosaic covenant, therefore, although the second reading of the Abrahamic Covenant would also apply: 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.' (Genesis 17:1), since: 'Holiness is Christlikeness.' (The Salvation Army 2010:193), with a proper view of the supreme love of and from God being the motivation for holy living (The Salvation Army 2010:196). In the past, there have also been opportunities given to embrace a covenant of holiness, as found in a previous Salvation Army Ceremonies Book (The Salvation Army 2007), which declares:

'All I have, and all I hope to be, I lay upon Thine Altar, for joy or for sorrow, for prosperity or adversity, desiring that I may have the high privilege of sharing Thy sufferings and the honour of bringing glory to Thy name and Salvation to the precious souls for whom Thou hast died.' (The Salvation Army 2007)

The hope of Salvationist mission is to see transformation. A grounding in covenantal holiness could be critical to that transformation, as some suggest that reciprocation in God's covenant partnership entails obedience that will transform life and society (Borowitz 1996:230).

Salvationist terminology implies a strong culture of covenant. Commitments to membership and ministry are all referred to as covenants. For 'full' Church membership as a Salvation Army Soldier, what was once referred to as the 'Articles of War' changed in 1989. An article published in 'The Officer' magazine (1989:244-245) discussed the changes and how difficult it was to get agreement, but does not discuss the reason behind what may be the most obvious change, from the title of 'Articles of War' to 'A Soldier's Covenant', with the default option of:

'A Soldier's Covenant
Articles of War' (The Salvation Army 1989:246)

There was also the possibility of having them in reverse order (The Salvation Army 1989:247). In making this commitment, the soldier states that they: 'by God's grace enter into a sacred covenant' (The Salvation Army 2010:309), asking the congregation to: 'witness that I enter into this covenant and sign these articles of war of my own free will' (The Salvation Army 2010:322). Indeed, for some, the ideas of covenant and soldiership go hand in hand: 'Becoming a soldier means devoting oneself to the salvation of the world through sacred covenant.' (Walters 2018:44). It may, therefore, seem a significant omission that the report of The Salvation Army's Spiritual Life Commission neglects to even mention covenant in its discussion on soldiership (Street 2008:43-47).

Another longer established covenantal commitment is found in the officer's covenant:

'Called by God to proclaim the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as an officer of The Salvation Army, I bind myself to him in this solemn covenant: to love and serve him supremely all my days, to live to win souls and make their salvation the first

purpose of my life, to care for the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love the unlovable, and befriend those who have no friends, to maintain the doctrines and principles of The Salvation Army, and, by God's grace, to prove myself a worthy officer.' (The Salvation Army 2010:322)

The Officer's Covenant was instigated by General Bramwell Booth, to be signed by cadets on their final Spiritual Day before commissioning, being first reported in The War Cry report on Covenant Day on 13th May 1922 (Hill 2004:144). This speaks of covenant, and of God's calling, but also as the person's binding self to God, contrasting the passages in Genesis 15-17 where God binds himself to Abraham. However, there is biblical precedent to approach God to covenant with him: 'Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the Lord' (2 Chronicles 29:10a). Reflecting on the instruments that define the relationship between an Officer and The Salvation Army, Harold Hill (2004:144) notes that: 'the covenant is, strictly speaking, an agreement between God as well as, or rather than, with the Army.' When discussing the nature of Salvation Army officership in relation to other churches, then-Major Ian Barr stated that covenant was: 'a perpetual thing [which] once signed cannot be unsigned' (Hill 2004:201-202), which could be seen as anomalous for a denomination with an Arminian perspective, which allows for loss of salvation (The Salvation Army 2010:179-189).

In contrast to this, Hill (2004:253) reports that people who resign as Salvation Army officers and later return to that position are not re-commissioned but do have to re-sign their officer's covenant, which could be viewed as a personal expression of relationship with God irrespective of clerical position. This, however, contradicts a recent communication with a recently re-instated officer, that all that was required was to re-sign his officer's undertakings (Payne 2019). The wording of the officer's covenant is ambiguous in its scope of commitment, not explicitly stating that this is a lifetime commitment, although the original 1922 version calls it a 'life covenant' (Hill 2004:383). Another historic area of dissonance in Salvationist understanding of covenant, is that in the 1970's the relationship between officer husband and wife couples was described as a joint covenant (Hill, 2004:351), which neither agrees with a Salvationist ethos of gender equality in ministry, nor with the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. Ray Harris, as with some Methodists (Celiz et al. 2013) asserts that Salvation Army officers constitute a covenant community formed for the service of the wider world (Harris 2013). This covenant, and the nature of officership is not seated in specific theology, but in functional necessity (Daniels 2019), not necessarily marking any ontological change, but the work of God thus far, acknowledging that this work remains unfinished (Daniels 2019).

The most likely source of Salvationist thought on covenant comes from 'Primitive Salvationists', who see themselves as: 'a revolutionary movement of covenanted warriors exercising holy passion to win the world for Jesus.' (Court 2018). In keeping with assumptions on the Abrahamic covenant, they typically see this as an irrevocable covenant (Bryant, 2009 p.33), where we are: 'fettered, shackled, and bound.' (Ramsay 2006:17), not necessarily being as negative as this sounds, as the same author elsewhere compares this to a three-legged race (Ramsay 2010:24). This binding is not seen as a voluntary restriction on our part only, as it is noted in Genesis 15 that it is only God that is bound (Ramsay 2010:67), and that in only one of three covenants with God, is God bound (Ramsay, 2010:64).

To assess what sources of the theology of covenant The Salvation Army might have when we have no formal liturgy to refer to, it may help to look at the Song Book. One example being a verse that says:

'My changing moods do not control
Thy covenanted aid;
Thou hast the guarding of my soul,
And I am not afraid.' (The Salvation Army 2015 song 489)

This was written by John Izzard, a Salvationist and Officer, in a bleak time as a reminder that no matter our highs or lows, God remains dependable (Taylor 1990:34-35). The Salvation Army also has no formal lectionary. One is suggested, based on festivals of the Church and The Salvation Army year, including making the first Sunday of the New Year 'Covenant Sunday' (The Salvation Army 2010:328). This is marked in in the UK, not as Covenant Sunday, but Commitment Sunday. Perhaps a better understanding of both commitment and covenant would be had if it was known as Covenant Renewal Sunday.

We have seen that covenants may: 'constitute the framework of the larger story. They are the backbone of biblical narrative.' (Gentry 2012:Ch.4). Covenant is the unifying theme of the Bible. A well-grounded individual and corporate understanding of this will benefit the Church's understanding of both scripture and their place in God's story (Dean 2014:281). God's covenant with Abraham is particularly significant, being used so much in New Testament writings (Morris 1984:21). This is the covenant that has endured, unreplaced through all generations, with Paul reminding us:

‘The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them’ (Romans 4:11)

That God covenants with us says much about his character and his choice not to act unilaterally even when we fear we may not be up to the task as: ‘God prefers covenant partners with whom things are yet to be decided, rejecting a situation [...] where nothing is in question’ (Brueggemann 1994:47). Churches and theologians disagree on the equivalent sign of circumcision, whether that be baptism or inward change, and whether baptism is for infants or as a sign of conversion. For The Salvation Army, not practicing sacraments, that conversation may look different, although as Michael Ramsay (2010:63) says, circumcision may be a less obvious a sign than uniform wearing, but no less extreme. The Salvation Army would do well to develop a deeper theology of covenant. This exists in its words and songs. It might be argued that scripturally, God is always the initiator of covenant, which affects the use of covenants for soldiers and officers (Read 1995:4), but it is also associated with the Hebrew word ‘*hesed*’: covenant love, a love which flows both ways (Read 1995:102). Deuteronomy 23:21-23 says ‘if’ you make a vow to God that you be careful to keep it, meaning that covenanting to God is permissible when done with caution (Read 1995:107). The Salvation Army inherited its covenant tradition from its Methodist roots, but this is not well clarified. Perhaps it would be well to reinstate traditions, maybe never widely known but potentially helpful, such as covenant renewal services and Holiness covenants.

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