



The
William Booth
Collection

THE GENERAL'S LETTERS

"THEORETICAL RELIGION"

From the "War Cry," June 13th, 1885

MY DEAR COMRADES,

Are we a practical people after all? We say we are. We profess to measure ourselves by the good actually accomplished. But are we what we seem? Are we a reality? My mind is agitated on the subject.

Nothing is worse – we feel that nothing can very well be more abominable to God and angels, and we are sure that nothing can be much more abhorrent to ourselves – than shams and make-believes. We hate them with a hatred that we believe is Divine. We have said so before; we are always saying so, and we shall go on saying so, because we feel it in our bones.

In this hatred at least we have Jesus Christ for our pattern. He was – as we all know – pitiful and lenient to thieves and publicans (tax gatherers – not drunkard-makers, mind) and poor harlots, but he had no mercy on the pretended religionists about Him. He unmasked their hollow hypocrisy, called them hard names, spoke of them as a generation of poisonous snakes, and wondered how it was possible for the mercy of God to reach them; and wondered by what possible means they could manage to escape the damnation of hell.

Do you ask me, my comrades, why the Pharisees excited this bitter antipathy of the Master? I answer it was because they were a mere pretence, a hollow form, an empty ceremony, they did their religion as it were by machinery, and they knew it.

They had a theory which they did not practically carry out; used religion and the name of God and sacred things to minister to their own selfishness and temporal interests. They traded on the everlasting hopes and fears that are born in men's souls for the sordid purposes of making gain and reputation and position. They were a gigantic hypocrisy. Hence His hatred – His denunciation – His withering scorn.



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We can understand this, my comrades. It was perfectly natural for the Son of God to feel thus. We feel after this fashion ourselves to all whose lives contradict the theories on which they trade and live. Everybody does so about matters in which they are interested. Would not everybody hate a man who was always setting forth his beautiful theories of truth if his life was a continual falsehood? Or a man who was constantly enlarging on honesty while known to be a practical thief? Or a boaster in the beauty and value of benevolence when he was seen to be a practical miser? Or the politician who was always showing how his reforms and plans and methods would mend the condition of things, who, when vested with power and possessed of the opportunity, bettered nothing?

If then theory, unaccompanied by practice, is such an abomination in earthly things, what must it be when associated with those eternal questions which are measureless in value?

What shall we say of religious people who say they love God and worship at His feet and build Him temples, and yet do not even pretend to keep His commandments

Or what shall we say of those who call themselves Christians, who say they are disciples of Christ, and yet will not follow Him one yard further than where all is pleasant and smooth; who never for a moment dream of going with Him to the Wilderness, to Gethsemane, or to the Cross, to save the souls of men?

Or of those who say they believe in hell, and would send anybody there if they could who did not hold the same theory, and yet in practice will not part with the luxuries of life or endure the smallest hardship in order to save the souls of the poor sinners about them from going there?

Oh, my comrades, this holding truth in theory and not working it out in practice is damning. My soul is agitated about it. Do we stand clear ourselves? Let us look at our lives and answer to God for ourselves.

What is the end of a religious organization? What is it for? To maintain the name of God? Well, we suppose that is very important, but we fancy He could maintain His name and fame in the



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earth without us. For the offering up of worship and praise? Very good; but we suppose that is not all. The great purpose must be to continue and carry out and complete the work that Christ began of saving the world from its black rebellion, delivering it from the power of the fiends of hell and bringing it back to God.

Let us measure the religious organizations by this standard. Surely no one naming the name of Christ can object to that. Salvationists cannot and will not. Lift the standard high. Apply it fairly. What is the result?

Men measure the worth of earthly organizations by the extent to which they secure the end for which they are instituted. Take a fire brigade establishment, for instance. This would be nothing, anyway people would say so, if not practical. They might paint the fire-escape all the colours of the rainbow, put the firemen into blazing uniforms and glittering helmets; give them a thousand lessons in all the secrets of their business; show them how to manipulate their engines and hose and ladders and hand-buckets and all the paraphernalia of their craft. But if they did not put out the fires, and rescue the husbands and wives and children from the blazing buildings, the citizens would count them a delusion, the juries would charge them with manslaughter, and well for them if the mob did not tear them in pieces. They would say, "We don't care about your drill and skill and engines; the only use you are to us is to put OUT FIRES AND SAVE LIFE!"

I fancy the angels of Heaven, my comrades, measure our religious organizations very much after this fashion. If I am not mistaken, the Great King who sits up on the Throne says, in heart, of us all, "What good are you with all your methods and agencies and talk and bands and processions, if you don't put out the fire? if you do not stop the terrible burnings and rescue the poor sinners who are being literally swallowed up in the flames?"

Yesterday was Sunday. Oh, what talking and preaching! Oh, what observances and ceremonies and religious doings in general there were! But so far as stopping the burning that is going on about us – the terrible burning that is consuming so much happiness and blackening and charring so many poor souls, – what was done?



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My comrades, never mind other people. Take your eyes off them. What do we accomplish? The streets of Christian cities are full of harlots at midnight. They tell me that in this city in which I write – which has been lately said to be the most religious city in the world – there are *eighty thousand* of these poor creatures.

And who cares?

Our prisons are full of criminals. In one London prison alone there is always an average of a thousand debauched women.

Who cares?

All over Christendom thousands of little children are being brought up in actual training for crime. Unless death interferes they are certain to become criminals, and equally certain to be damned.

Who cares?

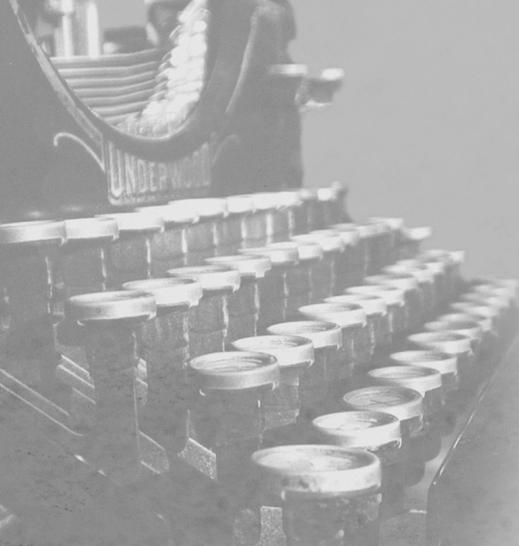
At the corner of almost every street in the cities where the Christians live there is a trap to catch and ruin souls, a trap beautifully lit and fitted and painted and baited?

Who cares?

The breweries and distilleries in all the Christian lands pour forth their millions of barrels of liquid damnation to quench the Christian thirst, besides only too much over for the heathen. And every one of the manufacturers know this to be so.

Who cares?

And the churches and the ministers and the Christians and the Salvationists know it is so, and—



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Who cares?

Oh, my comrades, what do our theories say? Again, I say, never mind anybody else. What do our Bibles and song-books, our prayers, our religion, our theories – what do they all say? They say the millions around us – the hundreds of millions, the thousands of millions – are on their way to perdition; not the drunkards and the harlots and the criminals alone, but the Christless respectables, and especially, according to the Christ by whom the Christians swear, the people who hold the theory of religion and do not practise it. For them, according to the Master, is reserved the hottest damnation of all.

Who cares?

If there is a triple murder – a fire – an earthquake – a famine, by which a few men, women, and children die, going out of life without a struggle, what a hue-and-cry there is! What a sensation!

But here, come and listen! Listen! to the march of millions to endless misery! Tramp! tramp! tramp! There they go; from every land, more especially the Christian lands, for God's bowels of compassion must move towards the heathen multitudes; through every town, down every street, from every home, the children, the fathers and mothers, the aged sires – on they go; up to the Judgment Seat, and then down to – hell!

My comrades, it must be so. The Salvation Army has not discovered this state of things to make people unhappy. Bibles and bishops and ministers and everybody say so – in theory. But who cares, and whose practice is in keeping with their faith? Where are we as Salvationists? I am agitated about the matter. Where am I? Where are you, dear comrades?

I must pause for reflection. Farewell till next week. Meanwhile put the question to your own hearts,

Who cares?



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Believe me, yours affectionately,

WILLIAM BOOTH.
June 8th, 1885.