

Unless or Until?

A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON COMMITMENT IN CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP

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Introduction: Beyond Structure, Toward Posture

Over nearly four decades of leadership within The Salvation Army, I have witnessed how both the **content of leadership** and the **context in which we lead** have changed. While some developments reflect intentional theological reflection—such as a movement from control-based structures toward servant leadership—others have been shaped by necessity.

One shift is particularly striking across many Western territories: the steady decline in the number of people committing to officership. As a result, an increasing number of corps—and in some contexts, entire ministries—are now led by **employed personnel rather than covenanted officers**. While this change is often marked by faithful leadership and due to practical necessity, it has created uncertainty—not only about the **spiritual role and responsibility of those in such positions**, but also about the **meaning and expectations of officership itself**. Some officers find themselves asking how others can hold the same responsibilities without having made the same commitments, or what covenant means when the same authority can be exercised without it. Yet beneath this structural and vocational tension lies a deeper question—one not ultimately of title or contract, but of **commitment**.

What kind of commitment does spiritual leadership require today? And how do we name and form that posture in a way that honors both The Salvation Army's heritage and the realities of contemporary ministry?

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Three Postures of Commitment

In various areas of Church life, we can observe at least three distinct postures of commitment. While each reflects different attitudes toward calling and responsibility, only one aligns with a spiritual posture of discerned obedience.

1. “As Long As” Commitment

This is the consumerist posture: “I’ll stay as long as it suits me. As long as I feel good. As long as my needs are met.” Though rarely stated so bluntly, this mindset can appear subtly in a church culture shaped by individualism or low expectations. It lacks resilience and confuses comfort with calling.

2. “Until” Commitment

This is the career-based posture: “I’ll serve until I find something more fulfilling. Until I’m promoted. Until I need to make a career move.” While often responsible in tone, “Until” remains rooted in **self-directed criteria**—its limits are defined by personal thresholds or opportunity, rather than spiritual discernment.

3. “Unless” Commitment

This is the vocational posture: “I will stay unless the Lord clearly calls me elsewhere. Unless I can no longer give my best. Unless the mission is compromised.” This posture reflects biblical models of calling—Abraham who moves only when God leads, Ruth who binds herself to Naomi’s people, and Paul, who stays or moves by the Spirit’s leading. What unites these stories is not permanence, but obedience—a readiness to remain or move solely at the Spirit’s direction.

The biblical call to spiritual leadership is consistent: offer yourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), share not only the gospel but your very lives (1 Thessalonians 2:8), and be found faithful as stewards (1 Corinthians 4:2). Notably, it is **faithfulness** that is required—not **permanence**. Jesus himself called his followers to take up their cross daily (Luke 9:23)—a rhythm of surrender, not a contract of permanence.

In the reflections that follow, I focus primarily on how the “unless” posture shapes spiritual leadership—particularly in the context of **officership and other forms of spiritual ministry** within The Salvation Army.

Covenant, Calling, and Commitment in the Army

The Salvation Army has historically held two formal covenants—Soldiership and

Officership—as expressions of vocational and spiritual commitment. While these forms remain important in many contexts, conversations are emerging about **new models of membership and discipleship** that reflect changing cultural and ministry realities.

Though these covenants may no longer **explicitly require lifelong service**, they are still often **interpreted and experienced as permanent commitments**. This implicit expectation, though historically shaped, may no longer align with the vocational realities faced by many leaders today.

As I reflect theologically, I find that Scripture only explicitly calls for lifelong commitment in two areas: to **Jesus and His Church**, and to **one's spouse**. These are covenantal in the truest sense—relational, enduring, and formed in love. Ministry leadership, by contrast, is **vocation**: spiritual, weighty, and accountable, but not covenantal in the same absolute way. This distinction allows us to take **“life” out of the structural language of commitment**, while keeping the full **weight of faithfulness** in its spiritual posture.

We are not asking those entering into spiritual leadership—whether officer, soldier, employee, or member—to guarantee a lifetime of service. Instead, we are inviting them into a **spiritually grounded commitment**: “I will remain faithful unless the Lord clearly calls me elsewhere, unless I can no longer give my best, or unless the mission is compromised.”

This shift does not weaken commitment—it strengthens it. It removes permanence as an assumption and replaces it with **discernment and surrender**. “Unless” doesn’t mean *forever*—it means *obedient*. It reframes calling not by duration, but by **Spirit-led availability**.

There are also emerging conversations within the Army about introducing *timed officership*—a defined commitment (e.g., five or ten years) that allows for intentional entry and a **faithful conclusion** after the agreed term. While not a substitute for vocational calling, this model could function alongside the “unless” posture, offering leaders clear opportunities to reflect, discern, and renew their sense of calling. In some cases, a timed approach may help individuals grow into an “unless” mindset over time. Rather than weakening commitment, this layered model could support healthier leadership pathways—anchored in discernment, not duration.

This reframing also honors the reality that some leaders come to discover their calling through *practice*, not just pre-commissioning conviction. Officers and employees alike can be shaped by this posture of presence.

I remember speaking at my farewell meeting before entering training college.

The Territorial Leadership was present, and I stood in front of the congregation and said something like this: *“I am following Jesus, and my commitment is to him—not to The Salvation Army. If these paths ever lead in different directions, I will follow Jesus.”* I was young, probably too bold, and no doubt more radical than wise—but I meant it. Looking back, I didn’t have the language of “unless” yet, but that was the posture I was trying to express. And here’s the beautiful irony: that was more than forty years ago—and I am still here. It has always been an *unless* commitment, and it has, so far, lasted a lifetime.

Implications for Leadership Formation

Reframing commitment around **posture rather than position** opens doors for a renewed understanding of leadership within The Salvation Army—one that is faithful to our mission and responsive to cultural realities, vocational nuance, and spiritual discernment.

It invites us to reconsider how we perceive **officership and membership**. The “unless” posture challenges assumptions of permanence and opens the possibility of a covenantal commitment that is deeply rooted in faithfulness, discernment, and obedience. This may lead to the emergence of **new forms of vocational ministry**—including employees and lay leaders whose spiritual authority comes not from title but from posture. When we honor the deep commitment of those who serve vocationally **outside our two traditional covenants**, we resist the unhelpful differentiation between “real officers” and “committed employees,” and instead affirm all who faithfully respond to God’s call in their context.

This shift also affects how we **present ministry opportunities**. Rather than asking for a lifetime up front, we invite people into a Spirit-led journey—offering a high calling with language that reflects humility, reality, and grace. In doing so, we lower no standards; rather, we raise expectations of spiritual attentiveness and intentional discernment.

It may also help us connect with emerging generations. Many young people today hesitate to make lifelong commitments—not out of reluctance, but from a place of **integrity**. They simply do not know what life will bring. The “unless” posture honors that honesty without encouraging disengagement.

It offers a pathway to full-hearted commitment without demanding a lifelong guarantee. It creates space for robust discipleship, rooted not in long-term projections but in spiritual attentiveness and obedience.

The “unless” model may not yet offer a fully developed framework—but it does

offer a **direction**. It is a hopeful reframing of vocational commitment, one that centers availability, surrender, and spiritual obedience rather than formal duration. If embraced, this could influence how we train, appoint, and encourage leaders across the Army—creating space for both long-faithful service and seasons of meaningful vocational engagement.

This is not only a theological correction—it is spiritual liberation.

Conclusion: Staying Faithful, Not Forever

The Army's future does not depend on promises of permanence. It depends on leaders—officer and employee alike—who are willing to say: "I will stay unless the Lord leads me elsewhere." That posture is covenantal—even when not lifelong. It is not a loophole. It is what obedience looks like in real life.