

FUNDAMENTALISTS AND THE “INCORRUPTIBLE” BLOOD OF CHRIST (5)

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The Meaning of the Blood of Christ in Scripture

The problem with the “Blood Indoctrinators” (again to borrow the term from Richard Alexander) is that they insist on an absurd literalism. When the blood is mentioned in the Bible, they always read it *literally*, except when it speaks of the Lord’s Supper. Then they rightly eschew the error of Romish transubstantiation. Thus, according to the “Blood Indoctrinators,” we are *literally* “washed in the blood” (Rev. 1:5), the blood is *literally* sprinkled on our souls (I Peter 1:2) and the blood *literally* speaks in heaven (Heb. 12:24). To say that the blood of Christ is theological shorthand for the bloody, sacrificial, atoning death of Christ is anathema to the “Blood Indoctrinators.”

The Scriptures plainly teach that Jesus Christ died and was buried (I Cor. 15:3-4), and that as part of His dying, He shed real, literal blood, but we do not believe that every New Testament reference to the blood of Christ is a reference to the red liquid which flowed in His veins and arteries when He was on earth. How can a *physical* substance (blood) be applied to a *spiritual* soul? When the Bible speaks of us being washed in blood, it means that our guilt and pollution are removed by virtue of His atoning death; it does not mean that we are *literally* washed in blood.

John Calvin explains it well when commenting on Romans 3:25:

A propitiatory through faith in his blood, &c. I prefer thus literally to retain the language of Paul; for it seems indeed to me that he intended, by one single sentence, to declare that God is propitious to us as soon as we have our trust resting on the blood of Christ; for by faith we come to the possession of this benefit. But by mentioning *blood* only, he did not mean to exclude other things connected with redemption, but, on the contrary, to include the whole under one word: and he mentioned “blood,” because by it

we are cleansed. Thus, by taking a part for the whole, he points out the whole work of expiation.¹

A. W. Pink agrees (quoting John Owen with approval):

The blood of Christ is comprehensive of all that He did and suffered in order unto our redemption, inasmuch as the shedding of it was the way and means whereby He offered Himself (in and by it) unto God.²

In a few instances, the word blood, in reference to Christ, is His literal physical blood. John 19:34 (“and forthwith came there out blood and water”) would be a good example. In other places, the word blood has the idea of guilt, of bearing the responsibility for the death of another. For example, “Behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us” (Acts 5:28) and “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt. 27:25). In other instances, blood is a reference to Christ’s violent death on the cross for the redemption of God’s elect. For example, concerning Ephesians 1:7 (“in whom we have redemption through his blood”), Calvin comments,

St. Paul speaks here expressly of his blood, because we are obliged to resort to his death and passion as to the sacrifice which has power to blot out our sins ... Now it is true that Jesus Christ not only shed his blood, even in his death, but also experienced the fears and terrors which ought to have rested upon us. But St. Paul here under one particular comprehends the whole, in the manner common to holy Scripture.³

Elect sinners are saved by virtue of the redeeming work of Christ. The Bible uses various terms to refer to that work. Sometimes, the word “blood” is used; sometimes the word “cross,” and on other occasions the word “death.” For example, Paul writes, “if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). Elsewhere, Paul writes that we are reconciled by Christ’s death (Col. 1:21-22).

¹*Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948), p. 143.

²*An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), p. 492.

³*Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1979), p. 53.

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Let the Fundamentalists cavil that you cannot wash in blood (Rev. 1:5) that perished in the dust; that you cannot have faith in His blood (Rom. 3:25) if it no longer exists; that you cannot be cleansed in blood (I John 1:7) that has passed away. They refuse to understand. The Bible *uses figures of speech* to represent a glorious reality. The redemption accomplished on the cross is eternal in its effects which will never perish.

We could pose similar questions: How can the believer glory in the cross (Gal. 6:14) if that piece of wood rotted away two thousand years ago; how can the believer suffer because of the offence of the cross (Gal. 5:11), when it no longer exists; how can the cross be preached (I Cor. 1:18), if it has passed away; why does Paul weep over men who are enemies of a decayed piece of wood (Phil. 3:18); and how can that cross be anything but “of none effect” (I Cor. 1:17)? The answer is simple: by the “cross” here is meant the redemptive sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus, not the piece of wood on which Christ was put to death.⁴ It is a similar case for the term “blood.” There was no need for the literal, physical blood of Christ to be preserved.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* explains what is meant by being “washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ”:

It is to receive of God the remission of sins, freely, for the sake of Christ’s blood, which he shed for us by his sacrifice upon the cross; and also to be renewed by the Holy Ghost, and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblamable lives (Q. & A. 70).

Reformed writers in the past have eschewed the fanciful interpretations so popular with some modern Fundamentalists.⁵ For example, Robert Traill writes,

⁴Even Paisley acknowledges this: “When we refer to the Cross we refer not to the wood of the Cross but to the work of the Cross. The wood corrupted but the work is incorruptible” (*Christian Foundations*, p. 98).

⁵Quotes from various theologians on this subject, including John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Richard Alleine, Samuel Rutherford, John Owen, David Clarkson, Matthew Poole, Philip Henry, Robert Traill, Thomas Watson, Ebenezer Erskine, Ralph Erskine, Robert Haldane, Alexander Stewart, William Symington, Charles Hodge, Patrick Fairbairn, Robert S. Candlish, J. A. Alexander, Andrew Bonar, George Smeaton, C. H. Spurgeon, John Macleod, Lorraine Boettner, John Murray and Kenneth Smith, can be found on-line (www.loughbrickland.org/articles/quotes.shtml).

But His entering in with His own blood is spiritually to be understood; that Christ's appearance in heaven, is to bring up a memorial continually before God, of the virtue and savour of that sacrifice he offered without the gates of Jerusalem: Eph. v. 2. Christ hath loved us, and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour. This savour never spends or wears out. The blood of Jesus, in the virtue of it, is as fresh this day, as in the day it was shed on the cross.⁶

Notice that Traill teaches that the *virtue* of the blood, the efficacy of the atonement, is the emphasis of Scripture, not the physical substance. Traill condemns the viewpoint of those who emphasise the physical over the spiritual virtue of the blood, calling them the "Antichristian party":

But what is the sprinkling of this blood of Jesus? The sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ is nothing else but this, the spiritual application of its power and virtue. It is an old doting dream of the Antichristian party, to make a great deal of noise about the material blood of Christ; it is probable that the natural blood of Christ sprinkled the garments of many of his murderers, who were never a whit the better for it; and that the earth drank it in, like the blood of another man; but the spiritual heavenly virtue of it is quite another thing.⁷

As Traill rightly points out, if a person washed their garments in literal blood they would not come out white. The Bible is not speaking of washing in *literal* blood. A spiritual application of "its power and virtue" is what Scripture means.

Ralph Erskine writes forthrightly, calling a material consideration of the blood of Christ "vain, vile, useless and imaginary." Blood, Erskine insists, is sprinkled *spiritually*. Only when "morally considered" can blood be said to "cleanse." Otherwise it "bespots anything whereon it is dropt":

Hence learn the great need of spiritual discerning for taking up spiritual things under outward signs; and spiritual mysteries, under common metaphors: for, here the clean water represents,

⁶*Works* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1975), vol. 1, p. 106.

⁷*Works*, vol. 1, p. 36.

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as in baptism, the pure and precious blood of Christ; and the blood of Christ is not to be considered materially, but morally: even so the sprinkling here, is a spiritual sprinkling; and the cleansing a spiritual and moral cleansing. The blood of Christ, materially considered, as it ran from the veins of his body, though Papists pretend to have enough of it in reserve, this is a vain, vile, useless, and imaginary conception of it; this corporal and carnal consideration of it, is of no more avail than the corporal and carnal application of it; for, as Christ says, “The flesh profiteth nothing”; so, in this sense, the blood profiteth nothing. The proper use of blood is not to cleanse; for it defiles and bespots anything whereon it is dropt; but morally considered, as the shedding of blood implies loss of life and punishment for a crime; so blood is the expiation of a crime, and a satisfaction to the law for the offence committed against it.⁸

Alexander Stewart denies that the literal blood of Christ is the emphasis of Scripture. He trusts that none are “so ignorant” as to imagine otherwise. What would he have thought of modern Fundamentalism?

We trust none are so ignorant as to imagine that it means literally the red fluid that flowed in the Saviour’s veins—that this is the blood of Christ which can cleanse the conscience. God would not mock us by telling us of a way of cleansing beyond our reach. And if in this literal sense, the blood of the holy Son of God is of no avail to cleanse the conscience, what a conclusive argument is it against all Popish relics, of what ever character!⁹

William Symington thought it “almost unnecessary to remark” that the literal material blood is not carried into heaven. Because of the error of Fundamentalism in our day, it is very necessary that Symington’s remarks are heard!

By his blood and sacrifice, represented in these passages as carried by him into heaven, it is almost unnecessary to remark, we are not to understand the material blood which flowed in the garden and on the cross, but the merit of his suffering and

⁸*Works* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Press, 1991), vol. 4, pp. 134-135.

⁹*The Mosaic Sacrifices* (Edinburgh: publisher not given, 1883), pp. 275-277.

death; the virtue of his atonement, the substance of his sacrifice, the whole essence of his passion. The intercession is founded on the oblation.¹⁰

Conclusion

We have seen that the Bible does not teach that Jesus Christ's shed blood was literally preserved in heaven to be revered by Christians, either in His body (for it could not all fit) or in a vial. When Scripture teaches us to have faith in His blood (Rom. 3:25), it means we must trust in the finished work of Christ as the ground of our acceptance with God. Our focus should be on what He accomplished by His death. When we say, "My hope is in the cross" we do not mean the actual wood that Christ was nailed to, nor do we need the actual wood to be preserved (like a popish relic) for salvation is to be assured. Rather, we mean what the cross represents. The blood of Christ represents all that Christ did in suffering and dying for His elect on the cross.

One final irony needs to be pointed out. A large majority of Fundamentalists, who trumpet about the preciousness, efficacy and incorruptibility of the blood of Jesus Christ, are Arminian in their theology of the atonement or engage in ecumenical relations with Arminians.

The *Revivalist*, the magazine of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, has reported regularly on the World Congress of Fundamentalists. For example, the December 1980 edition reports that Ian Paisley addressed the opening meeting. That Congress made a number of resolutions, one of which is especially of interest:

While recognising that great pastors, missionaries, evangelists and revivalists, such as Charles Haddon Spurgeon, William Carey, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards aligned themselves with the theological system known as Calvinism, we reject a hyper-Calvinism which negates or eliminates human responsibility in either the proclamation or reception of the Gospel message as destructive to a Biblical evangelism which would offer the Gospel freely to all men. On the other hand, we equally deplore

¹⁰*The Atonement and Intercession of Christ* (Edinburgh: publisher not given, 1834), p. 361.

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and condemn hyper-Arminianism which refuses to recognise the total corruption of fallen man including his will and by high pressure techniques and worship of statistics would make man his own saviour, thus denying the free grace of Almighty God and the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of the soul. Calvinists and Arminians, though they differ on some points of interpretation, are agreed on the great fundamentals of the faith and should join together in the battle against the end time apostasy.¹¹

We too oppose hyper-Calvinism, but we, unlike the Fundamentalists, oppose Arminianism in all its forms. But how disgraceful that in a zeal to “protect the Blood,” some supposedly Calvinistic Fundamentalists, including Free Presbyterians, who have subscribed to the Calvinistic and anti-Arminian *Westminster Standards* (which teach “neither are any other redeemed by Christ ... but the elect only” [WCF 3:6]), can join together with Arminians to “battle against the end time apostasy.”¹² Arminianism is part of the end-time apostasy!

Hyper-Arminianism is here defined as that which “refuses to recognise the total corruption of man including his will.” That is not *hyper*-Arminianism: that is Arminianism! The *Canons of Dordrecht*, the original “Five Points of Calvinism” do not look so benignly on the Arminian heresy. The fathers at Dordt said of Arminianism (not just “hyper-Arminianism”) that it “bring[s] again out of hell the Pelagian error” (*Canons* II:R:3).

Arminian Fundamentalists who harp on about the blood being incorruptible in heaven, and yet teach that Christ died for all men without exception, are the real insulters of Christ’s blood. John Wesley, the Prince of Arminians, taught that the blood of Christ can go to hell:

What! Can the blood of Christ burn in hell? ... I answer ... one who was purchased by the blood of Christ may go thither. For he that was sanctified by the blood of Christ was purchased by the

¹¹Cf. “Regarding Hyper-Calvinism, and Hyper-Arminianism” in “Resolutions of the World Congress of Fundamentalists,” November 12-19, 1980 Manila - Singapore, reported in the *Revivalist* (www.ianpaisley.org/revivalist/1980/Rev80dec.htm).

¹²There is a lot more material in the *Westminster Confession* than “The Pope is the Antichrist” (25:6) and “The Popish sacrifice of the Mass” is blasphemous (29:2).

blood of Christ. But one who was sanctified by the blood of Christ may nevertheless go to hell; may fall under that fiery indignation which shall for ever devour the adversaries.¹³

Obviously, Wesley did not believe that some of the *material blood* shed on the cross went to hell; he meant that those for whom Christ died could go to hell. Wesley denied the *efficacy* of the atonement. All Arminians deny the efficacy of the atonement, for they teach that Christ shed His blood in a vain attempt to save the entire human race, but whether a person is saved or not depends on whether he chooses to accept the sacrifice made on the cross. The blood can plead (literally) all it wants before the Father on a (literal) mercy seat, but if the sinner refuses to accept Christ, all is in vain. That is the true blasphemy, and one against which few voices today (even many professing Calvinists) are heard to thunder!

¹³*The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), vol. 10, p. 297.