

The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews

Part I: The Significance of the Blood of Jesus

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THE THEORY OF THE IMPERISHABILITY OF CHRIST'S BLOOD BENGEL'S THEORY STATED

In the eighteenth century J. A. Bengel (1687-1752) propounded, with a passion and at a length that were alike uncharacteristic, the theory that in the suffering and death of Christ his blood was totally poured out so that not one drop remained in his body.¹ This total effusion of his blood, says Bengel, was not limited to the suffering on the cross, but extended from the agony in the garden, where His sweat was like great drops of blood, to the scourging in the praetorium, and then to the piercing of hands and feet by the nails that fastened Him to the cross, and, after death, the effusion that resulted from the thrusting of the spear into His side. He held, further, that this blood, even after it had been shed, was preserved from all corruption. The justification for this conclusion was sought in the declaration of 1 Peter 1:18-19 that "we were redeemed not with corruptible things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ." According to Bengel, "the *preciousness* of that blood excludes all *corruption*." Its supreme value requires its imperishability.

What, then, happened to this precious blood which Christ shed? Bengel rejects the opinion that at the resurrection it was somehow

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a series of articles entitled "The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews," which were the W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures given by Dr. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes at Dallas Theological Seminary on November 14-17, 1972.

¹ Joh. Alberti Bengelii, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (4th ed.; London, 1855), p. 922; John Albert Bengel, *Gnomon of the New Testament*, trans. by Andrew R. Fausset (5 vols.; Edinburgh, 1858), IV, 474 [hereafter the English translation will be designated ET].

restored to the vascular system of Christ's body, maintaining rather that at the ascension the blood that had been shed was carried by Christ, in separation from His body, into the heavenly sanctuary. With reference to Hebrews 9:12, he says:

Christ entered into the sanctuary through his own blood (not just after the blood had been shed, or by virtue of its effusion, or when it had again been taken into his body, but THROUGH the blood); therefore he as the high priest carried his own blood, in separation from his body, into the sanctuary, and at the time of his entry or ascension Christ kept his blood apart from his body. His body was bloodless (*exsanguie*); not inanimate (*exanime*), however, but living (*vivum*).²

Had the blood been in His body, Bengel contends, there would not have been a correspondence with the typology of the Old Testament, where the high priest entered the sanctuary with the blood of animals, and it is important, he adds, to "preserve the analogy between type and antitype" (a principle he quotes from Witsius). What he fails to take into account is the fact that biblical analogies cannot be pressed into correspondence at every point, and the particular analogy on which he wishes to insist here is hardly favorable to his hypothesis, for, while it is true that the high priest of old entered the sanctuary with the blood of sacrifice in separation from himself, his own blood was at the same time freely flowing within his body—that is, he himself was not in a bloodless state. If analogy is enforced at one point it cannot be enforced at another, and on this basis those who maintain that Christ's blood was restored to His risen body can equally well claim the support of analogy. It is indisputable that in the Epistle to the Hebrews there are many analogies and correspondences, but no less striking are the contrasts and differences between the levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Christ which the epistle brings to light.

Among those whose support Bengel claims are Chrysostom, who says that Christ's blood "was taken up into heaven," with the result that "we partake of blood that has been carried into the sanctuary, the true sanctuary" (Homily 33 on Heb. 13),³ and Calvin, who comments as follows on Hebrews 10:19:

The blood of beasts, since it immediately undergoes putrefaction, could not long retain its vigor; but the blood of Christ, which is corrupted by no putridity, but ever flows with pure color, is suffi-

² *Ibid.*, p. 923; ET, IV, 476.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 924; ET, IV, 477.

cient for us even to the end of the world. No wonder slain animal victims had no power to give life once they were dead; but Christ, who rose again from the dead to bestow life on us, pours his life into us. This is the perpetual consecration of the way, because in the presence of the Father the blood of Christ is always in a sense (*quodammodo*) distilling for the irrigation of heaven and earth.⁴

Again, on 13:11-12:

In order that he might atone for the sins of the world Christ took his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary.⁵

And on 13:20:

It seems to me that the apostle means that Christ rose from the dead in such a way that his death was not abolished but retains its power eternally; as though he had said, "God raised up his Son, but in such a way that the blood, which he shed once in death, continues powerful after the resurrection for the ratification of the eternal covenant and brings forth its fruit just as if it were for ever flowing."⁶

In the first of these quotations from Calvin the Reformer's manner of expression is unusually forced and even fanciful. What he is intent on saying, it seems, is that the blood-shedding of Christ was no ordinary blood-shedding; its effects were not momentary but eternal, and they were not geographically limited but universal in their scope. It does indeed sound strange to be told that Christ's blood is "always distilling for the irrigation of heaven and earth," but this is no more than a figure of speech (*quodammodo*), even though not a particularly happy one. Calvin undoubtedly allowed himself more license in expression when preaching (as in his exposition of Hebrews) than he would otherwise have done when writing (in accordance with Francis Bacon's well worn dictum: "Speaking maketh a ready man; writing maketh an exact man"). Similarly, in the last of the three quotations he is saying that the power of Christ's atoning death, which is identical with the power of His blood, is in no way annulled by the event of the resurrection. Christ is no longer dead, but risen and alive for evermore; yet His sacrifice on the cross still

⁴ Ioannis Calvini, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, Vol. LV of *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. by Guilielm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard Reuss (Brunswick, Germany, 1896), p. 129; John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. by William B. Johnston. *Calvin Commentaries*, ed. by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, 1963), XII, 140-41 [hereafter the English translation will be designated ET].

⁵ *Ibid.*, LV, 192; ET, XII, 210.

⁶ *Ibid.*, LV, 197; ET, XII, 215.

avails for the repentant sinner "just as if" (though this is not actually the case) "it were for ever flowing." The other quotation, which is to the same effect as that cited from Chrysostom, will be discussed a little further on.

To return to Bengel: it is his conviction that the blood of Christ, now forever separated from His risen and glorified body remain eternally the blood that was shed. He mentions the vision of the heavenly Christ in Revelation 1:14, where His head is described as white, from which some have drawn the inference that the whiteness was to be attributed to bloodlessness—an exceptionally jejune piece of special pleading, as is also the conclusion derived by some from Luke 24:39 ("See my hands and feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have") that the risen Savior had flesh and bones but no blood. On the same principle of logic it could be argued that he had no skin or hair, but only and solely flesh and bones. The consideration is left out of account that the normal conception of flesh involves the presence of blood as a component part; and in any case it is difficult to imagine how the spectators could reasonably have been invited to "see my blood." Bengel, however, does not "allege" these inferences as evidence, realizing, no doubt, that they are scarcely compatible with sober exegesis.

He feels himself to be on more secure ground when offering the explanation that in the supper of the Lord, instituted by Christ as a reminder of His death, the body and the blood of Christ are set before us in separation from each other. But this seems to be putting asunder two things that God has joined together, and it is surely preferable to understand the twofold structure of the eucharist as a theological hendiadys, the presentation of a single truth by means of two particular aspects of its reality. The "body of Christ" here speaks to us of a victim, and, what is more, a truly *human* victim, who was thus fully qualified to serve as our substitute, and did so on the cross where "he himself bore our sins in his body" (1 Peter 2:24); and the "blood of Christ" here speaks to us of the *sacrificial* nature of His death, in which His precious blood was voluntarily shed for the forgiveness of our sins (Matt. 26:28; 1 John 1:7). In line with this understanding, and contrary to Bengel's supposition, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks both of our being "sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10) and also of our being "sanctified by the blood of the covenant" (10:29), and thus, so far from teaching a disjunction of the blood

from the body of Christ, testifies to the virtual interchangeability of the terms "body" and "blood" in reference to Christ's redeeming death and its sanctifying effect.

This conclusion is confirmed, moreover, rather than contradicted by the declaration of John 6:53 (another "proof-text" adduced by Bengel): "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"; for in this same discourse the manner of interpreting these words had already been given in verse 35, where Christ says: "He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" that is to say, to come to Christ is to eat His flesh and to believe in Him is to drink His blood: but to come to Christ and to believe in Him are different ways of saying the same thing; hence, again, a hendiadys.

Bengel insists, however, that now in heaven the outpoured blood of Christ, in separation from His body or flesh, is present before the eyes of God. By way of answer to those who maintain that the blood must have returned to the body of the risen Christ to ensure the completeness of His glorified humanity, he contends that, while the circulation of the blood is a necessity for natural or animal life, it is not so for the life of glorification, in which everything is of God. But, presumably, the same should be postulated of the eschatological body of the believer which is to be made like Christ's body of glorification (Phil. 3:21); and, indeed, by the same token, it might be affirmed that Christ's (and the believer's) body of glorification has no more need of a digestive system than it has of the circulation of blood. Yet the risen Lord, on the same occasion on which He displayed himself as having "flesh and bones," showed that He was able to eat and assimilate food (Luke 24:41 ff.). Not that this explains anything, for the fact is that the resurrection body of Jesus (and of the believer) is a mystery which will be explained only when it is experienced.

The blood, of Christ, transported separately into heaven, is, according to Bengel, repeatedly sprinkled there for the removal of sin. Support is found in the writings of the English mystic Thomas Bromley (1629-1691), who is cited to the effect that the blood of the eternal covenant is sprinkled in the heavenly sanctuary, and that our great High Priest continues to perform this act of sprinkling from time to time for the purpose of assuaging the wrath of God which is aroused by sin. In more recent times we find a similar view propounded by the Anglican scholar Henry Alford (1810-1871) in his commentary on Hebrews 12:24. which speaks of the blood shed by Jesus as "the blood of sprinkling":

And if Moses had blood wherewith to sprinkle the people, much more Jesus, of whom Moses was a shadow. And therefore the Writer, enumerating the great differences of our Sion from their Sinai, though he has not recounted their blood of sprinkling, as not being worthy of mention in the face of the terrors of God's law, mentions ours, by which we were redeemed unto God. and assigns it a place in the heavenly city, next to, but separate from, Jesus Himself in His glorified state. If we come to enquire how this can be, we enter on an interesting but high and difficult subject, on which learned and holy men have been much divided. Our Lord's Blood was shed from Him on the Cross. And as His Body did not see corruption, it is obvious to suppose, that His Blood did not corrupt as that of ordinary men, being as it is so important a portion of the body. Hence, and because His resurrection Body seems to have been bloodless—see Luke xxiv. 39: John xx. 27, and notes,—some have supposed that the Blood of the Lord remains, as it is poured out, incorruptible, in the presence of God. On such a matter I would neither affirm nor deny, but mention, with all reverence, that which seems to suit the requirements of the words before us. By that Blood we live, wherever it is: but as here it is mentioned separately from the Lord Himself, as an item in the glories of the heavenly city, and as "yet speaking," it seems to require some such view to account for the words used.⁷

John Keble (1792-1866) may be cited as one who, apparently, held that the blood of Jesus was reunited with His resurrection body. Thus he writes:

This memorial Christ offers in heaven, night and day, to God the Father, His glorified body with all its wounds, His blood which he poured out on the cross but on His resurrection took again to Himself, and with it ascended into heaven. With that body and blood He appears continually before the throne, by it making intercession for us, by it reminding God the Father of His one oblation of Himself once offered on the cross.⁸

BENGEL'S THEORY REFUTED

The notion, however, that the blood shed by Christ in His passion and death is incorruptible, and that it is now in the heavenly sanctuary, whether reassimilated into His glorified body or in separation from Him, is inappropriate and naive. It involves a strange confusion of the physical and the spiritual. In no place do the scriptural accounts say that every drop of Christ's blood was drained from His body, or that the blood which was shed in one way or another participated in incorruptibility and in the resurrection. Certainly, common experience

⁷ Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament* (3rd ed.; London, 1866), IV, 256.

⁸ John Keble, *On Eucharistical Adoration* (Oxford, 1857), pp. 66-67.

would lead one to expect that the body taken down from the cross was not entirely bloodless, however great the loss of blood may have been. After all, the blood is distributed throughout every portion of the human body, not only in the large arteries and veins but also in the minute capillary networks. To seek support for the view that the risen Lord was a bloodless being from passages like Luke 24:39 and John 20:27 has the appearance of a desperate device. The fact of the matter is that, though there is a genuine continuity between the body of humiliation and the body of glory, in speaking either of the resurrection body of Christ or of the believer's glorified body hereafter we are speaking of a quite different category of existence, of which as yet we have no experience. All we can say is that "what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable," that "it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory," that "it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power," that "it is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body," and that "just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:42 ff.). But our experience of this great transformation is not yet. Accordingly, meanwhile we must be content to say: "It does not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

It is wrong-headed, then, to be curious or concerned about what happened to the blood which Christ shed. The important thing is that it was shed—in consequence of the incarnation, which made it possible for Christ, as Son of man, to shed His blood for men. Being truly human blood, it was susceptible to the same consequences as happen to other human blood that is shed. We may at least (and perhaps at most) assert that the body of Christ's resurrection was, by the power of God, the human body in the perfection of its glorification, and as such the prototype as well as the firstfruits of the bodies of our resurrection.

The untenability of the negative deduction from a verse like Luke 24:39, which mentions only flesh and bones in reference to Christ's risen body, that this body was bloodless, becomes perfectly plain when the same type of exegetical logic is applied to the declaratory statement of 1 Corinthians 15:50 that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," which would shut one up to the conclusion that the resurrection body is not only bloodless but also fleshless (a conclusion that was in fact drawn by the Socinians). This, however, involves a contradiction, the one text assigning and the other denying flesh to the resurrection body. Such is the peril of a crass literalism

that does not show proper regard for the manner of speaking and for the context of such biblical statements. In both cases a figure of speech is employed, not a precise literal definition: "flesh and bones" in Luke 24:39 and "flesh and blood" in 1 Corinthians 15:50 are both descriptive of the body as a whole (synecdoche, in which a part stands for the whole). In the former case, the purpose is to emphasize the reality of the resurrection as a bodily resurrection; in the latter case the expression "flesh and blood" is used of the present mortal and corruptible body (cf. Matt. 16:17; Gal. 1:16; Eph. 6:12).⁹

In his extended excursus Bengel has made his position perfectly clear regarding the incorruptibility of the blood shed by Christ and its transposition in separation from the body of Christ into the heavenly sanctuary; but where commentators speak more briefly (as, for example, Chrysostom and Calvin to whom, as it was seen, Bengel appeals) caution should be observed in attributing the same or similar teaching to them. John Owen (1616-1683), for instance, writing on Hebrews 12:24, says that the blood shed by Christ, which, according to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "speaks" to God, did so speak "when it was shed" and "continues so to do in that presentation of it in heaven."¹⁰ From this language it might be inferred that Owen (and also Chrysostom and Calvin, on the strength of the passages adduced from them by Bengel) held that the blood shed by Christ on earth was carried by Him into heaven and is there continually "presented" to the Father. That this is not at all Owen's doctrine, and thus that he is here writing of the presentation of Christ's blood in heaven only in a manner of speaking, not in a literal sense, is demonstrated by what he had written earlier at considerably greater length when commenting on Hebrews 9:12, where it is said that Christ entered into the heavenly sanctuary through or by virtue of his own blood. He comments as follows:

The apostle is so far from using the particle δία [through] improperly for σὺν [with] so to frame a comparison between things wherein indeed there was no similitude, as they [the Socinians] dream, that he useth it on purpose to exclude the sense which σὺν would inti-

⁹ Behm states: "σὰρξ καὶ ἄϊμα = אדם בשר: an established Jewish (though not OT) term for man, whether as individual or species, in his creatureliness and distinction from God, . . ." Johannes Behm, "ἄϊμα," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1964), I, 1972.

¹⁰ John Owen, *An Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, 1869), VII, 349.

mate: for he doth not declare with what the high priest entered into the holy place, for he entered with incense as well as with blood; but what it was by virtue whereof he so entered as to be accepted with God. . . . It is a vain speculation, contrary to the analogy of faith, and destructive of the true nature of the oblation of Christ, and inconsistent with the dignity of his person, that he should carry with him into heaven a part of that material blood which was shed for us on the earth. This some have invented, to maintain a comparison in that wherein none is intended. The design of the apostle is only to declare by virtue of what he entered as a priest into the holy place. And this was by virtue of his own blood when it was shed, when he offered himself unto God. This was that which laid the foundation of, and gave him right unto the administration of his priestly office in heaven.¹¹

THE THEORY OF CHRIST'S SHED BLOOD AS THE LIBERATION OF LIFE FOR OTHERS

A distinctive opinion regarding the significance of the term "blood" in Scripture has become associated with the name of B. F. Westcott (1825-1901). His viewpoint is summed up in the statement that "the blood poured out is the energy of present human life made available for others."¹² Applied to Christ, this means that by His death and blood-shedding He made "the virtue of His life accessible to the race."¹³ In an earlier work Westcott endeavoured to show that "the Scriptural idea of blood is essentially an idea of life and not of death."¹⁴ The chief biblical justification for this view is found in certain Old Testament statements which identify blood with life: Genesis 9:4 (which prohibits eating "flesh with its life, that is, its blood"); Deuteronomy 12:23 (a similar prohibition: "for the blood is the life; and you shall not eat the life with the flesh"); and especially Leviticus 17:10-11 (which to the injunction against eating blood—"for the life of the flesh is in the blood"—adds the instruction relating to the blood of sacrifice: "and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life"). From such declarations Westcott argues that "by the outpouring of the Blood the life which was in it was not destroyed, though it was separated from the organism which before it had quickened."¹⁵ He also postulates a distinction

¹¹ Ibid., VI, 280-81.

¹² Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1889), p. 294.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. The reference is to his earlier work *Epistles of St. John* (Cambridge and London, 1883), Additional Note on i. 7, pp. 34-37.

¹⁵ Westcott, *Epistles of St. John*, p. 34.

between the death of the victim occasioned by the shedding of its blood and the life of the victim which, supposedly, by the release of its blood is made available in life-giving virtue for the benefit of others—a distinction which, he maintains, is apparent in the two stages of the ritual performed on the Day of Atonement, firstly, by the shedding of blood at the altar of sacrifice and, secondly, by the sprinkling of that same blood in the sanctuary of the tabernacle.

This view had in fact already been developed at greater length a short time previously by William Milligan in his book *The Resurrection of Our Lord*.¹⁶ Much is made by Milligan of the assertion of Genesis 4:10 that the voice of Abel's blood cried to God from the ground, which is taken up in Hebrews 12:24 where it is declared that the sprinkled blood of Jesus "speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel." "What speaks," Milligan contends, "must either be, or must be thought of as being, alive."¹⁷ This, however, is an inadmissible interpretation to impose on what is so clearly a figure of speech. By the same method it could be equally well argued that the affirmation of Hebrews 11:5, that through faith Abel, though dead, is still speaking, implies that Abel must be alive, despite the assertion that he is dead, because otherwise he could not still be speaking. This would manifestly be nonsensical. The point is that the blood of Abel, that is, his murder by the hand of his brother, cried out to a just God for vengeance, whereas the blood of Christ, willingly shed on the cross, speaks or assures one of pardon and reconciliation.

Further, it is altogether unrealistic to speak of the shedding of a victim's blood in terms of the liberation of life which is thereby made available for the benefit of others—and it is biblically unrealistic, since throughout Scripture the shedding of blood in death means not the release of life but the loss of life.¹⁸ Nor will it do to explain, as Milligan does, that such blood is not physically but "ideally" alive, for mystical exegesis of this kind does more to confuse than to enlighten. On the basis of this hypothesis, moreover, the conclusion

¹⁶ William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London, 1881), p. 140 n. 56; pp. 274-304.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹⁸ See Leon Morris, "The Biblical Use of the Term 'Blood,'" *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, III (October, 1952), 216-27. A careful survey of the evidence leads Morris to the conclusion that in the Old Testament the term "blood" "signifies life violently taken rather than the continued presence of life available for some new function, in short, death rather than life" (p. 223), even where the reference is to atonement, and that "it seems tolerably certain that in both Old and New Testaments the blood signifies essentially the death" (p. 227).

might logically be drawn that, as the life of Christ was released and made available to the world in the act of his blood-shedding on the cross, there is no proper necessity for his resurrection from the dead: the regenerating life is there in the outpoured blood; what need is there for a risen and living Redeemer in addition to this? In Scripture however, it is the life of the risen Lord, not the life supposedly inherent in the outpoured blood, which, through the work of the Holy Spirit, is the dynamic principle of the revitalization and triumphant living of the Christian believer. This is what Paul calls "the power of his resurrection" (Phil. 3:10).

An important consideration that must not be left out of account is that Scripture does not speak of the blood as life in isolation from the flesh: it is the life of the flesh; that is to say, it is properly described as life only insofar as it belongs to the living person or organism. To describe it as life in separation from the living being does not make sense. An accurate summary of the doctrine of Scripture is given by Johannes Behm as follows:

To shed blood is to destroy the bearer of life and therefore life itself. Hence αἷμα ["blood"] signifies "outpoured blood," "violently destroyed life," "death" or "murder." In this sense it is used of the slaying of Jesus in Mt. 27:4,24; Ac. 5:28, and of the prophets, saints and witnesses of Jesus in Mt. 23:30,35; Lk. 11:50 f.; Rev. 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2.... The interest of the NT is not in the material blood of Christ, but in His shed blood as the life violently taken from Him. Like the cross, the "blood of Christ" is simply another and even more graphic phrase for the death of Christ in its soteriological significance.¹⁹

Similarly F. J. Taylor:

The phrase "the blood of Christ" is used much more frequently in the NT than either the death of Christ or the Cross of Christ, ... especially in Pauline Epp., Heb. and 1 John. It is a pictorial way of referring to the violent death upon the cross of shame voluntarily enduring for men by Christ (Rom. 325; 5:9).²⁰

And Charles Bigg, with reference to 1 Peter (commenting on 1:2):

Throughout this Epistle the writer dwells so constantly upon the sacrifice of the Cross that the Blood of Christ can mean nothing else than His Death and Passion.²¹

¹⁹ Behm, I, 173, 174.

²⁰ F. J. Taylor, "Blood," *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. by Alan Richardson (London, 1950), p. 34.

²¹ Charles Bigg, *A Critical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, The International Critical Commentary (2nd ed.; Edinburgh, 1902), p. 93.

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