

Blood and Life

Though I was old enough to know better nearly twenty years ago, that did not keep me from letting the middle finger of my left hand invade the fiercely protected domain of the blade of my lawn mower. As punishment for my intrusion, my finger was shortened about a quarter of an inch instantly. In the emergency room of the hospital, a friend who was a general practitioner rendered first aid, saying he would get another doctor to finish the job. When I questioned why he did not do it, he replied, "I can't stand the sight of blood!"

The doctor was joking (I hope!), but he expressed a horror felt by most of us. Something about the sight of blood, whether it is from a human or an animal, is shocking and repulsive to our very nature. In times past when people lived closer to nature and had to prepare their own foods, as was true during my growing up on the farm, we had to learn to deal with it. Today, however, if we each had to butcher the chicken or animal we eat, no doubt, the tribe of vegetarians would multiply rapidly.

We who have been students of the Bible for a long time have grown accustomed to the frequent mention of blood in relation to religion. It began with Abel in the first mention of worship (Gen. 4:4). It reached staggering proportions at the dedication of Solomon's temple when they sacrificed 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (2 Chron. 7:5). Throughout Old Testament history, blood was a focal part of worship rituals. Then Jesus spoke of our eating his flesh and drinking his blood! And he poured out his own blood for us.

I wonder how that impresses those who have no background of Bible learning. It must seem bizarre to hear one claim our sins are washed away by Christ's blood, that our robes are made white and we are made clean by the blood of the Lamb. They may wonder what it means to claim that we are redeemed by his blood and that he purchased the church with his blood. We can wonder how many have been confused or repulsed by such an introduction to Christianity.

In former ages people were instructed to offer animals with their blood as sacrifices pleasing to God. Shedding of blood became a part of daily life and culture. To the people of Israel, ritualistic sacrifice of blood had a very special meaning. What was that meaning?

After the flood, God instructed Noah and his family, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" (Gen. 9:3-6). So, from early in recorded history, blood was identified with life. Life and blood became as synonyms. In this same reference God is quoted as declaring, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed... ." From the time of Noah until this present time, to "shed blood" has been an idiom meaning to kill or take life.

In the sacrificial rituals of the Law of Moses, in offering "the blood of bulls and goats" and sheep, it was understood that an animal's life was being given as a substitute for the life of the worshipper. It was not just an offering of animal blood in the place of the blood of the sinful worshipper, but it was a substitution of life for life. As we move into the Scriptures

of the new covenant, we see that this literary device of speaking of life as blood was also prevalent and understood by the Jews.

During the Passover meal in the night of Jesus' betrayal, "...he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (Matt. 26:27-28). Interpreting Hebrew literary devices, just what was Jesus saying? The cup was Passover wine rather than a literal cup (a metonymy where the container is put for the thing contained). The wine was not his physical blood which was still in his body, but it symbolized it. Yet further, the blood was an idiom meaning his life. His life being poured out meant that he willingly and deliberately gave his life. His death as a substitute for man's was the basis of the covenant, or agreement, through which man's sins could be forgiven.

So, interpreting all these Hebrew literary devices, was not Jesus announcing something like this: "I am agreeing to accept your guilt and to die in your place in order that you may be forgiven and live, and you will share this wine ritually as a token of your sharing my life"? In some such simple language easily understood, the message of the Gospel can be communicated without distractions due to cultural backgrounds. So, is it not wise to avoid use of confusing, and even offensive, literary devices today whose terms must be explained before the uninitiated can understand?

What we are suggesting is that the gospel proclaimed to people in our century does not have to be clothed in the same terminology as it was to Hebrews in the first century. After an American is taught the basics of the gospel, however, in the continuing education of the student, all the richness of the types and literary expressions of Old Testament writings may add to understanding and appreciation. The emphasis on blood may then no longer seem so bizarre.

Although this essay has focused on understanding the significance of blood in religion, its application may be much wider. There are many words and expressions whose meanings have become so veiled and misleading as to become a sort of theological legalese or dialect.

If I were to begin speaking to a great segment of our society about righteousness, justification, sanctification, regeneration, and spirituality, I suspect they would not have a clue as to what I would be talking about. It would be very interesting to have one-sentence definitions by preachers and Bible teachers of those words plus many others in common use like holiness, fellowship, communion, worship, church, authority, priest, bishop, pastor, elder, deacon, preach, preacher, evangelist, minister, prophet, predestination, works of law, and works of obedience. I probably could not "four point" that list myself!

We are not born immortal, that is, with never-ending life. Jesus died and arose to life again. Now he lives free of death unendingly. He was our substitute making it possible for us to enjoy unending life with him. He wants you to accept his invitation to do so. That is the Good News, the Gospel.

(Cecil Hook; July 2002) []