

When is the Blood Applied?

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Part One

*Down at the cross where my savior died.
Down where for cleansing from sin I cried.
There to my heart was the blood applied.
Glory to His name!*

The famous song writer, Elisha Hoffman, rhapsodized about his faith in Jesus by declaring that the blood of Jesus was "applied" to his heart at the Cross. Like Hoffman, many Christians adopted the language of "the blood applied" in their quest to locate the moment of personal salvation. However, many, not following men like Hoffman, wandered far afield from the truth about the blood of Jesus. As a result of the influence of Modernism, mainline liberal churches rejected the language of the blood of Jesus. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary tells of his experience as a student in a liberal professors classroom. The professor told the class: "I will have no more bloody cross religion in this classroom." R. C. Sproul tells of a meeting where he was teaching on the Cross, and a man spoke out and said, "That is crude and obscene." A certain segment of nominal Christianity has rejected the importance of the blood of Jesus altogether. Doris Williams of Union Theological Seminary said, "I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses, and blood dripping, and weird stuff."

Thank God, there are still churches where the message of the Cross and the language of the blood of Jesus is esteemed and adored. These churches are to be commended and encouraged for their convictions. Yet, even among these churches, there are Christians who seem to lack Hoffman's clarity. While they would fight for the use of the blood in their hymnals and preaching, they are not

clear as to what it means. For example, I recently read a column in a magazine¹ where ministers were interviewed as to the question: "When is the blood of Jesus applied?" I was amazed at the disparity and confusion in their answers. Here are some of those statements:

The application of the blood is not a one-time event.

Without the blood of Jesus, none of the steps we take in salvation would be efficacious. Forgiveness comes at repentance through His blood; sins are washed away at baptism through his blood.

The blood is applied through the entire new birth process.

The blood is applied when you repent, but I don't believe it's fully applied until you're baptized in Jesus' name. The reason some people get the Holy Ghost before baptism is because God honors their reaching out to Him in the process of repentance; you might say they get it on credit.

. . . the purging of the conscience takes place at baptism by the blood. The reason some people receive the Holy Ghost before baptism is because Jesus said that the one requirement for being filled is to be hungry.

I believe Scripture backs up the fact that the blood of Jesus is applied at baptism. . . . His blood is shed "for remission of sins.["] This would seem to link baptism and Jesus' blood together in the work of remission of sins. . . . If remission comes by baptism, then blood and baptism seem to be connected in their work. . . . repentance symbolizes death. However, the Bible says that *life*, not *death*, is in the blood. Finally, the blood is not applied when we receive the Holy Ghost, because this is the Gift that comes as a result of the work of atonement having been done.

Without the shedding of blood is no remission of sin. And we know from Acts 2:38 that both repentance and baptism are connected with the work of remission. And I think the culminating experience of receiving the Holy Ghost is a continuation of that blood flowing.

Finally, the view expressed by the editors was given:

¹Indiana Bible College Perspectives, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 2.

In addition to our traditional way of thinking of salvation as a three-step process, we can also think of it as having two key aspects: God's provision and our appropriation. In Acts 2:38, "for the remission of sin" is not tied to just baptism, but also to "repent and be baptized." Together, these constitute our appropriation of God's grace in our lives. Neither of those steps by itself completes the work of remission of sins. Only when a person first repents (turns away from sin) and then seals that commitment through baptism are sins remitted through Jesus' shed blood.

These comments were taken from interviews of ministers of the United Pentecostal Church. These quotations reveal the UCPI's general obscurity about the meaning and purpose of the blood of Jesus in the Atonement. They all hold to some notion that we must do certain things in order to appropriate the blood of Jesus. They are not in agreement as to how that is done. Some see the "blood applied" in repentance. Others believe it is only partially applied in repentance and is completed in baptism. Some say it is applied in both repentance and water baptism, but not as part of Spirit reception. Yet others say that the blood is applied in Spirit reception. Why such a discrepancy? This divergence of opinion obscures the vital purpose of the atoning blood of Jesus in God's plan. It also reveals a lack of understanding of the meaning of the blood of Jesus in the Atonement.

Understanding the Atonement

First, we must ask, what is at issue in the question: "When is the blood of Jesus applied?" To answer this surface question we must go deeper and ask, "How can God and Humanity be reconciled?" This question reaches into the realm of biblical Atonement, and more specifically, the work of Christ on the Cross. In the language of the New Testament, blood represents the work of Jesus on the Cross. The blood of Jesus is integral to the question of Atonement in Scripture.

While many believe that Jesus shed His blood to take away their sins, they don't agree about how we may obtain, appropriate or apply that blood personally. Different groups within Christianity have their distinctive expectations of how the recipients of salvation should appropriate it. A group's requirements for appropriating Christ's blood becomes their most distinguishing theological mark. The issue of the blood leads to a more fundamental question: "What does the Bible say is necessary for a person to obtain salvation?" This is the test of all groups,

and determines whether they are “honoring the blood” or are preaching “another gospel.”

Where is the Doctrine of Atonement?

As a part of my Master of Divinity degree, I took several courses in systematic theology. One of our projects was to research the doctrinal statement of our denomination and then compose our own faith statement based on the study of our own tradition. This course did not discourage what we believed, nor did it attempt to dissuade us from agreeing with our denomination. Its purpose was to aid us in better understanding our own faith so that we could articulate it in our own words. At this time I was a minister of the United Pentecostal Church. After my project was completed I discovered one glaring deficiency in my faith statement. You might believe I was challenged to change my view about the Godhead, water baptism, or Spirit-baptism. But, it was not these of which I was most concerned. It was in my understanding of the Atonement. I discovered that the UPCI did not have a formal statement about the Atonement. Our beliefs about it were more caught than taught.

In a tape of a Heritage conference message, David Bernard acknowledged that no formal statement about the Atonement is found in the UPCI articles of faith. He offered this reason why that was so. He said that the Oneness Pentecostal's beliefs about the Atonement were generally the same as their evangelical (fundamentalist) peers. The Oneness people were more concerned about issues where they disagreed with other Christians – the Godhead, water-baptism, the New Birth – so they wrote about those things. They did not bother, says Bernard, to write about those areas where agreement already existed. I would probably agree with Bernard that early Oneness advocates spoke and wrote more on the areas of sharp disagreement. But, I would disagree with the assumption that they believed the same thing about the Atonement.

First of all, his explanation assumes that there was a monolithic agreement among fundamentalists concerning the nature of the Atonement. Conservative Christians held a variety of theories, approaches and nuances of the meaning of the Atonement. In some cases, no clear, comprehensive articulation of the

Atonement existed beyond their denomination's statement of faith. In many cases these Christians operated with borrowed currency - the theological reflection of previous generations. I believe that many Pentecostals operated in praxis (practical faith) out of models of the Atonement which were handed down (consciously or unconsciously) to them by the birth denominations. When they left their native denominations to form new Pentecostal bodies, they usually retained much of the doctrinal articulations with which they were most familiar. Their positions usually remained intact until a theological crisis emerged which demanded a clarification or a rethinking of a position. In the case of the Assemblies of God, this occurred in the Oneness-Trinity controversy of 1915-16. They were forced to reexamine their faith about the Trinity and then make modification to their doctrinal statement to clarify their beliefs for future generations. The same thing occurred in 1918 over the "initial evidence" controversy.

Secondly, it assumes that the early Oneness leaders were comprehensively aware of the issues of the Atonement and possessed a substantial understanding of what conservative Protestants believed about the Atonement. I would ask, how could a movement, denomination or group claim to agree with other fundamental, conservative Christians if they do not have their own statement.² If they have no statement, then there is no corporate, intentional, and conscious articulation of what that group believes about the Atonement. Therefore, there is nothing to compare to the beliefs of other denominations. It also leads to historical revisionism about what the earliest members believed. This points out the real problem: A group lacking a comprehensive statement about the biblical nature of the Atonement is subject to not only a lack of clarity and identity, but more seriously, to erroneous teachings.

Without a statement it does not have a standard by which to measure or refute the false. When mistaken notions of the work of Christ begin to emerge there is no doctrinal corrective available. This becomes even more acute as the

²I mean by statement a formal statement by the UPCI as a body, agreed upon by all licensed ministers, and incorporated into its articles of faith. I do not mean statements made by prominent writers who are popular. Nor do I mean a collection of opinions or interpretations found in written sources throughout the UPCI's history. This statement should not only articulate what the body confesses as true, but also what it denies as false.

earlier generations pass on. In time, the following generations hold beliefs without a full conscious awareness of why. And with that, they do not have the benefit of the context of the earlier generations, or their rationale for those beliefs. They are believed more because they are there. If these inherited beliefs happen to deal with critical areas of salvation, theological ignorance can lead to tragic doctrinal mistakes. I believe that the statements made by ministers at the beginning of this article are products of just such a situation. They exhibit a confusion and disharmony between themselves which reflects their particular understanding of the blood's application. This is because they lack an essential, more substantial background in the biblical meaning of blood as it pertains to Atonement. This confusion and disjunction of notions will remain until a common ground of biblical teaching about the Atonement is recovered.