

# Tyndale's use of the Blood of Christ in the Meaning of Baptism

RALPH S. WERRELL

In this study we are not looking at Tyndale's doctrine of baptism but at one important aspect of it. Tyndale's theology springs from Christ's sacrifice on the cross and there is no Christian doctrine that affects man which has not its starting place and strength in the blood of Christ. Because Tyndale's writings were not theological treatises but practical, we find an overlapping of doctrines as each man-made division is part of a total theology which affects the whole of each one of us in our Christian life.

When we come to look at the place of Christ's blood and the sacrament of Baptism we find that we are looking at something in Tyndale's theology which spreads from the Triune God into every aspect of our Christian life.

For baptism is the sign of the covenant between God and man which teaches us of God's promises, which applies the sacrifice of Christ to our lives, and which leads us on to witness and make a profession of our baptism through our works of righteousness.

The order is important, and many heresies have risen because people have failed to keep in step with God's revelation and give man a place in his salvation as he tries to earn a place in God's sight through his works. Works, or any other way by which we try to earn some credit for our righteousness before God, takes some of the glory from God. It is the blood of Christ, shed once and once only on the cross, which can wash away our sin, and make our deeds acceptable to God. It is the Testament which God has made with sinners which enables us to be Christians and servants of God.

TESTAMENT; that is, an appointment made between God and man, and God's promises. And sacrament is a sign representing such appointment and promises; as the rainbow representeth the promise made to Noe, that God will no more drown the world. And circumcision representeth the promises of God to Abraham, on the one side; and that Abraham and his seed should circumcise, and cut off the lusts of their flesh, on the other side, to walk in the ways of the Lord: as baptism, which is come in the room thereof, now signifieth on the one side, how that all that repent and believe are washed in Christ's blood; and on the other side, how that the same much quench and drown the lusts of the flesh, to follow the steps of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Tyndale continues with the relationship between circumcision and baptism, drawing out that they both have the same signification for man. Both were signs of the promises of God assuring us that we are accepted by God. Both were signs that we must turn from sin, and also that we must walk in the ways of the Lord.

And as circumcision was a token certifying them that they were received unto the favour of God, and their sins forgiven them; even so baptism certifieth us that we are washed in the blood of Christ, and received to favour for his sake: and as circumcision signifieth unto them the cutting away of their own lusts, and slaying of their free-will, as they call it, to follow the will of God; even so baptism signifieth unto us repentance, and the mortifying of our unruly members and body of sin, to walk in a new life, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

Baptism in itself does not make us good and enable us to do good works which are acceptable to God, for the sign cannot be in itself the thing signified. It is wrong to teach that God looks at our good deeds or that he chooses us for our goodness because the only goodness we have comes from God himself as by his Holy Spirit he chooses us whilst we are still sinners and washes us clean from sin, and brings us to a new birth in Christ.

For the seed of that birth, that is to wete the Spirit of God and the lively seed of his word sown in our hearts, keepeth our hearts, that we cannot consent to sin; as the seed of the devil holdeth the hearts of his, that they cannot consent to good. This is contrary unto the bishop of Rome in two points: in the one, that he saith, that our good deeds make us first good, and teacheth us not to believe in Christ's blood, there to be washed and made first good; and in another, that he saith, God chooseth us first for our good qualities and properties, and for the enforcement and good endeavour of our free-will. What good endeavour is there, where the devil possesseth the whole heart, that it can consent to no good?<sup>3</sup>

We need to remind ourselves of the profession of our baptism when we find that we are tempted and yield to sin. Not only to remind ourselves of Christ's death for us, but also our own promises to serve the Lord.

Wherefore as, when an old sore is broken forth again, we begin, as it were, a new cure with greater diligence and more care than before; even so here we must renew our old battle against the flesh, and more strongly go to work, to subdue it, [and to quench the lusts thereof, which are waxen so rank, that the bud out openly,] according to the profession of our baptism, which is the very sacrament or sign of repentance, (or, if they will so have it called, penance,) by the interpretation of Paul (Ro. vi). For the plunging into the water, as it betokeneth on the one part that Christ hath washed our souls with his blood; even so on the other part it signifieth that we have promised to quench and slay the lusts of the flesh with prayer, fasting, and holy meditation, after the doctrine of Christ, and with all godly exercise, that tame the flesh, and kill not the man.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to keep the profession of our baptism we cannot trust in our own selves or the power of our free-will. It is only through the power of God the Holy Spirit as he preaches to us reminding us that through faith in Christ's blood we are cleansed from sin. Because of this the Lord's Supper is a sacrament and a memorial of Christ's death on the cross at Calvary and preaches to the living the reality of Christ's sacrifice.

So now if baptism preach me the washing in Christ's blood, so doth the Holy Ghost accompany it; and that deed of preaching through faith doth put away my sins. For the Holy Ghost is no dumb God, nor no God that goeth a mumming. If a man say of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, that it is a sacrifice as well for the dead as for the quick, and therefore the very deed itself justifieth and putteth away sin; I answer, that a sacrifice is the slaying of the body of a beast, or a man: wherefore, if it be a sacrifice, then is Christ's body there slain, and his blood there shed; but that is not so. And therefore it is properly no sacrifice, but a sacrament, and a memorial of that everlasting sacrifice once for all, which he offered upon the cross now upon fifteen hundred years ago; and preacheth only unto them that are alive.<sup>5</sup>

The washing in Christ's blood makes us clean from all sin. It is not the act of baptism which effects this cleansing; we are cleansed because it is a work of the Holy Spirit in us.

And therefore Paul saith, "If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from death be in you, then will he that raised up Jesus from death quicken your mortal bodies by the reason of the Spirit that dwelleth in you." So that it is not possible for him that knoweth the truth, and consenteth thereto, to continue in sin. And then, finally, if we have the light in our hearts, and walk therein, then we have fellowship with God, and are his sons and heirs, and are purged from all sin through Christ's blood.<sup>6</sup>

If our love to God were perfect then we would be able to live a sinless life. But in many ways we come short of the profession of our baptism and we need to turn to God for mercy and forgiveness, and for him to make us better Christians, and to increase our love to him.

And therefore, until that love be come, thou must knowledge unfeignedly that there is sin in the best deed thou doest; and it must earnestly grieve thine heart, and thou must wash all thy good deeds in Christ's blood, ere they can be pure, and an acceptable sacrifice unto God, and must desire God the Father for his sake to take thy deeds a worth, and to pardon the imperfectness of them, and to give thee power to do them better, and with more fervent love.<sup>7</sup>

With this imperfectness remaining in us we can see that baptism does not work *ex opere operato* but is in itself a sacrament which preaches the promises of God to us and brings us into a covenant with God. On our part, we have to accept the conditions God has given if we are to receive these promises.

Now as a preacher, in preaching the word of God, saveth the hearers that believe; so doth the washing, in that it preacheth and representeth unto us the promise that God hath made unto us in Christ. The washing preacheth unto us, that we are cleansed with Christ's blood-shedding; which was an offering, and a satisfaction, for the sin of all that repent and believe, consenting and submitting themselves unto the will of God.<sup>8</sup>

We respond to that preaching, and we continually desire God to have mercy on us for our sins. In our weakness we turn to God in repentance and in sorrow cast ourselves on his mercy.

He that desireth mercy, the same feeleth his own misery and sin, and mourneth in his heart for to be delivered, that he might honour God; and God for his truth must hear him, which saith by the mouth of Christ, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." God, for his truth's sake, must put the righteousness of Christ in him, and wash his unrighteousness away in the blood of Christ. And be the sinner never so weak, never so feeble and frail, sin he never so oft and so grievous; yet so long as this lust, desire, and mourning to be delivered, remaineth in him, God seeth not his sins, reckoneth them not, for his truth's sake, and love to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

For our repentance and faith open up the mercy of God to us and we receive the forgiveness of our sins. We are reminded of God's promises, made to us in our baptism, in the Lord's Supper.

Here it is said, "Drink of it every one," that your souls within may be sprinkled, and washed through faith, with the blood of the Son of God for the forgiveness of sin, and to be partakers of a more easy and kind testament, under which, if you sin through fragility, you shall be warned lovingly, and received to mercy, if you will turn again and amend.<sup>10</sup>

Baptism is a sacrament or signification of the cleansing of sin through Christ. The realisation that we are still sinners, and that we need continually to repent and turn from our sin, and to ask God to forgive us, does not cast us down because we know that Christ has washed us clean in his blood.

For we always repent, and always knowledge or confess our sins unto God, and yet despair not; but remember that we are washed in Christ's blood: which thing our baptism doth represent and signify unto us.<sup>11</sup>

Our own works and our own efforts are of no avail because they cannot be righteous, and even our best deeds cannot blot out our failings and weaknesses. But what we cannot do God has done for us, and so our hope of forgiveness is sure and we can praise the triune God for all he has done for us in Christ Jesus.

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Neither can actual sin be washed away with our works, but with Christ's blood; neither can there be any other sacrifice, or satisfaction to Godward for them, save Christ's blood; forasmuch as we can do no good works unto God, but receive only of his mercy with our repenting faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Saviour: unto whom, and unto God our Father through him, and unto his holy Spirit, that only purgeth, sanctifieth, and washeth us in the innocent blood of our redemption, be praise for ever. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

Although the profession of our baptism leads us to doing good works, these works have nothing in them for us to glory in as if they were perfect and could earn us God's favour. Our good works are signs to us of our election by God to eternal life as the Holy Spirit works in us.

A Christian man hath nought to rejoice in, as concerning his deeds. His rejoicing is that Christ died for him, and that he is washed in Christ's blood. Of his deeds rejoiceth he not, neither counteth he his merits, neither giveth pardons of them, neither seeketh an higher place in heaven of them, neither maketh himself a saviour of other men through his good works: but giveth all honour to God; and in his greatest deeds of mercy knowledgeth himself a sinner unfeignedly, and is abundantly content with that place that is prepared for him of Christ; and his good deeds are to him a sign only that Christ's Spirit is in him, and he in Christ, and, through Christ, elect to eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

It is Christ's merits that have earned us our salvation and given us the will and power to serve God, and our works are only signs of that salvation Christ has purchased for us.

So doth a Christian man freely all that he doth; considering nothing but the will of God, and his neighbour's wealth only. If I live chaste, I do it not to obtain heaven thereby; for then should I do wrong to the blood of Christ; Christ's blood hath obtained me that: Christ's merits have made me heir thereof; he is both door and way thitherwards.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore there is nothing we gain for ourselves by the good works we do, for Christ has done everything for our salvation. Our works must be for Christ's sake, and are signs that we have been cleansed by Christ's blood. They must be done not just to those we love, but also to those who are poor and unable to pay us back for those deeds. For when we help the poor out of love and because we love Christ, then we can be assured of Christ's love to us and that we are his chosen.

"It shall be recompensed thee at the rising again of the righteous." Luke xiv. Read this text before, and thou shalt perceive that Christ doth here that same that he doth, Matt. v., that is, he putteth us in remembrance of our duty, that we be to the poor as Christ is to us; and also teacheth us, how that we can never know whether our love be right, and whether it spring of Christ, or no,

as long as we are but kind to them only which do as much for us again. But and we be merciful to the poor, for conscience to God, and of compassion and hearty love, which compassion and love spring of the love we have to God in Christ, for the pure mercy and love that he hath shewed on us: then have we a sure token that we are beloved of God, and washed in Christ's blood, and elect, by Christ's deserving, unto eternal life.<sup>15</sup>

Evangelism is another work which we have to do. We must teach the love and the power of God so that others might be washed in the blood of Christ and enter into Christ's spiritual kingdom cleansed from their sin.

When Christ, as I said, because he had no temporal kingdom, even so he meant of no temporal power, but of power to save sinners, which the process of the text declareth, by that he saith, Go ye therefore, and teach and baptize; that is, preach this power unto all nations, and wash off their sins, through faith in the promises made in my blood.<sup>16</sup>

Infant children of Christians who die before they are baptized are not in a worse state than those who have been baptized, because it is God who has made the covenant with us and our children of which baptism is the sign. They are included in the covenant God has made with man in the same way that Abraham's children were covered by Abraham's faith before they were circumcised. It is the covenant and not the sign of the covenant which is important.

And then it followeth, that the infants that die unbaptized, of us Christians, that would baptize them at due time and teach them to believe in Christ, are in as good case as these that die baptized: for as the covenant made to the faith of Abraham went over his seed as soon as it had life, and before the sign was put on them; even so must needs the covenant, made to all that believe in Christ's blood, go over that seed as soon as it hath life in the mother's womb, before the sign be put on it. For it is the covenant only, and not the sign, that saveth us; though the sign be commanded to be put on at due time, to stir up faith of the covenant that saveth us.<sup>17</sup>

For the outward sign of baptism does not give life, it is our faith, the inward spiritual reality, which is important, and the washing, not with water but with Christ's blood, which saves us.

And as the circumcised in the flesh, and not in the heart, have no part in God's good promises; even so they that be baptized in the flesh, and not in the heart, have no part in Christ's blood. And as the circumcised in the heart, and not in the flesh, had part in God's good promises; even so a Turk unbaptized (because he either knoweth not, that he ought to have it, or cannot for tyranny,) if he believe in Christ, and love as Christ did and taught, then hath he his part in Christ's blood.<sup>18</sup>

We see, therefore, that the profession of our baptism takes away pride and gives us a true love to God in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit opens to us the Scripture so that we are preserved from heresy and false opinions. We are truly Christ's servants who serve him in true humbleness of heart without seeking anything for ourselves.

Another conclusion is this: as he which ever creepeth along by the ground, and never climbeth, cannot fall from on high; even so no man, that hath the profession of his baptism written in his heart, can stumble in the scripture, and fall into heresies, or become a maker of division and sects, and a defender of wild and vain opinions. For the whole and only cause of heresies and sects is pride. Now the law of God, truly interpreted, robbeth all them in whose hearts it is written, and maketh them as bare as Job, of all things whereof a man can or may be moved to pride. And on the other side, they have utterly forsaken themselves, with all their high learning and wisdom, and are become the servants of Christ only, which hath bought them with his blood; and have promised in their hearts unfeignedly to follow him, and to take him only for the author of their religion, and his doctrine only for their wisdom and learning, and to maintain it in word and deed, and to keep it pure, and to build no strange doctrine thereupon, and to be at the highest never, but fellow with their brethren, and in that fellowship to wax ever lower and lower, and every day more servant than another unto his weaker brethren, after the example and image of Christ, and after his commandment and ordinance, and not in feigned words of the pope.<sup>19</sup>

It is not baptism in water but the inward baptism in Christ's blood which is our salvation, and which opens the Scriptures to us, and guides us in the way of life.

Lo, now, dear reader, to believe in Christ's blood for the remission of sin, and purchasing of all the good promises that help to the life to come; and to love the law; and to long for the life to come, is the inward baptism of the soul, the baptism that only availeth in the sight of God; the new generation and image of Christ; the only key also to bind and loose sinners; the touchstone to try all doctrines; the lantern and light that scattereth and expelleth the mist and darkness of all hypocrisy, and a preservative against all error and heresy; the mother of all good works; the earnest of everlasting life, and title whereby we challenge our inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

In conclusion the meaning of baptism is that the way of life has been opened up before us so that we can follow that way to life everlasting.

The whole sum then of all together is this: If our hearts were taught the appointment made between God and us in Christ's blood, when we were baptized, we had the key to open the scripture, and light to see and perceive the true meaning of it, and the scripture should be easy to understand.<sup>21</sup>

This brief survey of the importance of Christ's blood for Tyndale only scratches the surface. We can trace it in the doctrine of God as the Trinity

plans man's salvation, as God elects those who are to be saved. Our repentance, justification and sanctification depend on the blood of Christ being shed for us once and for all at Calvary. It is through the blood of Christ that we can have faith, that we can do works which are pleasing to God. It is the crimson thread flowing through the sacraments, and so there can be only two sacraments, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord, for they preach to us that Christ's blood was shed for our salvation and are symbols to us of God's saving love.

Because our salvation comes from God, and that without the shedding of Christ's blood for us there is no salvation, there is nothing for us to boast about. Our faith, our very best works, are of no value unless they have been washed and cleansed by the blood of Christ, for without that cleansing we are dead in trespasses and sin.

Throughout the whole of Tyndale's writings we can see the power of the Scriptures on his thinking. We can see that the hours spent translating the New Testament and part of the Old Testament meant that his mind was saturated with the word of God, and that if he had written a theological work Tyndale would have taken his place amongst the great theologians of the Church. As it is he made an even greater contribution through his translation. As he would have wished, the effect was not only in his generation but in many later generations who have used his translation as a basis of theirs; it is God's word and not Tyndale's translation which matters. His work of translation, as with any other work, could only be worthwhile if it were cleansed by the blood of Christ.

Tyndale's theology, of both Baptism and the Lord's Supper, stands out on the one hand against the teaching of the Roman Church, and on the other against both Luther and Zwingli. From his knowledge of the Scriptures he reached out with a new interpretation.

Thus, in summary, Tyndale stressed that a sacrament was a sign which communicated a promise or 'preached' to stir in the memory the thing signified. The sacrament was useless, however, if it did not enter the motivation of the participant's actions.<sup>22</sup>

We need to add Smeeton's summary that without the blood of Christ washing us clean from all sin there can be no theology, no salvation, no Christianity. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary, and the shedding of his blood, once for all, is, says Tyndale, crucial for our Christian faith.

**RALPH S. WERRELL** was until his recent retirement Rector of Southam, Warwickshire.



## NOTES

(Notes 1–21 refer to Tyndale's Works (Parker Society).)

- 1 Addresses on Scripture. *Works vol 1* p. 409.
- 2 Addresses on Scripture. *Works vol 1* p. 426.
- 3 Exposition of I John. *Works vol 2* p. 190.
- 4 Exposition of I John. *Works vol 2* p. 160f.
- 5 Addresses on Scripture. *Works vol 1* p. 424.
- 6 Exposition I John. *Works vol 2* p. 149.
- 7 Addresses on Scripture. *Works vol 1* p. 463.
- 8 Obedience of a Christian Man. *Works vol 1* p. 253.
- 9 Parable of the Wicked Mammon. *Works vol 1* p. 94.
- 10 Sacraments. *Works vol 1* p. 364.
- 11 Obedience of a Christian Man. *Works vol 1* p. 262.
- 12 Addresses on Scripture. *Works vol 1* p. 466.
- 13 Parable of the Wicked Mammon. *Works vol 1* p. 97f.
- 14 Pathway. *Works vol 1* p. 21.
- 15 Parable of the Wicked Mammon. *Works vol 1* p. 106f.
- 16 The Practice of Prelates. *Works vol 2* p. 282.
- 17 Sacraments. *Works vol 1* p. 350.
- 18 Sacraments. *Works vol 1* p. 351.
- 19 Exposition of I John. *Works vol 2* p. 140.
- 20 Exposition of Matthew v, vi, vii. *Works vol 2* p. 13.
- 21 Exposition of I John. *Works vol 2* p. 141.
- 22 Donald Dean Smeeton. *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Kirksville Missouri, Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1986) p. 205.