Foreword

Does Alan Stibbs' essay 'His Blood Works' count as old? By the standards of modern scholarship it does, because it was first published in 1962, and since then much has been written about sacrifice in the Old Testament and about the atonement that Jesus Christ offers. In such thinking the word 'old' suggests 'out-dated' and 'out-moded'.

In a consumerist society it is fatal for a product to attract the tag 'old' in that sense, and it is worth bearing in mind that Christian readers and Christian academics can have consumerist attitudes too. Part of the sadness about a consumerist society is its difficulty in finding contentment and rest, because it consistently demands more: it is insatiable,

and this marches very closely with what older generations called gluttony.

It is possible for Christians, whether academics or not, to have an intellectual gluttony which is equally insatiable, not in the sense simply of searching to learn, but rather looking for something new for the sake simply of the newness. We rightly decry a merely entertainment culture in public worship in churches, where a church service looks like a cross between a game show and a pop concert, precisely because it takes so much so uncritically from a worldly entertainment consumerism. We sometimes forget that consumerism can be there on the bookshelf too. Such a consumerist attitude will, I think, tend to dismiss Stibbs and his essay.

That would be a great loss. For the word 'old' can have other connotations than 'out-dated'. 'Old' can suggest 'old master', and it can suggest wisdom. Like so much of his work, Stibbs' *His Blood Works* is old in that sense. C.S. Lewis wrote of the value of reading old works because of their enduring value; a characteristic simplicity; and their ability to address us in our limited horizons because, while products of their own times, they are not captured by the spirit of our times in the

way that we are.[1] All these characteristics are present in 'His Blood Works'.

Stibbs' essential case can be summarised fairly shortly: it is highly important to work out what the word 'blood' means in the Bible because the work of Jesus Christ is so frequently referred to in terms of his blood. This means that our understanding of 'blood' affects our understanding of the Cross. The word 'blood' in the Bible, Stibbs argues, does not stand for life released for new purposes, but does stand for the benefits given by the life laid down in death.[2]

At first hearing, one is tempted to ask what the difference is between these two accounts of what 'blood' means and why it matters. After all, some would say that the idea of 'life released for new purposes' does not deny that Jesus Christ died, nor that his death was necessary, nor that it was sufficient. However part of Stibbs' enduring value is that he does see a difference and he explains its significance with such clarity. He penetratingly asks

1 C.S. Lewis, 'Introduction', pp 3-10 in *St Athanasius On the Incarnation.* St Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestwood NY, 1993 (original edition 1944).

2 See for example Stibbs' summary of the Old Testament evidence on p 35 of this edition and his reference to the drinking language of John 6:54-58 on p 61.

whether the necessity and sufficiency of Christ's death really is the same in the two different accounts of what 'blood' means.

The way Stibbs structures the argument in four short sections helps readers see this very clearly. Thus, he explains in his introduction why the definition of 'blood' matters and where the idea of 'blood' as 'life released' principally comes from, namely B. F. Westcott's commentary on 1 John published in 1883.[3]

He then develops in chapter 1 an account of the range of what 'blood' means in the Old Testament, in the course of which he shows why the three major texts apparently in favour of the 'life released' case (Gen. 9:4, Lev. 17:11 and Deut. 12:23) do not support this reading when examined more closely in context.[4] Stibbs summarises: 'Blood shed stands, therefore, not for the release of life from the burden of the flesh, but for the bringing to an end of life in the flesh.'[5]

Chapter 2 is, naturally, an account of New Testament usage, showing how 'blood' is associated with the benefits of a life laid down in death, while the conclusion develops

3 See p 14. Westcott was commenting on 1 John 4:8.

4 See p 25.

5 See p 26.

the magnitude both of our plight and our redemption when 'blood' is viewed as referring to the death of Christ in its redemptive significance.[6]

Why, then, was it so important for Stibbs to refute Westcott's case about 'life released'? The answer lies in the way that Westcott's view can lead to an anaemic view of the Cross (if the pun can be excused) which understates key aspects of the saving work of Christ.

Critically, the idea of 'blood' as the release of life for new purposes tends to divorce the shedding of blood from the idea of sin involving the penalty of death, both physical and spiritual. The Bible is clear that sin does involve death as a consequence for disobedience (Gen. 2:17, Rom. 5:12ff) and the consequences of sin are understood in legal and punishment terms (note the judicial tones of 2 Thess. 1:6-9). But if the shedding of Christ's blood is divorced from the penalty of death for sin, then serious consequences readily follow.

To begin with, if one accepts that sin does involve a penalty, then the obvious question is what happens to that penalty.

6 See p 71.

The classical Christian doctrine of penal substitution answers this question by saying that Christ in his merciful love bears the penalty as a substitute for his people.[7] Yet the Westcott account of 'life released' has no *necessary* connection with paying sin's penalty for the believer. Naturally, one asks how sin's penalty is paid for, and by whom. If one has a doctrine of sin deserving punishment (and this is the Bible's testimony), then principles of distributive justice (which Ezekiel 18:20 and similar passages endorse) require the sinner to pay the penalty him or herself. It is hard to reconcile this with Paul's description of the blood of Jesus' Cross achieving peace in earth and heaven (Col. 1:20).

Of course, in our time the idea of God punishing for sin has in any case become more and more unpopular. For those committed to the view that God does not punish for sin, the 'life released' thesis looks highly attractive, because it offers an alternative explanation of

7 J.I. Packer's definition of penal substitution remains invaluable: '...Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgement for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory.' *Celebrating the Saving Work of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), p. 105.

a prominent strand of language which does not depend on legal notions of punishment and justice. Rather, instead of understandings of Christ's work which include forensic elements, this tends to encourage an understanding of Christ's work which leans towards the therapeutic: Christ brings remedy or healing to those in need of life.

This idea of a therapeutic element in redemption requires further comment. It is important to remember that there is indeed a therapeutic element in Jesus' redemptive work. He speaks of his work with sinners in therapeutic terms in, for example, Luke 5:31. He is the Physician of the Soul. This means that responsible and comprehensive accounts of redemption will include notions of sin as sickness and those afflicted with it as in some ways victims. Some of these ways of explaining sin are helpful, and we might particularly mention here the metaphor of sin as addiction,[8] which is a particular instance of sin considered as sickness needing cure.

However, the tendency of Westcott's 'life released' account is not simply to set one

8 See e.g. J. Keith Miller, *Sin: Overcoming the Ultimate Deadly Addiction* (Harper Collins, 1987) and P.T McCormick, *Sin as Addiction* (Paulist Press, 1989).

biblical picture alongside another to provide a fuller account of Jesus' work. The tendency rather is to put forward an *alternative* view which tends to *exclude* understandings which link 'blood' with death and the penalty for sin. Minimally, this attenuates forensic and justice dimensions from Jesus' work. Stibbs' lucid examination of the texts of the Bible is therefore of the greatest value. Furthermore, his re-statement of the meaning of 'blood' in terms which do respect the forensic dimensions is not insisting on a penal substitutionary view of the Cross to the exclusion of others. Instead, Stibbs is the one sensitive to the wider range and subtleties of the Bible's thought because he preserves different dimensions to the Cross and Jesus' work by protecting a dimension which the 'life released' tends to gloss over. This point has not always been appreciated in recent discussions about penal substitution.

There is also a significant pastoral danger in advocating a therapeutic view of Jesus' work to the *exclusion* of sin as something requiring judgement and punishment. The point has been forcibly made that modern Anglophone cultures emphasise the therapeutic and the notion of victimhood, the so-called 'triumph

of the therapeutic'.[9] This tends to minimise or even eliminate the notion that sin brings guilt under law, and is an offence against God. The pastoral danger that emerges in this guilt-free Christianity is that it also undermines any place for repentance.

The loss of repentance is serious indeed. In the first place, the Book of Acts features repeated calls precisely to repentance, culminating in Paul's teaching in Acts 17:30 that all people everywhere must repent. But furthermore, evangelical repentance is not merely a confession of guilt, a confession of who we are; it is also, as John Calvin notes,[10] a call on the merciful God to have mercy according to his promises, and a confession of who he is. In refusing to recognise who we are as guilty, we also do not recognise something about God.[11] This is the pastoral casualty, an attenuated sense of guilt breeding an attenuated sense of God's mercy.

9 See e.g. P Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (*Background: Essential Texts for the Conservative Mind*) (1st ed., 1966, re-issued: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2006) and P.C. Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

10 *Institutes* III.3.2

11 Calvin notes the intense connection between our understanding of ourselves and our understanding of God in *Institutes* I.1.

No wonder, then, that the contemporary Church struggles with questions of God's love for us, our love for him, and assurance: we have lost a full appreciation of the dimensions of God's mercy, because exclusively therapeutic views actually underplay the wonder of what God has done. And Jesus himself warns that those who are forgiven little, or perceive themselves to have been forgiven little, love little: Luke 7:47.

Intriguingly, this is not the only point in Westcott's theology where one wonders whether something of the full grandeur of the saving work of Christ has been lost.[12] The same commentary on 1 John where the 'life released' view is developed also contains Westcott's essay 'The Gospel of Creation' in which he sets out the idea that Jesus would have become incarnate without the Fall. This shifts the Incarnation from a work primarily of salvific intent: it is salvific, but that is not *primarily* what it is about. Insensibly, the view of the reader is taken away from Jesus and his Cross as the 'main thing'. This possibility was taken further by Charles Gore and his fellow

12 Although other aspects of his work as an exegete remain of enduring value, for example in his commentary on the Gospel of John.

liberal catholic essayists in the collection *Lux Mundi* (1889).

For Stibbs, though, the Cross remains central. He will not let us forget the magnitude of the guilt-cleansing benefits of Jesus' death for his people. It is precisely on the themes of the greatness of Jesus' offering and the greatness of our sin against him that Stibbs ends his essay.[13] On the one hand, Stibbs' essay is a theological jewel, with its close and lucid reading of biblical material. On the other hand, it is a pastoral masterpiece, because the reader loves Christ more at the end of it. I think that would greatly please Alan Stibbs, and it is why this 'old' essay is so worth reading.

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13 See p 69.