

Jehovah's Witnesses and Blood Transfusions

By Wayne Jackson

Most people are aware that for more than half a century the "Jehovah's Witnesses" have vigorously opposed the medical practice of blood transfusions. In a number of well-documented cases, the "Witnesses" have allowed family members die, rather than permitting a transfusion to save their lives. Though the sincerity of these folks can scarcely be questioned, they have a zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2), and it goes far beyond this solitary issue.

According to an official booklet published by the Watchtower society, it is wrong "to sustain life by administering a transfusion of blood or plasma or red cells or others of the component parts of the blood" (*Blood, Medicine and The Law of God*, 1961, pp. 13-14; hereafter cited as *BMLG*). After considerable research into the history of the matter, Walter Martin & Norman Klann suggested that the doctrine was first taught in the *Watchtower* magazine in the July 1, 1945 issue (*Jehovah of the Watch Tower*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953, pp. 115-116).

Misapplied Texts

The Witnesses misapply several biblical passages in an attempt to support their theory. Immediately after the Flood, God forbade Noah to "eat" of "flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof" (Genesis 9:4). Later, in connection with certain animal sacrifices, the law of Moses stated: "You shall eat neither fat nor blood" (Leviticus 3:17). Do the Witnesses avoid all "fat"? The Lord declared that he was against the soul "that eats blood," the reason being, the "life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:10-11). "Blood" was viewed as the depository of "life."

The purpose of this regulation doubtless was due to the fact that Jehovah had appointed blood as a fitting symbol for the atonement process. As Israel was being trained in the concepts of sin and salvation, the sanctity of blood was employed as a visual aid in their spiritual education.

It should be noted, however, that animal blood was under consideration in these texts, and it was the eating/drinking of that blood that was forbidden. These ancient passages have nothing whatever to do with the modern medical practice of transfusing blood to sustain physical life. There is a vast difference between drinking blood and receiving a blood transfusion.

Similarly in the New Testament, instructions are given which exhort Christians to abstain from blood (Acts 15:20,29). In this instance, the allusion is perhaps to pagan, ritualistic ceremonies in which blood would be drunk. Whatever the background, there is no relationship between those ancient practices and modern, life-saving medical techniques.

Watchtower Inconsistencies

Oddly, the Witnesses contend that there is nothing intrinsically evil about channeling the blood from one's own body, through a heart-lung machine, with the blood flowing immediately back into the body — so long as the blood has not been "stored" (*Watchtower*, October 15, 1959, p. 640). If the blood is

stored, however, even for a “moment,” medical use of it is forbidden (*BMLG*, p. 15). Hence one may use “non-stored” blood to save life, but not “stored” blood.

But where in the Holy Scriptures is any distinction made between the “use” of blood, and the “storing” of blood? Were the ancient Hebrews permitted to drink “flowing” blood, so long as it had not been stored? This is pure fabrication. Then there is this question. Might one receive a transfusion if it came directly from the donor to the recipient, without any intervening storage?

What about vaccinations? The “Watchtower Witnesses” are on record as opposing the medical use of any of the “component parts” of blood (*BMLG*, pp. 13-14). But in this policy they have been woefully inconsistent. This writer interviewed a Unit Overseer of the Kingdom Hall of his city, and inquired as to whether or not the Witnesses had objections to diphtheria vaccinations. He was informed that they did not oppose vaccinations. Yet, diphtheria antitoxin is obtained from the blood serum of horses and sheep. Also, vaccines for the prevention of tetanus, hepatitis, measles, mumps, and whooping cough are derived from blood substances, e.g., serum or gamma globulin. Consistency obviously is not a matter of concern with the *Watchtower* advocates.

Recent Changes

In the June 15, 2000 issue of the *Watchtower* magazine, a new policy, recently implemented by the governing body of the society, was discussed. In an article titled, “Questions from readers: Do Jehovah’s Witnesses accept any minor fractions of blood?”, the JW authorities affirmed that **any** “fraction” of a “primary component” of the blood is permitted, though not whole blood.

The June 15, 2004 issue of the *Watchtower* detailed the rules regarding the use of blood products. While some items remain “unacceptable,” others are a matter of conscience for each person “to decide.” For example it is “unacceptable” to use whole blood, red cells, white cells, platelets, or plasma. However, it is a matter of choice as to whether one may use “fractions” from red cells, white cells, platelets, or plasma. This, of course, is quite at variance with the earlier pontification that none of “the component parts of the blood” could be used (*BMLG*, p. 13-14). For an analysis of the “Witnesses’” criteria for classifying blood components, see Dr. Osamu Muramoto’s article, “**The Watchtower Society redefines the guidelines for the use of blood products**”.

At the height of their glory, the first-century Pharisees were not as artful at “straining out the gnat” while “swallowing the camel,” as are the modern “Watchtower Witnesses.”

There is no prohibition, or principle, in the Bible that would condemn the transfusion of blood for necessary medical procedures. To contend otherwise is to create a law where God has not; such is both presumptuous and evil.

About the Author

Wayne Jackson has written for and edited the *Christian Courier* since its inception in 1965. He has also written several books on a variety of biblical topics including *The Bible and Science*, *Creation, Evolution, and the Age of the Earth*, *The Bible on Trial*, and a number of commentaries. He lives in Stockton, California with his dear wife and life-long partner, Betty.

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