

# BLOOD TRANSFUSION AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Blood transfusion is the administration of whole blood or its components to replace large amounts of blood lost through accident, injury, childbirth or disease. It is a vital procedure for preserving life by the grace of God. This vital procedure for preserving life has become a subject of controversy and this we intend to address by the grace of God.

It is a well-known fact however that a Christian sect the WatchTower Bible and Tract Society, (WBTS) who call themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses" reject blood transfusions on the basis of Bible texts that condemn the eating of blood. They insist it is a grievous wrong and that even in emergencies it is not permissible to sustain lives through blood transfusion.

To explain their position on the matter the WBTS devoted a special publication entitled "How can blood save your life?" published in December 1990, to the issue of blood transfusion. One of the quotations they cited to back their stand was Genesis 9:3-6 where God Almighty declared:

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you...But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. For your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting..." (*New International Version*) They then added: "All humanity was thus notified that in the Creator's view, blood stands for life. This was more than a dietary regulation. Clearly a moral principle was involved. Human blood has great significance and should not be misused."

The publication also cited Leviticus 17:10,13,14 in which God pronounces the death sentence on those who eat blood to wit: "And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people. And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust. For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof; whosoever eateth it shall be cut off". – see also Deuteronomy 12:23-25; Leviticus 7:26,27; Ezekiel 33:25

Another text often cited by the Witnesses is Acts 15:1-21 in which Luke the historian, records the meeting of the elders in Jerusalem to counter the subversive preaching of some false brethren among the churches then. At the end of the meeting, the council resolved to lay on the Christians no "greater burden than these necessary things; that ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well." -Acts 15:22-29.

Because of the risks involved, medical personnel generally recoil and even refuse to carry out surgeries without blood transfusion. To relieve them of liability for the high risks involved in treating the Witnesses without transfusing blood, (including legal actions) the Witnesses encourage their members to carry "Medical Alert" cards, and to sign the American Medical Association "Refusal to Accept Blood Products" forms as well as "Hospital Consent" forms which among other things state, according to Watchtower publications that "As a member of the religious body of Jehovah's Witnesses, I categorically refuse the use of foreign blood or blood components during my surgery. I am aware that the planned and needed procedure thus has a higher risk due to bleeding complications. After receiving thorough explanations particularly about that, I request that the needed surgery be performed without using foreign blood or blood components.'

According to the WBTS some Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain wear on their person a legally binding document called "Advance Medical Directive/Release" which among other things, states, "I...the undersigned being of Jehovah's Witness with firm religious conviction have resolutely decided to obey the Bible command "Keep abstaining...from blood." (Acts 15:28,29) With full realization of the implications of this position I HEREBY DIRECT

- Consent (subject to the exclusion of the transfusion of blood or blood components) to all such necessary emergency treatment including general anaesthesia and surgery as the doctors treating me may in their professional judgment deem appropriate to maintain life
- that such consent and any subsequent consent that I may give excludes the transfusion of blood or blood components but includes the administration of non-blood volume expanders such as saline, dextrin, haemaccel, hetastarch and Ringer's solution
- that my express refusal of blood is absolute and is not to be overridden in any circumstances by a purported consent of a relative or any other person. Such refusal remains in force even though I may be unconscious and or affected by medication, stroke or other condition rendering me incapable of expressing my wishes..."

Needless to say so many of their members have died because of this rule. Here in Nigeria the newspapers reported the case of a woman Mrs Martha Okorie who died in 1999 for refusing blood transfusion. She had delivered a baby on July 29, that year – but complications set in, and some ten days later on August 8 she was admitted at a hospital in Onitsha. The physician recommended blood transfusion which she roundly rejected. After nine days, the patient asked to be discharged and the physician obliged. She was admitted at another hospital in Enugu where the medical director is also a Jehovah's Witness. There she signed a document which directed "that no blood transfusion be given to me, even though physicians deem such vital to my health or my life. I accept non-blood expanders. It accords with my rights as a patient and my beliefs as one of Jehovah's Witnesses. I direct that I be given no blood transfusions. I accept any added risk this may bring. I release doctors, anaesthesiologists, hospitals and their personnel from responsibility for any untoward results caused by my refusal, despite their competent care." Mrs. Okorie died in the hospital on August 22. Subsequently, the mother of the deceased caused the medical director to be tried by the Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal which convicted him for (1) failing to transfuse blood to Mrs. Okorie even though he knew she was severely anaemic (2) in the alternative failing to transfer the patient to a bigger centre; (3) permitting his religious belief to influence his treatment of the patient. The doctor was consequently sentenced to a six-month suspension. The case went on appeal and the medical doctor concerned was freed on the ground that it was the patient who directed that she be not given blood. See *Okonkwo vs Medical and Dental Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal 1999 9 NWLR (Part 617) 1*. (Newspaper?)

So frustrating is the situation doctors find themselves because of the refusal by the Witnesses to accept blood transfusion that a medical practitioner was quoted to have stated in *The Guardian* of August 22, 1996 at page 29, that he has a practice of surreptitiously transfusing patients contrary to their expressed refusal. Other doctors frown at such practice saying it is "dishonest, fraudulent and unethical and a clear violation of the patient's rights, quoting some decided cases to that effect. Some have contended that the refusal by the Witnesses to accept blood amounts

to suicide. Writing on this issue, one Mr Emerka Chianu stated in *The Guardian* of July 18, 2000, page 61 that: "Declining potentially life-sustaining treatment is not considered in law or medical practice as attempt at suicide. Suicide is a deliberate, intentional termination of one's life by act or omission." He added: "The facts show that Jehovah's Witnesses reject blood transfusion but eagerly pursue alternative non-blood management of their health. This choice of alternative non-blood management evinces a desire to enjoy healthy life, not to accomplish their own death."

In a tacit admission of the huge risks they are exposing their members by insisting on non-blood management of cases, the WBTS authorities advocate the use of "skilled physicians" to help one who has lost blood and so has fewer red cells. They argue that "during surgery, skilled and conscientious surgeons and anesthesiologists can help by employing advanced blood-conservation methods, meticulous operative techniques ...to minimize bleeding" adding "We hope that you never lose a great amount of blood. But if you did, *it is very likely* that skilled doctors could manage your care without using blood transfusions, which have so many risks." The questions then arise: What of the millions of patients around the world who after losing much blood through accidents or in the course of surgery, have no access to "skilled surgeons" who have facilities for "advanced blood-conservation methods"?

On the issue of blood expanders which the Witnesses urge their adherents to use, medical experts insist that "these chemicals are not true substitutes for blood, since they cannot restore lost blood cells or lost proteins. Instead, they simply help to hold fluid in the blood vessels and in this way temporarily combat the effects of shock."

## **The Bible view**

What must be pointed out is that the references quoted by the WBTS as their stand for refusing blood transfusion applied to eating of blood only. As the Witnesses themselves concede, modern therapy of employing blood in surgery did not exist at the time the Bible was written. Medical authorities say that the experiments on blood transfusion started in Europe only in the 16th and 17th centuries and that it was not until the 20th century that physicians began to learn more about blood that transfusion could be safely given. Even now work is still going on to improve the efficacy of the procedure. What was prevalent among those who did not know God both in the old and new testaments was the eating of blood. Records show that the Egyptians believed that drinking of human blood was the cure for leprosy, the Romans used it for epilepsy and even in France people were made to drink blood as supposed cure for certain ailments. Determined not to violate their faith, the early Christians at the time of the Roman empire refused to eat "sausages filled with blood" even in the face of the most intense persecution. It was therefore the sin of eating of blood either of man or of animals that God Almighty directed the laws the Witnesses are so avid in quoting.

According to medical authorities, "since blood performs so many functions, it usually reflects the state of a person's health. Many diseases can be detected by examining the blood and various tests have been developed for this purpose, such as anaemia, various kinds of infections, chemical poisoning, leukaemia, etc."

Ingestion or eating refers to “the taking in or procuring of food” which is followed by digestion during which what is taken in is converted to forms usable by cells. Thereafter waste products are passed off by the body. Jesus Christ asked: “Are you still lacking in understanding also?”

“Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated? (*New American Standard Version* (Matt 15:16-17) *The Living Bible* renders the text thus: “Don’t you understand?”... “Don’t you see that anything you eat passes through the digestive tract and out again? Eating of blood is thus different from transfusion which involves transferring the blood of one person into the circulatory system, not the digestive system of another person. Eating of food merely serves to satisfy the craving for food while transfusion is a big sacrifice by one to sustain the life of another person. Jesus Christ said: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) The argument of the WBTS that “the Biblical law (against eating of blood) applied to taking blood into the veins just as it did to taking it into the mouth” is therefore spurious. Transfusions are also done before, during and after surgical operations and in treating leukemia, chronic anaemia and Rh-factor disorders in the newborn. There is no denying the fact that millions of lives have been saved from untimely death as a result of blood transfusion. This is in accord with the divine purpose which is to save lives until God’s Kingdom fully established when sickness and death shall be no more. See 3 John 2; Psalm 103:1-4; Jeremiah 33:6; Isaiah 33:24. On the contrary, many members of the Watchtower society have died due to misled by their leaders. The Bible says “For the leaders of this people cause them to err and they that are led of them are destroyed.” (Isaiah 9:16) And “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...” (Hosea 4:6)

As for risks of contracting certain diseases due to blood transfusion, such infections can be taken off through proper screening of the donor’s blood. Medical science is the work of imperfect men and is not therefore failure-proof. People will still die no matter the state of technology in this world.

## **The significance of blood**

The statement “the life of the flesh is in the blood” for which God made laws against eating of blood, has both literal and spiritual significance. Literally, blood, which is pumped by the heart through arteries, capillaries, and veins, has the function of carrying oxygen and nutrients to body cells and carbon dioxide and other waste products away from body cells. According to the *American Educator Encyclopedia* (Volume 2) “The blood carries digested food, oxygen, water, hormones and other necessities of life to each of the billions of cells that make up our bodies. The blood also carries away carbon dioxide and other waste products formed in the body cells and delivers them to the organs that dispose wastes. The blood helps guard against infection. It contains special cells and substances called antibodies that destroy germs invading our bodies. Blood also keeps the right amounts of water and certain other substances in the body and it helps regulate body temperature.” There is no doubt that these functions are central to human life.

In the spiritual sense, however, blood is used in the Scripture in relation to the expiation of sins. In the typical nation of Israel, the satisfaction or payment for human sins was made by the death of a specified animal substitute. The Bible says “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul” (Lev. 17:11) And in the words of St. Paul “And almost all things are by the

law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no  
However, since "...it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins."  
(Hebrews 10:4) Jesus Christ had to die to repay the perfect life lost at the garden of Eden. This  
he did by shedding his blood on the tree. "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of  
an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the  
blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your  
conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" said St. Paul in Hebrews 9:13-14. The  
shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ "is once for all" that is, it is sufficient atonement for the sins  
of mankind. – Hebrews 10:12,14,18.

He further stated that it was Jesus Christ "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through  
faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the  
forbearance of God." (Romans 3:25; See also 1 Peter 1:19; Revelations 1:5 Ephesians. 1:7) It is  
therefore wrong for the Witnesses to limit the scope of the law on the sacredness of blood to  
issue of blood transfusion.

## U-TURN

In the face of the tenacity with which the Witnesses have held to their doctrine of refusing to eat  
blood, as a result of which many of their adherents have died, it was no surprise that a story in  
*The Times* of London with the headline "U-turn on blood transfusions by Witnesses" should  
generate great interest among millions of people around the world. The story says carried in *The  
Times* of Wednesday June 14, 2000, *The Times* of London carried at page 3 the headline  
"JEHOVAH's Witnesses are to be allowed to accept blood transfusions after an extra-ordinary  
U-turn by leaders of the controversial religion. Elders have decreed that Jehovah's Witnesses  
who accept blood transfusions under life-or-death conditions will no longer face  
excommunication from their religion." This is of course the direct opposite of the earlier  
contention of the Witnesses that "Contrary to how some today reason, God's law on blood was  
not to be ignored just because an emergency arose. During a wartime crisis, some Israelite  
soldiers killed animals and "fell to eating along with the blood" (1 Samuel 14:31-35) They then  
asked: "In view of the emergency, was it permissible for them to sustain their lives with blood?  
No. their commander pointed out that their course was still a grave wrong."

Evaluating the significance of the "U-turn by the Witnesses, *The Times* states: "The move  
represents the biggest climbdown in the movement since the predicted Armageddon failed to  
materialise as forecast in 1975." The paper adds that the decision of the Witnesses "follows  
decades of adverse publicity about adults and children who have died or come close to death  
because of their faith." The paper recalled that in January 2002 a young mother in Lagos ,  
Beverly Matthews, 33, died after refusing an emergency blood transfusion and that "only last  
week, a Jehovah's Witness, Brent Bond, from Nottingham, who lost five pints of blood in a  
machete attack, renounced his faith just seconds before he lost consciousness so that he could  
have a lifesaving blood transfusion."

We must point out that the Watchtower Society are notorious for their tendency to change and  
adjust their doctrines. They had predicted that the world will end in 1914, 1939, 1975. They  
surmised that 1925 will see the earthly resurrection of faithful men of old such as Abraham,

David, Daniel. When all these failed they merely dismissed them as making adjustments from time to time to their views describing their blunder as “mistakes or misconceptions, as in the case of first-century Christians” due to a “fervent desire to realize the fulfilment of God’s promises in their own time.” – See *Awake!* June 22, 1995, pages 6-9.

It should be pointed out that the blood of all those who have died for refusing to accept blood transfusion will be on the heads of the Watchtower leaders who misled them. God almighty declared: “Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!”

(Jeremi8ah 23:1) And Jesus Christ stated: “Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15) Already several former Witnesses are considering legal action against the organization.

We thank God that by His grace the GKS has been vindicated on the issue of blood transfusion. The truth from God is constant and does not change. Equivocation is the mark of false prophets. The prophet Solomon declared: “My son, fear thou the LORD and the king: and meddle not with them that are given to change: For their calamity shall rise suddenly; and who knoweth the ruin of them both?” – Proverbs 24:21-22