

## Organ Transplants and Blood Transfusions

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It has been stated that we are now living in the best of times. We are clothed better, fed better, travel better and things are generally easier than ever before. We have comfortable homes with hot and cold running water. And without doubt we have access to the finest medical care ever experienced in the history of our world. We are now enjoying the age of space technology and scientific advancements have soared beyond anything imagined fifty or sixty years ago. However, with all this progress man seems to be regressing in the area of ethics and morals. On every hand men are "cutting the apron strings" from God and the absolute standards of ethics and morality contained in His word are being abandoned.

As science has advanced, the tendencies of some men who seek to be smarter than the God of heaven has advanced as well. The medical field has in some instances taken on the position of making themselves gods. Many of these advancements have been very beneficial to mankind and to the ethical climate of our society, while others are completely at odds with Biblical principles. Some have set out to bind things which are not founded upon Biblical truths. Our task in this lesson is to examine the ethics involved in organ transplantation and blood transfusions. Our aim will be to establish Biblically whether or not these practices are in harmony with the word of God or whether they are condemned.

### DEFINE ETHICS

Ethics and moral action involves the study of man's activities and the determination of whether these actions are right or wrong. We must have an absolute standard to make this distinction. Both ethics and morals are derived from the Greek word ETHOS. It is a term scientifically applied to the general science of determining that which is right and that which is wrong. Ethics, therefore is the set of precepts which govern right and honorable living.

The coming of Christianity marked a revolution in ethics. It introduced a single standard as man's guide to that which is right or wrong. In the Christian view, a person is totally dependent upon God and His word to achieve an understanding of correct behavior. The fundamental Christian ethical belief is grounded in what is commonly known as the golden rule, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). We see the same principle in the injunction to love one's neighbor as thyself (Leviticus 19:18), to love one's enemies (Matthew 5:44); and to, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Jesus taught that the fundamentals of faith are encompassed in the commandment; "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with

all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself" (Luke 10:27). Proper ethical standards are found only in the inspired word of God (Psalm 119:11).

## BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS

In this section of our study we will seek to answer the question of whether it is right or wrong to use blood transfusions. There are a few who feel that the use of blood in this manner is a violation of scripture. The most notable religious group to affirm this position is the Jehovah Witnesses. They claim that all Christians must abstain from blood and the early church understood this as a universal rule. They often appeal to early uninspired writers to bolster their claim and take some Bible passages out of context. Based upon these two things, the Jehovah's Witnesses reject the medical practice of blood being given intravenously to help in the preservation of life. We will not be able to cover all of the material that refutes their claims but will deal with the manner in which they interpret Acts 15:13-29.

In this passage James is affirming that the prophets had spoken of the time when the Gentile would be ushered into the kingdom. To do so he cites Amos 9:11-12 which gives the picture of the tabernacle being rebuilt so that the Gentiles might be saved. James charged the Jewish Christians not to trouble the Gentile Christians except to inform them to "abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20). These four things were mentioned because they were common occurrences among the Gentile people. The Jehovah's Witnesses take the "abstain from blood" to mean blood must not be used in transfusions because this constitutes the eating of blood.

The blood represents the life that is in men (Leviticus 17:13-14). Moses, by inspiration, penned these words more than three thousand years before William Harvey, an English physician, discovered the circulatory system. Life is sustained because the red blood cells carry oxygen throughout the body. This fact was not understood in the medical community until a few centuries ago. In fact, in 1799 when George Washington became ill from an acute cold and eventually died this was not common knowledge. His death was not caused so much from the ailment, but because of the blood letting that took place. The scientific principle that states life is in the blood was taught many years before the death of our first president (Genesis 9:4). The blood coursing through our veins represents life, a fact taught in each of the three dispensations. This precept was taught in the Patriarchal age (Genesis 9:3-4), the Mosaic age (Leviticus 17:13-14), and in the Christian dispensation as well (Acts 15:20). The eating of blood was condemned not just because it was associated with idol worship but because this precept was said to be wrong from the beginning. Many today eat blood in some form or another. Some eat puddings made from blood, drink blood, or eat a kind of sausage made from blood. The prohibition for such is understood under all three dispensations. Clearly stated, the consumption of blood as food is condemned in the word of God. This is the message being taught in Acts 15:28-29.

Having established this fact, we now turn our attention to the subject of blood transfusions. We must point out that eating blood is the prohibition in Acts 15:20, 28-29 not the receiving of blood

transfusions. Some in the religious world, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, believe and teach that blood transfusions are parallel to eating blood. However, transfusions are for the purpose of saving and maintaining life. God chose for a mother to feed her unborn child by means of blood through the umbilical cord. This fact clearly shows a great difference from a Biblical standpoint in the matter of eating blood, which is sinful, and in taking life-giving properties via the transfusion of blood.

It is interesting to note in the early years of the Witnesses they did not advocate their present position relative to blood transfusions. The current application of certain Bible texts, notably Acts 15:28-29, to support a blood prohibition by Christians was not shared by Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Watch Tower Society. In a commentary about the apostolic council of Acts 15, Russell said, "He (James) further suggested writing to them merely that they abstain from pollutions of idols (verse 29), and from things strangled and from blood - as by eating such things they might become stumbling blocks to their Jewish brethren." So even though blood transfusions were not yet in use, Russell's position was clear in that he did not consider the dietary law on blood as binding for Christians. After his death, the Witnesses changed their position and felt that the "blood prohibition" in Genesis 9:4 applies to all men. In 1954 blood transfusions and blood products are officially banned as "pagan and God-dishonoring." (Watch Tower 7/1/45, p. 198-201) Their link between the eating of blood and the transfusion of blood was stated very clearly in that same issue of Watch Tower on page 415. This article states, "A patient in the hospital may be fed through the mouth, through the nose, or through the veins. When sugar solutions are given intravenously, it is called intravenous feeding. So the hospital's own terminology recognizes the process of putting nutrition into one's system via the veins. Hence the attendant administering transfusion is feeding the patient blood through the veins, and the patient receiving it is eating through its veins." Their belief is that a blood transfusion is the same as eating the blood. This is a false conclusion based upon an improper application of both medical and Biblical facts. Acts 15:28-29 is not dealing with life saving blood transfusions but the oral consumption of blood.

I am amazed at a new wrinkle in the Jehovah's Witnesses position about blood transfusions. The Watchtower Society now approves *hemopure*, a new oxygen carrying solution made from the blood of cows ([www.ajwrb.org](http://www.ajwrb.org)). I cannot imagine why they would condemn the use of human blood products and then approve the blood product of an animal. In Leviticus 17:10-12 the prohibition relative to the consumption of blood referred to the blood of animals offered on the altar (vs. 11). Verse 10 clearly says; "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." There is no consistency in their practice by allowing the product of animal blood to be used while condemning the use of human blood transfusions.

## ORGAN TRANSPLANTS

Organ transplantation is the practice of removing usable organs from people and giving them to others who is seriously ill. Every year about 20,000 organ transplants take place. Although it is not generally known to the public, research on cardiac transplantation began as long ago as 1905 and continued progressively until 1960, when the first successful complete replacement of the heart in dogs was reported. The work was complicated and the failure rate was very high. Since that time the

success rate has been greatly improved by the use of drugs that help keep the body from rejecting the donated organ. However, this increased success rate has raised many ethical questions. The methods of procuring organs have come under close scrutiny. Questions are being raised that need to be answered. Should people profit from the donation of organs? Should only the wealthy benefit from organ transplantation? Does the Bible condemn the practice? These and many more questions are being asked. Our lesson will deal with the ethical aspects of organ transplantation.

There are several religious groups, most notably the Watch Tower Society, who would not accept the advancing technology surrounding organ transplantation. In *The Watch Tower*, 11/15/67, p. 702, the following statement was made, “when there is a diseased or defective organ, the usual way health is restored is by taking in nutrients. The body uses food eaten to repair or heal the organ, gradually replacing the cells. When men of science conclude that this normal process will no longer work and they suggest removing the organ and replacing it directly with an organ from another human, this is simply a shortcut. Those who submit to such operations are thus living off the flesh of another human. That is **cannibalistic**...” The article goes on to say God did not grant permission for such to occur. However, in the March 15, 1980 issue, the mandate was changed to say that it would be a matter of conscience (p. 31). The Bible did not change! Who then has made it a matter of conscience? God or men?

On the subject of who can be an organ recipient, we read discussions concerning selection of the recipients based on whether one contributed to his or her own illnesses or not. Should an alcoholic be equally eligible for a liver transplant as a person who is suffering from liver failure due to other causes for which they were not responsible? Should a smoker have the same rights to a lung transplant as the non-smoker?

There are some issues that are clearly in violation of God’s law. It is becoming more and more popular to “harvest” organs from aborted fetuses. Recently the legislation for the Adult Organ Transplant Program was expanded by the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act (UAGA) to include the fetus as an organ donor. They justify this proposal on the basis that the dead fetus parallels that of the dead adult cadaver as an organ donor. Currently this practice is being used to experiment in the cure for Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease, Huntington’s Chorea, and spinal cord or other neural injuries. (Rae) Of course this practice violates God’s word concerning the taking of a life. (Exodus 20:13) In my mind this practice is accepted because many do not understand or do not want to understand when life begins. God’s word plainly states that life begins at conception (Job 3:3).

Another issue which needs to be considered is the question of when death occurs. In the past, death was determined when there was no respiration and no heartbeat. Then the term “*brainstem dead*” began to be used. This meant that those who were determined to be “*brainstem dead*” could be removed from the life support system. Then in 1979, a memorandum from the Royal Colleges and their faculties determined that “*brainstem dead*” patients were already dead. Organs could not be taken from these ventilated patients for transplantation and this decision led to the practice of electively ventilating potential donors. Prior to that there was a time frame between death and the removal of the deceased’s organs. Since this ruling went in force, organs have been removed from donors BEFORE the ventilator is switched off. Clearly this violates the ethics of preserving life. In fact

it very well may be the taking of a life. After reading several pieces of documentation dealing with the pronouncement of “*brainstem death*”, I was shocked at some conclusions that are inevitable. In the sequence of events, after a doctor pronounces the patient “*brainstem dead*”, the donor is then taken to the operating room and the organs are harvested. The ventilator is not turned off until all the organs that are needed have been removed. It is THEN that the time of death is recorded in the Operating Register. Clearly the person filling out the Register could not have regarded the patient as being dead until after the harvesting. There is a serious problem when someone manipulates death for his or her own purpose. Life is terminated only when the body and spirit are separated (James 2:26).

The question of ethics also arises when financial gain is considered. Some are going about trying to sell organs that can be spared. Some feel that since they can live and function well without certain organs, it is perfectly proper to make merchandise of their spare body parts. In certain countries the organs of criminals are put on the market to the highest bidder. In China prisoners can be executed for crimes such as robbery, drug dealing, and black market activities in addition to murder. It is extremely rare for those accused not to be found guilty of their accused crimes. As soon as the prisoner is sentenced, blood samples are taken for grouping. The prisoner's appeals are hardly ever considered, much less upheld. Ambulances wait at the site of executions, and fresh organs from healthy young persons are harvested, to be transplanted into recipients abroad. The recipients pay from \$17,000 to \$40,000 for the harvested organ depending upon the type of organ it is ([www.organtx.org](http://www.organtx.org)).

As we have noted, there are some situations and conditions of organ transplants that clearly are unethical. However, there are some factors which are ethical and proper for our consideration. In my mind one of the greatest ethical considerations involved in organ transplantations is that of the preservation of life. It is always ethical to preserve life, so long as it does not violate some other law God. It is God who gave life to His creation, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Since God gave life, men must not take it away and should do all possible to preserve and maintain it.

The issue of human mortality is addressed throughout the Bible. Death entered the world through Adam (Genesis 3:9) and it remains with us as a reminder of man's disobedience to God. Death is one thing no man can escape (Hebrews 9:27). Life is fragile at best (Psalm 103:15-16) and men should never intentionally destroy it. In connection with this fact, we must ever seek to preserve life wherever and whenever possible. Organ transplantations are not unethical in and of themselves. It is the abuse of the ability to preserve life that becomes an ethical issue. The apostle Paul strongly alluded to the possibility of helping one in need, by the giving of an eye (Galatians 4:13-15). Why would Paul use this example if the act would be a sinful practice? We would do well to consider even the very act of God in the creation of Eve. God took a rib from Adam and used it to make the woman (Genesis 2:21-22). I believe that we can search through all the Bible and find nothing that prohibits organ transplantation. We do find some principles that would make the procedure unethical, but the violation of a proper principle does not nullify the action itself.

## CONCLUSION

The world is moving forward in many technical areas. Science and medicine have made great strides over the past twenty five years. Some for our good while some are to the detriment of mankind. In the areas of our discussion much good has come from the advancement in medical knowledge and surgical procedures. It is good when people can take advantage of such advancement and can prolong and maintain a better quality of life. However, we must be careful not to step over into God's realm. Men must not try to act like God by making decisions that solely are His.

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