

THE REJECTION OF MEDICAL HELP THROUGH BLOOD TRANSFUSION

The refusal of Jehovah's Witnesses to accept blood transfusions as if it were morally wrong has been in the news again. They insist that Acts 15:29 "Abstain...from blood" includes blood transfusions. However, this passage plainly refers to the eating of meat of strangled animals, which still had the blood in them, or eating anything made with blood. Such kinds of food had been forbidden by the Law of Moses (Lv 17: 12-14 and Deut 12:23). The New Testament nowhere repeats this aspect of the ceremonial law. In fact, it makes the point that food and drink are in the area of Christian liberty (Rm 14:1-15:8; 1 Cor 8:1-13) and to insist on not eating some kinds of food is therefore legalism (Col 2:20-23; 1 Tm 4:3-5; Ac 10:11-16; Mk 7:18-19).

The point in Acts] 5 was that Jewish Christians, who all their lives had been following the law of Moses, found four practices of Gentile people in particular offensive. Fornication was a moral question, but the other three, eating food sacrificed to idols, eating food containing blood, and eating the meat of strangled animals, were offensive to Jewish Christians at that time, and Gentiles were asked to respect the consciences of Jewish people about these three, as a temporary measure. That it was temporary is clear from the fact that in 1 Corinthians 8 Paul does not even refer to the decree made by the meeting in Jerusalem (reported in Acts 15), but argues the whole question afresh on the basis of the Gospel.

Since the Levitical ordinances were no longer in force for the New Testament church, the apostles, according to Acts 15, advised Gentile Christians out of love to avoid certain foods and activities that would offend the sensitive consciences of Jewish Christians who still felt a horror of doing such things because of their strict early training. God's reservation of blood for atonement for sin in the Old Testament was one of the shadows of the ceremonial law pointing forward to the shedding of Christ's blood. When this was about to be fulfilled in His passion Jesus did a radically new thing: instituting the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in which He gave His disciples His blood to drink, in memory of Him.

However, the crucial point is that none of this has anything to do with blood transfusion. In fact, if the means of preserving life are present, and a person refuses them, he is directly accountable to God for the loss of a life, which, of course, is murder. Isn't this a case of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel? When people lose the Gospel, as the Jehovah's Witnesses certainly have, and turn to a religion of salvation through works, they begin to become legalistic also in the area of setting up man-made laws, where God's word has been silent, and binding people's consciences by them. For a passage of Scripture to apply, it must speak about the same thing. Simply quoting "Abstain from blood" right out of context misapplies Scripture and binds people's consciences by legalism, and this is fairly typical of the approach to Scripture by Jehovah's Witnesses. Often the best answer to their misuse of Scripture is to read the section before and after the passage in question to understand its proper context.

The positive side of the commandment, "You shall not kill" is that we should use all means in our power to preserve human life, and defend the helpless. God's word at creation to human beings to rule over the earth and "subdue it" included the positive use of all the resources in this earth for the benefit of human beings. That includes making medicines from the resources available in this created world to promote health, and all means of preserving life, including blood transfusions.