

I Desire Mercy

The Watchtower's Changing Doctrine of Blood — and What Scripture, the Church, and Medicine Actually Teach

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I. A Doctrine of Life and Death

Most disagreements between Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses are matters of doctrine that can be argued at leisure — the Trinity, the cross, the Kingdom. The teaching on blood is different, because it can kill. A Witness who refuses a transfusion in a hemorrhage may die of it, and Witness children have died of it, with the Watchtower's blessing and praise. When a doctrine carries that weight, it deserves the most careful possible examination of its foundations.¹

And the foundations turn out to be surprisingly unstable. This essay will argue three things. First, that the biblical texts the Watchtower cites do not address blood transfusion at all, but the eating of blood from slaughtered animals — a different matter entirely. Second, that the doctrine has changed so many times, in so many directions, that it cannot plausibly be the unchanging law of God it claims to be; and that its present form, permitting “fractions” while forbidding “components,” is internally incoherent. And third, that the deepest principle of Scripture on this question — affirmed by Judaism, by the Catholic Church, and by Jesus himself — runs the other way: that the saving of life takes precedence over ritual law, because God “desires mercy, and not sacrifice.”

Let me say plainly that I do not doubt the sincerity or the courage of Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse blood. They believe they are obeying God, often at terrible cost, and that conviction deserves to be met with arguments, not contempt. But sincerity is not the question. The question is whether the conviction is true — and when a teaching can cost a child her life, getting the answer right is not an academic exercise.

II. The Texts the Watchtower Cites

The Watchtower rests its doctrine on three sets of texts. From the covenant with Noah: “Only flesh with its life — its blood — you must not eat” (Gen. 9:4). From the Mosaic law: “You must not eat any blood ... anyone who eats any blood must be cut off” (Lev. 7:26–27; cf. Lev. 17:10–14). And from the apostolic council at Jerusalem: “Abstain ... from blood” (Acts 15:29). On the strength of these, the Society teaches that a Christian may not accept a transfusion of whole blood or of its four primary components, on pain, in the gravest cases, of forfeiting everlasting life.

The argument has a syllogism buried in it, and it is worth stating openly so it can be examined: intravenous transfusion is equivalent to eating; the Bible forbids eating blood; therefore the Bible forbids transfusion. Both the major premise and the conclusion will not survive scrutiny. But notice first what kind of texts these are. Every one of them concerns *food* — the eating of the blood of animals killed for the table. The question is

whether a command about diet can rightly be stretched to cover a medical procedure unknown to the biblical world, in which no animal is killed and nothing is eaten.

III. What the Blood Laws Actually Forbade

Read in their own setting, the blood laws are about reverence for life in the taking of animal life for food. When an animal was slaughtered, its blood — understood as the seat of its life — was to be poured out on the ground, not consumed: “You shall pour it out upon the earth like water” (Deut. 12:24). The point was not that blood is a magical substance, but that life belongs to God, and the life of the creature was to be acknowledged and surrendered to him rather than treated as ordinary food.²

A blood transfusion is, on every count, a different act. Nothing is eaten: transfused blood is not taken as food, not digested, not broken down in the stomach; it is introduced into the circulation, where it does the work of living blood. No animal or person is killed: the donor gives blood and lives, exactly as a mother’s blood once nourished each of us in the womb through the umbilical cord — a transfer of blood from one living person to another that no one imagines to be a sin. The blood laws forbade *consuming the life of a slaughtered creature*. A transfusion *shares life between two living persons*. To treat the second as though it were the first is to mistake the category entirely.

There is a further sign that the Watchtower itself does not really believe transfusion is eating. A man told by his doctor to abstain from meat would not imagine he had broken the rule by receiving a kidney transplant; eating and transplanting are simply different things. Yet a transfusion is, in effect, a transplant of blood tissue from one body to another — and the Watchtower freely permits organ transplants. If receiving a kidney is not “eating” a kidney, receiving blood is not “eating” blood.

IV. “Abstain from Blood”: The Council at Jerusalem

That leaves Acts 15, the one New Testament text in the case. When the early Church faced the question whether Gentile converts must keep the Mosaic law, the council at Jerusalem answered no — with four exceptions: Gentile believers should “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). The Watchtower reads “abstain from blood” as a sweeping, permanent prohibition covering every use of blood, medical included.

But the context tells against so absolute a reading. These were not four new moral laws for all time; they were a pastoral accommodation, chosen so that Jewish and Gentile Christians could share a common table without the Jewish believers being scandalized — “for from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him” (Acts 15:21). And we can watch Paul himself handle one of the four items, food sacrificed to

idols, not as an absolute but as a matter of conscience and love: an idol is nothing, he says, and such food is in itself indifferent — but do not eat it if it would wound a weaker brother (1 Cor. 8; Rom. 14). The provision that is plainly permanent, the prohibition of sexual immorality, is reaffirmed as moral law throughout the New Testament; the food provisions function as what they were, a charitable concession for the sake of unity.³

So even at Acts 15, the command “abstain from blood” most naturally means what the whole Bible elsewhere means by it: do not eat blood, as the surrounding food-items (“what is strangled” — that is, meat not properly drained) confirm. To read into these words a prohibition of a life-saving medical transfusion is to ask of them something their author never put there. As one writer observes, it is hard to imagine Luke supposing that his sentence would one day be parsed on a hospital consent form into a checklist of permitted and forbidden plasma derivatives.

The Witness reply, prepared in the Society’s own literature, is that fornication stands in the same list—and nobody calls that a temporary table rule. True; but the New Testament itself sorts the list. The moral item is commanded again and again on its own authority, in every letter and every age (1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Cor. 6:18), while the dietary items are never again enjoined—and one of them Paul expressly reduces to a matter of charity toward the scrupulous (1 Cor. 8). The decree bundled, for one pastoral moment, things whose natures differ; the apostles’ own subsequent teaching is what tells us which was which.

The appeal to the early Christians is accurate as far as it goes: Tertullian wrote that Christians did not consume even animal blood, and Minucius Felix said they excluded it from their food; many kept the dietary abstention for centuries. But notice what they were abstaining from—blood as food, at table, exactly the practice Acts 15 addresses—and notice what became of the custom: it faded as its pastoral reason faded, without controversy, Augustine already observing in his day that few any longer took the rule as binding. A discipline that the Church could let lapse was discipline, not divine moral law; nobody ever let the prohibition of porneia lapse. And no ancient writer—none—extends the abstention beyond eating, because the question of putting blood into a vein for healing existed for no one before the twentieth century. The early Christians the Society quotes had never heard of the thing the Society forbids.

V. Mercy, Not Sacrifice: The Principle of Saving Life

Behind the particular texts stands a principle that decides the matter, and it is not a Catholic invention but the common inheritance of Scripture. Judaism calls it *pikuach nefesh*, “the saving of life”: the duty to preserve a human life overrides almost every other commandment. This is why Orthodox Jews — who drain the blood from meat with the greatest care, far more strictly than any Witness — nonetheless permit blood transfusions

without the slightest hesitation. Saving a life is not an exception grudgingly allowed; it is the higher law.⁴

The rabbis derived the principle from Leviticus 18:5 — the commandments were given that a man should live by them, and not die by them (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 85b) — so the exception is not modern laxity but the Law's own self-understanding.

And this is precisely the principle Jesus invokes, again and again, against a religion of rule-keeping that had lost sight of mercy. Challenged for healing on the Sabbath, he answers: "Who among you, if his sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!" (Matt. 12:11–12). Twice he throws the prophet Hosea in his critics' faces: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). The whole thrust of his ministry is that the weightier matters of the law — "justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23) — govern the lighter, and that no ritual regulation may be wielded so as to destroy the life it was given to protect.⁵

Here the Watchtower is caught in its own teaching. It has itself written that mercy is among "the weightier matters of the Law," praising Jesus for showing mercy to the woman with the flow of blood — ritually unclean under Leviticus, yet healed and commended rather than rebuked. The Society understands the principle. It simply does not apply it where it matters most: at the bedside of a dying believer, where mercy would transfuse and live, and the doctrine instead refuses and dies.

VI. A Doctrine That Keeps Changing

A teaching presented as the unchanging law of God ought, at a minimum, not to keep changing. The Watchtower's blood doctrine has changed repeatedly, in every direction, and the record is its own.

Blood could be eaten until 1927, when the Society first declared the Noahic prohibition binding on Christians. Transfusion itself was not clearly forbidden until the mid-1940s, and was not made a disfellowshipping offense — a matter of expulsion and shunning — until 1961, more than eighty years after the movement began. If this were truly the critical, life-and-death law of God, why did God wait eight decades to reveal it through his alleged channel? Vaccination was condemned as a violation of God's covenant from 1921, then quietly permitted again in 1952. Organ transplants were called "wonderful" in 1949, condemned as "cannibalism" in 1967 — so that Witnesses refused them — and then permitted once more in 1980. Serums and gamma-globulin were ruled forbidden, then allowed, then forbidden, then a matter of conscience, across barely two decades.⁶

This is not the record of a faithful steward transmitting a fixed deposit but of a human committee revising its rules — and revising them on questions where the wrong answer

was fatal. Which brings the gravest question of all. Between 1961 and 2000, Witnesses were required, on pain of disfellowshipping, to refuse blood fractions that the Society now freely permits. Some of them died rather than accept those fractions. If the fractions are acceptable to God now, they were acceptable to God then — and the believers who died refusing them died for a rule, not for a revelation. Who answers for those deaths?⁷

VII. The Incoherence of the Fractions Rule

The doctrine's present form is as incoherent as its history is unstable. The Watchtower forbids whole blood and its "four primary components" — red cells, white cells, platelets, plasma — but permits "fractions" derived from those very components: albumin, immunoglobulins, clotting factors, hemoglobin solutions. The trouble is that the "four components" scheme is not a fact of nature but an artifact of a centrifuge; medical texts describe blood as having two major parts, or four, or sixteen, depending on the purpose. A "component" simply is a fraction. The line between the forbidden component and the permitted fraction of it is drawn by the Society, not by Scripture and not by biology, with the strange result that, broken down finely enough, virtually one hundred percent of blood becomes acceptable.⁸

The illustration the critics use is exact. If it is a crime to steal a car, it is no less a crime to strip it for parts and sell the parts; either taking the car is wrong or it is not. If blood is so sacred that it may not be taken at all, then it may not be taken in fractions either; and if its fractions may be taken, then the sacredness cannot forbid the whole. One cannot have it both ways. Worse, the rule against *storing* blood collapses under the same weight: a Witness may not store even his own blood for a few hours during surgery, because blood must be "poured out" — yet the fractions he is permitted are manufactured from enormous pools of donated, stored blood, a single immunoglobulin dose drawing on tens of thousands of donors. He may not donate blood; he may receive products that exist only because others donate. The standard forbids the small storage and permits the vast one.⁹

VIII. What Medicine Actually Says

The medical premise of the doctrine — that a transfusion is a form of eating — is simply false as physiology. Blood taken by mouth is broken down in digestion into its constituent nutrients and does not enter the bloodstream as blood; blood given by transfusion circulates and functions as living blood. The two are not the same act with the same effect; they are different acts with different effects. An alcoholic told to abstain from drink is not thereby forbidden an alcohol-based disinfectant on a wound, because swallowing and applying are different things, and so are eating and transfusing.¹⁰

It is worth granting what is true in the Witness position. Blood is not a trivial treatment; it carries real risks, it has at times been over-used, and the “bloodless” surgical techniques developed partly in response to Witness objections are a genuine medical good that has benefited many patients beyond their ranks. A reasonable person may decline a transfusion in many circumstances, and patient autonomy deserves respect. But there are circumstances — catastrophic hemorrhage, profound anemia — in which no volume expander can carry oxygen as red cells do, and the only thing that will save the patient’s life is blood. The Watchtower’s own legal representatives have conceded as much to a parliamentary committee. In those circumstances the doctrine does not protect life; it ends it.

IX. The Symbol and the Reality

How does a movement that prizes the sanctity of life arrive at a doctrine that destroys it? The biblical scholar G. B. Caird described the mechanism exactly, writing of how a sacred word can “become an idol supplanting the reality” — a “trigger symbol” so charged with emotion that devotion to the word eclipses the thing the word was meant to honor.¹¹

That is precisely what has happened here. In Scripture, blood is the great *symbol* of life — “the life is in the blood” — and the laws about it were laws of reverence *for life*. The Watchtower has taken the symbol and made it absolute, until reverence for the symbol of life overrides the life it symbolizes. A child bleeds, and the doctrine guards the sacredness of the substance while the child who bears the life dies. This is the idol supplanting the reality: the sign of life honored unto death, the thing signified — the living person, made in the image of God — sacrificed to it. “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”

X. The Catholic View: Life as a Gift

The Catholic position, like the Jewish and the broadly Christian one, is straightforward: there is no Scriptural prohibition of blood transfusion, because the texts concern eating, not medicine, and because the law’s own deepest principle is the preservation of life. The Church teaches that bodily life is a gift to be revered and cared for, that legitimate medical treatment is to be accepted with gratitude, and — far from forbidding the giving of blood — that the donation of blood and organs can be a “noble and meritorious act” of charity, an imitation of the One who poured out his own blood that others might live.¹²

There is a deep fitness in this. At the center of the Christian faith is a transfusion of sorts — the blood of Christ, poured out not to be hoarded or poured uselessly on the ground, but given for the life of the world. “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). The blood of the new covenant is life-giving precisely in being

given. A doctrine that would let a neighbor die rather than receive the gift of another's blood has, however unintentionally, set itself against the very logic of the cross.

XI. Conclusion: I Desire Mercy

Let the case be summed up. The texts the Watchtower cites forbid the eating of blood, not the transfusing of it — a different act, in which nothing is eaten and no one is killed. The apostolic “abstain from blood” was a pastoral provision about food, not a permanent ban on medicine. The governing principle of Scripture, affirmed by Judaism and by Jesus himself, is that the saving of life overrides ritual law: “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” The doctrine has changed so often, in so many directions, that it cannot be the unchanging law of God; and in its present form it is incoherent, forbidding components while permitting their fractions, forbidding storage while consuming the fruits of storage. Medicine knows that transfusion is not eating, and that in some cases it alone will save a life. And the Catholic Church, with most of Christianity, finds in blood given for another not a defilement but an image of charity — indeed of Calvary.

None of this is said to wound the Witness who has refused blood in good conscience, or the parents who have grieved a child lost to this teaching. It is said because the teaching is not true, and because the truth here is a matter of life and death. The God of the Bible is not honored by the death of the child whose life he gave. He has told us, twice from the lips of his Son and once from the mouth of his prophet, what he desires: “mercy, and not sacrifice.” To save a life with the gift of blood is not to break his law. It is to keep its deepest meaning.

Endnotes

1. The Watchtower presents abstaining from blood as a mark of true worship that distinguishes Jehovah's Witnesses from other religions. Its current medical statement holds that Witnesses "do not accept blood transfusions" of whole blood or of the four primary components — red cells, white cells, platelets, and plasma — citing Genesis 9:3–4, Leviticus 17:13–14, and Acts 15:29 ("Religious and Ethical Position on Medical Therapy," jw.org).
2. Genesis 9:3–4; Leviticus 17:10–14; Deuteronomy 12:23–25. In every case the command concerns *eating* the blood of a slaughtered animal: the blood of a killed creature was to be poured out, not consumed, in recognition that "the life is in the blood." A transfusion is not eating — transfused blood is not digested as food — and the donor is not killed. The categories the texts address (diet, the taking of animal life) are simply not the categories of a life-saving transfusion between living persons.
3. Acts 15:19–29. The Jerusalem council's requirements — abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality — were a pastoral measure to make table-fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile believers (cf. Acts 15:21). That Paul did not treat the food provisions as permanent absolute law is clear from 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, where eating food offered to idols is left to conscience and governed by love of neighbor, not by an unvarying prohibition. The one enduring moral item on the list, sexual immorality, is reaffirmed throughout the New Testament; the dietary items functioned differently.
4. *Pikuach nefesh* ("saving of life") is the rabbinic principle that the duty to preserve human life overrides nearly every other commandment. Orthodox Jews, who drain blood from meat with great care, nevertheless permit blood transfusions without hesitation, precisely on this ground; so do observant Muslims. Jesus invokes the same principle when he defends healing on the Sabbath: "Who among you, if his sheep falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!" (Matt. 12:11–12), and "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matt. 12:7, quoting Hos. 6:6).
5. Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6; Hosea 6:6. Strikingly, the Watchtower itself has taught that mercy is among "the weightier matters of the Law" and praised Jesus for showing mercy to the woman with the flow of blood, who was ritually unclean under Leviticus 15 (*The Watchtower*, Feb. 15, 2015, p. 13). The blood-transfusion doctrine is difficult to square with the principle the Society elsewhere affirms: that acts of mercy, above all the saving of a life, take precedence over ritual regulation.

6. The history is documented from the Watchtower's own publications. Blood could be eaten until 1927 (*The Watch Tower*, Dec. 1927, p. 371). Transfusion was not clearly forbidden until the mid-1940s–1951, and became a disfellowshipping offense only in 1961 (*Jehovah's Witnesses—Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*, pp. 183–184). Vaccination was condemned from 1921 and permitted again in 1952. Organ transplants were called “wonderful” in 1949, forbidden as “cannibalism” in 1967, and permitted again in 1980 (*The Watchtower*, Nov. 15, 1967, pp. 702–704; Mar. 15, 1980, p. 31). Serums and gamma-globulin were ruled unacceptable, then acceptable, then unacceptable, then a matter of conscience across the 1950s–1970s. The allowance of blood fractions was broadened progressively, especially from the year 2000.

7. The Watchtower has acknowledged that its stand has cost lives, and has presented such deaths as faithfulness — including the deaths of children. *Awake!* of May 22, 1994, devoted its cover to “Youths Who Put God First,” featuring Witness children who died refusing blood. The gravest question raised by the doctrine's long history of reversals is this: who bears responsibility for those who died refusing, before the year 2000, the very fractions the Society now permits? A teaching that changes cannot have been, at every stage, the unchanging requirement of God.

8. The “four primary components” scheme is a simplification of what a centrifuge yields, not a fixed fact of nature; medical texts variously describe blood as having two major components, or four, or sixteen, depending on the purpose of the classification. A “component” is itself a fraction; the terms are interchangeable in hematology. The result is that the Watchtower forbids four named fractions while permitting their sub-fractions — so that, as critics note, virtually 100 percent of blood, broken down finely enough, becomes acceptable. The line between forbidden “component” and permitted “fraction” is drawn by the Society, not by Scripture or biology.

9. The Watchtower forbids storing blood — even a patient's own, even for hours during surgery — on the ground that blood must be “poured out” (Lev. 17:13). Yet the fractions it permits (albumin, immunoglobulins, clotting factors) are manufactured from large quantities of donated, stored, pooled plasma; a single immunoglobulin preparation may draw on the blood of tens of thousands of donors. Witnesses may not donate blood, yet may receive products made only because others donate. The standard forbids the lesser storage (one's own blood, briefly) while permitting the greater (industrial pooling of others' blood).

10. Modern medicine affirms what common sense suggests: ingested blood is broken down in digestion and does not enter the circulation as blood, whereas transfused blood circulates and functions as blood — so the “transfusion equals eating” equation fails physiologically. The development of “bloodless” surgery and transfusion-alternative strategies is a genuine good, and Witnesses have helped advance it; but clinicians

recognize that in some hemorrhagic and anemic emergencies no volume expander can replace the oxygen-carrying capacity of red cells, and transfusion is life-saving. Legitimate medicine treats blood as a remedy to be used wisely, not a defilement to be refused absolutely.

11. On the danger of a sacred word or symbol “becoming an idol supplanting the reality,” see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 30: a cherished term can become a “trigger symbol” that engages the affections so powerfully that devotion to the word eclipses the very thing it was meant to honor. A reverence for the *symbol* of life (blood) that overrides the *reality* of life (the living person) is exactly such an inversion.

12. The Catholic Church has no prohibition against blood transfusion; it regards the donation of blood as an act of charity and the acceptance of needed medical treatment as consonant with the duty to preserve life. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§2288–2289 (the care owed to bodily health and life as a gift) and §2292–2296 (the moral evaluation of medical procedures and the praise of organ and blood donation “if it conforms to the moral law” and is a “noble and meritorious act”). Most Christian communions, Catholic and Protestant, find no Scriptural barrier to transfusion.

For Further Reading

Associated Jehovah’s Witnesses for Reform on Blood (AJWRB), history and analysis of the blood doctrine.

Blood Transfusions, jwfacts.com—documented history of the changing stance.

Religious and Ethical Position on Medical Therapy, jw.org—the Watchtower’s current statement. Free online at <https://www.jw.org/en/medical-library/medical-information/ret/religious-ethical-position/>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§2288–2296 (life, health, and medical care). Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

The Language and Imagery of the Bible, by G. B. Caird (on symbols becoming idols).

* * *

“Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’” —
Matthew 9:13

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Jewish and Christian tradition on the sanctity of life, and the medical and documentary record on the history of Watchtower blood doctrine. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching, and it is not medical advice. Where this defense aligns with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.