

# Does Jehovah's Witnesses' Leadership Believe Its Own Blood Doctrine?

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Jehovah's Witnesses are known for refusing blood transfusions even if that means suffering premature death. This stance comes from the religion's leadership teaching that accepting transfusion of blood is a mortal sin. Former leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses initiated the religion's blood doctrine on a central premise that contemporary leadership of the religion arguably no longer believes, yet the doctrine is still enforced by the religion under pain of extreme communal shunning.

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For what became its blood doctrine, in 1945 the leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses (the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society) set forth its primary doctrinal premise as: *blood is a sacred substance*.<sup>1</sup> As the doctrine progressed additional premises were developed. *God restricted the use of blood solely for sin atoning sacrifices* and *blood belongs to God alone* are two such premises.<sup>2</sup>

Based on the doctrine's central premise Watchtower leadership asserted very strict conclusions about blood and how its members should and should not use the substance, particularly of eating or infusing it. One of these conclusions asserted it as sinful to accept a medical transfusion of blood, even if it was essential to saving the life of a member or of a member's child.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in 1961 Watchtower started imposing its blood doctrine by enforcing organized communal shunning of members who conscientiously accepted blood transfusion.<sup>4</sup> This shunning is severe. It requires members to avoid all social fellowship with the individual. Even immediate family members who do not live in the same house are to shun the individual by avoiding association, including keeping any business dealings to an "absolute minimum". In effect, this shunning transforms the target individual into a social outcast who should not be recognized with as much as a "Hello".<sup>5</sup> This shunning is for life or until the individual "repents" of their sin, whichever comes first.<sup>6</sup>

## Stated reason for the doctrine

Watchtower has consistently expressed the same primary reason for its blood doctrine by asserting that blood is sacred.<sup>7</sup> This was true in 1945 at the doctrine's beginning, and to this day Watchtower asserts the same premise as the fundamental reason for its position on blood. Of its position of a biblical prohibition on blood transfusion, in 2006 Watchtower stated, "The prohibition was based, not on health concerns, but on the sacredness of blood."<sup>8</sup>

## Manifestation of the doctrine

Contrary to the consistency of the doctrine's primary reason for existing, Watchtower has inconsistently asserted how its members should manifest belief that blood is a sacred substance.

Relatively early in the doctrinal position, members were taught the sanctity of blood meant they would accept "no form of blood to be transfused".<sup>9</sup> Though at the time Watchtower's position was against Witnesses accepting infusion of any fractions from blood, it specifically named

albumin and hemoglobin as forms of blood that should be avoided.<sup>10</sup> As late as 1998 Watchtower's doctrinal position cited hemoglobin as a form of blood it was against members accepting.<sup>11</sup>

Decades after the doctrine expressed it as sinful to accept *any form* of blood, Watchtower's position changed to allow acceptance of some forms of blood. In 1978 Watchtower no longer took a position against its members accepting infusion of albumin from blood.<sup>12</sup> Later on, in 2000 Watchtower no longer took a position against members accepting hemoglobin from blood.<sup>13</sup> Today members are taught they can "accept all fractions derived from any primary component of blood".<sup>14</sup>

## Discussion

Watchtower's stated reason for its blood doctrine has remained static, yet its projection of that doctrine has changed. We have the following distinctly different manifestations of the doctrine:

- Blood is sacred therefore accepting any form of blood for transfusion is wrong and members who act otherwise should be shunned by family and friends in the religion for the rest of their lives or until they repent for their wrongdoing.
- Blood is sacred but the only forms of blood that it is wrong to accept are those of whole blood, red cells, white cells, platelets or plasma. Otherwise if the blood is sufficiently fractionated then accepting all of it is not necessarily wrong.

The doctrinal projection went from *prohibiting* everything to *accepting* everything (so long as it is sufficiently fractionated).

This dramatic change in doctrinal projection stirs the question: Does Jehovah's Witnesses' current leadership believe the tenet "blood is sacred"? If so it means the leadership believes respect for a supposedly sacred substance that belongs to God alone is consistent with consuming everything of that sacred substance so long as it is sufficiently fractionated beforehand. In other words, in the absence of express permission we should be able to dismantle someone's automobile, convert it into our own property and do this without stealing it. Since such a notion is absurd then it is questionable, at the very least, whether Watchtower leaders of today believe the premise "blood is sacred".

## Conclusion

Watchtower leaders of today would be disfellowshipped by former leaders of the religion for their current position. Without a doubt the leadership of Jehovah's Witnesses has experienced profound change in its own belief regarding blood. Arguably this leadership no longer believes the primary tenet that blood is a sacred substance that belongs to God alone. Yet it continues teaching and enforcing its blood doctrine among the membership as if it does.



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- <sup>1</sup> The Watchtower, *Immovable For The Right Worship*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, July 1, 1945 pp 195-204
- <sup>2</sup> The Watchtower, *Letter*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, March 1, 1950 pp 79-80; The Watchtower, *Saving the World of Mankind by Blood*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, December 1, 1967
- <sup>3</sup> *Jehovah's Witnesses AND Blood Transfusion THE FACTS*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1960 p 8
- <sup>4</sup> The Watchtower, *Questions from Readers*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, January 15, 1961 p 63-64
- <sup>5</sup> Our Kingdom Ministry, *Display Christian Loyalty When a Relative Is Disfellowshipped*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, August 2002 pp. 3-4
- <sup>6</sup> *Organized to Do Jehovah's Will*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2005 pp 156-157
- <sup>7</sup> The Watchtower, *Immovable For The Right Worship*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, July 1, 1945 pp 195-204
- <sup>8</sup> Awake!, *The Real Value of Blood*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, August 2006 pp 10-12
- <sup>9</sup> The Watchtower, *Happy Those Who Refuse to Compromise*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, September 1, 1957 pp. 530-536
- <sup>10</sup> The Watchtower, *Respect for the Sanctity of Blood*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, September 15, 1961 p. 553-556; The Watchtower, *Questions from Readers*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, November 1, 1961 p. 669-672
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Bailey and Tomonori Ariga, *The View of Jehovah's Witnesses on Blood Substitutes*, Art. Cells, Blood Subs., and Immob. Biotech., 26(5&6), 571-576 (1998) Note: Authors Bailey and Ariga are official representatives of the Watchtower organization's Hospital Information Services department.
- <sup>12</sup> Awake, *Jehovah's Witnesses—The Surgical/Ethical Challenge*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, June 22, 1982 pp. 25-27; The Watchtower, *Questions from Readers*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, June 15, 1978 pp. 30-31
- <sup>13</sup> The Watchtower, *Questions from Readers*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, June 15, 2000 pp. 29-31; Awake!, *The Real Value of Blood*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, August 2006 pp 10-12
- <sup>14</sup> *Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, January 2001