Commenting On The Text

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“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you 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….” Acts 15:28, 29

To a Jehovah’s Witness this text is an injunction against blood transfusions. Their reasoning goes like this; If the text says “abstain from blood” how can you take a blood transfusion and still say you are abstaining? Abstain means abstain. This column will answer that very superficial reasoning.

The context of the passage has to do with a cultural conflict going on in the church where believers were first called “Christians.” Antioch is where Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles first came into significant contact with each others cultures. The Gentiles had no cultural or religious background that prepared them for the dietary and ceremonial laws of Old Testament Judaism. Though the Jews were freed from the obligations of these Old Testament observances they were so ingrained in their culture that it would be a long time before they would lose the force of tradition and belief. Therefore, many Gentile practices were offensive to the Jews until they found a level of spiritual maturity in their new Christian faith that would allow them to look beyond their inherited culture.

Sure enough the conflict did arise. It happened while Paul was in Antioch. Paul could have, as an Apostle, issued his judgment about how to resolve it but he didn’t. He wisely took the issue to the Apostles in Jerusalem. This sort of conflict would surely arise elsewhere so a resolution by all the Apostles would help to forestall the development of factions among the Apostles and churches. It also set an example for the Church on how to deal with such a controversy.

In the Old Testament the Jews were commanded not to eat blood, nor the meat of any animal that was strangled because the blood was still in the meat (Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 7:26, 27 and Deuteronomy 14:21). The purpose of God, I believe, is that He wanted His people to have a very high regard for blood, and therefore the high value of it in the Old Testament system of blood sacrifices as payment for sin. All the Old Testament animal sacrifices were a type, and picture, of the perfect sacrifice of Christ as the Lamb of God on Calvary. Therefore, God did not want His people to cheapen the symbolism of blood by treating it as food.

The superficial understanding of Acts 15:28 and 29 by a Jehovah’s Witness can be demonstrated

with a few questions. First, ask a Witness if he thinks the abstention from blood in Acts is commanded for all Christians for all time. He will answer in the affirmative. Next ask him if the abstention from fornication is commanded for all Christians for all time. He will again answer in the affirmative, and rightly so.

Then ask him if the command to abstain from meat offered to idols is for all Christians for all time. Here, if he knows his Bible, he will have to say no. The reason is that he knows Paul said in I Corinthians 8 that "an idol is nothing at all." Therefore, according to Paul, a strong Christian could eat without offense to his conscience. However, in consideration of our weaker brother we should not eat so we don't cause him to stumble. As Paul has defined the problem it is not the meat offered to idols that is the problem, but rather the weaker brother's conscience.

Given that the Witness must now agree that this particular abstention is temporary and situational how then can a Witness say that the command to "abstain from blood" is not temporary? It is arbitrary on his part to say "abstain" is interpreted one way with regard to blood, but not interpreted that way with regard to meat offered to idols.

We know from other passages of scripture how to interpret the command to abstain from fornication. It is prohibited throughout scripture, no exceptions. We also know from I Corinthians 8 how to interpret the command to abstain from meat offered to idols. It is the two abstentions that relate to blood that we must look at in the larger context of scripture.

In Deuteronomy 14:21 the Jews were commanded not to eat meat that was strangled, or unbled. However, they could give to the Gentiles! This alternative means that the prohibition was of a ceremonial nature. To violate it would make a Jew ceremonially unclean. If it was a moral issue it would not have been proper to offer the unbled meat to the Gentiles. An aside here, it is interesting that the God who prohibited eating blood made so many carnivores in the animal kingdom. And why would He ever create leeches? Wouldn't those little blood suckers become stumbling blocks to Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses?

The chief passage in the Old Testament used by Jehovah's Witnesses to prove blood should not be eaten, or transfused, is Leviticus 17:10. In that passage Jehovah says that for anyone who eats blood He "will set His face against that soul… and will cut him off from among his people." This sounds severe. It sounds like a disfellowshipping offense. However, for a Jew who violated the prohibition against eating blood, or unbled meat, the resolution of this sin is found a few verses farther down in the same passage. In verse 15 God says anyone who is a violator of the prohibition shall become clean again by washing his clothes, taking a bath, and quarantining himself until sundown. This was a ceremonial offense and therefore the resolution of it was also ceremonial.

A few final thoughts about blood transfusions are in order. To eat blood is to take it into the stomach as food. As food the blood would be digested and its nutrients would be carried to the

rest of the body by the persons own blood cells. However, to take in blood via a transfusion is to make those transfused blood cells the carrier of whatever nutrients are ingested in the stomach and intestines. The two systems are completely separate.

Blood was marked by God for respect because God wanted life itself valued highly. “The life of the flesh is in the blood” scripture tells us. Christ shed His blood, to give us eternal life. If we were to eat blood that would cheapen the symbolism. However, in a transfusion life is saved. A totally opposite value and consistent with God’s purpose for us.

By David Henke