Questions from Readers

Is there any Scriptural objection to donating one's body for use in medical research or to accepting organs for transplant from such a source?—W. L., U.S.A.

A number of issues are involved in this matter, including the propriety of organ transplant and autopsies. Quite often human emotion is the only factor considered when individuals decide these matters. It would be good, though, for Christians to consider the Scriptural principles that apply, and then make decisions in harmony with these principles so as to be pleasing to Jehovah.—Acts 24:16.

First, it would be well to have in mind that organ transplant operations, such as are now being performed in an attempt to repair the body or extend a life-span, were not the custom thousands of years ago, so we cannot expect to find legislation in the Bible on transplanting human organs. Yet, this does not mean that we have no indication of God's view on such matters.

When Jehovah for the first time allowed humans to eat animal flesh, he explained matters this way to Noah: "A fear of you and a terror of you will continue upon every living creature of the earth and upon every flying creature of the heavens, upon everything that goes moving on the ground, and upon all the fishes of the sea. Into your hand they are now given. Every moving animal that is alive may serve as food for you. As in the case of green vegetation, I do give it all to you. Only flesh with its soul—its blood—you must not eat." (Gen. 9:2-4) That allowance was made to Noah, from whom every person now alive descended. Hence, it applies to all of us.

Humans were allowed by God to eat animal flesh and to sustain their human lives by eating the lives of animals, though they were not permitted to eat blood. Did this include eating human flesh, sustaining one's life by means of a body or part of the body of another human, alive or dead? No! That would be cannibalism, a practice abhorrent to all civilized people.

Jehovah clearly made a distinction between the lives of animals and the lives of humans, mankind being created in God's image, with his qualities. (Gen. 1:27) This distinction is evident in His next words. God proceeded to show that man's life is sacred and is not to be taken at will, as may be done with the animals to be used for food. To show disrespect for the sanctity of human life would make one liable to have his own life taken.—Gen. 9:5, 6.

When there is a diseased or defective organ, the usual way health is restored is by taking in nutrients. The body uses the 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. However, in allowing man to eat animal flesh Jehovah God did not grant permission for humans to try to perpetuate their lives by cannibalistically taking into their bodies human flesh, whether chewed or in the form of whole organs or body parts taken from others.

It is of interest to note that in its discussion of cannibalism the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings, Volume 3, page 199, has a section designated "Medical cannibalism." It points out that this is associated with the idea of obtaining strength or some medical virtue from the flesh of another human, adding: "The most remarkable example of this practice occurs in China. Among the poor it is not uncommon for a member of the family to cut a piece of flesh from arm or leg, which is cooked and then given to a sick relative.... The whole superstition in China is certainly connected with the idea that the eating of the human body strengthens the eater.... Among savages the practice is found of giving a sick man some blood to drink drawn from the veins of a relative." Some might argue that therapeutic practices involved in modern organ transplant operations are more scientific and more primitive treatment. Nonetheless, it is evident that men practicing medicine have not been beyond using treatments that amount to cannibalism if such have been "thought justified."

Modern science has developed many different types of operations that involve human body parts, some common and usually successful and others experimental and often unsuccessful.