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*Equal rights for children under the law*



*Bill Bowen*

## God's law, Caesar's law, and suffering children

The Jehovah's Witness church has been called a "pedophile's paradise," by former member William H. Bowen of Calvert City, Kentucky. He claims the church maintains a secret database of 23,720 confessed or accused child molesters among its members.

A church elder for nearly twenty years, Bowen resigned his position in 2000 after working for almost a year to protect children from an accused child molester in his congregation. While the person was forced to resign as elder, he was allowed to tell the congregation that he was resigning to spend more time with his family, and the hierarchy prohibited Bowen from warning church families of the danger to their children or from telling the police about the crime.

In a taped conversation, church officials told Bowen to go to the accused member and ask if he sexually abused a child.

"If he says 'no,' then walk away from it. Leave it for Jehovah. He'll bring it out. But don't get yourself in a jam."

Jehovah's Witnesses live among mainstream society, but are in many ways isolated from it. They are forbidden to celebrate holidays, salute the flag, vote, or hold political office on the rationale that they are, in reality, citizens of another, unearthly kingdom. Until very recently, they were discouraged from attending college. Visiting other churches and friendships outside the faith are discouraged. Those who break the rules can be disfellowshipped, and members are ordered to have no contact with a disfellowshipped person. Many ex-members report being cut off from their parents or children forever.

Elders lay down rules about how members should dress, stalk wavering ones, warn youngsters against masturbation, order members to remove symbols of other religions from their homes, and bring charges against disobedient members.

It is understandable, therefore, that Witnesses are extremely dependent on elders and other church officials for guidance and help. Witness literature refers to elders as "Princes on Earth," "Glorious Ones," and "Stars on the Right Hand of Christ," Bowen says.

### **Elders advise submission of wife**

Sara Poisson in New Hampshire sought help more than a dozen times from her church elders because her husband Paul was beating and starving her and her daughters and because she suspected he was molesting the younger daughter.

Time after time Sara was told to be a better wife and pray more. "I assumed they were right

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because they were God's representatives on earth," she told a BBC reporter.

She never sought help from outside the church because Paul "was a man and a baptized male and I'm a woman and they're kids."

Finally, the school reported bruises on her daughters to authorities. A state social worker told Sara she must leave Paul or lose her children.

Forced to choose, as she said, between God and her children, she chose her daughters. She left with them, homeless, penniless, and friendless.

Paul Berry was later convicted on all 17 counts of molesting and assaulting his stepdaughter. Yet two dozen Jehovah's Witnesses stood up at the sentencing hearing to vouch for his good character and deny the girls' testimony.

### **Elders in charge of investigation and justice**

The Witnesses' church has a firm policy on dealing with child sexual abuse. Members are told to report it to church elders. They are also told not to talk to others about it for that would be "gossip." Elders are told to report it to the legal department at the church headquarters in Brooklyn. The legal department will determine if their state laws require them to report the case to state authorities.

Bowen says the legal department believes that only 16 states with a total population of 90 million require the elders to report allegations of child abuse to the police or state child protection services. He says elders in those states are directed to tell families to report to public authorities, but will obey the law and report if families fail to do so.

The church also tells the elders to investigate reports of child sexual abuse by themselves. They must first interview the accused and the child victim separately. If the accused denies the charge, the elders "may arrange for him to have the opportunity to confront the accuser in their presence." (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society letter to BBC, May 9, 2002) But if there is only "one allegation by a young Child's parents and the accused denies it, then there is no need to interview the young child." (Supplementary Course for Congregation Elders in the UK, 2003) Either a confession or the eyewitness testimony of two witnesses is required before the church will take further action.

If the elders determine that the member did sexually abuse a child, the congregation may take "judicial action" against the member. A girl in Scotland told the BBC that her father confessed to molesting her and so the church "publicly reprov[ed]" him before the congregation, but did not explain why and even then did not report his crimes to the police.

In a recent South Dakota case, a Witness child was sent to live with other relatives after being molested. Rather than getting the child treatment or the abuser punished, the elders' priority was to protect the church's reputation, charged an ex-member.

### **Rape victims can be disfellowshipped**

The church is extremely patriarchal. Only men may become elders or deacons. For decades the church put out statements charging that rape victims are guilty of fornication unless they scream in protest. Increased risk of the victim's death was of secondary importance. "If she did not scream," declared the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society,\* she "would ruin her relationship with Jehovah God and the Christian congregation" and then "she would be disfellowshipped," which "would be worse than being killed as far as she was concerned." (*Awake*, March 8, 1974:14) In 1984, Witness woman and girls were told to treat their rapist "understandingly as a fellow human." (*Awake*, Feb. 22, 1984:24) And in 1989, the Watchtower again reminded women that Deuteronomy 22 says that "if a woman does not cry out when attacked, it indicates she is submitting to the man and is committing a sin against Jehovah." (*Awake*, Aug. 22, 1989:24)

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\*The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, the publishing house at church headquarters in Brooklyn, spells "Watchtower" as one word, while some other Witness Societies spell it as two words. Actually, the Bible applies that judgment only to engaged women who are raped in towns and prescribes that both victim and rapist be stoned to death. The Watchtower ignores such distinctions, but relentlessly claims that it must follow Scripture.

In 1993, the Watchtower stated that a victim's submission to a rapist was not consent and she should not be blamed for the rape. (*Awake*, March 8, 1993:4) As usual, the Watchtower did not advise members to disregard its many past statements to the contrary.

The elders choose their successors and hold their positions indefinitely. Being known and liked by the elders is key to getting the post, said ex-member Jerry Bergman of Northwest State College in Ohio. No prior education or training is required.

### **No secular education required for elders**

The elders, said Bergman, "have no formal training in child abuse or even psychology, which they condemn as based on a worldly philosophy. Their training is all on the job."

The insistence of Witness elders on doing their own investigation of child sexual abuse sometimes frustrates the police. According to BBC, Simon Brady kept silent for years about being sexually assaulted in the West Midlands of England. When he finally told the elders, they did not believe him.

Then he went to the police, but when the police took over the case, the elders insisted on "investigating" it despite police complaints that they were intimidating witnesses and obstructing justice.

Even after Brady's abuser was convicted and sentenced, the elders publicly announced at his Kingdom Hall that they believed in his innocence.

### **Elders compromise criminal investigations**

Bill Bowen said the church expects untrained elders to first interrogate the children who report the abuse and then ask the accused if the allegations are true. The accused perpetrator is told everything the child has said against him or her. "If the parents then want to report it to police, the child is traumatized and the leaders have already tainted the whole process of investigation," Bowen charged.

Several abuse victims have told the press that the elders told them not to take further action or talk about the abuse to others, but instead trust Jehovah to effect justice. In declining to act on an abuse allegation, the Watchtower wrote to one member that he should "have confidence that Jehovah is watching all things. If by cunning or pretense someone is able to fool men, even men appointed in

the congregation, they could not fool Jehovah." (Letter from the Watchtower Society to Brother Fitzwater, September 25, 1999) "Don't drag Jehovah's Church through the mud," another victim reported being told by the elders.

### **Child warned against reporting abuse**

In September, 2002, Victoria Boer of Shelburne, Ontario, testified in her civil suit against the Watchtower that she went to local elders because she was severely depressed about her father's molestation of her when she was a young teenager.

The men made her repeat her story over and over, she said, then insisted she not go to authorities but instead confront her father in their presence and give him the chance to repent.

In these confrontations, Ms. Boer's father admitted some sexual improprieties, apologized to her, and agreed to do some extra service for the Watchtower Society, she said.

The elders then declared the matter closed because the man had shown signs of repentance.

They told her, she testified, that if she went to the Children's Aid Society, the family would be investigated, her father would lose his job, her mother would be left destitute, and the entire Jehovah's Witness community could be exposed to God's wrath in Armageddon.

### **Two eyewitness rule, secret data base defended**

The Witness hierarchy defends their policies as required by Scripture. They cite 1 Timothy 5:19, "Do not listen to an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or more witnesses," and Deuteronomy 19:15, "One witness is not enough to convict a man of a crime. . . ."

They also defend their secret data base, but say it has many fewer than the 23,720 names claimed by Bowen and includes names of people against whom charges were not substantiated and those guilty only of voyeurism or buying pornography rather than sexual abuse. (Letter from the Watchtower to the BBC, May 9, 2002)

The purpose of the data base, says the Watch Tower, is "to document our compliance with what the law requires in many U.S. jurisdictions." It is also used as a tool for screening out "possible child abusers from appointment to responsible positions



*Bowen and survivors call for action to stop abuse of "silent lambs" in Witness churches*

within the congregation" so that "Christian parents can rightly feel secure" that church officials are trying "to protect the flock from harm."

*Loc. cit.*

Watchtower officials speak of secular "privacy laws" as an important factor in their procedures. "Even if the elders cannot take congregational action, they are expected to report the allegation to the branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in their country, if local privacy laws permit. Again, privacy laws permitting, a record is made at the branch office that the individual has been accused of child abuse," the Watch Tower told the BBC.

*Loc. cit.*

### **Adjusting to Caesar's law**

The Watchtower has written detailed directions to the elders on "keeping information relating to

child abuse in a sealed envelope in the congregation's confidential file" with "only a brief note" kept so that they "conform to Caesar's laws respecting the handling of sensitive information."

As more cases of child sexual abuse by clerics and other church leaders have come to public attention, the Witness hierarchy has issued more cautious directives. "Caesar's law does not stand still and this at times necessitates adjustments," they say. (Watchtower letter to "All bodies of elders," June 1, 2001)

"Child abuse is a crime," they point out. "Never—and we'll emphasize that—Never suggest to anyone that they should not report an allegation of child abuse to the police or other authorities. If asked, make it clear that whether to report the matter to the authorities is a personal decision for each individual to make, and there are no congregation sanctions for either decision. That is, no elder

will criticize or punish anyone who reports such an allegation to the [secular] authorities.” *Loc. cit.*

Many, however, claim the elders did warn them not to report.

### **Why child sexual abuse has been hidden**

The Witness church policies are a logical outgrowth of their posture of aloofness and isolation from the secular world. While they do show concern for protecting their children from sexual abuse, the rhetoric has at least equal concern for “protecting the cleanness of Jehovah’s organization,” including its reputation.

Their elaborate concern for respecting “privacy laws,” should in itself be a clue that they cannot effectively handle child sexual abuse cases independently of the secular world.

Church officials do not report allegations to secular authority unless their legal department determines that state law requires it. Church theology makes members heavily dependent on the elders for guidance, yet the elders are told to be silent about reporting when parents, relatives, or children tell them child sexual abuse is happening. Church statements acknowledge no value to the criminal justice system nor do the elders advise anguished parents or children to report to public agencies unless the elders are mandated reporters.

### **Members cannot listen to dissidents**

The church is quick to punish those who speak out. Disfellowship proceedings were begun against four Jehovah’s Witnesses including Bill Bowen shortly before an NBC *Dateline* program interviewing them on sexual abuse of Witness children was to air. Bowen charged that the church’s motive was not only to frighten others from speaking out, but also to prevent loyal members from watching the program. Witnesses are forbidden to speak or listen to a disfellowshipped person.

Here is what the church advises elders to do for victims. “We need to reassure them of Jehovah’s love and of ours. . . . As elders we should always be alert to show loving concern for children.” (Watchtower Letter of October 15, 2002 read at an Elders’ School) There is no acknowledgement that a sexually abused child needs professional therapy

or that seeing an abuser convicted of a crime would be therapeutic for the child.

### **God requires loyalty to organization**

The heavy emphasis on the strong bonds among members of a minority church puts pressure on victims and relatives to keep quiet and not make trouble. “We must not lose sight of the fact that God is directing his organization. . . . Even if we have suffered some real wrong at the hands of a brother or a sister, would that give us just cause to stop associating with the congregation? Would we thus be justified in ceasing to render sacred service to Jehovah? No, for such a course would be one of unfaithfulness to God and ingratitude for his leadership. It would also indicate that we did not love our loyal fellow believers earth wide. Moreover, if we were to break our integrity to Jehovah, that would give Satan a basis for taunting God—something we surely do not desire!” (*Watchtower Today*, June 1, 1985:16)

### **Disagreements must be settled within church**

Church officials decline on-camera interviews if other Jehovah’s Witnesses are also interviewed. “It would be neither proper nor Scriptural,” they told the BBC, “for us to place ourselves in what might turn out to be an adversarial position with our Christian brothers and sisters in a public setting.” (Watch Tower Letter, May 9, 2002) They told NBC that the “views and opinions” of Witnesses interviewed for its program should be heard in the church, but “not in front of a nationwide television audience. This would be in harmony with what the apostle Paul admonished [in] 1 Corinthians 1:10, ‘that you should all speak in agreement, and there should not be divisions among you, but that you be fitly united in the same mind and in the same line of thought.’ Our Governing Body is willing to resolve differences of opinion within the framework of the congregation and according to Scriptural principles.” (Watch Tower Letter, February 7, 2002)

### **Elders are guides and judges**

Members are repeatedly told to trust the elders to solve problems. Under “Whose Responsibility Is It?,” the church writes, “When elders learn about serious wrongdoing, they approach the individual

involved to give needed help and correction. It is the elders' responsibility to judge such ones inside the Christian congregation. Keeping a close watch on its spiritual condition, they assist and admonish anyone who is taking an unwise or wrong step." (*Watchtower Today* Aug. 15, 1997:26-30)

"Render unto Caesar the things that be Caesar's, and unto God, the things that be God's," said Jesus. (Matthew 22:21) The great upsurge in charges of child sexual abuse has made the Witness leadership more alert about the demands of secular law.

### **Secular help devalued; trust elders instead**

In our view, however, the Jehovah's Witness faith renders unto Caesar only in a narrow legalistic sense, grudgingly doing the minimum to comply with the criminal law, but sees no value in the secular world for preventing, treating, or punishing child sexual abuse. Instead, members are told to trust God and their church leadership to do everything worthwhile in dealing with this horror.

The tragedies are rather predictable. More than a dozen suits against Jehovah's Witness leaders for child sexual abuse have been filed by Kim Norris and Gregory Love of Fort Worth, Texas, and Jeffrey Anderson of St. Paul, Minnesota. Many more cases are being investigated by law firms around the country.

Bill Bowen's webpage at [www.silentlambs.org](http://www.silentlambs.org) is an excellent resource on child sexual abuse among Jehovah's Witnesses and church policy.

Other sources for this article include BBC *Panorama* "Suffer the Little Children," July 14, 2002; NBC *Dateline*, May 28, 2002; CBS *Evening News*, April 28, 2003; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2002; *Ottawa Citizen*, Feb. 1, 2003; Diane Wilson, *Awakening of a Jehovah's Witness* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 2002); and an interview with Bowen.

Officials within many faiths have been accused and convicted of child sexual abuse in recent years. Our focus here on the Jehovah's Witnesses does not indicate that the abuse in their denomination is more reprehensible, prevalent, or "cultic" than in others.

## **Dying teen puts faith above father**

Bethany Hughes of Calgary, Alberta, Canada, died in September, 2002, at age 17, leaving a family torn apart and litigation proceeding from several angles and parties.

In February, 2002, she was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. Medical treatment of the disease has a 40-50% success rate. Chemotherapy must be combined with blood transfusions to replace the blood cells that have been destroyed until the patient begins producing her own blood cells again.

### **Witness dad chooses transfusions**

Bethany and her family were Jehovah's Witnesses with religious beliefs against blood transfusions. The day after she was diagnosed, her father Lawrence Hughes broke with his church and consented to the blood transfusions. Bethany and her mother continued to oppose them.

### **Intelligence not the only requirement**

The Alberta Child Welfare Department sought a court order for the transfusions and a provincial court granted it. Judge Jordan found the girl intelligent and sophisticated, but ruled that she did not have "the life or developmental experience which allowed her to question her faith and/or its teachings, and such experience is an essential step in arriving at a personal level of development such that she could be considered to be a mature minor who had the capacity to refuse medical treatment which was necessary to save her life. Intelligence, thoughtfulness, exemplary behavior and notable academic achievement are not sufficient when the magnitude of the decision faced by a 16-year-old involves a certain risk of death."

Jordan relied on a decision ordering a transfusion for a 15-year-old Witness in which the court held that the "influence" of the church's teachings was "strong and powerful" and the boy's will was not "fully free." In *Re E (A Minor)* (1990), [1993] 1 E.L.R. 386 (Fam. D).

"He may assert it," Judge Ward wrote, "but his volition has been conditioned by the very powerful expressions of faith to which all members of the creed adhere. . . . I respect this boy's profession of

faith, but I cannot discount at least the possibility that he may in later years suffer some diminution in his convictions.”

Chemotherapy and transfusions for Bethany then proceeded while mother and daughter appealed.

In April Madam Justice C. A. Kent of the Court of Queen’s Bench of Alberta issued a ruling upholding the order for the transfusions, but also finding some fault with the lower court’s ruling.

### **Courts cannot rule religious beliefs unreasonable**

Justice Kent’s objection to the lower court ruling was that it indicated that the Witness beliefs about transfusions were unreasonable. Kent paraphrased Judge Jordan’s logic as follows: “B.H. has not yet done a critical analysis of a literal reading of the Bible. . . . We (and by that I mean most of society) are of the view that such an analysis necessarily leads to only one answer: blood transfusions are acceptable. Put more starkly, we say that B.H.’s religious beliefs are wrong and we hope that sometime before her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday she understands that and changes her mind. Or to use the words of [Judge] Ward, the child’s faith is interfering with the exercise of free will.”

### **Common law makes girl mature minor, but statute requiring medical care supersedes**

“That cannot be part of the concept of mature minor,” Justice Kent held. “What mature minor status requires is the intelligence to do the analysis, not that it has been done. And, in this case, the trial Judge has found that B.H. is of sufficient intelligence. . . . To say that no Jehovah’s Witness child who is of sufficient intelligence and ability to understand the nature and consequences of proposed medical treatment can refuse blood because the refusal comes from a religious conviction which we believe is wrong creates a principle which may be used at other times in dangerous circumstances.”

Kent held that Bethany was a mature minor at common law, but that Alberta’s Child Welfare Act, as legislation that “occupies the field,” supersedes “the concept of mature minor” in common law.

The Alberta Child Welfare Act defines a child as a person under 18 years old and provides

that a “child is in need of protective services if there are reasonable and probable grounds to believe that the survival, security or development of the child is endangered because. . . the guardian of the child is unable or unwilling to provide the child with the necessities of life, including. . . essential medical, surgical or other remedial treatment that has been recommended by a physician.” A judge must give an older child the opportunity to be heard in court, but rules on the basis of the child’s best interest.

### **Religious freedom not absolute**

Justice Kent also responded to Bethany’s claims that her rights to freedom of religion, liberty, and equal protection under Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms were violated. Kent held that “freedom of religion is not absolute and may properly give way to an order or orders duly made in a child’s best interest.”

While finding Bethany’s liberty interests violated by the forcible transfusions, Kent held that “a child’s liberty interests must still be balanced against the state’s ‘*parens patriae*’ jurisdiction” and “overriding interest” in protecting the child’s welfare. [quoting *Alberta v. K.B.* (2000), 279 A.R. 328 at para. 69 (Q.B.)]

After her conclusions, Justice Kent made comments about what she learned from the hospital records. She “was struck by the overwhelming compassion” and sensitivity shown by Bethany’s doctors and hospital staff.

She was also concerned about the attitudes of the Jehovah’s Witnesses around her. The mother told Bethany she had the right to withdraw from treatment. She and David Gnam, her Jehovah’s Witness attorney, told the girl that the treatment was “experimental.” Both statements were wrong.

### **Witnesses demand fighting**

A hospital social worker, who spent many hours comforting and listening to Bethany, wrote,

“Initially the Child co-operated with medical staff but voiced her objections to the transfusions in a way that did not place herself or others at harm. She has informed me that she had been instructed to ‘fight’ by both the

Mother and Mr. Gnam, counsel for the Child, and she was confused how passive resistance would not be accepted as ‘fighting.’ Once the Mother began to attend during the blood transfusions, there was an immediate and noticeable deterioration of the Child’s behavior.”

A doctor reported, “B. struggled with her IV line during transfuse. 3 people required to hold her to keep her safe. I allowed Mom to stay if she promised not to touch her lines & use only verbal protest. She was unable to comply.”

Justice Kent commented, “It is troubling to hear that B.H.’s mother would risk harm to her child by tampering with medical equipment during a procedure.”

Kent was also troubled by the mother’s affidavit in which she compared the transfusions to “the atrocities thousands of innocent persons endured during Nazi rule. . . because they would not violate their conscience.” Kent called it “one of the most intemperate statements I have seen in evidence.”

### **Transfusions discontinued**

Sadly, despite chemotherapy and 38 transfusions, cancerous lesions appeared on the girl’s back in July. Doctors then gave her only a 10% chance of survival and stated that simple palliative care was appropriate. Her father begged the court to continue the order for chemotherapy with transfusions.

Weak and pale, Bethany also addressed the court. “My case is about rights. I am almost 17, and I can’t make a decision that a person one year older can make, and that upsets me.”

The judge dismissed the province’s application to extend their guardianship not because the girl’s argument was persuasive, but because her doctors were no longer recommending transfusions.

### **Mom and children hide from dad**

The dispute over transfusions tore the family apart. Mrs. Hughes and their minor children moved out of the family home in June. The parents are getting a divorce. Church members shunned Lawrence Hughes.



*Bethany and her nurse*

After the court allowed Bethany to stop receiving transfusions, she moved to Edmonton with her mother and sister. Her father did not see her alive again. He was not given her address or phone number. Bethany spoke to him twice in telephone calls relayed by Jehovah’s Witness headquarters in Ontario. Two weeks before her death, she offered to meet him at an Edmonton restaurant for 15 minutes, the father said. She still refused to give him her phone number and said she would leave if he was not on time. Since it was a four-hour drive to Edmonton, Lawrence declined, but tried to work out a better arrangement through his lawyer.

His surviving children, wife, and other Jehovah’s Witnesses are forbidden to have contact with him, he reports. He has not seen his daughter Cassandra since she moved out in June, 2002.

Within a week after Bethany’s death, lawyers were back in court arguing that her and her mother’s rights under the Charter were violated by the guardianship order. Bethany’s lawyers said the girl had directed them to pursue a court ruling giving mature teenagers the right to refuse medical treatment.

The court ruled it had no jurisdiction to hear the case because the guardianship had been dismissed.

Bethany’s lawyers filed an appeal in November.

Hughes told the media that he would file a class action suit against the Witnesses’ governing body, charging them with wrongful death, alienation of family, deceit, and misinformation. He has not done so to date, but is fighting for custody of

Cassandra on the grounds that she could be endangered by Witness policy against transfusions.

Several physicians filed an affidavit to the Supreme Court of Canada asking for another ruling on the mature minor issue. The Supreme Court refused for a second time to consider Kent's ruling.

Sources include: Canadian Press, Sept. 6, 13, and 26, 2002; *Calgary Herald*, Sept. 7, 2002; *CBC News*, Sept. 6, Oct. 18, and Nov. 23, 2002; the web page [www.ajwrb.org](http://www.ajwrb.org), and the ruling by Madam Justice C. A. Kent in *B.H. v. Alberta (Director of Child Welfare)*, ABQB 371 (April 10, 2002). The ruling is at [www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb/1998-2003/qb/Civil/2002/2002abqb0371.pdf](http://www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb/1998-2003/qb/Civil/2002/2002abqb0371.pdf).

### Comment

The May 22, 1994 issue of the Witnesses' *Awake!* magazine features "Youths Who Put God First" with color photos and laudatory accounts of children who died after fighting against blood transfusions. One is 12-year-old Canadian Lisa Kosack who held off transfusion therapy by threatening that she "would fight and kick the IV pole down and rip out the IV no matter how much it would hurt, and poke holes in the blood."

Bethany Hughes began with passive resistance and verbal objection to transfusions, but that was not good enough for her mother and lawyer who told her to "fight." At the time when she most needed unconditional love and support, her parents were divorcing, church doctrine opposed contact with her father, and the church demanded that she expend emotional and physical energy being a perfect role model for the organization.

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## Historian traces disputes between Christian Science and medical profession

In *Christian Science on Trial: Religious Healing in America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), Rennie Schoepflin provides useful information and insight on the early clashes of Christian Science and the medical profession.

A history professor at La Sierra University, Schoepflin includes a large body of little-known

primary sources—transcripts of early court trials and passionate statements by Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, her followers, and detractors. His tables of all criminal court cases involving Christian Science practice in the U.S. from 1887 to the present are especially helpful.

### Insecurity behind sensationalism

Schoepflin presents the early conflicts between Christian Science and medicine as sensational, pitched battles that captured the general public's attention and thus contributed to "an American consensus about scientific medicine." (5)

The heated rhetoric of medical doctors, he argues, indicated insecurity about their authority and competence as they battled to get many sectarian systems out of the health care marketplace and establish medicine on a scientific footing.

In early court battles, defense attorneys for Christian Scientists "stressed the threat of medical monopoly and derided the 'imaginary' germs, inflated cure rates, and underreported death rates of scientific medicine." (5) Outcomes of early court cases varied, partly because Americans were ambivalent about medical science.

However, the drama of the trials, says Schoepflin, educated the public, and helped provide "authoritative norms" for health care leading to the dominance of medical science. (5)

### Church first seeks state recognition, then exemption from state regulation

The Christian Science church at first tried to get its healers state recognition as medical practitioners, but that became impossible as bacteria were identified as pathogens, diphtheria antitoxin became available, laws began to require reporting of contagious disease, and Christian Scientists continued to claim that they healed disease by denying its existence.

They eventually established their right to "treat" disease and to bill for their treatments by a radically different strategy of arguing that they were not practicing medicine and therefore should be exempt from medical licensing requirements.

### **Right to withhold medical care from sick children claimed**

The right to practice their religion did not include a legal right to withhold medical care from a sick child, but the church has often indicated to its members that it did.

His book concludes with a brief account of the criminal prosecutions of Christian Science parents in the 1980s and early 1990s and statutory religious exemptions from child neglect charges.

### **Charges on both sides inflammatory**

The florid and inflammatory prose in the early history is fascinating. Dr. Samuel Tannenbaum's call to arms was not atypical: "it is the business and duty of the medical profession to wage incessant war on the Eddyites. . . and to prosecute every breach of the law." (138) *The New York Evening Journal* charged that a Christian Science practitioner's "incantations" against diphtheria were as "senseless" and "vicious. . . as would be the contortions of some ngress of the voodoo faith twisting serpents around her neck. . ." (187)

The Christian Science church responded in kind with broadbrush attacks on medical doctors. "Our religious freedom is not to be curtailed in the interest of a hoary and decrepit theory of physic, erected into a craft as a source of wealth and social respectability," said *The Christian Science Journal*. (149)

### **Human reproduction a "superstition"**

For those skeptical of Christian Science claims, Eddy and her early followers come across in this book as ridiculous and self-serving though Schoepflin presents them fairly. Eddy's distaste for bodily functions and sexual activity show in student Alfred Baker's lecture notes from her course in metaphysical obstetrics:

Because there are no distinctive male or female organs and because nerves do not exist, there is "no sexual desire or genital sense. . . . The capacity to reflect the eternal is intercourse." The physical union of marriage, in which, so often, the man has "pleasure and the woman pain," is an error of belief that causes "much dissension" and should be remedied by an

affirmation of Eddy's recognition that "unity of Principle and idea is the only marriage." Sperm and ovum do not physically conjoin in conception for sperm "is Truth, Mind, and the expression of Mind" and the "seed of God is the angels." Women should lay aside the "superstition" that "menstrual function" accompanies "egg formation." (102)

The woman's pelvis is "a shadow picture" to be outgrown. It cannot be deformed or become rigid and there are no material organs within it. Eventually, a woman who grows in Truth will recognize that "there is one Mother, even God, and will lose all desire for creation apart from God." (102)

### **CS healed Eddy of menstruation**

Eddy advertised herself as a "Professor of Obstetrics" and claimed that her method of childbirth not only made the experience painless and "lustless," but also "eradicate[d] in children hereditary taints." (98, 102) She bragged that her menstrual periods stopped the moment she "discovered" Christian Science in 1866 and she had "never seen anything of the claim since." (102) ("Claim" in Christian Science means a false belief that the physical body is real.) Eddy was 44 years old in 1866.

In 1888 her student Abby Corner was charged with murder for trying to apply Eddy's teachings at her daughter's delivery during which both her daughter and grandchild died. Embarrassed by this threat to her reputation, Eddy attacked Corner in the press as incompetent.

Offended by Eddy's "love of money" and cruelty, many defected from Eddy at that time. Eddy retreated from Boston to Concord, New Hampshire, stopped teaching obstetrics, and disbanded the organizations she had established. Later, she founded new ones over which she had more control.

### **Does church have statistics?**

Schoepflin's last chapter on recent developments is weak on legal analysis and naïve about church claims. He says, without documentation, that "many members of the legal community called for the abolition of religious healing." (208) We know of none who did. He writes that the church

“cited statistics” to show that Christian Science healed children’s diseases at a higher percentage rate than medical science. (208) The church did claim in the press to have such statistics, but no journalist to our knowledge ever saw them, and they were not introduced in court.

### **Will Christian Science challenge medicine’s “hegemony”?**

At the beginning of the book, Schoepflin says that in the past quarter century “a resurgence of interest in the spiritual dimensions of human health” has again challenged the “hegemony of medical science” and put Christian Science again “at center stage.” (5) He ends with the criminal trials of the 1980s and 1990s and other public relations fiascos for the church. Explanation of the relationship Schoepflin sees between those developments would be illuminating.

Our own feeling is that recent interest in the connection between spirituality and health will not put Christian Science back on center stage nor cause the public to believe that it should be substituted for medical care of a sick child.

## **When prayer does not heal the body**

*Faith Beyond Faith Healing* (Paraclete Press, 2002), a slim paperback by Kimberly Winston, traces the history of belief that prayer heals disease, discusses contemporary types of faith healing, and presents several accounts of people who experienced deaths of loved ones despite ardent faith that God would heal.

The book has the usual flaws of its genre. The documentation is extremely inadequate. The stylistic flourishes of imagery are sometimes pointless and flat. There are glaring errors of fact, such as putting Africa on the Pacific Ocean. Its conclusion seems preordained.

The book is subtitled *Finding Hope after Shattered Dreams* and all its narratives are of people who developed more faith in God after the failure of prayer. None, however, continued to believe in withholding medical care.

## **Three reasons for persistence of faith**

Interestingly, Winston offers both secular and religious explanations for the persistence of faith in these cases. She cites Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance that when people hold a belief that is dissonant or incompatible with what they see, they are more likely to devise an explanation to make the belief more compatible with what they see than to reject the belief completely. (49) She cites two religion professors who say that Judaism and Christianity are founded on the belief that God is good and its adherents will develop explanations for their losses to preserve that core belief. Either suffering is part of a divine plan beyond our human understanding or the sick person or his family had secret sins, but God cannot “ever be morally culpable.” (50-51) Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* offers a third explanation: God has limited power to intervene in human affairs, but is not limited in his compassion. (52)

## **Preacher linked doctors to witchcraft**

One chapter (82-95) presents Bob and Linda Shepherd of Redding, California, who lost their daughter Debbie in 1983. The Shepherds belonged to an independent full-gospel church called Christ’s Church of Restitution. Linda’s father worked there, but its leader was a charismatic preacher identified in the book by the pseudonym Brother Bee. Shortly after Linda and Bob were married, Brother Bee got a “leading” to move the church to northern California, and the Shepherds followed him there.

The preacher directed his followers to be “in the world, but not of the world.” He taught them to rely on God for healing disease and preached that medical doctors were practicing witchcraft. Like several other full-gospel churches, he frequently cited Jeremiah 17:5 as the basis for his belief: “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord.”

Linda and Bob had eleven children, all born at home without medical attention.

### **Back and stomach pain for three months**

In 1982, their eight-year-old daughter Deborah Elizabeth complained of back and stomach pain. Linda thought she had a kidney infection, encouraged her to drink more water, and prayed.

For the next three months, whenever Debbie complained of the pain, Linda worried, but maintained her expectation that God would heal Debbie.

Then Debbie stopped eating. She became thinner, but her stomach kept growing. One day Linda saw a golf ball-sized lump on Debbie's abdomen.

### **Healing rituals for lump, weight loss, and pain**

She and Bob called Brother Bee for help and then brought Debbie to the church grounds for his healing rituals.

Debbie and her grandmother stayed with Brother Bee for a week. He prayed for her healing, laid hands on her, and anointed her with oil. Still, Debbie did not improve.

### **Child accused of choosing to die**

At the end of the week, the preacher declared that Debbie had "decided to die" and told the grandmother to take her home to her parents.

Bob and Linda were shocked at his pronouncement, for he had, of course, always urged his members to have absolute faith that God would heal.

### **Wilm's tumor**

Brother Bee then advised the Shepherds to take Debbie to a hospital, not because he thought medical science could help, but to protect them from prosecution. They obeyed. Child Protection Services obtained a court order for medical treatment.

Debbie was diagnosed with a Wilm's tumor, a form of cancer that is highly treatable if detected early. One of her kidneys was removed. After the surgery, Linda—in a dramatic break with her faith—asked to see it. The kidney was double its size and dark. "That made it real. That made it human," Linda recalled.

### **"Vanity"**

Debbie had chemotherapy for a year. For part of that time she was well enough to return to her

school run by church members. But because the church opposed medical treatment, some children made fun of her and once a teacher snatched the wig off Debbie's bald head, calling it "a vanity."

Debbie died at age nine in November, 1983.

Bob and Linda felt their fellow church members did not engage with their pain, but instead told them "to forget about Debbie and move on." They found criticism and detachment from those they had most depended on, while, by contrast, they found Child Protection Services and Debbie's doctors charitable and sensitive.

### **Importance of humility and gentleness**

They began visiting other churches. There too "they felt they heard a strain of the isolationist teachings, the messages of spiritual superiority, which reminded them of Brother Bee." Now they attend an independent Baptist church.

Both Bob and Linda have posted webpages in memory of their daughter. On his site Bob says they have learned the importance of being "gentle" because "God can meet you in many forms" and "use many agents and channels for his blessing."

See <http://lindy1950.tripod.com> and <http://geocities.com/robby01>.

### **About CHILD Inc.**

CHILD is a national membership organization dedicated to stopping child abuse and neglect related to cultural traditions or religion, whether because harmful practices themselves are justified by religious beliefs or because religious doctrine interferes with prevention, treatment, or reporting of child abuse or neglect.

CHILD opposes all religious exemptions from health and safety laws for the protection of children. We believe that children have a Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection of the laws.

More information and a membership application form are available on CHILD's website at [www.childrenshealthcare.org](http://www.childrenshealthcare.org). To reach CHILD by mail, phone, fax, or e-mail, see the contact information on page 1.