



Jehovah's Witnesses

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Introduction: At one time or another, almost everyone has answered a knock at the door only to come face to face with members of the organization known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Witnesses are very well known for their zealous door-to-door evangelism. Most people would be somewhat surprised to learn that all of this door-to-door work in the United States is being accomplished by fewer than one million active Jehovah's Witnesses (5.6 million world wide) (1997 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide, 1998). Obviously, this relatively small religious organization gets a lot of effort out of each member. How is this accomplished? What beliefs do they hold that inspire such zeal and loyalty? Can we understand them well enough to engage in a meaningful dialogue with them?

In truth, it may not be possible to fully understand the Jehovah's Witnesses unless you've been one. Their teachings are complex and unorthodox. Their unity is centered around an organization that has frequently been labeled as a cult. In my experience they are less interested in talking with you than in talking at you. Yet, a basic knowledge of their history, organization, and beliefs may help us lead a Witness to the truth, and it will definitely help prepare us to defend the faith of the gospel against their perversions of it.

< Point of Origin >

Charles Taze Russell organized the movement that later came to be known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. His followers were originally called "Russellites" and later "Millennial Dawnists" and "International Bible Students". Born on February 16, 1852, Russell was raised as a Congregationalist. As a young man he showed an interest in spiritual matters. Early on, he rejected "Organized Religions" and the doctrine of

eternal torment. In 1879 Russell began publishing the magazine "Zion's Watch Tower," now known as "The Watch Tower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom". By 1886, he published the first of seven books (six of them written by him) entitled Studies in the Scriptures. These books contain the basic tenets of modern Jehovah's Witness doctrine.

Russell's presidency of the Watchtower organization was extremely colorful. He was frequently in courts of law. His wife sued him for separation. He sued a Brooklyn newspaper and a baptist preacher for libel when they publicly exposed him as a fraud. Russell lost each case. The newspaper had lampooned Russell for advertising at \$1.00 per pound "Miracle Wheat" which was supposedly five times more productive than any other brand of wheat. Upon government inspection, the wheat turned out to be of inferior quality. The baptist preacher had written that Russell was "neither a scholar or a theologian." In court, the attorney for the baptist preacher demonstrated this claim to be true in the following exchange with Russell:

Attorney: Do you know the Greek alphabet?

Russell: Oh, Yes.

Attorney: Can you tell me the correct letters if you see them?

Russell: Some of them, I might make a mistake on some of them.

Attorney: Would you tell me the names of those on top of the page, page 447 I have got here?

Russell: Well, I don't know that I would be able to.

Attorney: You can't tell what those letters are, look at them and see if you know?

Russell: My way... [he was interrupted at this point and not allowed to explain]

Attorney: Are you familiar with the Greek language?

Russell: No. (Martin, 1977, p. 39).

Russell died in 1916. The presidency of the Watchtower was taken over by Russell's attorney Joseph F. Rutherford, known as Judge Rutherford. Rutherford was well educated and an over-powering leader, but his doctrinal emphases were slightly different from those of Russell. Several groups split away from Rutherford's

leadership; among them the group known as "The Dawn Bible Student's Association". However, Rutherford controlled most of Russell's following and the group adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931. While Rutherford was president, a large estate called Beth-Sarim was purchased in San Diego; this was to be a palace for heavenly princes such as Abraham and Isaac who were to return to earth to rule with Christ during the millennium. Before his death in 1942, Rutherford wrote about 100 books and tracts which define Jehovah's Witness official doctrine. One of the most famous of these books is entitled Millions Now Living Will Never Die, published in 1920.

Nathan H. Knorr was president of the Watchtower from 1942 to his death in 1977. During his term many more official books were published by the Watchtower, but an author's name was not attached to any of these publications. Significant among these, "The New World Translation" of the Bible is worded in such a way as to support several unorthodox Witness doctrines. Other important works explaining basic Witness doctrine were Let God Be True (1946), and Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God (1966). One of the most recent books Witnesses use to explain the basics of their system is entitled You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth (1982).

< Distinctive Points of Belief >

1. Authority and inspiration of the Watchtower. Russell and Rutherford both claimed that their writings are the result of God's continuing revelation to men. Watchtower publications are supposed to contain the true interpretations of scripture; in fact, most Witnesses would say the Bible cannot be correctly understood without relying upon Watchtower material. Vice President of the Watchtower Fred Franz gave the following testimony in Scottish court in 1954:

Question: Who is responsible for the interpretation in case of doubt, or in general, of scriptural writings for the guidance of Jehovah's Witnesses?

Answer: We believe that Jehovah God who is the author and inspirer of the Bible is the one who makes the interpretations. He is his own interpreter. He does this by the use of his invisible active force the Holy Spirit operating upon the minds of his Witnesses upon this earth.

Question: Is it for that reason that Jehovah's Witnesses accept without question doctrines and Biblical interpretations as expounded by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society through its Directors?

Answer: Yes.

Question: In publications both periodical and in book form?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Is there any hope of salvation for a man who depends upon his Bible alone when he is in a situation in the world where he cannot get the tracts and publications of your Incorporation?

Answer: He is dependent on the Bible.

Question: Will he be able to interpret it truly?

Answer: No. (Bolton, pp. 2-3, --Scottish Trial, excerpts).

2. No Godhead (Trinity) -- Jesus was a created being. The Witnesses strongly object to the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity and the Biblical doctrine of the Godhead. They say "Sincere persons who want to know the true God and serve him find it a bit difficult to love and worship a complicated, freakish looking, three headed God" (Let God Be True, 1946, p. 102). "As for the 'Holy Spirit,' the so-called third Person of the Trinity, we have already seen that this is not a person but God's active force (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 41).

3. No eternal torment or consciousness after death. Witnesses teach that hell is only the grave -- an unconscious state. They deny that it is a place of fiery eternal torment. "If the idea of roasting people in fire had never come into God's heart [referring to Jer. 7:31, SRK], does it seem reasonable that he created a fiery hell for those who do not serve him? The Bible says, 'God is love.' (I John 4:8) Would a loving God really torment people forever? Would you do so?" (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 81). Witnesses do not accept the idea of consciousness after death. They say that "the dead are unable to do or feel anything. They no longer have any thoughts, nor do they remember anything." "Before God created him from the dust, Adam did not exist. After his death, Adam returned to the same state of nonexistence" (The Watchtower, 1997).

4. Jesus began to reign in 1914. Witnesses believe that Jesus' invisible "presence" returned to earth in 1914. They say the Greek word "parousia," frequently translated "coming" in reference to the second coming of Jesus, has been mistranslated. They

claim that the word only refers to Jesus' "presence," which is invisible.

5. Armageddon and God's new system of things. Armageddon, a physical battle in which Jesus leads the hosts of heaven against Satan's forces, composed of human governments, is supposed to occur in the life time of "millions" who were alive in 1914. Witnesses believe that Armageddon will usher in Jesus' Thousand Year Reign, during which "faithful humans will work to turn the whole earth into a paradise (Luke 23:43). Also, millions of dead ones will be resurrected to human life on the earth. (Acts 24:15) If they do what God requires of them, they will continue to live on earth forever. If not, they will be destroyed forever" (Beliefs and Activities..., 1998). After this, Christ will reign in the new heaven with His "little flock" of 144,000 faithful followers selected off the earth.

6. Salvation by faith only. Witnesses believe that salvation comes through faith alone. Baptism, they say, is only "a public demonstration, testifying that one has made a solemn dedication to Jehovah God and is presenting himself to do His will" (The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life, 1968, pp. 183–184).

7. Jesus died on a stake. According to the Witnesses, "Jesus did not die on a cross, He died on a pole or a stake...The symbol of the cross comes from ancient false religions" (Beliefs and Activities... 1998).

< Distinctive Points of Practice >

1. Organization. Headquartered in Brooklyn, New York, the controlling powers of the Watchtower organization have under them the "regional servants," then the "zone servants" on down to the individual congregation's "company servant" (North, 1984, p. 98). Congregations meet in "Kingdom Halls". Members are expected to be "Publishers of the Kingdom" and most of them give generously of their time to knock doors and teach in private homes (Mead, 1980, p. 146). Each "Publisher" is expected to give at least 60 hours per month to these efforts; missionaries and special pioneers give much more of their time. All of this is usually done at the expense of the Publisher, with only a small amount of financial support from the Watchtower Society for those who are very heavily involved in the work.

With a little practice, each Publisher soon becomes well schooled in the official Watchtower teachings. They are trained to believe that believe that "Christendom" has

implanted many false and evil ideas in the heads of other religious people. Use of terms like "Holy Trinity", "Deity of Christ," "Hell," "Eternal Punishment," "Christendom," or "Immortal Soul," often spark a "reflex action on the part of the Jehovah's Witnesses which is instantaneous and hostile." (Martin, 1977, p. 30). "When dealing with the average Jehovah's Witness this entire pattern of preconditioning must be understood so that the Christian can avoid, where possible, direct usage of terms that will almost certainly evoke a theologically conditioned reflex and sever the lines of communication" (Martin, 1977, p. 30).

2. Witnesses refuse to be associated with human government. Believing all human governments to be tools of Satan, Witnesses will not salute the flag, hold a government job, or take part in political affairs.

3. Witnesses refuse blood transfusions. They believe that blood transfusions are a violation of the apostolic decree to "abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:29). They claim that "Jehovah requires that we abstain from blood. This means that we must not take into our bodies in any way at all other people's blood or even our own blood that has been stored (Acts 21:25) (Beliefs and Activities..., 1998).

4. Lord's supper celebrated once a year. Witnesses believe that the Lord's supper is to be celebrated annually on the anniversary of the Passover when Jesus ate the meal in the upper room with His disciples (Note: This date is Nisan 14 in the Jewish calendar).

5. No celebration of birthdays or so called Christian "holidays". Witnesses explain their beliefs about these issues as follows:

Jesus never commanded Christians to celebrate his birth. Rather, he told his disciples to memorialize, or remember, his death. (Luke 22:19, 20) Christmas and its customs come from ancient false religions. The same is true of Easter customs, such as the use of eggs and rabbits. The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas or Easter, nor do true Christians today. The only two birthday celebrations spoken of in the Bible were held by persons who did not worship Jehovah. (Genesis 40:20-22; Mark 6:21, 22, 24-27) The early Christians did not celebrate birthdays. The custom of celebrating birthdays comes from ancient false religions. (Beliefs and Activities..., 1998).

Cross-points

In this section, statements from the Bible are simply laid beside statements from the Watchtower's official publications for comparison

The Watchtower

1. The origin of Jesus. Jesus is "called God's 'First-born,' as well as his 'only begotten' Son. (John 1:14; 3:16; Hebrews 1:6) This means that he was created before all the other spirit sons of God..." (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 58). "The truth of the matter is that the Word is God's Son who became Jesus Christ and who did have a beginning" (Let God Be True, 1952, p. 107).

2. The deity of Jesus. Jesus "could not be the supreme God almighty in the flesh" (Let God Be True, p. 106). He is "a Son of God." (Life Everlasting..., 1966, pp. 58ff.)

3. The destiny of earth. "God made this planet Earth just right for humans to live on, and it is his will that it remain forever. (Psalm 104:5) (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 160.)

The Bible

1. The origin of Jesus. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God... All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." (John 1:1,3, 14; see Colossians 1:15-17). Of the One who "formed the earth and the world" it is said, "From everlasting to everlasting, You are God." (Psalm 90:2; see also Micah 5:2).

2. The deity of Jesus. "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). [Note: On page 113 of You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth it says "The child, whose birth was foretold in Isaiah 9:6-7, was Jesus."] See also John 20:28; Acts 20:28; Colossians 2:9 compare Revelation 1:8, 17 with Isaiah 44:6 ; 45:21).

3. The destiny of the earth. "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They

Ecclesiastes 1:4, Psalm 148:5–6 and Matthew 5:5 are also frequently quoted to support this teaching.

4. The Lord's Supper. "Since the anti-typical Lamb Jesus Christ died on the passover day, Nisan 14, and since on the night of that same day he instituted the Lord's evening meal, Nisan 14, of each year is the only scriptural time to observe it" (Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, 1966, p. 134).

5. Baptism. "What then does Christian baptism signify? It is not a washing away of one's sins, because cleansing from sin comes only through faith in Jesus Christ." (The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life, 1968, p. 183).

6. The return of Christ. "His return also would be invisible, in a spiritual body. How, then, are we to understand the words of Revelation 1:7? The apostle John writes: Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him... Here the Bible speaks of seeing not with physical eyes, but in the sense of discerning or perceiving... everyone will then understand or recognize that Christ is present". "In Matthew 24:3 "What do these expressions 'thy coming' and 'the end of the world,'

will perish, but You will endure..." (Psalm 102:25–26). "Heaven and earth will pass away" (Matthew 24:35) (see Hebrews 12:26–28; II Peter 3:9–11). [Note: The Bible does state the earth is to abide "forever" which means "age-lasting" or "continuing without interruption" -- notice the following passages on the meaning of forever: Exodus 12:24; 14:13; 19:9; 21:6; 27:21; 28:43; 29:28; 31:16–17; etc.]

4. The Lord's Supper. "After the days of Unleavened Bread...on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..." (Acts 20:6–7). "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? (I Corinthians 10:16b; cf. 11:26).

5. Baptism. "Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins..." (Acts 22:16). (see also Acts 2:38).

6. The return of Christ. "Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye shall see him..." (Revelation 1:7). "For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then

really mean? The Greek word here translated 'coming' is *parousia*, and it means 'presence.' So then, when the 'sign' is seen, this means we would know that Christ is present though unseen, that he has already come in Kingdom power." (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, p. 146 & 148).

7. Consciousness after death. "the dead are unable to do or feel anything. They no longer have any thoughts, nor do they remember anything." (The Watchtower, May 15, 1997)

we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). [Note: There is no passage where the Greek word *parousia* must mean "invisible presence" in order for the passage to make sense. However, the following passages indicate it does mean "visible presence": 1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6; Philippians 1:26; 2 Peter 1:16]

7. Consciousness after death. "The rich man also died and was buried. {23} "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. {24} "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'" (Luke 16:22b–24).

< Witnesses Weaknesses >

1. The fallibility of the infallible Watchtower. Time and time again the prophets of the Watchtower, to whom the Witnesses have given their complete trust, have made prophecies and predictions which have turned out to be incorrect. The test for a true prophet of Jehovah is accuracy (see Deuteronomy 18:22). Many examples could be given to show the inaccuracy of the Watch-tower's prophets, but the following should suffice.

In volume two of *Studies in the Scriptures*, Russell said that "the period of Christ's reign...began in 1873...we are already in it." (Bolton, p. 3). Later, the Witnesses

"revised" this date and said that Christ began to reign in 1914. The Witnesses under "prophet" Rutherford's guidance purchased and maintained "Beth Sarim" (the House of Princes) in San Diego to house Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Moses and Daniel upon what was said to be their imminent return to earth. In 1954, Vice President of the Watchtower Fred Franz admitted that the Watchtower had been wrong about Beth Sarim. In Scottish court he testified concerning why Beth Sarim was sold:

"Because it was there, and the Prophets had not yet come back to occupy it, to make use of it, and the Society had no use for it at the time, it was in charge of a caretaker, and it was causing expense, and our understanding of the Scriptures opened up more and more concerning the Princes, which will include those prophets, and so the property was sold as serving no present purpose."

One of the most damaging predictions to the credibility of the Watchtower in recent years was that the end of the present world and the beginning of Christ's visible reign would take place by 1975. They said:

"...six thousand years from man's creation will end in 1975, and the seventh period of a thousand years of human history will begin in the fall of 1975 C.E....It would not be by mere chance or accident but would be according to the loving purpose of Jehovah God for the reign of Jesus Christ, the 'Lord of the sabbath,' to run parallel with the seventh millennium of man's existence" (Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, 1966, pp. 29 & 30).

2. The unreasonableness of Witness' reasoning. In defense of their doctrines, the Witnesses rely heavily upon what seems "reasonable" or in accord with common sense. (e.g. You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 81). But the truth is that many things they ask us to believe are simply not reasonable. For instance they continue to ask us to believe that the generation of people who were living in 1914 will "by no means pass away" before "Armageddon" occurs (You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth, 1982, p. 154). In the Bible, one generation was considered to have passed away after 40 years time (see Numbers 32:13; Hebrews 3:10). "Reason" would suggest that the 1914 generation has by all means passed away.

Questions on the Jehovah's Witnesses

1. In order, name the first three presidents of the Watchtower.

2. How do Witnesses feel about the accuracy and reliability of Watchtower publications?
3. What is the name of the translation of the Bible published and preferred by the Jehovah's Witnesses?
4. According to Witnesses, what happens to the soul at death?
5. According to Witnesses, what is the destiny of the earth? What passages do they use to support these claims? What scriptures would you use to show it is false?
6. Do Acts 15:29 and 21:25 prohibit blood transfusions? Why or why not?
7. How would you answer the contention of the Jehovah's Witnesses that it is wrong to celebrate birthdays?
8. In your opinion, what is the most obvious contradiction between what the Witnesses teach and what the Bible teaches?
9. Give the details of at least one of the Jehovah's Witnesses' prophecies which has failed.
10. What is the biggest weakness of the Jehovah's Witnesses?

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