

Watchtower Bible and Tract Society

By Jason Barker

Founder: Charles Taze Russell

Founding Date: 1879

Official Publications: *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*; *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines; at least one new book and/or booklet is released each year for door-to-door distribution and congregational study.

Unique Terms: The Truth; Theocratic Organization; Faithful and Discreet Slave; Anointed Class; Great Crowd; Generation of 1914; Kingdom Hall.

HISTORY

In 1869, Charles Taze Russell, a former Presbyterian and Congregationalist, encountered a Second Adventist congregation near his clothing store in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. He later said regarding his early Adventist influences, "...though Adventism helped me to no single truth, it did help me greatly in the unlearning of errors, and thus prepared me for the Truth."¹ Included in this preparation was meeting Nelson H. Barbour in 1876, publisher of the Adventist newspaper *Herald of the Morning*, who taught that Christ returned to reign invisibly and begin the "Great Harvest" in 1874. Russell credited Barbour with awakening his interest in prophecy, and the two published several works before falling out in 1878.²

The split with Barbour motivated Russell to begin publishing *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* (later called *The Watchtower*) in 1879. Russell exhorted his readers to use his publications to proselytize, telling them in 1881, "We believe that none will be of the little flock (at this time Russell used the term for all believers) except preachers."³

Russell began to develop his own prophetic system with his second book, 1889's *The Time is at Hand*, in which he claimed that 1872 not only marked the beginning of the seventh millennium since the creation of the world, but that it was this chronological event that precipitated Christ's invisible return in October of 1874.⁴ God's judgment of the world began in 1878 (beginning with the "nominal church"), Russell concluded, and would end in 1914 when God would destroy the governmental "Gentile kingdoms" and give authority over the world to the true Church.⁵

As 1914 drew closer, Bible Students (as Jehovah's Witnesses were then called) began to wonder whether Russell's prophecy should be altered. In response to one such question, Russell responded, "We see no reason for changing the figures nor could we change them if we would. They are, we believe, God's dates, not ours."⁶ This created what the Watchtower Society calls "a time of testing" when 1914 passed without the prophesied apocalypse. Russell himself believed World War I would end with Armageddon. He died, however, in 1916, and the combination of his death and failed prophecies sent Bible Students' morale into a tailspin.⁷ This low morale was exacerbated by a struggle for control of the Watchtower Society, which was ultimately won by Joseph F. Rutherford (popularly called "Judge" because he had been a lawyer). The combination of failed prophecy and leadership struggles resulted in an almost sixteen percent decline in active membership between 1917-1919.⁸

Rutherford made the Watchtower Society's third failed prediction regarding the end times in 1920 when he wrote, "We may confidently expect that 1925 will mark the return of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the faithful prophets of old, particularly those named by the Apostle in Hebrews chapter eleven, to the condition of human perfection."⁹ Interestingly, after 1925 the Watchtower Society simply moved the date of this return to the indefinite future: the

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Society purchased a home in San Diego, which they named Beth Sarim, for use by resurrected biblical persons¹⁰ (the Society later simply said it had purchased the house for Rutherford¹¹). Despite the Watchtower Society's continued confidence, the failure of this prophecy resulted in a nearly ten percent drop in reported membership between 1925-1926.¹²

Given these years of turmoil, it is no surprise that between 1917-1930 a sizeable number of former Bible Students formed competing organizations, including the Pastoral Bible Institute, Berean Bible Institute, SteadFast Bible Students Association, and the Dawn Bible Students Association. To avoid being confused with these splinter groups, the Watchtower Society formally adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses" at their 1931 convention.¹³

The Watchtower Society experienced significant growth despite occasionally fierce opposition during the Depression and World War II, adding over 110,000 members between 1939-1946. This dynamic growth continued through the next twenty years, as membership reached 519,982 in 1953,¹⁴ and over 1,000,000 in 1964.¹⁵ This period also marked the publication of the Watchtower Society's *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*.¹⁶

Membership doubled over the next ten years¹⁷ as the Watchtower Society prepared for 1975, the year in which many Jehovah's Witnesses expected Armageddon to occur. In 1966 the Society slightly revised Russell's millennial timeline—whereas Russell said 1872 marked 6,000 years since the world's creation, the Society now claimed, "The seventh period of a thousand years of human history will begin in the fall of 1975 CE...It may be the purpose of God for Christ's reign to run parallel with the 7th millennium of man's existence."¹⁸

The failure of this prophecy resulted in the Watchtower Society's most notable decline in both morale and membership. Estimates for membership defection rate worldwide during the 1970s range from twenty to forty percent. Even when the defection rate eased, the number of hours spent in proselytism remained notably lower until the mid-1980s.¹⁹

The prolonged disillusionment of its membership prompted the Society to acknowledge that it had published some statements implying the probability of Armageddon occurring in 1975; at the same time, it claimed these statements were merely the work of isolated "persons having to do with the publication of the information that contributed to the buildup of hopes centered on that date" (rather than the Society itself), and that the blame ultimately lay with the Witnesses themselves.²⁰ History professor (and former Jehovah's Witness) James Penton even quotes Watchtower President Frederick Franz as saying to a gathering of Witnesses, "Do you know why nothing happened in 1975...It was because YOU expected something to happen!"²¹

While the Watchtower Society has become somewhat more circumspect in setting prophetic dates, it has continued to struggle with its prophecy concerning the "generation of 1914"—the generation of people who would live to see Armageddon. Originally referring to adults living in 1914,²² the Society later extended the definition of "generation of 1914" to include babies born in that year,²³ then finally simply to "the peoples of earth who see the sign of Christ's presence but fail to mend their ways,"²⁴ thereby extending the definition of "generation" to a purely symbolic—and safely timeless—group.

This redefinition is closely linked to a redefinition of the "anointed class" (see below), because it is from this group that the Society's Governing Body had been chosen. The Society has taught that the "anointed class" was filled by 1937,²⁵ resulting in the continual shrinking of their pool of potential leaders. In 2000, however, a member of the Governing Body addressed this problem during the announcement of a restructuring of the Society's legal corporation when he said there is no scriptural need for limiting the Governing Body to members of the "anointed class."²⁶ The Society has thereby removed the doctrinal and organizational obstacles to its ongoing survival.

Establishing future stability is important for the Watchtower Society because, while the failure of the 1975 prophecy resulted in a short-term—albeit serious—decline, activity among the membership rebounded, and the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses eventually reached 3,229,022 in 1986,²⁷ and in four years climbed to 4,017,213.²⁸ The Society now claims a membership of 7,508,050, who in 2010 engaged in 1.6 billion hours of door-to-door proselytism.²⁹

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

The Trinity: The Watchtower Society is emphatically anti-Trinitarian, saying, “Beyond a doubt, the Trinity doctrine has confused and diluted people’s understanding of God’s true position. It prevents people from accurately knowing the Universal Sovereign, Jehovah God, and from worshipping him on his terms.”³⁰ The Society teaches that the Bible contains no Trinitarian concept, but instead ancient pagan triadic deities and Platonism served as the source of the doctrine, which was brought into Christianity in the fourth century.³¹

God the Father: Jehovah, “the true God is one Person, separate from Jesus Christ.”³² He is the only eternally existing being,³³ and the Watchtower Society therefore translates Deuteronomy 6:4 as reading, “Jehovah our God is one Jehovah.”³⁴ While the Society acknowledges there is no way to determine the correct pronunciation of God’s name (since ancient Hebrew did not use vowels), it nonetheless maintains that Christians must use the name “Jehovah” when referring to God.³⁵

Jesus Christ: Jesus is “a very special person because he was created by God before all things.”³⁶ He is in fact the foremost angelic being, identified in the Bible as Michael the Archangel.³⁷ Through ages of living with Jehovah before his incarnation, Jesus “came to be just like his Father, Jehovah.”³⁸ Because Jesus was perfectly obedient to Jehovah’s will, he serves as “the key to the knowledge of God.”³⁹ Part of this obedience was his death on an upright pole, or “torture stake;” the Society argues there is no biblical evidence for Christ having undergone crucifixion.⁴⁰

The Holy Spirit: Holy spirit is “a force, not a person;”⁴¹ it is “Jehovah’s active force, used by the Almighty to accomplish his purposes.”⁴² The Watchtower Society uses two primary arguments to support their teaching that the spirit is not a personal being: because the Greek word for “spirit” (*pneu'ma*) is neuter, rather than masculine or feminine; and because holy spirit allegedly lacks personal identification.⁴³ The Society claims the misunderstanding of holy spirit as a divine person did not arise until the fourth century.⁴⁴

Eternal Life: The Watchtower Society divides its members into two classes: 144,000 members constitute the “anointed class” (also called the “little flock”) who will reign with Christ in heaven and who form the “faithful and discreet slave” who provide guidance for the organization,⁴⁵ and the “great crowd” of Witnesses whose hope is to survive Armageddon and spend eternity in a paradise on earth.⁴⁶ The Watchtower counted 11,202 members of the “anointed class” alive in 2010⁴⁷—interestingly, while the Watchtower Society claims the number of the 144,000 was filled in 1937 (as noted above), the number of people partaking of the bread and wine at the annual Lord’s Evening Meal (a privilege given only to members of the 144,000⁴⁸) has increased each year since 2002.⁴⁹

In contrast to these two groups, non-Jehovah’s Witnesses will not have an eternal existence. The Watchtower Society rejects the idea of eternal punishment in hell,⁵⁰ teaching instead that Jehovah will destroy the wicked at Armageddon.⁵¹

Birthdays and Holidays: Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to celebrate birthdays, linking such festivities to ancient celebrations of the birth of deities and nobility, as well as to astrology.⁵² They similarly refuse to celebrate all “religious and semireligious holidays.”⁵³

Blood Transfusions: Jehovah’s Witnesses are forbidden from receiving blood transfusions, believing transfusions violate the biblical commandment to abstain from blood.⁵⁴ Adults are likewise commanded to refuse blood transfusions being given, not only to their children,⁵⁵ but even to their pets.⁵⁶ Jehovah’s Witnesses are, however, permitted to receive blood fractions and expanders.⁵⁷

Governmental and Military Involvement: Jehovah’s Witnesses are forbidden from engaging in any “nonneutral activities,” such as running for elected office or voting,⁵⁸ nor will they salute a national or state flag or sing patriotic anthems,⁵⁹ seeing such activities as illicit support for the world and traitorous to God’s kingdom.⁶⁰ As noted above, Jehovah’s Witnesses will not engage in military service.⁶¹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

The Trinity is Biblical: The Watchtower Society is correct in asserting that there is only one God (Isa. 43:10; 44:6-8; 45:5-6, 18, 22; 1 Cor. 8:4), and that the Father is God (2 Pet. 1:17; Phil. 2:11). Contrary to their teaching, however, the Bible is clear that Jesus is God (John 1:1⁶²; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6-9; Heb. 1:8), and likewise that he himself claimed to be God (John 8:58). Jesus is the creator of *all* things (John 1:2-3; Col. 1:16), and therefore is not an angel (Heb. 1:6).

The Holy Spirit is also God (Acts 5:3-4), and is clearly a person (rather than an impersonal force) (John 16:13-14; Acts 8:29; 13:2).

Heaven and Hell: All Christians will go to heaven to be with God (John 14:1-4; Heb. 3:1; 12:22-24), whereas those condemned by God face eternal punishment in hell (Matt. 23:33; 25:41, 46; Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14-15).

False Prophecy: A prophet who prophesies falsely in God's name is condemned (Deut. 18:20-22). False prophets can be identified by their fruits (Matt. 7:15-20).

Notes

- ¹ *Jehovah's Witnesses—Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1993), 43-44.
- ² *Ibid.* 46-48.
- ³ *Ibid.* 48, 51.
- ⁴ Russell, Charles Taze. *The Time is at Hand. Millennial Dawn*, vol. II (Allegheny, PA: Tower Publishing Co, 1889), 3, 42, 54, 242, 363.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 81, 211-212, 239, 363.
- ⁶ *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, July 15, 1894, 226.
- ⁷ See, Penton, James M. *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of the Jehovah's Witnesses*. 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 46.
- ⁸ *1975 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1975), 80, 87-92, 94.
- ⁹ *Millions Now Living Will Never Die* (Brooklyn, NY: International Bible Students Association, 1920), 89-90.
- ¹⁰ Deed for the purchase of Lots 110 and 111 of Kensington Heights, Unit 2 in San Diego County, California. Dated December 24, 1929.
- ¹¹ 1975, 194.
- ¹² Rogerson, Alan, *Millions Now Living wil Never Die* (London: Constable, 1969), 54.
- ¹³ "A New Name," *The Watchtower*, October 1, 1931, 291; cf. *Proclaimers*, 82.
- ¹⁴ *Proclaimers*, 98, 100.
- ¹⁵ *1964 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1964), 287.
- ¹⁶ *Proclaimers*, 99.
- ¹⁷ 1975, 257.
- ¹⁸ *Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1966), 28-29.
- ¹⁹ Singelenberg, Richard. "It Separated the Wheat from the Chaff: The '1975' Prophecy and Its Impact Among Dutch Jehovah's Witnesses." *Sociological Analysis*, 50.1, 1989, 34, 35.
- ²⁰ "Choosing the Best Way of Life." *The Watchtower*, March 15, 1980, 17-18; the article quotes the July 15, 1976 issue of *The Watchtower*.
- ²¹ Quoted in Singelenberg, 34.
- ²² "What Will the 1970s Bring?" *Awake!* October 8, 1968, 13-14.
- ²³ "1914—The Generation that will not Pass Away." *The Watchtower*, May 15, 1984, 5.
- ²⁴ "A Time to Keep Awake," *The Watchtower*, November 1, 1995, 19.
- ²⁵ *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1958), 194-95; *Man's Salvation Out of World Distress at Hand!* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1975), 302.
- ²⁶ "Watchtower Reorganizes for Legal Advantages," Free Minds, Inc., <http://www.watchtowernews.org/reorganization.htm> (accessed November 30, 2011).
- ²⁷ "Jubilation Among God's People," *The Watchtower*, January 1, 1987, 7.
- ²⁸ *1991 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1991), 44.
- ²⁹ *2011 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2011), 51.
- ³⁰ *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 30.
- ³¹ *Ibid.* 6, 11-12.
- ³² *The Knowledge That Leads to Eternal Life*. 2006 printing (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1995), 31.
- ³³ *Let God Be True*. 2nd ed (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1952), 25.
- ³⁴ *Knowledge*, 31; cf. Mark 12:28, 29, NWT.
- ³⁵ *The Divine Name* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1984), 7-10, 28-31; *The Knowledge That Leads to Eternal Life*, 24, 27.
- ³⁶ *The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1991), Introduction.
- ³⁷ *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* 2009 printing (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2005), 219.
- ³⁸ *Knowledge*, 39.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* 41.
- ⁴⁰ *Insight on the Scriptures*. Vol. 2, Jehovah-Zuzim and Index (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), 1116-17.
- ⁴¹ *Holy Spirit* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1976), 12.
- ⁴² *Knowledge*, 31.
- ⁴³ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 2, 1019.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Come Be My Follower* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2007), 164. The Governing Body represents the "faithful and discreet slave," and only a limited number of the anointed serve in preparing literature and other materials; see "The Faithful Steward and Its Governing Body," *The Watchtower*, June 15, 2009, 24.
- ⁴⁶ *Insight on the Scriptures*. Vol. 1, (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988), 996.
- ⁴⁷ *2011 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses*, 51.
- ⁴⁸ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 2, 270.
- ⁴⁹ See the "Memorial Partakers Worldwide" statistic in the *Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* for each year of 2003-2011.
- ⁵⁰ "What Really is Hell?" *The Watchtower*, July 15, 2002, 5-7.
- ⁵¹ "Armageddon—A Happy Beginning." *The Watchtower*, December 1, 2005, 4-7; *Keep on the Watch!* 2006 printing (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2004), 14.
- ⁵² *Jehovah's Witnesses and Education* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2002), 15-16.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.* 18.
- ⁵⁴ *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Question of Blood* (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1977), 16, 17.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 33.
- ⁵⁶ "Questions from the Readers." *The Watchtower*, February 15, 1964, 127.
- ⁵⁷ "Questions from the Readers." *The Watchtower*, June 15, 2000, 29-31.
- ⁵⁸ "Pay Attention to Yourselves and to All the Flock" (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1991), 95-96.
- ⁵⁹ "Salvation Belongs to Jehovah." *The Watchtower*, September 15, 2002, 21, 23.
- ⁶⁰ "Questions from the Readers." *The Watchtower*, Nov. 1, 1999, 28-29.
- ⁶¹ See "What the Love of God Means." *The Watchtower*, May 1, 1989, 28.
- ⁶² For more on the Watchtower's Society's translation of *theos*, see Countess, Robert H. "The Translation of *Theos* in the *New World Translation*." *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Summer 1967, 153-160.



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