

Christianity vs Jehovah's Witnesses



Summary:

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the Watchtower Society is God's "sole channel of communication" to people on earth. Accordingly, only membership in their organization constitutes being a true Christian. Witnesses believe that all other Christians groups are not actually Christians. Today, Jehovah's Witnesses are governed by a board of elders which is headquartered in Brooklyn, New York. Witnesses believe that the destruction of this present world is near at hand, and that after Armageddon, God's kingdom will be established over the whole world. They do not believe in the Trinity, the divinity of Christ or the reality of hell. The Watchtower Society classifies as a cult in that if one were to believe and practice the official doctrine of the Watchtower Society, they would be denying core aspects of the Gospel message.

Brief History:

Jehovah's Witnesses have been significantly impacted by their various Presidents. The founder of the Watchtower Society was Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). Russell was a member of a congregational church, but became very troubled by the idea of predestination and hell as eternal punishment. This dissatisfaction eventually led him to join the Seventh Day Adventists. Following a teacher named N. H. Barbour, he became convinced that Jesus' Second Coming would occur in 1874. This would commence a 40 year period of "harvest." When Jesus did not return that year, Barbour and he claimed that Jesus did come, but that His return had been invisible and spiritual in nature, and that Jesus would physically return in 1914.

Barbour and Russell started a periodical in 1878 called *The Herald of the Morning*. A year later Russell and Barbour split, and Russell began publishing *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*—which later became the Watchtower Magazine. Through this periodical and his preaching, Russell spread his teachings, which deny the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the deity and personality of the Holy Spirit and the existence of hell (among other things). Russell also taught that his books and publications were indispensable for understanding the Bible. Without them one would remain in spiritual darkness. It is worth noting that Jehovah's Witnesses now deny many of the tenets and practices that Russell originally taught and held.

After Russell's death in 1916, the new President was Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942). He had been serving as the society's legal counselor. He made many changes to the beliefs of Witnesses, and dissatisfaction with his leadership and election led many Witnesses to leave the Society altogether. Rather than emphasizing literature-led Bible study and character development (as Russell had done), Rutherford placed great stress on handing out literature and making calls to people's homes.

He also changed the official stance of Witnesses to one of non-involvement in the military. He centralized the leadership of the Witnesses from being congregational-led to a “theocratic” (really autocratic) type of church government. He predicted that Christ would return in 1925.

Nathan Knorr (1905-1977) was the third President of the Society. He had become a Witness preacher at 18 and later had become the general manager of the publishing office and plant. Knorr focused on improving the training programs for Jehovah’s Witnesses; He re-worked some of the doctrine and published books for local educational purposes. He is responsible for the New World Translation of the Bible—the Bible that Witnesses still use today. It is worth noting that the members of the translation committee for this Bible were never divulged. During his time of leadership, a governing board was established and now there is a body of elderly men that lead the Watchtower Society.

Frederick W. Franz was the fourth president and began his leadership in 1977. He predicted that Christ would return in 1975. There was much disappointment and disillusionment among the Witnesses when this prediction failed (many Witnesses had sold homes and left jobs to preach full-time leading up to Christ’s return). Milton G. Henschel was the fifth president and began his leadership in 1992. Henschel stepped down from leadership in 2000, when a major re-organization of the Society occurred. The governing board of the Witnesses is now led by Don A. Adams.

Basic Beliefs:

Defining the official doctrine of the Watchtower Society is difficult for two reasons. First, the Watchtower Society refuses to publish an official “Statement of belief.” They prefer, rather, to spread their beliefs unofficially through their publications. It is also complicated by the fact the official Witness beliefs have changed many times through the years (Witnesses refer to this as receiving “new light”). What is presented here is the best I can piece together from various sources on what Jehovah’s Witnesses believe today.

God:

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not believe in the Trinity. They believe that God’s true and exclusive name is Jehovah. Witnesses believe that Jehovah is eternal—but neither omnipresent or omniscient.

Jesus/Christ:

Witnesses believe that Jesus is not fully equal with Jehovah, nor fully divine. Rather, they believe that Jesus is the first creation of Jehovah and that the rest of the cosmos was created through Jesus.

Witnesses believe that Jesus/Christ has taken several different forms:

- Pre-humanity: Witnesses believe that Jesus was the archangel Michael.
- Human form: Witnesses do not believe in the incarnation. They believe that at the moment when Jesus was to be conceived, Jesus/Michael willed himself out of existence, and Jehovah (not the Holy Spirit) caused a baby to be conceived with the mind and personality of Jesus/Michael. According to Witnesses, during his earthly existence Jesus was just a man—he did not have two natures. Jesus was just like all other men until His baptism. At that point he became the Christ. Witnesses believe that Jesus did not die on a cross, but on a torture stake. They view the cross as a pagan object of worship (they think that Christians worship the cross as an idol). They also believe that in order to atone for Adam’s sin, Christ had to sacrifice his body permanently. If Christ were to be resurrected that would be equivalent to taking back the ransom which He had paid to atone for sin. Therefore, Witnesses reject the resurrection. They believe that Jehovah disposed of Jesus’ body, and then re-made Michael the archangel/Jesus.
- Post-Human: After Jesus’ death, Jehovah re-made Michael/Jesus. Jesus now reigns at the right hand of Jehovah and will return one day with judgment and to bring the kingdom of God to earth.

Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is not considered a person by Witnesses. It is an invisible force which finds its source in Jehovah.

Creation:

Witnesses reject all forms of evolution and believe that everything was made either directly by Jesus, or at least with His cooperation. They believe that each “day” of creation was 7,000 years long and that we are currently still living in the seventh day.

Humans:

Witnesses believe that humans were created good. They also believe in an inherent unity of the human person. In other words, a human is a soul/body unity that cannot be separated. Accordingly, physical death means the annihilation of the person.

Sin:

Witnesses believe that the penalty of Adam’s sin was physical death. They take Romans 6:23 (“for the wages of sin is death”) literally to mean that every person must pay for their own sins by dying. What was lost by Adam (and restored through Christ) is perfect human life. Witnesses do not place much emphasis on personal sin. Instead of forgiveness, we need education (teaching).

Salvation:

One can differentiate between several different aspects of salvation for Jehovah’s Witnesses. First, Witnesses believe that through Jesus’ death he paid the ransom for the sin that we inherited from Adam. They do not believe that Christ died for the personal sins of people. Rather, through his death he paid the price of death. Accordingly, now everyone may, when they are resurrected, experience the perfect life that Adam had with God.

Additionally, for Witnesses, salvation means two completely different things depending on which class you are in. There is an “anointed class” (the 144,000) and the “other sheep.”

- **Anointed Class:** The anointed class must believe, repent, and hold to pure Watchtower doctrine. The anointed class are the only ones who need to be justified. What Witnesses mean by justification is that these anointed ones receive the right to a perfect life on earth. However, like Jesus, they choose to sacrifice this perfect earthly life in order to share in the heavenly life. If they hold their integrity until death they will receive immortality and reign with Christ for a thousand years. According to Watchtower publications, the complete number of the 144,000 was reached in 1935. Publications also emphasize that the anointed class will have to sacrifice having families and the pleasures of earth in order to reign with Christ. Accordingly most Witnesses would not want to be part of this class even if they could.
- **The “Other Sheep”:** Witnesses believe that being “born again,” and “justified” are only necessary for the Anointed class. This means that, for the majority of Witnesses, they will be justified not by faith but by their “unbreakable steadfastness” during this life and during the millennium. They believe they will be judged by Jehovah according to how faithful they are to the Watchtower Society.

Church:

Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that Jehovah has always had one central organization through which He channels all of his communications to humans. To a Witness, when God’s organization (the Watchtower Society) speaks, it is just like God speaking. To refuse to believe everything the Society claims is equivalent to blaspheming God. They believe that the Watchtower Society is the only organization which has the authority and inspiration to interpret Scripture correctly. This is why they place a great

emphasis on getting people to read their publications. Witnesses believe that organized Christianity—especially from the fourth century onward, represented the “man of lawlessness.”

One must be baptized (as an adult) into the Jehovah’s Witness church to be guaranteed that they are following God’s will. Witnesses also celebrate the Lord’s Supper. However, they only practice this once a year, supposedly on the exact date Christ died. Also, only members of the “anointed class” are allowed to take of the Lord’s Supper. Therefore at each Lord’s Supper, only a very few in attendance take the elements.

Last Things:

Witnesses believe that when a person dies, they are gone. Accordingly, there is no belief in Hades or hell. Hell simply refers to the annihilation of a person.

Witnesses believe that Jesus will return soon, bringing destruction and judgment with Him—and then the millennial (1,000) year reign of Christ will begin. At that time all the inhabitants of the earth will be destroyed in Armageddon—except for faithful Jehovah’s Witnesses. Christ will reign, with the 144,000 (the anointed class), in heaven over this earthly kingdom. All of the “other sheep” will work to make the earth into paradise: tearing down old buildings, planting gardens, building homes, etc.

During this thousand year reign of Christ, almost every person who has ever died will be raised from the dead, taught the truth of God by Jehovah’s Witnesses, and given a chance to repent and choose life. If they choose life they will continue to live in this millennial kingdom. If they do not repent they will be annihilated once and for all. The only ones who will not be raised from the dead during this time will be Jehovah’s Witnesses who have been disfellowship for various reasons.

After the Thousand year reign of Christ, there will be a final battle with Satan and then Jesus will hand the kingdom over to Jehovah.

Sharing Christ with Jehovah’s Witnesses

- 1) **Pray**, and be attentive to the guidance of the Spirit.
- 2) **Build friendships**: Most Witnesses (who joined as adults) joined the movement because of an emotional need.
- 3) **Do not argue about the Trinity or the deity of Christ**: Witnesses are taught many arguments for their view about the Trinity and the deity of Christ. You won’t get very far if you start here, and (more importantly) you probably won’t get them to start thinking on their own.
- 4) **Do ask questions in order to get them thinking**: Like many cults, Witnesses are taught to never question their beliefs or the Watchtower Society. If you can get a Witness outside of their normal (memorized) arguments, then they will start to think for themselves, and may start to question what they have been fed.
- 5) **Do get them to question the Watchtower Society**: The Watchtower Society has made many errors over the years. If you can help a Witness look at some of these and understand them, it can work a long ways towards getting them out of the movement.
- 6) **Do look at the context**: If a Witness uses a verse out of context, explain the importance of context, and then ask them if they would be willing to study the chapter where that verse comes from.
- 7) **Do ask Bible questions**: Witnesses believe that they should be Bible teachers, and everyone else students. You can play along with this, but ask that you study a whole book of the Bible together (such as Ephesians)—rather than a theological topic. Then, as you read through that book of the Bible, ask a lot of questions about the text (In this context, what does Paul mean by “grace?” What does he mean by “works”? etc.)

- 8) **Do not invite them to church:** Witnesses are taught that Satan will enter their heart if they walk through the doors of a church building. Even after a Witness has come to Christ, it might take them a long time to feel comfortable attending Sunday morning services.
- 9) **Do invite them to a home Bible study:** It is best to stay away from using literature-based studies. Before coming to Christ, a Witness believes that only the Watchtower's literature contains truth, so they will be skeptical of whatever study you use. After coming to Christ a Witness will be scared of being deceived all over again through literature about the Bible. Accordingly, it is best just to work through a book of the Bible together.

Hard Questions/Discussion Starters:

Note: These questions are not for the purposes of getting into an argument, but rather to help a Jehovah's Witness think outside of their memorized arguments and to start to question the Watchtower Society. Almost all of these questions come from Wilbur Lingle's book *Approaching Jehovah's Witnesses in Love*. His book contains many more questions than what I have included here.

- Witnesses believe that questioning the organization is equivalent to questioning Jehovah Himself. But the truth is, I could start a religious organization and make that claim! How can you know for sure that the Watchtower Society is God's sole channel of communication if you are not allowed to investigate it and know more about its leaders?
- Why would God make people wait 1,900 years before bringing an organization that has the authority to illuminate the Bible?
- Watchtower publications quote a lot of different books and encyclopedias. That must mean that these books contain at least some truth. Are you free to read these sources? Why can the leaders of the Watchtower Society read these sources, but not you?
- According to Watchtower teachings, every person will be raised during the 1,000 year reign of Christ —except for disfellowshipped Witnesses. This means that murderers and rapists will be given a chance to repent, but disfellowshipped Witnesses will not. Why is the Watchtower Society so severe with its members when the God of the Watchtower is apparently so lenient?
- You believe that God is going to destroy the wicked people of the earth, have the Jehovah's Witnesses work to rebuild the earth and make it beautiful, and then He will resurrect all of the wicked people to enjoy the beautiful world that the Witnesses have worked hard to create. Can you help me understand why anybody would want to become a Jehovah's Witness if this is the case?
- Can you tell me what teachings of the Watchtower are 100% from God and will never change? How can the Watchtower Society claim to be God's exclusive organization when it cannot give me assurance that its current teachings are actually the truth?
- I have heard that the Watchtower supposedly admits its mistakes when it receives "new light." Would you please show me one place in a Watchtower publication where they admit that they have made a mistake and have apologized for it? (There aren't any) Can you tell me what kind of restitution they have made for their mistakes? (Did they do anything for the people who sold their homes and quit their jobs because of the 1975 prediction of Christ's return?)
- The Watchtower talks about receiving "new light." Is this from God? If it comes from God, that should mean that it is absolute truth and will never need future changing. If it comes from men, how does this work? How do the men on the governing board figure out what to present as "new light?"
- Why aren't you free to decide if the "new light" is legitimate or not, or at least discuss it, if the organization admits that it does sometimes make mistakes?
- How can you present what you are teaching as the truth, when there is a possibility that it could be changed with "new light" at any time?
- 1 John 4:1 talks about testing a religious claim. How did you investigate the Watchtower Society before you joined? Did you read books both for and against it? Did you read the Bible in its entirety and then come to the same conclusions and beliefs that the Watchtower holds?

Challenges for Us:

- **Exegesis not Eisegesis:** Jehovah's Witnesses are notorious for using bible verses out of context. The goal of good Bible study is to extract the meaning from the text (*ex*-egesis), not read what you already think into the text (*eis*-egesis). However, the truth is that all of us have a natural tendency to read and interpret the Bible in such a way that it supports what we already believe to be true. We must be humble as we approach the text and learn to hold our positions with openness.
- **Beware of equations and dates!** Jehovah's Witnesses began out of failed predictions about when Christ would return. In the course of their movement there has been over four different predictions about when Christ would return—none of which have come true. This should be a warning to Christians to beware of any prediction of Christ's return. Jesus Himself said that "no one knows the day or the hour" (Matthew 24:36). By the way, He also said that we should *always* be ready for His return (Matthew 24:44). If we are actually living this way, what would be the point of knowing anyway?
- **The importance of church history and tradition:** With respect to Jesus' deity, Jehovah's Witnesses fall into the early Christian heresy of Arianism (the view that Jesus is of *like* substance to the Father but not of the *same* substance). Heresies are named as such because when you work out how that belief affects the Gospel message, it distorts it in such a way that it is no longer the Gospel message. The challenge for us is: do we know our church history and theology? Are we learning and growing in this area? Do we trust that the Spirit was at work in the believers who have gone before us?
- **Are we being good neighbors?** Adults who convert to Jehovah's Witnesses often do so because of an emotional need for acceptance. Someone moves to a new neighborhood, no one welcomes them or befriends them, and then a friendly Jehovah's Witness knocks on their door... Sadly, folks sometimes find more acceptance and love in Jehovah's Witnesses than they do in their neighbors. Make sure that you are being welcoming and hospitable to those God has placed around you—especially new folks to your neighborhood.

Sources Used:

- *Approaching Jehovah's Witnesses in Love: How to Witness Effectively Without Arguing* by Wilbur Lingle (Christian Literature Crusade: 1994) A great book on the basics of what Jehovah's Witnesses believe, as well as a lot of information on how to share your faith with Witnesses.
- *Jehovah's Witnesses* by Anthony A. Hoekema (Eerdmans: 1963) A good introduction to the basics of belief. However, the information contained is somewhat dated at this point. When you have a movement that is constantly changing with "new light," it is very important to have an up-to-date book.
- *The End of Religion* by Bruxy Cavey (NavPress: 2007) This book is not so much about Jehovah's Witnesses as it is about what it really means to be a Christian. The main point is that Christ brought an end to any kind of religious work that would earn God's favor and make us right with Him. In one of the chapters Bruxy offers a great framework for understanding the essentials of what makes someone a Christian, and relates how Jehovah's Witnesses fail that test.