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Jehovah Witness: The Historical Background

Charles Taze Russell was born on February 16, 1852 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, the second of five children born to Joseph and Ann Russell. Charles grew up in a devout home and his parents were respected members of the Presbyterian church. When he was young, his family moved to Pittsburgh, where his father came to own a number of haberdashery stores. In his early teens Charles became a partner in this business and soon owned several of the locations.

As a boy Charles had a great deal of religious enthusiasm, and while still only a teenager left his Presbyterian congregation to attend a Congregational church. As a form of evangelism, he would often go to public locations and use chalk to write out Bible verses related to sin and damnation. But then, at the age of sixteen, he engaged in a debate with a friend that led him to question the reliability of the Bible and the validity of the Christian faith. He embarked on a period of religious searching and dabbled in many Eastern religions before determining that they, too, were empty and unsatisfying.

When Charles was eighteen, he encountered Adventist preaching and began to regularly attend a Bible study. It was not long before he determined that he could not reconcile an eternal hell with a merciful God. Over the next two years he came to question many other historic Christian doctrines and became convinced that the historic creeds betrayed true Christianity. At the same time, he adopted Adventist teachings: that the end times had begun in 1799, that Christ had returned invisibly in 1874 and been crowned King of Heaven four years later, that all Christians who had already died would be resurrected before the end of 1878, and that 1914 would mark the end of a harvest period and usher in Armageddon. He sold his five clothing stores, an act that generated a substantial amount of money (today's equivalent of several million dollars), and committed his life to writing, publishing, and funding the propagation of the message of Christ's imminent return. He did this at first through a partnership with Nelson H. Barbour and his Adventist periodical *Herald of the Morning*.

When 1878 came and went without any of the predicted events, he was forced to re-examine his beliefs and to distance himself from some of his Adventist peers, including Barbour. He founded his own periodical which he titled *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*. At this time, he also married Maria Frances Ackley in an apparently celibate union that would last until 1897 before ending in an acrimonious divorce.

In 1881 Russell founded the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society which grew to a substantial publishing venture, and there were soon some 16 million of his books and booklets in print. His ministry and his opportunities to preach grew exponentially and Pastor Russell, as he became known, soon had followers all over the Northern and Eastern states. He preached and wrote constantly, his sermons were printed in several thousand newspapers around the globe, and he became one of the most famous preachers in the world. He eventually moved the headquarters of the Watch Tower Society to Brooklyn, New York, where they remain today.

Russell died of cystitis on October 31, 1916, near Pampa, TX, as he attempted to return to his home in Brooklyn. By the time of his death, his writings had become among the most widely distributed works in the world. Some estimate that when he died, only the Bible and the Chinese almanac were in greater circulation than his myriad books and pamphlets.

False Teaching

Unlike so many other false teachers before and after him, Russell did not rely upon visions or other extra-biblical revelation. Rather, he simply interpreted, and misinterpreted, the Bible. While claiming to be a Christian and, in fact, a Christian who was restoring the faith of the New Testament, he denied many key Christian doctrines including eternal punishment, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the existence of the Holy Spirit.

Russell, as with most Adventists, denied the existence of hell as a place where the wicked face God's wrath. He also held that the soul simply ceases to exist after death.

As with [Arius](#) centuries before, he held that Jesus was a created being, and was actually Michael the Archangel in human form. While he taught that this Jesus died on behalf of humanity, he also taught that Jesus rose only spiritually rather than physically. While he denied the *divinity* of Jesus, he denied the *existence* of the Holy Spirit, teaching that the Spirit is not a person, but simply a name given to express a specific manifestation of

God's power. In denying the divinity of Jesus and the existence of the Holy Spirit, he necessarily denied the Trinity.

Followers and Modern Adherents

Those who followed Russell during his lifetime referred to themselves as Bible Students. In the years following his death, Joseph Franklin Rutherford succeeded him as president of the Watch Tower Society. Despite many people withdrawing from the Bible Study movement, and despite those who remained splitting many times over, Rutherford's followers maintained control of the Watch Tower Society and officially renamed themselves Jehovah's witnesses in July 1931. The Watch Tower Society remains the official religious body of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Though both their beliefs and their structure have evolved in the past century, they continue to state that there is one God in one person, that there is no Trinity, that Jesus was God's first created being, that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force, and that there is no hell. While Russell is honored among Jehovah's Witnesses, they do not refer to him as their founder. Rather, they hold that Jesus is their founder while Russell was simply a man used by God to restore beliefs that had been lost.

Today there are some 8 million Jehovah's Witnesses in the world.

Jehovah Witness: The Basic Theology

Jehovah Witness theology has many subtle (and not-so-subtle) nuances. Here are the basics of Watchtower doctrine:

1. God is a single being, not a Trinity.
2. He is not all-knowing or present everywhere.
3. First, God created Michael the Archangel, through whom God later created all "other things," such as the earth, the universe, and all mankind. This process took place over exactly 42,000 years. When it was time for the birth of a savior, Michael became a man, in the form of Jesus Christ. He was without sin and kept every law of God.
4. According to Jehovah's Witness theology, Jesus was put to death on a "torture stake." It is here that He bore the sins of all mankind (except for Adam). Later, Jesus rose from death in spirit, but did not rise in physical form.

5. Jehovah's Witnesses who faithfully abide by God's organization on earth (the WBTS – The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society) will be spared from eternal annihilation. They will live forever on Paradise Earth.

6. Heaven is a special place that is reserved for a distinct group of 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been deemed "born again" by the WBTS and are allowed to take annual communion.

7. Generally, Jehovah's Witnesses agree to attend five meetings a week where they are taught from WBTS literature. After studying the material for at least six months, they answer a series of questions before a panel of elders, and upon approval, are baptized into the organization.

8. Followers are then asked to maintain a modest appearance and demeanor, refusing to vote in government elections, salute the American flag, join the U.S. armed forces, or celebrate birthdays and Christmas.
 - a. Each member is required to fulfill a schedule of public canvassing in order to distribute WBTS literature and collect donations for WBTS headquarters in New York. If a Jehovah's Witness leaves the organization, he is shunned in all ways.

 - b. Outside the WBTS organization, "Christendom" is considered "demonic." Christianity is deemed "apostate," filled with pastors who are antichrists, in churches run by Satan, who support the earthly governments.

Jehovah Witness: Watchtower Doctrine vs. Christian Doctrine

What the Bible Says

The Bible teaches clearly, forcefully, and repeatedly that hell is real and that in hell God's wrath is poured out upon the wicked in conscious, eternal punishment.

The Bible teaches with equal force and clarity that Jesus is co-eternal with God, uncreated, and in all ways fully divine. This is proven in a host of places in the New

Testament. Among them are **John 20:28**, where Thomas exclaims to Jesus, **“My Lord and my God,”** **Acts 7:59** where Stephen prays to Jesus, and **John 10:30** where Jesus claims, **“I and the Father are one.”** John 1 is a key text that the Bible of the Jehovah’s Witnesses has modified to make Jesus “a god” rather than “God.”

That the Holy Spirit is a person rather than an impersonal force or manifestation of the power of God is attested in many passages that refer to the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A host of verses speak to his personhood, including **Romans 8:11**, **“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”** The Spirit is a person who can teach, be grieved, be resisted, speak, help, and so much more besides.

Jehovah Witness and Christian theology actually have some basic similarities.

Generally, they both teach that God is the Creator of everything, as opposed to naturalistic evolution, and they both share the belief that Jesus Christ will ultimately return to earth to destroy Satan and establish God's eternal kingdom. However, this is where the general similarities cease. There are many important differences in doctrine between the Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Christianity, most important of which is the person and nature of Jesus Christ. The deity of Christ is the central point of the entire Bible. Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is God. The Jehovah Witness teachings concerning Jesus Christ clearly contradict the teachings of the Bible. Multiple passages tell us that Jesus Christ, who existed as God, took the bodily form of a humble servant so that He could die on the cross in our place.

Jehovah Witness doctrine considers the 66 books of *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (NWT) as the only true and divinely inspired Word of God. The NWT is produced and published by an "anonymous" translation committee of the WBTS. The NWT is regarded BY Jehovah’s Witnesses as the best and only translation of the Bible, because "the translators held so closely to what is in the original Bible languages." In addition, the "governing body" of the WBTS is regarded as God's only true channel of accurate biblical interpretation. As such, Jehovah Witness doctrine requires that we be "associated with God's channel, his organization" in order to be true followers of God. This means that there is no salvation apart from the WBTS. Christian doctrine holds that the Bible is indeed composed of the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments and is indeed the inspired and infallible Word of God.

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However, the NWT is not a legitimate translation, and merely reflects Jehovah Witness theology, especially its bias against the deity of Jesus Christ and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. For example, John 1:1 in the NWT reads, "***and the Word [Jesus] was a god.***" All other legitimate Bible translations say, "and the Word [Jesus] was God."

Jehovah Witness: The Basic Christian Response

As far as the Jehovah's Witness claim that the NWT is the only true interpretation of the Bible, the Christian response is that no religious leader or religious organization can claim exclusive control or possession of the true interpretation of the Bible.

Through the Holy Spirit, all Christians are capable of interpreting and understanding the Holy Bible. As far as the Jehovah's Witness claim that the WBTS is the only way to God and salvation, the Christian response is that all people who have accepted the free gift of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior are saved. Salvation is "by grace through faith" in Jesus Christ alone.

No amount of works or membership in any religious group is required to receive eternal life from and eventually with God. Eternal life comes through faith in Jesus Christ; as God in the flesh; that died on the cross; that rose again.