# All along the Watchtower

The Jehovah’s Witnesses

When I say ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’, what comes to mind? ((Allow popcorn answers, and then fill in any gaps)): Well-dressed people doing door to door visits. Magazines left in public places. Or darker: Parents letting their children die rather than accepting a blood transfusion.

((Ask someone to define ‘cult’)) The Jehovah’s Witnesses definitely fit our definition of a cult from last week. Again, a cult doesn’t have to look strange from the outside to be a cult. Even so, they are a smaller sect within a larger religion and they use scripture selectively instead of as a whole in an attempt to make the Bible say things that simply aren’t in there. The Watchtower Society makes several serious errors, especially in the categories of ‘Errors about God and Christ’, ‘Salvation’, and ‘The Future’. We’ll get to the specifics of that in a few minutes.

To understand what the witnesses believe, you must first understand a little about where they came from. The story starts with a fellow by the name of Charles Taze Russell **(Slide 2)**. Born in 1852 in Pennsylvania to a Presbyterian family; very religious folks. Russell rebelled in his teenage years, however, after rejecting the doctrines of predestination and hell. Russell started his own Bible study, the International Bible Students. This was the forerunner of what we now call the Jehovah’s Witnesses. He also published a leaflet called ‘Zion’s Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Presence’. Its name was not an accident. Russell determined, he claimed, from careful analysis of scripture that Christ had returned already, but invisibly, in 1874. Let’s take a quick peek at Acts 1:11. Apparently that didn’t matter to Russell. He also predicted that the millennial reign, God’s paradise on Earth, would begin in 1914. This opinion was shaped by the work of a man named William Miller **(Slide 3)**. The two never met, Miller died three years before Russell was born, but Miller’s ideas were reflected in Russell’s theology and that of his successors. Let’s back up for a second and take a look at William Miller.

William Miller was essentially the televangelist of his day. He was incredibly charismatic, and his message was very popular. He attracted a following that numbered in the millions. Miller predicted through a long and very complex series of calculations that Christ was coming back in 1843. Apparently he forgot that the Bible says no man knows the day or hour of Christ’s return, which also implies that no man can figure it out… Since we’re all still here it should be fairly obvious that Christ declined to come back in 1843. Miller, not dissuaded by failure or the book of Deuteronomy, recalculated everything and apologized for the error, revising his prediction to October 1844. His followers sold their houses, land, and just about everything else that wasn’t nailed down or on fire which turned out to be a bad move when Christ neglected to show up in time for Halloween 1844. As you can imagine there were more than a few broken hearts.

To his credit, Miller gave up, repented, and walked away from date setting for good. His followers…? Not so much. This pair **(Slide 4)**, Ellen G. White and her husband, James Springer White, are the founders of one of the splinter movements that came out of the ‘Great disappointment of 1844’ as the failure of Miller’s second prediction came to be called. The Whites founded a group that eventually morphed into today’s Seventh Day Adventist Church. They, like most early Adventists, held a heretical theology known as Arianism. We touched on it briefly last week, but as a reminder Arianism denies the deity of Jesus Christ as well as the existence of the soul. Basically, to an Arian, once a person dies that’s it. Now then… isn’t that a cheery thought? The teachings of today’s mainstream Seventh Day Adventists, while still dangerous in some areas, at least accept the trinity. Time permitting we will look into this more in week six. Regardless, the Adventist philosophy of Ellen G. White influenced Charles Taze Russell further.

Russell died in 1916 and was replaced by a very interesting fellow named Joseph Franklin Rutherford, or “Judge” Joseph Rutherford **(Slide 5)**. Even before Russell’s death, Rutherford had been preaching with certainty that William Miller’s prior predictions of Christ’s return were only partially wrong. Wait… what? The calculations were off, Rutherford claimed, because Miller didn’t factor in the length of the passageways inside the Great Pyramid of Giza. Of course. How could he be so foolish? Rutherford had a habit of consulting extra biblical sources to gain insight, which is not bad if done with the understanding that when there is a conflict the Bible is right and the other source is not. It also helps if the two are actually talking about the same thing. You see, apparently Miller’s assertion that Christ returned invisibly in 1874 was unfounded. In truth, Rutherford claimed, Christ’s invisible Second Advent was in 1914 (a position still held by the Watchtower Society today) and that his bodily return would be in 1915. Failing at that prediction, and emboldened by his appointment to replace Russell as the leader of the church, Rutherford announced that Christ was coming in 1918 instead. He arrived at this conclusion by deciding that the passageways in question must be longer than he had originally thought. Sure. That’s got to be it.

In 1920, Rutherford published a pamphlet entitled ‘Millions Now Living Will Never Die!’ He was so convinced of the truth behind his message that he toured the country, and outside it as well, attracting large audiences. In his pamphlet, Rutherford made the curious prediction that the ancient prophets, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Samuel, and more, would be bodily resurrected in 1925. It didn’t happen, of course, but despite having failed the test of a prophet several times over he continued to preach that their return was ‘imminent’. In fact, he was so convinced that he was right that he had a house built for them in San Diego in 1929 which he named Beth Sarim, the House of Princes. Since there were no princes in residence, Rutherford lived in the house himself. There was some rebellion in the ranks at this time over some of Rutherford’s more controversial statements and policies, which resulted in Rutherford remaking the governing body and other parts of church leadership. Gradually he began grabbing more power for himself, ultimately declaring a number of startling doctrinal changes and summarily dismissing anyone who didn’t unquestioningly agree with him. On Rutherford’s watch, church membership fell from about 90,000 to around 17,000. By 1928 the church was so divided that a few splinter groups breaking away from Rutherford. The organization as a whole survived, of course, and in 1931 the church’s name was changed to Jehovah’s Witnesses which is the name we know it by today.

**(Slide 6)** It’s no secret that The Watchtower Society is well known for their door to door evangelism campaigns. Of the more than 18,000,000 members worldwide in 200 countries and territories, 7 million of them regularly go door to door investing 1.5 billion hours per year spreading their message. The Watchtower Society also publishes two magazines which you may or may not be familiar with. The Watchtower, an outgrowth of Charles Russell’s original publication, is printed in over 180 languages monthly. The other is ‘Awake!’ and it is printed in more than 100 languages. The same materials are available online in 300 or more languages and dialects. The simultaneous publication of these magazines in so many languages on a monthly basis is a feat unrivalled since the invention of the printing press. These are the most widely circulated periodicals on the planet, and they are being circulated in the name of a lie.

**(Slide 7)** Where do the Witnesses claim to get their authority from? They claim, unsurprisingly, that it comes from the Bible… but it’s not just any Bible. It is their Bible. The New World Translation. You must understand that this is a dishonest translation… in fact it’s not a translation at all. The New World Translation was created in 1950 because the witnesses couldn’t get the King James and other contemporary translations to say what they wanted them to say. They simply would not fit their doctrine. This is the height of human arrogance… trying to make God’s word say what we want instead of listening to what it actually says. The NWT distorts scripture in over 300 places, twisting it to fit their doctrine instead of building their doctrine on sound biblical authority. For example, let’s compare the first verse of the New Testament from the ESV that we use here at Liferoads to the New World Translation:

ESV: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
NWT: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.

The difference is subtle, but it completely changes the meaning and, as we discovered earlier, fits with the denial of Jesus’s (the Word’s) divinity. The NWT teaches that Jesus was a created being, that man has no soul, that there is no such place as hell, and more. It is a very dangerous book, in fact it has been called the world’s most dangerous book, but the Jehovah’s Witnesses will not use any other translation. Again, this is because any other translation pokes more holes in their theology than that iceberg did in the Titanic. Unlike many other cult groups, the JW’s claim to have a very high view of scripture, readily stating that it is God’s only written communication with us. But do they really believe that? The answer is no, they don’t. There is another source of doctrine that is considered co-equal with God’s word.

**(Slide 8)** The witnesses have a special class within their ranks, the ‘Faithful and discrete slave class’. These are witnesses of a higher order. They will be the ones who get to go to Heaven and be with God. Everyone else who accepts their message gets to live on a glorified Earth. This class of people is the only ones who have the ability and the right to interpret the Bible because they were alive in 1914 when, supposedly, Jesus returned invisibly. Until recently, nine members of this class served at the Watchtower headquarters in Brooklyn making all of the important decisions impacted the church, including interpreting the Bible for the faithful worldwide. Effectively they rule the daily lives of church members. One of the important benefits of publishing magazines as prolifically as they do is that it gives them an immense amount of influence over the lives of the witnesses all around the world. In the Watchtower Society, everyone must agree with everything the Governing Body says identically and at all times, no matter what they change or how often. Independent thought and study of the Bible outside the lens of the study guides published by the Watchtower Society, let alone daring to study a Bible other than the New World Translation, can get you expelled from the church. Hopefully that will give you a different perspective on the terrible burden that the nice men and women who come to your door are under. The edicts of the society are a heavy burden to bear.

But there’s a problem. Even the youngest Jehovah’s Witness alive in 1914 would be turning 101 this year. There aren’t very many of them left. Jesus was supposed to have returned by now… but irritatingly to the witnesses he still hasn’t. The problem with the declining number of authorized biblical interpreters was ‘fixed’ in 2012 when the governing body of the church, which by that point was not even made up of only members of the slave class, took it upon themselves to usurp the right to interpret the Bible. Here’s the current governing body. They may not be young, but I assure you none of these men was around in 1914. They did this by voting amongst themselves and, oddly enough, approving the resolution unanimously. To you and me this looks like blatant power grab, but to the governing body it is a matter of survival for the church. Even so, they claim to respect biblical authority while actively transgressing against their own doctrine.

## Distinctive and Curious Doctrines

Members of the watchtower society have been called, at times, apostles of denial. The name is not too far of the mark. If you can name a Christian doctrine, it is likely that the Watchtower Society has in some way attempted to turn that doctrine on its head.

They deny the trinity, calling it a pagan doctrine authored by Satan. As we discovered earlier from reading their take on John 1:1 they say Jesus is a lesser, created god. They claim he started out as Michael the Archangel, later becoming ‘just’ a perfect man on Earth. He is a ransom sacrifice to buy back what Adam lost, namely the right to live forever *on Earth*. Only the anointed, faithful slave class gets to go to heaven. Everyone else has to settle for a chance at perfect life on Earth. More on that in a minute. They deny that Jesus died on a cross, instead insisting it was a torture stake. To them Jesus didn’t physically rise from the dead; he rose as a spirit instead. If you ask them what happened to his body they’ll give you one of several answers ranging from Jehovah preserving it as a memorial somewhere to it being dissolved into gasses. The Holy Spirit is a what, not a who. They compare the Spirit to an invisible but active force like electricity or magnetism. This is interesting, and a crack in their armor. Their version of Ephesians 4:30 (do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (ESV)) is very similarly worded other than printing ‘Holy Spirit’ in lower case letters. Have you ever attempted to grieve a magnet? Neither have I.

To the Witnesses, you and I are apostates. Our only hope, they claim, is to embrace the teachings to the Watchtower Society without question. Then, and only then, do we have a shot at eternal life *on Earth.* We weren’t alive in 1914 so we can’t join that class but according to them we can join the ‘other sheep.’ We, and all witnesses who were not alive in 1914, are to be diligent workers for the Watchtower Society until the day of Armageddon (which they have finally stopped setting dates for).

**(Slide 9)** If you were to ask a witness what the requirements for their definition of salvation are, they would not quote Ephesians 2:8-9 (8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [ESV]). The witness would say that you must, among other requirements, ‘take in knowledge. Taking in knowledge means knowledge of Jehovah God. This is their version of placing faith in Christ (since to them Christ is not God). It is not a relationship at all, but an education. To them Jehovah is remote and distant, not personal and loving. Again they take a core doctrine and invert it. Beyond this, they are told they must obey God’s laws, belong to and serve in the Watchtower Society, and be faithful to the Watchtower Society. As with their take on the Holy Spirit this doesn’t jive even with their translation of Ephesians 2:8-9. From the NWT: *By this undeserved kindness you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing; rather, it is God’s gift. No, it is not a result of works, so that no one should have grounds for boasting.* In short, witnesses must work toward perfection while they are here, even though their own Bible states exactly the opposite. But that’s not all. They will also be required to work diligently in the thousand year millennial reign of Jehovah on Earth. Then, once Satan is let loose on the Earth they have to pass another test.

If they fail at any of this they are at serious risk of annihilation (eternal destruction, recall that the witnesses don’t believe in hell). This is the burden that is placed on the smiling men and women who visit you on a Saturday morning before you’re even completely awake. Hopefully from this you can see that it is grace they desperately need, not an education in what the Bible really says.

The witnesses hold some other interesting prohibitions that occasionally raise eyebrows. These are not matters of salvation. Don’t let them become a sticking point in your conversations with a Jehovah’s Witness. I use them as conversation starters, asking earnestly why they believe in one of these things and then transitioning to more serious matters.

**(Slide 10)** Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to have blood transfusions. This is hardly the only interesting idea they have entertained medically, though it is the one that most frequently makes the news. From 1931-1952 they forbade all forms of vaccination, calling them a crime against nature. From 1967-1980 organ transplants were forbidden because the governing body decided that they were a form of cannibalism. Other views may seem somewhat farcical. They spent several decades in the early to mid-20th century waging a war against aluminum cooking utensils. This was not ‘we have an opinion’ grade stuff. This was ‘thus sayeth the Lord’.

**(Slide 11)** Still today, if a witness wants to have fun they can’t celebrate Easter (what’s the point since Jesus wasn’t physically resurrected in their view). No Christmas and no birthdays; no mother’s day or father’s day. **(Slide 12)** Jehovah’s witnesses refuse to serve in the military. They don’t vote and they won’t salute the flag. To them, paying reverence to the flag, singing the national anthem, or saying the pledge of allegiance is akin to idolatry. A witness who casts any ballot, even for a minor ballot initiative, class president, or union representation, runs the risk of being kicked out of the witnesses and more importantly disowned by his or her family members who have not been excommunicated. Witnesses only recognize the theocratic kingdom of Jehovah God, as administered by nine old people on Brooklyn, New York. They are not even allowed to attend non-witness weddings and funerals – and non-witnesses are forbidden from attending such services at the Kingdom Hall. As before, this is a heavy burden for the witnesses you meet. Be gracious.

This form of behavior is called ‘boundary maintenance’ by sociologists. It serves as a stark reminder to everyone, on both sides, who is in and who is out. It keeps everyone on their toes. And yet, despite all of this the Watchtower is an incredibly popular organization. They are continuing to grow worldwide. People see them as logical, scholarly, well-organized, and committed to their beliefs. Plus, the whole rejection of hell thing is a nice selling point. Let’s dig into witness doctrine and compare it to genuine Christianity. We’re going to do this the way you should when you talk to them… by using their own version of the Bible. This is why it’s important to know your Bible. If you don’t, the few verses they are taught to use as proof texts will baffle you. The New World Translation has twisted many verses to the breaking point… but not all of them. There are plenty of verses in their own Bible that point clearly toward doctrines their church denies. For reference, each of the following slides will have the same verse from the ESV so you can see the differences.

1. There is one God – On this we agree
   1. Isaiah 43:10
2. The Holy Spirit is God
   1. 2 Corinthians 3:17
   2. Acts 5:3-4 (Power Verse)
3. Jesus is God
   1. Isaiah 9:6
   2. John 8:58, quote of Exodus 3:14
   3. Colossians 2:9
   4. John 5:18 and 5:23
   5. Hebrews 1:6
4. Jesus rose physically
   1. John 2:19
5. Salvation is a free gift
   1. Romans 6:23
   2. Acts 16:30-31
   3. Titus 3:5
   4. Philippians 3:9
   5. Luke 23: 42-43
6. New Heavens and New Earth
   1. **(Slide 20)** Their quotes: Psalm 89:36-37, Psalm 104:5, Ecclesiastes 1:4
      1. Olam (‘ō·w·lām) meaning ‘for many ages; for a long time’. Not ‘eternal’.
      2. ‘Eternal’ in Hebrew: Qedem (keh'-dem).
   2. **(Slide 21)** Our answers: Psalm 102:25-26, Isaiah 51:6 and 65:17, Matthew 5:18 and 24:35, Hebrews 1:10-12, 2 Peter 3:7 and 10-13, Revelation 20:11 and 21:1

**Do’s and Don’ts (Slide 22)**

1. Do remember that JW’s are real people. Treat them how you would like to be treated.
2. Do be courteous and respectful
3. Do know the Bible – be prepared to give a brief testimony. Witnesses have no experience with a relational God so they need to hear, first hand, from someone who does.
4. Do ask questions
5. Don’t assume the JW’s know their Bible. They know what the magazine says and a few verses, generally speaking. This doesn’t make them stupid. Remember that. They are misguided by false teachers and prophets, not morons. Again. Treat them how you want to be treated.
6. Don’t assume there is only one right way to witness to a Jehovah’s Witness. There is no magic bullet. There is no chain of verses that will instantly turn them to putty in your hands. Be patient and work through the scriptures with them. Remember – the LOVE to study, or are supposed to. Taking in knowledge is one of their keys to salvation. Use that.
7. Don’t try to force them into admitting they are wrong. Always two there are, a master and an apprentice. The person you are talking to is either training or being trained by the other witness in the room. Admitting error would be a huge loss of face.
8. Most importantly: DON”T JUST TURN THEM AWAY! They expect that from people. Don’t fuel the stereotypes they have been taught to expect!

One final note: Jehovah’s witnesses will not accept any materials from you. No tracts, no other versions of the Bible, no written testimonies from other former Witnesses (who they see as apostates and wicked slaves). Instead, reason from them by using their own version of the Bible, which they will happily provide you with a copy of if you don’t have one. It can also be found by searching the Internet for ‘New World Translation Online’ or at <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/bible/nwt/books/>.

Homework for next week:

Write your testimony, which should be easy since you already did this in level one. Even so, it never hurts to review it and refine it as a refresher. It doesn’t have to be extremely in depth, but it should take about two minutes to read from start to finish. Be ready to hand it in before you take your quiz next week. There won’t be any time to work on it while you are here. If you need help, there’s a template here: <http://www.cru.org/train-and-grow/how-to-tell-your-story-worksheet.html>

Study for next week by completing pages 34-44 in your participant guide. The notes and slides from tonight will be posted online by tomorrow afternoon.