

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society

(Taken from Milton V. Backman, Jr., *Christian Churches of America*.)

Nearly every American at one time or another has encountered “ministers” of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, known as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Although this is one of the relatively small denominations in America, such a contact is not surprising considering that every member of this faith is literally a missionary. Every Bible student devotes approximately ten hours or more each month to proselyting activities, including selling *The Watch tower* on busy streets, circulating tracts and magazines from house to house, and teaching a distinct Christian message to all who will listen. Even though most adults living in urban America have been approached by these missionaries and many have heard that these people endorse a strange belief (originating from the book of Revelation) concerning 144,000, most Americans have never seriously examined the history and beliefs of this religious community. As individuals reflect on their encounter with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, many might recall hearing their warning and prediction that the millennial reign of Christ is imminent.

Like many other religious communities, the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was founded by an industrious leader, Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916), who through conscientious work and personal sacrifice attracted many to the movement which he launched. While Joseph Smith, Ellen G. White, and Mary Baker Eddy published guides for their followers to the mysteries of the Bible, Russell followed in the steps of Alexander Campbell in rejecting all such latter-day works. Echoing a popular belief of the Disciples, Russell denounced all claims to modern-day visions and revelations, claiming that such miracles ceased with the death of the apostles. Many of Russell’s interpretations of the Bible, however, were in sharp contrast to teachings of the restorationist theologians of the nineteenth century and of other Christians of his age.

The controversial founder of this society was born in Allegheny (now part of the city of Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania, during the decade preceding the disruption of American democracy. Three years after the Civil War, Charles Taze Russell launched a personal quest for religious truth. Although he had been raised a Presbyterian and as a teenager had joined the Congregational Church, in 1868, at the age of sixteen, Charles Russell withdrew his membership from the Allegheny Congregational Church. About the same time that Mary Baker Eddy was challenging the traditional view of predestination, Russell also rejected it and became an avowed skeptic. Although he temporarily discarded the Bible and the historic creeds of Christendom, the seventeen-year-old boy, who had become a partner with his father in a growing chain of men’s clothing stores, had not lost all interest in the religious societies of America.

Charles Russell’s search for religious truth directed him to various Christian churches. One of his earliest contacts was with a group of Pittsburgh Adventists, a remnant of the Millerite movement. After the “Great Disappointment” of 1844, these Adventists had reexamined the scriptures and predicted that Christ would return in 1873 or 1874. Although

Russell soon learned that these Second Adventists had again erred in their calculations, during his association with them he developed a keen interest in biblical chronology, the Second Coming, and the millennium.

After reviewing biblical prophecies, Russell decided that Christ had returned in 1874, but not physically as the Second Adventists had anticipated. This coming, he announced, was as an invisible, spiritual being. Moreover, Russell predicted that the separation of the wheat from the tares had begun and this gathering of God’s children would continue until 1914. In October of that year, he declared, the Battle of Armageddon would inaugurate the millennial reign.

During the 1870s, the decade when Russell presented his view “that Christ’s second presence began invisibly in the fall of 1874,” he participated in a systematic study of the Bible with a small group of students. In 1876, after this group had increased to about thirty members, Russell was elected as their chairman or pastor. In the fall of that year, Russell embarked upon a successful lecture tour through the New England states where he popularized his eschatological views and enlisted a few converts. As the decade drew to a close, Russell began publishing his most influential magazine, *Zion’s Watch Tower*, and commenced organizing his followers into a distinct religious community. Within one year, thirty congregations had been constituted in seven states. Loosely united, these groups accepted the leadership of Russell and the directions which he issued from his congregation in Pittsburgh.

The year 1879 was significant in Russell’s life not only because he initiated a new religious movement but also because at the age of twenty-seven he met and married one of his Bible students, Maria F. Ackley. Immediately, Maria Russell became deeply involved in this new religion, assisting her husband in editing and publishing his journal, and acting as first secretary-treasurer of the Watch Tower Society after its incorporation. She remained an enthusiastic supporter of this faith until her separation from Pastor Russell in 1897.

The task of organizing a religious community continued throughout the 1880s. After many were converted to Russell’s biblical messages, they were authorized and encouraged to go forth as missionaries, teaching and warning others. In order to finance various proselyting activities, Russell liberally spent money earned from his successful mercantile business. In 1884, three years after organizing an unincorporated Bible society, the young man became president of a legal corporation, designated as Zion’s Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Twelve years later the name “Zion” was dropped from the organization’s official title. Although a Board of Directors assisted him in guiding the movement, Pastor Russell was throughout his life the dominant leader of this society. Russell did not pretend to establish a new church; Jehovah’s Witnesses currently insist that they are not affiliated with a church but are members of a Bible society.

Even though membership in the Bible society continued to

increase under Russell's direction, throughout the thirty-seven years in which he guided the movement Pastor Russell encountered much opposition and many trials. After being accused of fraudulent business dealings and profiteering, Russell was subjected to a series of legal trials; in the midst of many reported scandals, his character was defamed. His personal burdens were further magnified by his separation from his wife and dissension within the leadership of the society. Nevertheless, in the midst of external pressures and internal conflict, Russell continued to promulgate his beliefs by preaching frequently and writing profusely.

In 1909 Russell transferred the headquarters of the Bible society from Allegheny, Pennsylvania, to the Henry Ward Beecher mansion in Brooklyn, New York. From this new center, the movement spread throughout the United States and into many foreign lands. Converts to this new native American religion became missionaries not only in the neighborhoods where they earned their livings, but some accepted the challenge to labor overseas without financial remuneration.

As October 1914, the calculated beginning of the millennial reign of Christ, approached, Russell sensed that he might have erred in his analysis of Bible chronology and announced that a mistake on the precise date of the Battle of Armageddon would not invalidate his interpretations of other major themes of the scriptures. After World War I erupted, Russell confidently proclaimed that death, anarchy, and revolution would continue until Christ returned to rule on earth.

When 1914 brought no end to the world in its present state and some of Russell's predictions proved premature, he insisted that within a couple of years the millennium would begin. The biblical prediction, he explained, describing the forces of Satan combating the soldiers of God was imminent. But Russell did not live to witness the creation of a new world. On 31 October 1916, two years before the cessation of hostilities in Europe, Russell died. The Watch Tower Society had lost its founder and president, a man who had traveled more than a million miles, delivered more than 30,000 sermons, published books totaling over 50,000 pages, and left an established society of approximately 50,000 adherents. Eulogizing Russell's accomplishments, his followers declared, "Not since the Apostle Paul has there lived in the world a greater and better man than Pastor Russell."

After considering the qualifications for members of the Board of Directors, leaders of the Watch Tower Corporation nominated Joseph F. Rutherford (1869-1942) as second president of the society; he was unanimously approved by the members who voted. This attorney had served for many years as member of the board and had been a legal counselor for Pastor Russell. Since he had served briefly as a special judge in the fourteenth judicial district in Missouri, he was often referred to as Judge Rutherford.

While president of the Bible society, Rutherford introduced a number of doctrinal themes that were not taught by the founder of the movement. In the 1930s, he proclaimed that a central message of the Bible was the vindication of Jehovah's name, meaning that eventually God would defeat Satan and restore the earth to a state of its original perfection.

For centuries, Rutherford explained, Christians had taught that the principal mission of Jehovah (meaning Almighty God) was to save mankind by bringing individuals into heaven. "The Lord now makes it plain," he proclaimed, that "[He] will take drastic action against His enemies, not for the mere purpose of saving [those who are] consecrated to Him, but because of His own holy name." Equipped with another essential message, Bible students intensified their missionary labors. If mankind neglected to heed their message, the unbelievers would be held accountable while the ardent ambassadors of Jehovah would have accomplished the will of God.

Rutherford also introduced a distinct explanation of events that had transpired between 1874 and 1918. Revising Russell's predictions, the second president asserted that the Battle of Armageddon was not to commence in 1914 or shortly thereafter. In the year World War I erupted, he suggested, the war in heaven described in Revelation began; in 1918 Satan was cast out of heaven and confined to this earth. Jehovah's Witnesses further believe that in 1918 Jehovah placed Christ upon his throne, authorizing him to be king. Prior to this appointment, Christ was sitting on the right hand of God, but now he is ruling from heaven. According to this belief, for a few years the King will permit Satan to continue his reign of terror, and then with the beginning of the millennium Satan's power and influence will be temporarily crushed.

During the presidency of Judge Rutherford, turbulence among the leadership of the Bible society intensified. Replacing four members of the Board of Directors with his appointees, Rutherford worked to gain complete control of the organization. However, some of the original followers of Russell were not only dissatisfied with what they regarded as Rutherford's domineering actions, but they disagreed with the new doctrinal emphasis initiated by the second president in his controversial book, *The Finished Mystery* (1917). Following the publication of *The Finished Mystery*, Rutherford hoped to stem the rising tide of opposition by requesting members to conduct a straw vote. In the November, 1917, referendum, Rutherford received an overwhelming majority. While most Bible students indicated a strong support of their new leader, some members of the movement were not content, and various schisms occurred among the followers of Charles Russell known as "Russellites." One group who claimed to preserve the basic theology of Pastor Russell formed the Dawn Bible Students Association. Other offshoots of this movement are known as the Standfast Movement, Paul Johnson Movement (later renamed the Layman's Home Missionary Movement), Elijah Voice Movement, Eagle Society, and Pastoral Bible Institute of Brooklyn. In 1931, to differentiate the followers of Rutherford from other "Russellites," those who remained loyal to the second president adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses."

After winning the internal struggle and securing control of the Bible society, Rutherford and other members of the movement were threatened not only by mobs but also by the United States government. Many thought that the Great War was the beginning of Armageddon and was a necessary prelude to the dissolving of the present evil world and preparation for the millennial reign of Christ. In the midst of

wartime hysteria, Bible students were accused of being German agents, of circulating insidious propaganda, and of violating the Federal Espionage Law. (While members of the society were pacifists and refused to serve in the armed forces, they did not support the Germans.) In June 1918, Judge Rutherford and seven members of his staff were arrested and charged with conspiring to cause insubordination and refusal of duty in the United States military and naval forces. After a jury declared that the Witnesses were guilty, the eight men were sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. For nine months these leaders were incarcerated in a federal penitentiary in Atlanta. After the war ended, they were released; in 1919 their convictions were reversed. Meanwhile, other members of the society were charged with disloyalty; in the midst of oppression, many left the movement. By 1920, Rutherford's following had declined from nearly 50,000 to less than 9,000 members.

The responsibility of members serving as missionaries was emphasized in 1920 when everyone in the local congregations who participated in witness work was requested to submit a weekly report. Prior to 1918, only "pioneers," those who volunteered to serve as full-time nonsalaried missionaries, submitted such records. When the first of these new reports were introduced, more than 8,400 responded, with 350 designated as pioneers.

During Rutherford's administration there was a marked attempt to coordinate the efforts of the Witnesses and to establish increased unity in the society. This objective was partly accomplished by the creation of what Jehovah's Witnesses call a centralized theocracy. This theocracy, which is considered in harmony with New Testament Christianity, became an official structure in the summer of 1938 when leaders of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society gained control over the appointment of all local officials. According to the polity of the society, local bodies called congregations are arranged into circuits with traveling ministers assigned to visit regularly the local societies. The circuits are then grouped into districts and all phases of this organization are under the direction of a governing hierarchy.

When individuals unite with this theocracy, they are to disassociate themselves from all activities of the political state and give full allegiance to "Jehovah's organization." Such allegiance includes refusal to salute any national flag, to serve in the armed forces, to vote, or to run for public office. Witnesses generally view nearly every organization outside this theocratic body (including churches, ministers, and international organizations) as a giant conspiracy which is cleverly directed by Satan.

Harassment and persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s. During these two decades more members of this society were imprisoned in this country while practicing their religious convictions than were members of any other religious community. In the 1930s, for example, many Bible students were charged with selling without a license, distributing advertising matter without permission, disturbing the peace, and violating Sabbath laws and other local ordinances. After being convicted, many were jailed for from ten to thirty days and were fined up to \$200. Between 1928 and 1934 nearly 700 Witnesses were imprisoned in New Jersey. Hundreds of

others were jailed in other states, and in 1936 the society reported 1,149 faithful members arrested. For many Americans, these unorthodox "ministers" were a threat to the existing social order. Some Americans reacted violently because these Bible students vehemently denounced the major religious societies in America, attacked the clergy, and engaged in what they considered repugnant missionary tactics. A brief calm in this tidal wave of oppression, however, was created when the Supreme Court ruled in 1938 that these Christians had the right to distribute their literature in America.

Another type of persecution erupted in the late 1930s when young school children, at the request of their parents, refused to salute the flag. Thousands of children were expelled from school. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1940 that saluting the flag was a legitimate obligation for every American, the problems of these Christians intensified. Three years later, however, relief from this new form of external pressure was secured when the Supreme Court reversed its decision.

In the midst of the controversy concerning the national flag, Judge Rutherford died. On January 13 1942, five days after the death of the second president, the Board of Directors elected another conscientious leader to guide the young Bible society, Nathan H. Knorr (1905- 1977). Knorr's task was difficult. Mob violence against members of the society was evident in many sections of this nation and in many countries throughout the world. Moreover, during World War II, 3,500 Witnesses were imprisoned for refusal to serve in the armed forces. Recognizing some of the problems which precipitated persecution, Knorr labored to stem the tide of oppression and to make the Bible society more palatable to the American public. While Witnesses continued to denounce organized religions and launched an attack on the United Nations, they gradually altered some of their missionary techniques. Retaining their enthusiasm, Witnesses under Knorr's leadership became less aggressive and subsequently more acceptable to many Americans.

One of the new doctrines introduced during Knorr's presidency was the concept of a "New World Society." This belief refers to the earthly kingdom which will be created following the Battle of Armageddon. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, this New World Society has been functioning since 1919 and presently includes all members of their theocracy. Eventually, they teach, this New Society will encompass all nations of the earth.

Since 1942 leaders of the Watch Tower Society have witnessed a tremendous expansion throughout many parts of the world and acknowledge that their religious community has been one of the fastest growing religious bodies in America. In the year that Nathan Knorr became president, witnessing was conducted in fifty-four countries; in 1944 the society reported a membership of 129,000. Forty years later, in 1981, more than 2 million "ministers" were laboring in 206 countries with a membership in the United States of 600,000. In 1942 approximately 84,000 Witnesses attended the annual Memorial Supper, a service in which those who declare that they are included among the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation partake of the Lord's Supper. In 1981, almost 6 million attended this worldwide memorial service.

Under the leadership of Nathan Knorr, the image of the Witnesses has changed and in the opinion of many observers the society is attracting more mature, cultured, and better-educated individuals. Witnesses have gained a reputation in contemporary America of being neat, clean, courteous, honest, and industrious.

While changes have occurred in missionary techniques and the composition of the society, Jehovah's Witnesses have not lost their missionary zeal of warning others of the imminence of the Second Coming. These Bible students are currently emphasizing that "millions now living will never die," that the Battle of Armageddon will begin within a brief span of time, and that many will witness the inauguration of a new millennial era.

Distinguishing Beliefs

Although variations have occurred in the beliefs of members of this movement launched by Russell, there is a harmony of belief concerning many doctrines that are currently advocated by Jehovah's Witnesses; and many of these doctrines are different from the historical Protestant faith. Included among the unusual beliefs that are popular today among Jehovah's Witnesses are the following doctrines and practices.

Members of this Bible society teach that even though the Bible is inerrant, meaning that the scriptures were written by individuals who recorded accurately the message dictated by God, modern versions of the Holy Scriptures contain mistranslations. Consequently, a New World Translation of the Scriptures (1961), based upon what are called preferred texts, has been issued by these Christians. This new version, in the opinion of Jehovah's Witnesses, corrects mistakes appearing in other editions.

While describing their belief concerning the Godhead, Jehovah's Witnesses explain that the Father and Son are separate and distinct spirits and the Holy Ghost is not a member of the Godhead, but is a divine influence or active force. According to members of this Bible society, almighty God, referred to by the ancient prophets as "Jehovah," is the creator of all things. God was once alone in the universe, they say, but after initiating the creation, Jehovah brought forth a son who was called "Michael" or the "Logos" (the "Word") in his pre-mortal existence and Jesus during his journey on earth.

Members of this society further teach that while Jesus was born of a virgin and lived a perfect life void of sin, Jesus was not a God while residing on earth. They reason that since the mission of the Messiah was to provide a ransom, the ransom needed to be equal to the loss. Since Adam was a perfect being while living in Eden and not a God, they hold that God's justice would not permit Jesus to be more than a perfect man.

They also believe that although Jesus rose from the grave and appeared as a man, his true resurrected form was like Jehovah's, a spirit that was neither earthly, human, nor confined to a particular form.

While describing the fall and atonement, members of this faith declare that as a consequence of the fall of Adam, sin and death were transmitted to Adam's posterity,

necessitating an atonement. Christ, they add, laid down his life not only to cancel the sins of believing men but to free mankind from death's condemnation by a guarantee that everyone will receive full opportunity during the millennium to embrace the gospel.

There are a few parallels in the views of Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses regarding life beyond the grave. Members of both of these faiths teach that since man's spirit and body are never separated, the soul sleeps after death. Jehovah's Witnesses further believe that not all mankind will be judged at the same time. They explain that many who have lived an unrighteous life on this earth and have sinned against the Holy Spirit have already been judged. Those beyond reform and correction will not stand before Christ on the day of judgment but will remain asleep forever. The "lake which burneth with fire and brimstone," is considered a scriptural expression which means that there is no recovery or resurrection for the most wicked creatures. Jehovah's Witnesses also teach that at the end of Christ's thousand-year reign on earth, all of God's children, except those beyond reform, will gather for one last test. Satan will then be released from his prison and will cunningly strive to turn men from God. Individuals who succumb to the temptation will be exterminated with Satan and his demons, and all who remain loyal to God during this last trial will be blessed with eternal life. These obedient souls will be free from sickness, sorrow, confusion, and pain, and will be endowed by the pure love of God.

Another distinguishing belief of this religious community is that the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7:4 are the only Christians who will inherit heaven. When asked how these are selected, they answer that the spirit of God bears witness to these individuals that they are of this select group. This elite, they continue, will be raised with spiritual bodies (without flesh, bones, or blood) and will assist Christ in ruling the universe. Others who benefit from Christ's ransom will be resurrected with healthy, perfected physical bodies (bodies of flesh, bones, and blood) and will inhabit this earth after the world has been restored to a paradisiacal state.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, many significant developments will take place during and following the millennium. The period of time extending from 607 B.C., the date Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, to 1914 is referred to as the "times of the Gentiles." During these centuries, the Devil ruled the world without God's interference. In 1914, war erupted in heaven between Michael (Christ) and Satan. After his defeat, the "Dragon" was cast out of heaven and down to earth, and Christ commenced ruling in heaven as King. During the period in which mankind is now living, called the "Time of the End of this World," the gospel will be carried to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, and the wicked will be separated from God's people. One of the popular expressions of this group is that millions now living will never die but will live beyond the end of Satan's rule and will reside in a state of peace and happiness in Jehovah's righteous new world. Consequently, they reason that one of the major responsibilities of God's children today is to inform others of the drama described in the Bible, including the birth of God's kingdom, the imminent and final defeat of the Devil, and the creation of a new earth.

Jehovah's Witnesses also teach that everyone who accepts Jehovah as the Almighty God and agrees to serve him should indicate this dedication by being baptized by immersion. Since baptismal fonts are not built in "kingdom halls" (meetinghouses), this rite is generally performed in lakes, rivers, oceans, or municipal baths; and only Witnesses authorized to perform such ordinances may baptize.

Another distinct practice of this faith relates to the Lord's Supper. Individuals who are classified among the 144,000 are the only ones who should partake of the bread and wine as a symbol of the death of Christ and of the dedication to God. All Witnesses and others may attend this important meeting, but only those numbered among the 144,000 partake. It is also their belief that this Memorial of Christ's death should take place on the day corresponding to Nisan 14 of the Jewish calendar (occurring sometime in March or April). In 1981, 9,601 received the Lord's Supper.

Members of this Bible society also refrain from gambling, abstain from the use of tobacco, and hold that drunkenness is a serious sin. They do not celebrate popular holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, and are opposed to blood transfusions. Moreover, their position concerning saluting the flag and serving in the armed forces has not been changed; and they do not vote in civil elections or hold public office.