

Jehovah's Witnesses

(The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York)

History, Beliefs, and Practices

- Identity:** A religious organization founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1870 in response to disagreement with certain Adventist teachings. Jehovah's Witnesses, claiming to have restored teachings lost through the apostasy in Christendom, believe they are the only true Christian organization—though they reject central teachings of historic Christianity (e.g., Trinity, deity of Christ, physical resurrection of Christ, person of the Holy Spirit).
- Founder:** Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916)
- Statistics:** In 2003 the Jehovah's Witnesses reported a U.S. membership of 1,041,030 in 12,054 congregations.¹
- History:** The Jehovah's Witness organization grew out of an independent Bible study initiated by Charles Taze Russell in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania in 1870. Russell and his small group of followers were interested in studying Christ's return, also for the purpose of correcting Adventist beliefs. In 1879 Russell founded a periodical titled *Zion's Watchtower and Herald*, which later became *The Watchtower*. Russell's rapidly growing organization became Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society in 1884, moving its headquarters to its present location in Brooklyn, New York, in 1909. Russell worked out original tenets of the group in a seven-volume work titled *Studies in the Scriptures*. Following Russell's death in 1916, a split occurred in the group—the majority following J. F. Rutherford under the name Millennial Dawnists. They adopted the name Jehovah's Witnesses in 1931 to distinguish themselves from other splinter groups. During Rutherford's term of leadership (1916-1942) the *Awake!* magazine was founded and the current door-to-door method of witnessing was developed. Nathan H. Knorr succeeded Rutherford as president (1942-1977) and during his tenure the Watchtower Bible School of Gilead (for training missionary workers in foreign countries) was founded. Frederick William Franz served as president from 1977 to 1992. The current president is Milton G. Henschel (1992--).
- Texts:** *The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (completed in 1961)
Magazines: *Awake!* and *The Watchtower*

Beliefs and Practices:

- *God.* The only proper name for God is "Jehovah." (This term for God was artificially created by applying the Hebrew vowels for *Adonai* [translated "Lord"] to the Hebrew consonants for God [YHWH="Yahweh"]). Jehovah's Witnesses reject the doctrine of the Trinity as "false doctrine." They claim that it is nowhere mentioned in the Bible, makes God into three gods, is of pagan origin, and ultimately derives from Satan."²
- *Jesus.* Jesus existed in three separate states or phases. Jesus Christ, before becoming man, was Michael the Archangel, "the first of God's creations."³ Jesus ceased to exist as Michael. The life force of Michael was transferred to the man Jesus conceived by Mary

¹*Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches 2005*, edited by Eileen W. Linder (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 372.

²Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, *Things in Which It is Impossible for God to Lie* (Brooklyn: WTB& TS, 1965), 259: "The doctrine of the Trinity is a false doctrine and is promulgated by Satan for the purpose of defaming Jehovah's name."

³*Jehovah's Witnesses in the 20th Century*, 1979 [1989 edition], 13. Quoted in H. Wayne House, *Charts of Cults, Sects, & Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 154.

and he became a perfect man (there is no incarnation, as Christians teach). When this Jesus died, he ceased to exist (He was not bodily resurrected.). In his resurrection (as a “spirit person”; see below), “Jesus” again became Michael the Archangel newly created or restored.⁴ Jesus is not God, but a god—“the equal of the perfect man Adam.”⁵ This “perfect man” became “Christ” at his baptism and because of his obedience was “rewarded with the gift of immortality.”⁶ Jesus was resurrected as “a spirit person,” not in the body that died.⁷ Jesus returned invisibly in a spiritual existence in 1914 to begin setting up his kingdom (revised from an earlier 1874 prediction).

- *Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is not a personal being, but Jehovah’s “impersonal active force” “by which he accomplishes his purpose and executes his will.”⁸
- *Man and Sin.* Jehovah’s Witnesses teach that all persons are born sinners. Adam’s sin and its punishment, death, passed to all humanity. Man does not have an immortal soul. When a person dies, he or she ceases to exist.⁹
- *Salvation.* Jesus paid only for the sin of Adam (not for all human sin), to make salvation possible by means of one’s works.¹⁰ To be saved Jehovah’s Witnesses must meet the following requirements: “1) Take in knowledge by studying the Bible with the aid of *Watchtower* publications; 2) obey the laws of God and the laws of the Watchtower Society; 3) be baptized into the Watchtower organization; and 4) publish the good news of the Watchtower Society from door to door (*The Watchtower*, February 15, 1983, p. 12).”¹¹ Only a special “elect” class of 144,000 individuals (the “little flock” or the “anointed”) will actually enter heaven to be with Jehovah. Because of their works they will share in Jesus’ divine nature and in fact become gods in a spiritual existence (not physical). A second “earthly class” of people, called “the great crowd” (other Jehovah’s Witnesses), will inherit a “Paradise” on earth during a millennium, after unbelievers are destroyed in the Great Tribulation or Battle of Armageddon. Unbelievers in the rest of mankind will be annihilated. There is no eternal punishment or hell, which are “fiendish concepts” originating with “the chief slanderer of God” [the Devil].”¹²
- *Other Beliefs.* Blood transfusions are forbidden by Jehovah. Birthdays and holidays such as Christmas and , Easter (which are regarded as pagan in origin), Mother’s and Father’s days, etc. are not biblical and must not be celebrated. Participation in the armed forces, voting, and saluting the flag are wrong, demonstrating allegiance to men rather than to Jehovah. The cross is a pagan symbol; Christ was crucified on a stake, not a cross.¹³
- *Structure and Practices.* The Jehovah’s Witness organization or Watch Tower Society is headed by a “governing body” consisting of 18 men (chosen from living members of the 144,000 elect) having supreme and final authority, especially in the interpretation of the Bible. Locally congregations meet in the “Kingdom Hall,” usually on three days a week (a required 5 hours) and chiefly to learn from *Watchtower* materials taught by elders (there are no pastors) in preparation for door-to-door witnessing.

A Lutheran Response

The Scriptures teach that there is one God (Deut. 6:4) who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This teaching is found everywhere in the New Testament and is summarized by the Risen Christ in the command to baptize

⁴*Let Your Name be Sanctified* (1961), 272; *Man’s Salvation Out of World Distress*, 42-43; *The Watchtower*, January 15, 1980, 31. Cited in John Ankerberg & John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), 143, 204.

⁵*You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth*, 1982, 63; Quoted in W. House, *Charts*, 156.

⁶*Insight on the Scriptures*, vol. 1, 1988, 1189; Quoted in W. House, *Charts*, 156.

⁷*You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth*, 172, 143; Quoted in W. House, *Charts*, 156.

⁸*Aid to Bible Understanding*, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1542-43.

⁹See Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1997 Revised, Update, and Expanded Edition), 105-106, for citations. See also W. House, 158.

¹⁰*Watchtower*, July 1, 1947, 204: “To get one’s name written in that book of life will depend upon one’s works, whether they are in fulfillment of God’s will and approved by his Judge and King.” Cited in W. House, 159.

¹¹Herbert Kern, *How to Respond: Jehovah’s Witnesses* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995 Revised Edition), 36-37.

¹²*Reasoning from the Scriptures*, 1985, 175; Quote in W. House, *Charts*, 161.

¹³This paragraph summarizes the discussion in Herbert Kern, *How to Respond*, 53-58.

all nations “in the *name* [Greek: the singular *to onoma*] of *the* Father and of *the* Son and of *the* Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). In opposition to the false claims of Jehovah’s Witnesses that Christians believe in three gods (and are therefore polytheists), Lutherans confess with historic Christianity belief in one God in three persons—who manifested Himself clearly at Jesus’ baptism (Matt. 3:13-17). While distinct, the *three persons* of the Godhead are one in essence or being. Thus, as the ancient Christian creeds confess, the Father is God (1 Pet. 1:2), the Son is God (John 1:1; 20:28), and the Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). Christians know that the term “Trinity” [“tri-unity”= “three in one”] as such is not in the Bible (neither are many words that the Jehovah’s Witnesses themselves use; e.g., “dis-fellowship”), but it faithfully describes the God who indeed reveals His true identity in the Bible!

In sharp contrast to Jehovah’s Witness belief that the man Jesus is a created being, who when he died ceased to exist, Lutherans teach on the basis of clear passages of Scripture that the eternal (John 17:5) Son of God (Second Person of the Trinity) took upon Himself human flesh (was incarnate). The Gospel of John begins with its central theme: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2; 14).¹⁴ The Gospel ends with Thomas’ bold confession of Jesus, “my Lord and my God,” followed again by a summary of its purpose: “...that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31). The inspired apostle Paul taught in his writings that “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:9), that He is equal with God (Phil. 2:6; cf. John 5:18), and that He is ranked above all creation. Through Him all things were created (Col. 1:15-16). Jesus bears the names of God (1 John 5:20), has divine characteristics (e.g., Heb. 13:8; Matt. 28:18; John 21:17), does divine works (Matt. 9:6; John 1:3; Heb. 1:3), and receives divine honor and glory (John 5:22-23; Heb. 1:6).

The God-Man Jesus Christ died, but was raised again bodily (John 20:24-26) for humankind’s salvation. God “raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom.4:25; Acts 12:33; see also John 10:18 and Rom. 8:11¹⁵). Jesus’ perfect sacrifice was offered “for the sins of the whole world,” not just Adam (Rom. 5:12-21). Everyone therefore who believes in Him will have life through His name (John 20:31), deliverance from separation (spiritual death) from God in a real hell (Matt. 5:22; 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30, etc.) for eternal life in a real heaven (Rev. 21:11-27). That is to say, believers in Christ will not perish but will have eternal life (John 3:16). All of this is purely a gift of the God of all grace, received by faith apart from all human works (Eph. 2:8-9).

When Jesus began His public ministry he announced: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14). Lutherans teach that “God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.”¹⁶ God’s kingdom is present among all those who believe in Christ (Luke 17:20-21), whether on earth in the one holy Christian church (the body of Christ; 1 Corinthians 12), or in heaven in the church triumphant.

St. Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). Lutherans believe that imposing humanly devised teachings (e.g., rules regarding observance of holidays) places a “yoke of slavery” on individuals and thus compromises such Christian freedom. And, what God commands Christians must not forbid. For example, God clearly requires obedience to civil government (except when it commands us to sin; Acts. 5:29) and that such obedience glorifies Him (Romans 13).

¹⁴ In his lengthy discussion of the Greek grammar of John 1:1 Daniel B. Wallace concludes: “[Christ] shared the *essence* of the Father, though they differed in person. *The construction the evangelist chose to express this idea was the most concise way he could have stated that the Word was God and yet was distinct from the Father.*” *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 269.

¹⁵ Note that all three persons of the Trinity were involved in Christ’s resurrection.

¹⁶ *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 18.

For Further Reading

- Cetnar, Joan. *Questions for Jehovah's Witnesses*. Kunkletown, PA, 1993.
- Kern, Herbert. *Jehovah's Witnesses*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995 Revised Edition.
- Martin, Walter. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1997 Revised, Expanded, and Updated edition.
- Melton, J. Gordon. *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999 (549-551).
- Meyer, Kay. *Mission Field on Our Doorstep: Jehovah's Witnesses*. St. Louis: Family Shield Ministries, 1994.
- Reed, David A. *Jehovah's Witness Literature: A Critical Guide to Watchtower Publications*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1993.

Links and Websites

- www.equip.org
- www.freeminds.org
- www.watchtower.org
- <http://www.watchman.org/profile/jwpro.htm>
- www.irr.org/jwfacten.html