

## Jehovah's Witnesses

Although claiming to be a Christian denomination, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that other churches have deviated from the true teachings of the Bible.

The Jehovah's Witness movement was founded in the USA towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the leadership of Charles T Russell. Russell came from a Presbyterian family in Pittsburgh but in 1870, when he was 17, he discovered Adventist beliefs. Over the following five years he assembled a small group of students who met on a regular basis for Bible study and in 1876 he began to publish literature that expounded his views.

In 1879 he launched the magazine *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*. By 1880 there were over 30 groups following his teaching around the United States and the following year the *Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society* was formed. Its name was later changed to the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society*. By 1909 the movement had become international, and the society's headquarters were moved to their present location in Brooklyn, New York.

After Russell's death in 1916 the movement was led by Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869 – 1942). Rutherford made big changes in the organisation's structure and doctrines. He introduced what he called "Theocratic Government" and brought in a highly centralised structure, obedience to which was considered obedience to God. He focussed the movement on missionary work and in 1931 adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses," deriving it from Isaiah 43:10. All this led some followers to leave and form their own groups.

In 2007 there were about 6.9 million active Witnesses in 235 countries, including 1 million in the USA and 130,000 in the UK.

### God

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that God the Father — Jehovah — is the only true God; alone, and above all other beings.

Jesus was God's first creation and his firstborn son. Jehovah created everything else through him but although Jesus is a mighty being — a god — he is not equal to Jehovah either in power or eternity. Jesus came to earth from heaven, was born to the virgin Mary and when on earth he was a perfect human being. At his baptism he was "born again" and became the Christ — the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament.

The Holy Spirit is not a person and not part of a Trinity but is merely the active force Jehovah uses to accomplish his will.

Witnesses believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is inconsistent with the Bible, contradicting what the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christians believed and taught.

### Creation

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that God created everything. However they believe that the universe was created at least 4.5 billion years ago and that each day of the creation story in Genesis represents 7,000 years.

### Man

Man was created perfect in the image of God but, having no soul, he is not immortal.

### Man's Problem

Jehovah's Witnesses trace humanity's problems to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. By their disobedience death entered the world and God's plan, which was to make the

earth a paradise, was overturned. Witnesses do not emphasize the spiritual consequences of Adam's sin for humanity, neither do they teach that human free will has been damaged.

## **The Solution to the Problem**

According to Jehovah's Witness teaching, Jesus death<sup>1</sup> atoned only for the sin of Adam, making an exact payment for what Adam lost but not for anyone's personal sins. He did not therefore procure salvation but merely made salvation possible. This is the basis from which individuals work to earn their own salvation by engaging in evangelism, the sale of Watchtower literature and attending meetings and conventions.

Only Christ and his 144,000 anointed ones are born again.

## **The Final Outcome**

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that when a person dies, his or her existence stops. They will quote Ecclesiastes 9 verses 5 and 10 in support of this.

“The living are conscious that they will die; but as for the dead, they are conscious of nothing at all ... for there is no work nor devising nor knowledge nor wisdom in (the grave), the place to which you are going.”

There is, therefore, no place where sinners are tormented after death. Anyway, they argue, it would be completely against God's nature to torture humans for eternity.

However, death is not the end of everything for everyone: each person can be remembered and eventually raised — recreated — by God.

“The hour is coming in which all those in the memorial tombs will hear [Jesus'] voice and come out, those who did good things to a resurrection of life, those who practiced vile things to a resurrection of judgment.”

John 5:28-29

Jesus will be used by God to raise the dead and has been appointed by him to judge mankind.

Much Jehovah's Witness teaching concentrates on the end times. Russell predicted that the anointed would be called to heaven by 1914, although he later amended his view. Today his followers believe that the eschatological events predicted in Revelation began in 1914, though most human beings were unaware of it. This is when God gave Jesus his Kingdom, and Jesus has been ruling from heaven ever since. It was also at this time that Jesus threw Satan and his demons out of heaven and down to earth, which is why, according to Witnesses, the world has been getting progressively worse since 1914.

Jehovah's Witnesses look forward to a theocracy, in which all human governments will be abolished and God will rule the entire earth himself. This is expected to occur soon. Although Witnesses once predicted specific dates for this, they now state that "the Bible does not give a date for these events, but it provides evidence to show that we are living in the last days of this troubled world."<sup>2</sup>

When the end finally comes 144,000 will go to Heaven and rule the earth from there with Christ — these are known as the anointed. Their number was completed in 1931.

The majority of Jehovah's Witnesses are not anointed and will not spend eternity in heaven. They will dwell in paradise on Earth. In fact not only Jehovah's Witnesses but billions of others will have everlasting life on earth and thus fulfil God's original plan for humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> Modern Witnesses regard the Cross as a pagan symbol and do not use it, although it was accepted by the movement until 1931. They believe that Jesus died on a single pole or stake.

<sup>2</sup> In 1966 the Witnesses advanced the date of 1975 as marked in Bible chronology and many took this to mean that the end of the current system of things would probably come in that year. When it didn't, the movement suffered a setback and membership declined for three years, but growth was soon resumed.

## **How Do We Know These Things Are True?**

Jehovah's Witnesses believe the Bible to be inspired by God and historically accurate. They see it as the main way in which God communicates his will to human beings and will test any religious idea or teaching against it.

The Bible itself reveals why it is so accurate in scientific, historical, and other matters and why it is so harmonious and honest.

It shows that the Supreme Being, the almighty God, the Creator who authored the universe, is the Bible's Author. He merely used human Bible writers as his penmen, moving them by his powerful active force to put down what he inspired them to write.

From "What is the Purpose of Life?" a Jehovah's Witnesses brochure

The Witnesses have their own translation of the Bible — the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. It was published in 1961, following the production of their own translation of the New Testament in 1950.

They refer to the New Testament as the Christian Greek Scriptures and call the Old Testament the Hebrew Scriptures.

While they don't regard them as scripture, Witnesses greatly respect the doctrinal articles published in The Watchtower.

## **Distinctive Practices**

### **Separation**

Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a degree of separation from the world but unlike more extreme separatists they live and work in secular communities and send their children to secular schools. They do discourage participation in university education for its own sake and typically disapprove of the rat race rife in contemporary society. Earthly aspirations are of much less importance than spiritual concerns.

They also refuse military service, voting in elections, and taking part in religious festivals and secular celebrations including birthdays.

### **Missionary Work**

Witnesses believe that missionary work should take priority over career and many will choose lower-paid jobs with limited hours so as to have more time to devote to their faith.

Their main missionary activity is visiting door-to-door to discuss scripture. A successful discussion will lead to return visits and possibly home Bible studies. Witnesses place little emphasis on sudden, dramatic conversion experiences. True conversion is a slow intellectual process which gradually convinces a non-believer that Witness beliefs are true and rational.

### **Discipline**

Jehovah's Witnesses are expected to accept the movement's core beliefs and practices. When someone confesses to or is accused of a sin or spiritual transgression, he or she is questioned by elders. If found guilty, they can be punished by spiritual restrictions, public reproofs or expulsion from the congregation (disfellowshipping). A person who has been disfellowshipped is shunned. Worldwide, 50,000 to 60,000 are disfellowshipped every year but most (30,000 to 40,000) are subsequently reinstated.

### **The Memorial of Christ's Death**

The most important religious event of the year for Jehovah's Witnesses is the Memorial of Christ's Death, celebrated on the anniversary of the Last Supper. They believe that this is the only observance commanded by Christ. Only those who feel themselves to be anointed partake of the bread and wine at the annual Memorial. The anointed one knows directly from God that he or she has been chosen.

## **Organisational Structures**

Most Jehovah's Witnesses attend their closest Kingdom Hall regularly, and read and study their faith intensely, both on their own and in home groups. Congregations generally have fewer than 200 members and often several congregations share a Kingdom Hall by alternating meeting times.

There are no professional clergy. All baptised members are considered ordained ministers. Congregations are led by a body of elders, who are recommended by existing local elders and appointed by the Governing Body to be its direct representatives.

The national headquarters for each country is called the Bethel. There are about 500 volunteers living and working in the Bethel in London and over 5,000 in the New York Bethel most of whom are involved in publishing and printing the organisation's books and magazines.

The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society is controlled by the Governing Body, which Witnesses believe is commissioned by Jehovah. It currently has 12 members, and concentrates on doctrinal, evangelism, and pastoral care. In 2000 the Witnesses set up additional corporations to take over much of the business and administrative work of the movement.

Jehovah's Witnesses have a tradition of obedience to a strong central leadership.

“The "master" is Jesus Christ. The "slave" is the group of anointed Christians on earth. This slave class is entrusted with caring for Jesus' earthly interests and with providing timely spiritual food. A small group of qualified overseers from among the composite "faithful and discreet slave" form the Governing Body, serving as the representative of the slave class. They direct the worldwide Kingdom-preaching work and the supplying of spiritual nourishment at the right time. Christ thus leads the congregation by means of the spirit-anointed "faithful and discreet slave" and its Governing Body.”

The Watchtower, September 15, 2005

“...since Jesus Christ was actually working at the head of the Society through the medium of its earthly leaders, it would therefore be blasphemous to disagree with their directives.”

James Beckford, the Trumpet of Prophecy, New York, 1975

The headquarters gives directives to the ordinary members through letters to the elders, publications, regular assemblies and conventions held every summer around the world.

## **The Watchtower**

The Watchtower is the Witnesses' magazine and the primary Bible study aid for members. It is published monthly in 152 languages and has an average printing of 27 million, giving it the largest circulation of any religious magazine in the world.

## **Questions for Discussion**

In preparation for our study next week, how many points of Jehovah's Witness doctrine can you identify that go against the teaching of the Bible?