

# **WHO ARE THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES AND WHAT ARE THEIR BELIEFS?**

The sect known today as the Jehovah's Witnesses started out in Pennsylvania in 1870 as a Bible class led by Charles Taze Russell. Russell named his group the "Millennial Dawn Bible Study," and those who followed him were called "Bible students." Charles T. Russell began writing a series of books he called *The Millennial Dawn*, which stretched to six volumes before his death and contained much of the theology Jehovah's Witnesses now hold.

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society was founded in 1886 and quickly became the vehicle through which the "Millennial Dawn" movement began distributing their views. Group members were sometimes disparagingly called "Russellites." After Russell's death in 1916, Judge J. F. Rutherford, Russell's successor, wrote the seventh and final volume of the *Millennial Dawn* series, *The Finished Mystery*, in 1917. That was also the year that the organization split. Those who followed Rutherford began calling themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses."

What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe? Close scrutiny of their doctrinal position on such subjects as the deity of Christ, salvation, the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, and the atonement shows beyond a doubt that they do not hold to orthodox Christian positions on these subjects. Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus is Michael the archangel, the highest created being. This contradicts many passages of Scripture that clearly declare Jesus to be God (John 1:1, 14; 8:58; 10:30). Jehovah's Witnesses believe salvation is obtained by a combination of faith, good works, and obedience. This contradicts Scripture, which declares salvation to be received by grace through faith (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5). Jehovah's Witnesses reject the doctrine of the Trinity, believing Jesus to be a created being and the Holy Spirit to essentially be the inanimate power of God. Jehovah's Witnesses reject the concept of Christ's substitutionary atonement and instead hold to a ransom theory, that Jesus' death was a ransom payment for Adam's sin.

How do the Jehovah's Witnesses justify these unbiblical doctrines? First, they claim that the church has corrupted the Bible over the centuries; thus, they have re-translated the Bible to reflect their unique doctrines—the result is the *New World Translation*. The *New World Translation* has gone through numerous editions, as the Jehovah's Witnesses discover more and more passages of Scripture that contradict their doctrines.

The Watchtower bases its beliefs and doctrines on the original and expanded teachings of Charles Taze Russell, Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford, and their successors. The governing body of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society claims sole authority to interpret Scripture. In other words, what the governing body says concerning any scriptural passage is viewed as the last word, and independent thinking is strongly discouraged. This is in direct opposition to Paul's admonition to Timothy (and to us as well) to study to be approved by God, so that we

need not be ashamed as we correctly handle the Word of God (2 Timothy 2:15). God's children are to be like the Berean Christians, who searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things they were being taught lined up with the Word (Acts 17:11).

There is probably no religious group that is more faithful than the Jehovah's Witnesses at spreading their message. Unfortunately, the message is full of distortions, deceptions, and false doctrine. May God open the eyes of the Jehovah's Witnesses to the truth of the gospel and the true teaching of God's Word.

## **WHO WAS CHARLES TAZE RUSSELL?**

Charles Taze Russell was the founder of a religion that eventually became the modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses. His example demonstrates how untrained and un-disciplined people can twist Scripture to fit their own preferences and spread those errors to others. Russell's spirituality was marked by change, failed prophecy, and controversy. After his death, his followers split, with the most influential group taking on the name of Jehovah's Witnesses, headed by Joseph Rutherford.

Charles Russell was the son of a businessman and raised as a Presbyterian. In 1868, around the age of 16, he was stumped by skeptical questions of a friend. This led him to question his religious upbringing. Russell came across Adventism, which he found more appealing. By 1870, at the age of 18, he had formed a small Bible study composed of himself and several like-minded people. Already, this group held to certain ideas that deeply contradicted biblical Christianity, such as:

- Rejection of the Trinity.
- Belief that Jesus is identical to Michael the archangel and is God's first creation.
- Belief that the Holy Spirit is a force, not a person.
- Rejection of an eternal hell.
- Rejection of the bodily resurrection of Christ.
- Intense interest in—even obsession with—the return of Christ.

Initially, Charles Taze Russell dismissed attempts to give a prophetic prediction of Christ's return. That changed rapidly after speaking with Adventist author Nelson Barbour. By 1876, he became convinced that Christ would return in 1878. He sold all his business interests in preparation for the second coming. The failure of that prediction led to a split with Barbour, but there was little doubt among Russell's more loyal followers. This group was most commonly known as the "Bible Students."

Russell initiated the Watchtower Tract Society in 1881. He would later claim that Christ had returned—spiritually—in 1874 and that the end of the world would occur in 1914. Students of Russell began claiming he was a prophetic, end-times fulfillment of Matthew 24:45, which

speaks of a “faithful and wise servant” awaiting the return of his master. While Russell did not overtly assert this, neither did he deny it. Successors such as Joseph Rutherford later took on that title for themselves, and it eventually became part of Watchtower’s claim to unassailable spiritual authority. Russell wrote six volumes on spirituality prior to his death, collectively known as *Studies in the Scriptures*.

Of course, 1914 came and went without anything remotely resembling the second coming of Christ. The much-hyped year of 1914 has been the subject of increasingly convoluted explanations by Jehovah’s Witnesses ever since. Russell died in 1916. Around that time, a seventh book—claimed to be written by Russell—was published. In fact, the book was written by associates of Russell and heavily edited by Rutherford. Controversy over that volume, combined with disillusionment over 1914’s debacle, led to a schism, resulting in Rutherford leading a group later renamed Jehovah’s Witnesses.

A look at Russell’s spiritual history shows immediate reasons for concern. As a teenager, he knew little enough about Scripture to answer a skeptical friend’s challenges. Within two years, that same teenager was presumed to be able to interpret the Bible more accurately than any existing church. Not long after, Russell made a drastic change in his approach to eschatology and issued a failed prophecy. At no point did Russell demonstrate any signs of special insight or ability beyond the charisma needed to attract like-minded people. Sincere or not, Charles Taze Russell was a false prophet and a teacher of “another gospel” (see Galatians 1:8–9).

While Russell’s beliefs and efforts were what formed the Bible Students, it would be fair to say the group now known as Jehovah’s Witnesses is more distinguished by the contributions of Joseph Rutherford than of Charles Taze Russell. Rutherford introduced many of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ distinctive doctrines, such as the rejection of holidays, voting, and birthdays. Rutherford is also responsible for the Witnesses’ unique interpretations of Revelation, use of Kingdom Halls, and aggressive door-to-door evangelism. Only about one fourth of Russell’s followers stayed with Rutherford over the years after Russell’s death, during which time the group took on their new name.

Charles Taze Russell is a potent example of why Scripture emphasizes the need for proper discipleship (1 Timothy 3:16) and contains warnings about inexperienced and ignorant mishandling of the Word (2 Peter 3:16–17), seeking those who agree with you instead of seeking truth (2 Timothy 4:3), and accepting a gospel different from the one handed down by Christ and the apostles (Galatians 1:8–9). Had more people been willing to put Russell’s claims to a rigorous test (Acts 17:11), or had they taken note of his failure as a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:22), many fewer people today would be in the grip of a false sect like the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

## **WITNESSING TO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES - WHAT IS THE KEY?**

Jehovah's Witnesses say they are the only true Christians, but they are neither Protestant nor Catholic. The fundamental doctrinal issue that distinguishes them from orthodox Christianity is the Trinity. They say the doctrine of the Trinity is a pagan teaching, but they misrepresent it, saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit must be three gods. They actually agree with the Trinity doctrine when it says that the Father and the Son are two Persons, but they imagine they need to prove this to Trinitarians. They fail to grasp how the three Persons comprise the One Being of God, and so they come up with the idea of a Big God and a little god—two gods. They say Jesus was created (Arianism), that He was Michael the archangel, and that Jesus' body was not resurrected; it simply disappeared and He rose as a spirit creature. They say the Holy Spirit is not a person but is Jehovah's active force or energy.

Because they say that Jesus is a demi-god, their understanding of salvation and atonement is wrong. They say Jesus, who was a perfect Man, died only to atone for the sin of Adam and that, when we die, our death pays the penalty of our own sin. Only some 10,000 Jehovah's Witnesses today can possibly claim to be born again and have a heavenly hope. The rest say they don't want to go to heaven to be with the Lord but they want to live forever on a paradise earth (Restorationism). They believe if they remain faithful and obedient till the end of the Millennial Reign of Christ Jesus, they will earn the right to be declared righteous, and that's why they have to keep on striving, with no assurance of salvation. Only today's "remnant" of the 144,000 can say they are in the New Covenant and that Christ Jesus is their mediator. All must be obedient to the leaders (the Watchtower Society and its Governing Body) if they wish to survive Armageddon. To disagree with what the Governing Body says is to disagree with Jehovah because He uses them as His sole channel of communication to dispense "the truth." Only they saw "with spiritual eyes of discernment" that Christ Jesus started to rule from heaven in 1914, an invisible "second presence." Also, they say Christ Jesus will never return to earth but will remain in heaven, there to rule with the 144,000 over the earth.

With all these unbiblical beliefs, where does one begin to witness to a Jehovah's Witness? There is only one place to begin—with the person of Christ Jesus, whose deity is the foundation of Christianity. Jehovah's Witnesses are unable to grasp the significance of Jesus' death and why they must be born again in order to have their sins forgiven. Before they can put all their trust in the finished work of Christ Jesus, they have to understand they are not saved, which means they are presently lost in their sin. No Witness has the assurance of salvation, which is the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who belong to the Father through Christ (Romans 8:16). The full deity of Jesus Christ can only be revealed to them by the Holy Spirit, whom they relegate to commodity status, like electricity. To the Witnesses, the Holy Spirit is a "thing," not a Person.

Witnessing to the Witnesses must be done in Christian love and with compassion. Remember, they have been deceived and believe a false gospel, yet many have a genuine love for God and are utterly sincere in their beliefs. Do not be afraid of them (1 John 4:17–19), but let them know how much you care about their eternal salvation. Share your Christian testimony with them. Talk to them, discuss spiritual matters with them, but do not allow them to conduct what they describe as a Bible study, which is actually a study of their literature. Be aware they will not read any non-Watchtower literature or attend a church service. They say they will only accept what the Bible says, but their New World Translation has been altered to reflect their theology, and many verses in the New Testament that point to the full deity of Christ Jesus have been changed to support their view that only partial deity can be ascribed to Him. It always comes as a surprise to them to meet people who love the Lord, display the fruit of the Spirit, and use the Bible as the basis for their faith (Hebrews 4:12). Speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Direct all your conversation to the person of Christ and the need to put total faith in what He has done. Do not allow them to lead you down the path they wish you to take, namely, considering how you can survive Armageddon to live on a paradise earth. This is not the gospel. Above all else, pray for them.

### **BUT HOW COULD A CHRISTIAN REASON WITH JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ABOUT BIBLICAL BELIEFS?**

First, you will not be able to prove JW's wrong on:

- Trinity
- Hell
- Immortal Soul
- Birthdays
- Christmas
- Political Involvement
- War/Fighting for Country

JW's are taught that these are some primary reasons they're the only true Christians. JW's are very well trained on these subjects and armed with scriptures. The scriptures actually do support their positions on the above issues, except for birthdays.

Second, you can easily prove JW's wrong on:

- The Cross - "They nailed him to the stake." (John 19:18 NWT)
- "They crucified him"—John 19:18 NIV
- "This Jesus whom you executed on a stake." (Acts 2:36 NWT). In other words, a pole.
- "This Jesus whom you crucified"—Acts 2:36 NIV

The point that the New Testament emphasizes is that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3,4 NIV).

JW's believe that Jesus was killed on a stake, not a cross. Historical and archaeological evidence, however, is not clear cut. The Greek word “stauros” basically means stake or pole. However, we do know from history that the Romans did, in fact, execute people on both crosses and stakes. JW's believe that Christians should not use crosses for any purpose, since crosses have been used in idolatrous worship from ancient times. Crosses definitely should not be used for idolatrous purposes, such as worshipping them, and should not be used as good-luck charms. There is no evidence in the New Testament that early Christians made or displayed crosses. Christians should follow the counsel to: “Keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21 NIV).

Problem – There are lots of scriptures that indicate poles were also worshipped, however, such as:

“They abandoned the Temple of Yahweh, God of their ancestors, for the worship of sacred poles and idols.” (2 Chronicles 24:18 NJB). JW's seem to be unaware that poles are strongly linked to idolatrous worship in the Bible.

### **Predictions of the End of the World**

JW's have made many failed predictions – most notably 1914, 1925, 1975, and other dates.

*“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ” (Matthew 24:36 NIV) JW's have claimed to know what Jesus doesn't know.*

*“So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matthew 24:44) No Christian individually, or collectively, will be able to figure out the end time. Jesus said that each Christian “must be ready” for the end AT ALL TIMES!*

*“Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name claiming... ‘the time is near.’ Do not follow them.” (Luke 21:8) Avoid those who claim to know the timing of the end time, such as “the time is near”.*

All of their predictions of the end have proven false. JW's are indoctrinated to believe that their 1914 predictions were accurate – but they were false.

## False Prophets

“Watch out for false prophets. They will come to you in sheep’s clothing.” (Matthew 7:15 NIV)

“Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name?’” (Matthew 7:22 NIV)

“Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.” (Matthew 24:11 NIV)

“At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Messiah!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it.” (Matthew 24:23 NIV)

### **JW’s fit the description of “false prophet(s).”**

Why? The principle expressed at Deuteronomy 18:22 tells us: “When the prophet speaks in the name of Jehovah and the word is not fulfilled or does not come true, then Jehovah did not speak that word. The prophet spoke it presumptuously. You should not fear him.” (NWT) **Since all of their predictions of the end have proven false, they are false prophets . Even if only one prediction was false, they still would be ‘false prophets’, according to the scriptures.**

### **JW’s deny they are/have been false prophets. This was predicted in the Bible also:**

“On that day every prophet will be ashamed of their prophetic vision... Each will say, ‘I am not a prophet.’” (Zechariah 13:4-5 NIV) This describes JW’s. They denied that they weren’t predicting the end, and have whitewashed their history to sweep away most of the dirt of their false predictions.

### The Faithful and Wise Servant (Matthew 24:45)

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ” (Matthew 24:45 NIV)

JW’s claim that their leaders fulfill this “prophecy.” However, it is actually a parable, encouraging each Christian to be faithful and wise at all times. JW’s claim their leaders have fulfilled this by giving out spiritual “food at the proper time.” As you can see from their many failed predictions alone, this could not be the case.

Additionally, they have changed what they claim the Bible said many times, including what is supposedly right or wrong. They have changed their view on exactly who this “faithful and wise

servant” is, and when he (or the “class”) was appointed by Jesus to serve as such. Their claims of divine guidance fall flat when we consider:

“God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind.” (Numbers 23:19 NIV). God does not make mistakes, or provide tainted spiritual food.

### **Many Unwritten Rules**

“Not that we lord it over your faith.” (2 Corinthians 1:24 NIV)

Yet this is exactly what JW’s do. They makes lots rules, despite the scriptural counsel to the contrary:

“You should learn from us to not go beyond what is written in Scripture”—1 Corinthians 4:6 GWT

One notable example is men who grow beards have been treated with contempt if they are baptized JW’s. In most cases, new men who want to become baptized JW’s have been told they must shave their beard first, because having a beard would “stumble” people, according to JW lingo. The Bible makes no such rule.

### **Lack of Love**

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (Jn 13:35 NIV)

Although JW’s claim to be outstanding in this regard, especially since they don’t support wars in any way, the facts show this is not entirely the case. JW’s treatment of their own members who do not follow their rules is harsh. They practice a strict form of shunning former members who have been “disfellowshipped,” or excommunicated, even family members. Even those who simply disagreed as to some of the things JW’s uniquely believe are disfellowshipped.

With these topics In mind, one can more effectively witness to Jehovah’s Witnesses, hopefully opening their minds to a better understanding of the Bible.

**NWT** – New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, revised 2013. This is the JW Bible. Despite what you’ve heard, it is fairly accurate. It’s nicknamed by JW’s as the “Silver Bullet.”

**NIV** – New International Version Bible, revised 2011.

**NJB** – New Jerusalem Bible, revised 1998.