

The Jehovah's Witnesses: history and beliefs – Dr. Neil Shenvi

I. History

1. The Jehovah's Witnesses were founded by Charles Taze Russell in 1884.

2. Russell claimed that reading his writings was more useful for gaining than reading the Bible itself.

3. Russell and his successors made numerous false prophecies. Make sure to examine the 1st editions!

"The 'battle of the great day of God Almighty' (Rev. 16:14), which will end in A.D. 1914 with the complete overthrow of earth's present rulership, is already commenced" (Russell, *The Time is at Hand*, 101; cited in Martin's KotC, p. 104).

"In the year 1918, when God destroys the churches wholesale and the church members by millions, it shall be that any that escape shall come to the works of Pastor Russell to learn the meaning of the downfall of 'Christianity'" (*The Finished Mystery*, 485 (1917 ed.); cited in Martin's KotC, p. 105).

"Therefore we may confidently expect that 1925 will mark the return of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the faithful prophets of old" (Millions Now Living Will Never Die, 1918, p. 89)

II. Beliefs

1. The Watchtower is God's theocratic organization on Earth

"Is not the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society the one and only channel which the Lord has used in dispensing his truth...?" (*The Watchtower*, 1 April. 1910, p. 6414)

"Jehovah's organization alone, in all the earth, is directed by God's holy spirit or active force." (*The Watchtower*, 1 July 1973, p. 402)

2. God's name is 'Jehovah' and it is essential to use this name in prayer and worship

3. Jesus is the archangel Michael and is a created being

4. The Holy Spirit is not God and is an impersonal force like electricity

5. Salvation is by faith in Jesus, obedience to God's law and membership in God's organization

6. Jesus was raised spiritually, not bodily, from the dead

7. God's law says that blood transfusions, secular government, holidays, and birthdays are evil

8. Only a 144,000-member 'anointed class' are born again, are adopted sons of God, and have their sins completely forgiven through faith in Christ

9. Jesus will not return to earth. The Second Coming occurred in 1914 when Jesus' invisible reign began.

III. Sharing the gospel with Jehovah's Witnesses

1. The essential issue is whether the Watchtower itself is the ultimate authority or whether it is subject to the authority of Scripture. Jehovah's Witnesses are told not to read Scripture apart from the Watchtower

"From time to time, there have arisen from among the ranks of Jehovah's people those, who, like the original Satan, have adopted an independent, faultfinding attitude...They say that it is sufficient to read the Bible exclusively, either alone or in small groups at home. But, strangely, through such 'Bible reading,' they have reverted right back to the apostate doctrines that commentaries by Christendom's clergy were teaching 100 years ago..." (*Watchtower*; Aug. 15, 1981; p. 29).

"God has not arranged for [His] Word to speak independently or to shine forth life-giving truths by itself. It is through his organization God provides this light." (*The Watchtower*, 1 May 1957, p. 274 in Rhodes' RFS p. 28)

"If we have love for Jehovah and for the organization of his people we shall not be suspicious, but shall, as the Bible says 'believe all things,' all the things that *The Watchtower* brings out." (*Qualified to be Ministers*, WB&TS p. 156 cited in Rhodes' RFS p. 28)

Try raising the following questions:

- a. Do you agree that the Bible is God's written word?
- b. Do you agree that we should ultimately trust the Bible over any human religious organization?
- c. If some church contradicts the Bible, should we follow the church or the Bible?
- d. If the Watchtower contradicts the Bible, should we follow the Watchtower or the Bible?

Helpful passages include 1 Tim. 3:16-17, Jer. 23, Matt. 4:4, Psalm 119. See also the prohibition against adding or subtracting from God's word in Deut. 4:2, Prov. 30:6, Rev. 22:18.

2. One of the most important things you can do for a Jehovah's Witness is to ask them to read the Scriptures on their own and ask whether the Watchtower teaching is consistent with the Scriptures.

- a. Know the Bible! This should go without saying for all Christians
- b. Allow the Jehovah's Witness to see first-hand your love for the Bible
- c. The Jehovah's Witnesses approach the Bible through 'proof-texting'. Show them the correct approach by reading passages in context and in large sections (whole paragraphs, chapters or even books)
- e. Avoid digressions. Agree to focus on a single issue and then stick to it

3. Simply share the gospel as you would with anyone. Ask them 'What must we do to be saved?' and listen to their answer. Then explain the gospel using John 1:1-18, John 6:26-40, Rom. 3:9-26, or Gal. 2:15-3:14

4. Use these issues to challenge whether the Watchtower is God's theocratic organization. Insist that they provide a clear passage of the Bible that teaches these doctrines, not just 'proof-texts'.

- a. How do we know that the Watchtower is God's organization on earth? Does it say so in the Bible? How do you explain all of the false prophecies made by the Watchtower in the past? What does Jesus say in Luke 21:8 about those who say 'the time is near'? ('Do not follow them')
- b. **Why does the NWT inserts the name 'Jehovah' into the New Testament 237 times?** Is there a single Greek manuscript of the NT that uses the name 'Jehovah'? (No, there isn't). Is there any evidence at all that the original manuscripts contained the name 'Jehovah'? (No there isn't; the NWT translates the Greek word 'kyrios' = ('lord') as 'Jehovah' and other times as 'lord' to fit their theology). Does the Watchtower have the right to alter God's Word? How did the Watchtower know when to translate 'kyrios' as 'lord' and when to translate it as 'Jehovah'? Do the translators of the NWT claim to be inspired by God like the writers of the NT? Compare Acts 7:59-60, Rom. 10:9-13, Col. 3:13-3:25 in the NWT versus the NASB/NIV/ESV. Would it be fair to replace 'God' (a title) in Is. 45:18 with the personal name 'Jesus'? If I produced a Bible which consistently 'translated' the word 'God' as 'Jesus' in the OT, would I be a faithful translator of God's Word? If not, **why does the Watchtower translate the title 'lord' (Gk. 'kyrios') in the NT as the personal name 'Jehovah'?**
- c. **The Watchtower claims that not all Christians are born again, have their sins completely forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, and are adopted sons of God.** These doctrines only apply to the 144,000-member anointed class. **Where is this taught in the Bible?** (They will respond with Rev. 7 and Rev. 14). How do we know that these doctrines about regeneration, justification, and adoption apply only to this group? In contrast, consider the Bible's repeated assumption that all who trust in Christ are adopted sons of God (John 1:12-13, Rom. 8:14-17, Gal. 4:6-7, Eph. 1:5), that all Christians are born again (1 Pet. 1:3, 1 John 5:1), and are completely justified by faith (Rom. 3:22-38).

5. Pray. Share the gospel out of genuine concern and love, not a desire to win an argument.

Resources:

- *Reasoning from the Scripture with the Jehovah's Witnesses*, Ron Rhodes. Completely comprehensive.
- *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Walter Martin. Classic text on all major cults including the Watchtower.
- www.irr.org/ - Website with extensive resources on Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.
- <http://www.apologetics315.com/2011/04/robert-bowman-apologetics-audio.html> - See lectures 5-8. Dr. Bowman gives an excellent 6-hour overview of Watchtower history and theology.
- <http://www.bible.cc/> and net.bible.org/ - find any Bible verse in multiple translations along with the Hebrew/Greek original
- www.shenvi.org/ - my website where these notes will be posted. Contact me if you have any questions.