

# What Lutherans Believe

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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## Jehovah's Witnesses

Why do Lutherans consider The Watchtower / Jehovah's Witnesses a "cult?"

- Their founder and history
- Their belief that the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society is "God's Visible Organization on Earth", and their attitude towards -- and interpretation of -- the Bible
- Their doctrine about Jesus Christ, Heaven, Hell, and the name "Jehovah" (Exodus 3:13-14)

### Their Founder and History

"The Organization" began its life in Pittsburgh USA in the early 1870's when several young people began studying the Bible specifically to discover the date of Christ's return. The founder of the group, Charles Taze Russell, who became the first president of "International Bible Students", allowed some room for differences of opinion and expression. A former Presbyterian and Congregationalist, he encountered a Second Adventist congregation near his clothing store, and became fascinated in studies of the end times and the second coming of Christ.

Over time, Russell's flexibility gave way to a decidedly authoritarian model in which he ultimately claimed that he alone possessed the only truly Biblical understanding of God. In 1879, following a rift with Nelson Barbour, a well-known Adventist theologian of the time, he began publishing "Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence" (later simplified to "The Watchtower").

Russell got into quite a bit of legal trouble over the sale of "miracle wheat," which he sold at an exorbitant price, claiming that it would produce 15 times as many bushels per acre as ordinary wheat. He also had a rocky home life, divorcing his wife.

In 1889 Russell published "The Time is at Hand", in which he claimed that 1872 not only marked the beginning of the seventh millennium since the creation of the world (he was definitely a "Young Earth Creationist!"), but that it was this chronological event that precipitated Christ's invisible return in October of 1874. In it he also claimed that God's judgment of the world began in 1878, and that the world would end in 1914, when God would destroy the governmental "Gentile kingdoms" and give authority over the world to the true Church. The advent of World War I solidified his belief, and Russell believed World War I would end with Armageddon. He died, however, in 1916, and the combination of his death and failed prophecies sent the Bible Students' morale into a tailspin

The second president of the group, “Judge” Joseph Rutherford, made many changes, including moving headquarters to Brooklyn, NY (the home base is often referred to by Witnesses as “Bethel”, or “House of God”), and his call in 1931 to rebrand followers as “Jehovah's Witnesses”.

The third president, Nathan Knorr was the one who worked hard to bring the unity to the organization and the recognition of the central headquarters at Brooklyn New York. Knorr was succeeded by Fred Franz, Milton Henschel, Don Alden Adams, and as of 2014, Robert Ciranko.

TWBATS has become rather secretive about leadership, acknowledging only that a group of elders that is a remnant of the generation of 1914 oversee the Society.

Although there have been many changes in doctrine and practice over the decades, the Witnesses continue to maintain a thoroughly pre-tribulation millennialist theology, though their application of dispensationalism is unique to their group, so I'd not identify them as “dispensational pre-millennialists” in the conventional sense. TWBATS has published dates of prophetic fulfillment numerous times, none of which have come to fruition, or required reinterpretation after-the-fact. Only since the year 2000 or so has their web site acknowledged the literal truth of Jesus' words in Matthew 24 regarding the end of the world.

### **Jehovah's Witness Doctrine:**

- Jehovah God is the Creator and Preserver of the universe and of all things, and Jehovah alone is God.
- All true Christians should call God by his name, “Jehovah”.
  - This is ironic, as “Jehovah” is not really the name by which God identifies Himself in the Bible. The truth is, we don't know how to pronounce His Name, because that Name has historically not been spoken aloud by Jews, so there is no oral tradition to inform our pronunciation of it!

Even so, the use of “Jehovah” both is common and convenient. It is a Westernization of the made-up word that results from combining the consonants of the “tetragrammaton” *YHWH* (יהוה)<sup>1</sup>, and the vowels<sup>2</sup> from the word *adonai* (אֲדֹנָי)<sup>3</sup>, which is pronounced eh-do-nai.

Hebrew has no “J” sound. In the transliteration to Latin and/or German, the letter *yod* (the “jot” of “jot and tittle”) may be rendered as either “Y” or “J”, hence the word Jehovah. Our best-guess pronunciation of the tetragrammaton is “Yahweh”.

<sup>1</sup> YHWH is the actual name God reveals to us in the scripture, a form of the Hebrew verb “to be” – (“I AM who I AM”, “Tell them I AM sent you”, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Actually *vowel points*, added to the Hebrew Bible by Masorete rabbis ca. the 9<sup>th</sup> century to guide pronunciation.

<sup>3</sup> Adonai, which means “lord” or “master”, and is the word Jews even today speak whenever the YHWH is written in the scripture.

Why didn't the Jews just say the word and make all this easy on us? Out of respect for God's revealed Name, they would not deign to speak it out loud and risk pronouncing it wrong.

- The Bible is the inerrant, infallible, inspired Word of God as it was originally given, and has been preserved by Him as the revealer of His purposes through His Visible Organization on Earth (the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society). To Jehovah's Witnesses, and them alone, the Bible is not a sealed book (The Watchtower, July 1, 1973.)
- Satan was a great angel who rebelled against Jehovah and challenged His sovereignty. Through Satan, sin and death came upon man. His destiny is annihilation with all his followers.
- Jesus is Jehovah's first created being.
  - Jesus is called Michael the Archangel in Scripture.
  - Jehovah created Jesus and then used Jesus to create all other things.
  - Jesus is not God, but is instead a lesser god.
  - The Word, or Logos, is "a god," a mighty god, the "beginning of the Creation" of Jehovah, and His active agent in the creation of all things. the Logos was made human as the man Jesus and suffered death to produce the ransom or redemptive price for obedient men.
  - Atonement is the ransom paid to Jehovah by Jesus Christ, and is applicable to all who accept it in righteousness. The death of Jesus removed the effects of Adam's sin on his offspring and laid the foundation of the new world of righteousness including the millennium of Christ's reign.
  - The man Christ Jesus was resurrected as a divine spirit creature after offering the ransom for obedient man.
- The Holy Spirit is an active force, likened to electricity. He is therefore not a "person" and is not God.
- The Trinity is, therefore, a pagan doctrine invented in the 4th century.
- Jesus Christ returned to Earth (invisibly) in 1914, expelled Satan from heaven, and is proceeding to overthrow Satan's organization, establish the theocratic millennial kingdom, and vindicate the name of Jehovah God. He did not return in a physical form

and is invisible as the Logos. Therefore 1914 is considered to be the date for the end of the "Gentile Times" and the invisible return of Jesus Christ to take his throne in the heavens. Originally, Jesus' return was expected in 1874. WWI appears to have prompted a re-imagining of this belief.

- Until November 1995 it was also taught that the generation that was alive in 1914 would not pass away until Jehovah's Kingdom was set up on earth:

*Awake! is for the enlightenment of the entire family. It shows how to cope with today's problems. It reports the news, tells about people in many lands, examines religion and science. But it does more. It probes beneath the surface and points to the real meaning behind the current events, yet it always stays politically neutral and does not exalt one race above another. Most important, this magazine builds confidence in the Creator's promise of a peaceful and secure new world before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away. - Awake!, 22 October 1995, p. 4.*

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- See <https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/daniel-4-bible-chronology-1914/> for more on current Jehovah's Witness teaching regarding 1914.
- There are only 144,000 people with Jesus in heaven. The rest, the "Great Crowd", will have eternal life on Earth (paradise).
- All who are worthy will be "resurrected", and after Armageddon will be given a second chance of salvation. The soul of man is not eternal but mortal, and it can die. Animals likewise have souls, though man has the preeminence by special creation. After death man ceases to exist until God "remembers" and "recreates" him.
- Only active Jehovah's Witnesses, doing God's will by serving the Organization, will survive Armageddon, the outpouring of God's wrath on the Earth. The remainder of Earth's population will be annihilated, with no hope of resurrection.
- Man was created in the image of Jehovah but willfully sinned; hence all men are born sinners and are "of the earth." Those who follow Jesus Christ faithful to the death will inherit the heavenly kingdom with Him. Men of good will who accept Jehovah and His theocratic rule will enjoy the "new earth"; all others who reject Jehovah will be

annihilated. Rejection of Jehovah's Visible Organization is tantamount to rejection of Jehovah, salvation, and hope for eternal life.

- Hell, meaning a place of fiery torment where sinners remain after death until the resurrections, does not exist. This is a doctrine of "organized religion," not the Bible. Hell is instead the common grave of mankind (Sheol), "a place of rest in hope" where the departed sleep until the resurrection by Jehovah God.
- Eternal punishment is the penalty for unrighteousness, to which there is no end. It does not mean eternal torment of living souls. Annihilation, the second death, is the lot of all those who reject Jehovah God, and it is eternal.
- The kingdom of Jehovah is supreme, and as such cannot be compatible with present human government (the devil's visible organization), and any allegiance to them in any way which violates the allegiance owed to Jehovah is a violation of the Scripture.
- In order to gain Eternal Life, a Jehovah's Witness believes that the following things are necessary:
  - They must study the Bible diligently, through the guidance of Watchtower publications.
  - They should attend all five meetings each week.
  - They should devote as many hours as possible to the ministry's work.
  - They should only associate socially with other Jehovah's Witnesses.
  - They must be baptized.
- Witnesses believe "...that all of these things, and more, must accompany faith, because the earning of the reward of eternal life, requires 'hard work'." (The Watchtower, Aug. 15, 1972, pp. 491 - 497.)
- Jehovah's Witness teaching on Baptism:
  - The "recruit" must have previously shown his willingness to study, attended meetings, trained for the field service, and actually gone house-to-house before baptism is considered.
  - Once a recruit desires to be baptized as a Jehovah's Witness, he must embark on further study of the subject. Once prepared, he must submit to a long list of questions regarding his loyalty to the organization and its doctrines. Only upon completion of this grilling is he issued a

certificate indicating that he is a candidate for baptism. He is then registered at the convention as a baptismal candidate and undergoes the actual baptism by immersion in water.

- From The Watchtower, June 1, 1985, page 30:

*"Before reaching this point of baptism, all candidates have carefully reviewed with congregation elders the Bible's principal doctrines and guidelines for Christian conduct to make sure they really qualify for baptism. Thus the decision to be baptized is by no means a sudden emotional reaction. Rather, each one has "proved for himself the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" and wishes to submit to that will. -- Romans 1:22*

- Prior to baptism, the elders make sure that the candidate understands that "the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" is nothing less than obedience to the Watchtower Organization. Before the actual baptism, each candidate answers two questions:

*"On the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, have you repented of your sins and dedicated yourself to Jehovah to do his will?"*

*"Do you understand that your dedication and baptism identify you as one of Jehovah's Witnesses in association with God's spirit-directed organization?"*

- Per the Watchtower article, "Having answered yes to these questions, candidates are in a right heart condition to undergo Christian baptism".

- Secondary beliefs:

- Blood transfusions are forbidden by Jehovah
- Jesus died on a stake, not a cross
- Christmas, Easter and birthdays should not be celebrated or memorialized; doing so is idolatry and direct affront to and rebellion against Jehovah.
- Military service, specifically, and government service in general, is inconsistent with Jehovah's will for his people.
- Jehovah's Witnesses therefore should not become entangled with secular political matters or serve in civil political offices.

## **The Watchtower's Attitude towards the Bible**

*The Watchtower, Sept. 15, 1910, page 298:*

"Furthermore, not only do we find that people cannot see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the "Scripture Studies" (*C.T. Russell's 6-volume exposition on the Bible - kgc*) aside, even after he has used them, after he has read them for ten years...if he then lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness."

*The Watchtower, May 1, 1957, page 273:*

"Jehovah God has provided His holy written word for all mankind and it contains all the information that is needed for men in taking a course leading to life. But God has not arranged for that word to speak independently, or to shine forth life giving truths by itself. His word says, 'Light is sown for the righteous' (Psalm 97:11). It is through his organization that God provides this light that the prophet says is the teaching or law of the mother. If we walk in the light of truth, we must recognize not only Jehovah God as our father, but his organization as our mother."

*The Watchtower, July 15, 1960, page 439*

"...the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, is God's sole collective channel, for the flow of biblical truth to men on earth in these last days."

*The Watchtower, Oct. 1, 1967, page 587:*

"Thus the Bible is an organizational book and belongs to the Christian congregation as an organization, not to individuals, regardless of how sincerely they may believe that they can interpret the Bible. For this reason the Bible cannot be properly understood without Jehovah's visible organization in mind."

*The Watchtower, May 1st, 1972, page 272*

"...they must adhere absolutely to the decisions and scriptural understandings of the Society because God has given it this authority over his people."

*The Watchtower, July 1, 1973, page 402*

"The Watchtower Society claims to be the only organization upon earth guided by God's Holy Spirit, and the only organization capable of understanding the meaning of the Holy Scriptures."

## Tips for Dealing with Witnesses *(From the Jehovah's Witness Outreach Center)*

- 1) Do not argue. The Witness is trained in argumentative means, and is more susceptible to genuine Christian love, which may disarm him. Lead the conversation by asking questions. The Witness is there to teach, not to be taught. The only way you can make him think for himself is to ask questions.
- 2) Don't get sidetracked. The Witness will try to change the subject when getting too close to something he is not comfortable with. Keep the conversation on the subject at hand, and tell him you will get back to his new subject later. The Witness will try to play Bible hopscotch, reading a verse from one Bible book, then a verse from a different book, and so on. Always stop him long enough to establish the context of the verse. This will often prove the Watchtower's argument to be wrong, and will also demonstrate to the Witness the right way to study the Bible. Also, he is trained to present only one side of a question. Remember that you are not dealing with his own beliefs, but those of the Watchtower Society. The Witnesses are trained not to think independently, but to stick to what the Society has told him is true.
- 3) Realize that you will get nowhere on doctrinal issues until you have undermined his faith in the Watchtower organization. He feels that all truth come through the organization, so no matter how much the Bible shows that it is wrong, he will believe the Society's explanation until his faith in it is shaken. The Witness has a faith in the Society that is similar that a Christian has in God.
- 4) If you cannot avoid a doctrinal discussion, deal only with primary doctrines: the Person and the Work of Christ are vital.
- 5) Give your personal testimony of salvation.
- 6) Don't deal with the Witnesses without your own Bible, as theirs (the "New World" pseudo-translation) has been modified to match the doctrines they have been taught.
- 7) Pray that God will open their eyes to the truth and that they will be saved.
- 8) Do love them in Christian love. Let them know that your love is for them as individuals, but that you have problems with the Watchtower organization.

### The Individual Witness:

- 1) ...is trained in a particular doctrinal system and is normally quite comfortable as long as no questions are brought up that are outside that system;
- 2) ...is committed to the Society without reservation and considers it to be God's Channel of Communication through which truth will come;
- 3) ...is under mind control, a fact attested to by many former Witnesses;
- 4) ...rejects being born again, therefore cannot give a testimony of an accomplished personal salvation.