

3 Jehova's Witnesses

Jehova's Witnesses define themselves to be *servants of Jehova, the Almighty God, and active witnesses to his sovereign supremacy*. They reject any association with organized Christendom, which they view as religious hypocrisy. For them, the central issue is *vindication of the name and sovereignty of Jehova* – far more important than the salvation of men.

Jehova's Witnesses are known for their amazing publication and witnessing activity. In every major city you will notice Jehova's Witnesses displaying the *Awake* and *The Watchtower* magazine while enduring the ridicule of the secular population. Almost every household is visited by Jehova's Witnesses at least once a year. Each issue of their *Awake* and *The Watchtower* magazines is printed more than ten million times in more than 80 languages and there is an apparently endless production of books – all written in an authoritative tone, very convincing to the uninformed reader.

Their current booklet *Knowledge that leads to Everlasting Life*, for instance, presents an excellent, easy to understand introduction into the foundations of what seems to be genuine Christianity. It contains, for example, a very good exposition about the uniqueness and the trustworthiness of the Bible. On the surface, they have very much in common with faithful believers. So to the unsuspecting observer they only seem to be a bit extreme because they are so eager to stand up for God in an ungodly world.

3.1 History

This exactly is the claimed purpose of the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society* – the organization which we know today as Jehova's Witnesses. It was founded in 1884 by Charles Taze Russell who viewed most of orthodox Christianity as corrupted and began to build his own system of Bible interpretation. His ideas were widely circulated through a seven volume book called *Studies in the Scripture* which has been distributed about 15 million times.

3.2 Major Doctrines – where are the differences?

In contrast to most other cults, Jehova's Witnesses focus on the Bible as their sole source of authority. But their interpretation of the Bible differs from orthodox Christianity in many essential points. They reject the doctrine of the trinity as unscriptural, deny the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit. Any assurance of salvation is virtually impossible because it depends on faithfulness, which is the reason why each Jehova's Witness spends hundreds of hours of witnessing per year.

In most other aspects Jehova's Witnesses share the orthodox beliefs. This makes it extremely difficult to detect the deception in their teachings, particularly because it has improved over the years. Only a few years ago, their foundational booklet openly attacked the doctrine of the trinity and other orthodox doctrines. But their more

recent publications are much smoother. They just tell the story as *they* see it, which means that they describe Jesus as the Messiah, but simply never say that he is also co-equal with God the Father. An uninformed reader will hardly notice that something essential is missing here.

Most of the differences between the teachings of Jehova's Witnesses and orthodox Christianity are of that nature: a few words here, half a sentence there – that is all you may notice. But if you sum up all these tiny little differences they lead to a belief system that has little to do with the true Word of God.

How do we know? What is it that shows us that Jehova's Witnesses actually deviate from the word of God while claiming to be the only faithful followers? Let's look at our measuring rod – our own articles of faith – and compare.

3.2.1 Sources of Authority – anything but the Bible?

Jehova's Witnesses strongly emphasize that for them the Bible is the ultimate source of authority. It is "*Jehova God's written word to mankind, revealing himself and expressing his purpose*". With such a strong devotion to the Word of God it appears strange that the doctrines of Jehova's Witnesses are so different from those of orthodox Christianity. Is the Word of God so ambiguous that it allows such different interpretations?

It is not. Actually, the ultimate source of authority for Jehova's Witnesses is not the pure Word of God, but the bible as translated and interpreted by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society. Russell's *Studies in the Scripture* and the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, which appeared in 1961, differ from the conventional translations whenever this is necessary to verify specific doctrines. Many of the peculiar teachings of Jehova's Witnesses are smuggled into the text of their Bible itself. The differences are not very obvious: a few words here, a different sentence structure there – that is all you see. But the consequences of these modifications are severe.

At this point one might say that Jehova's Witnesses have a right to create their own translation if they think that their choice of words would make certain aspects clearer to today's society. This is certainly true. But if you compare the translation with the original Greek and Hebrew, you will find that it is not just a bit biased, but plain wrong. If you look up Bible dictionaries or were fortunate enough to have studied Hebrew or Greek for a few years, you will notice that the modifications of critical passages may appear acceptable in the English language, but are not warranted by the original text. **John 1:1**, for instance is translated:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a God.
and **Colossians 1:16–17** reads

For by him were all other things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all other things, and

by him all other things consist.

By inserting the indefinite article into John 1:1 and the word *other* into Colossians 1:16–17, the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* supports the Witnesses' doctrine that Jesus Christ is not co-equal with God the Father. In the translation of **Luke 23:43**: *Verily I say unto you today, you shall be with me in paradise* the comma has been shifted after the word *today*, which gives the whole sentence an entirely different meaning and allows a different teaching about paradise. In all three cases the Greek original does not allow the translations chosen by Jehova's Witnesses. In Colossians the word "other" does not occur at all. Luke 23:43 is a bit more tricky, because there are no commata in the original text. But the Greek grammar of the text does not allow to consider the word *today* as linked to the word *say*, so the traditional translation is correct. I will say more about John 1:1 and other false translations when we go into the specific doctrines.

So you have to be careful. Don't let a Jehova's Witness cite from his own Bible but ask him to open a conventional one and study the Word there. That may lead to a few disputes about the accuracy of the translation but most Witnesses are not even aware of that fact or will turn out to be unable to defend their translation. But very likely you will not run into this discussion and can focus on the pure Word of God instead. Maybe this will open their minds and make them able to see themselves that their doctrines are wrong.

3.2.2 God

For Jehova's Witnesses, God the Father is the only true God who "*is now working out his purpose of vindicating his name, Jehova, and sovereignty, and blessing all faithful mankind through his kingdom*". Jehova is *one* person, self-contained and never lonely, omniscient, but not omnipresent – although his power extends everywhere. Jehova God is the supreme sovereign of the universe.

This description is close to how orthodox Christianity would characterize God the father. However, Jehova's Witnesses vehemently deny the doctrine of the trinity. They view it as a "*false, unbiblical doctrine that would deny His almighty supremacy*". They consistently deny the deity of Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit.

In our first session we have discussed the trinity of God, the deity of Christ, and the personality of the Holy Spirit. There is plenty of biblical evidence for these doctrines although they are never spelled out explicitly in a single verse. But Jehova's Witnesses ignore these evidences or translate them away in their *New World Translation*. For them, the doctrine of the trinity is originated in ancient Babylonish paganism, and the central issue is to stand up for the vindication of the *name* "Jehova", which they sometimes view as a requirement for salvation.

3.2.3 Creation

Almost all of Jehova's Witnesses's doctrines are built around an elaborate view of creation: Jehova God brought into being all that exists, both the material and the spiritual. Jesus Christ was God's first creation (thus his *son*) and was given "*priority and preeminence among all God's creatures*". The Son then became the co-worker of Jehova through whom all else came into existence. Angels were created next, with Lucifer being the first of them – a prince almost equal to the only-begotten son, but later falling away. Finally, the heavens and the earth were created at God's command. Jehova's Witnesses like to calculate: since the *sabbath rest* began some 6000 years ago, the Battle of Armageddon is near and "*Christ's reign of 1000 years will begin immediately after it*", each of the creator's workdays was 7000 years long and mankind is 42,000 years old. The world itself may be much older, because the "silence" of Genesis 1:1 "*may allow*" for a period of several billion years.

3.2.4 Jesus Christ

Jesus, the Christ is a created individual, the second greatest Personage of the universe. Jehova God and Jesus together constitute the Superior authorities.

The vehement denial of the deity of Christ is an outstanding feature of Jehova's Witnesses's doctrinal system. Actually, it is just a revival of an old heresy known as *Arianism*. To the Witness, Jesus Christ is the Messiah, but not Jehova God. He is the first-born son of God and lesser than Jehova. He was born as a Human (in the October of 2 B.C.) and did not possess immortality. But he *became* the Messiah when he was baptized by John (in Fall 29 A.D.) and acknowledged by God, died on a *stake* (not a cross) as ransom for our sin (in Spring 33 A.D.), and was resurrected immortal as a *spirit* (not a physical body) on the third day. There is no bodily resurrection and consequently there can be no second coming in the scriptural sense of that term.

To support these doctrines, many key passages of the bible are twisted in the *New World Translation*. **Philippians 2:6**, for instance, is translated as

who .. gave no consideration to a seizure, namely that he should be equal to God.

which seems to say that Jesus never claimed to be equal to God. Quite the opposite is true if you look at the actual text.

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God.

Reference is also made to **John 1:1–3**, which says

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

We think this is pretty plain. Jesus is *the Word* — Jehova's Witnesses agree to that — Jesus was there from the beginning, Jesus was with God, Jesus was identical with God, and He was the Creator of everything. But the Witnesses say that this is not so.

For them, Jesus is a created being – the “firstborn of creation”, so he was present since the beginning of creation but not earlier. They say he cannot be identical with God the Father, because the Bible says that the Word was *with* God. And since two persons cannot be identical, Jesus cannot be God. He was created by God as the very first there was and from then on he created all of the material world.

Sounds plausible – doesn’t it? But there is a contradiction with the end of verse 1, which says that **the Word was God**. If you point that out to them, you will hear that the correct translation would be *the Word is a God*, which means exalted, but not identical with Jehova. Well, they are right in saying that the Greek doesn’t use the definite article here, but the Greek sentence actually says **God was the Word**, so it is a statement about God the father. In English (and German as well), we can change the order of words without changing the meaning of the sentence, so **the Word was God** is also a correct translation while **the Word is a God** cannot be justified.

Jesus cannot be a created being because verse 3 clearly says that **without him nothing was created that was created**. So nobody else created him. The Greek term here is absolute and not restricted to material things. *Nothing* is more than just *no thing*. The English translation is a bit ambiguous here because there is no word in the English language to express this appropriately. The same holds for **in the beginning**, which in the Greek has a connotation of “always” and not of a starting moment. So Jesus was there not just since the beginning of creation but always.

Now someone may point out that the Bible speaks of Jesus as the only begotten son of the Father (**John 1:14**). Doesn’t that mean *created*? No it doesn’t! The Greek original *monogenos* points at uniqueness in rank and relation and is not related to the word *gennao*, which means *to create*. The translators 300 years ago chose the words *only begotten* because at that time this clearly expressed that Jesus’ relation to the Father was special and unique and that as the heir he was equal in rank with the Father. They couldn’t use “*the only son*” because that would contradict the fact that all Christians are children of God. Today’s understanding of *only begotten* is a little different, but it is difficult to find an English phrase that expresses the meaning of *monogenos* accurately.

I went into these details to show you how subtle the deception is. At a first glance you would hardly notice that the tiny little differences in the translation have any effect on our interpretation of God’s word. But the doctrines derived from these tiny little twists are extremely different from what we believe.

3.2.5 The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not a person but defined as “*Jehova’s invisible energizing force that produces visible results experienced by men*”. To support this, the *New World Translation* never capitalizes references to the Holy Spirit and many passages referring to the Holy Spirit are modified accordingly. **Genesis 1:2**, for instance, is translated as: *And God’s active force was moving to and fro over the surface of the waters.*

There are no attempts to explaining the Spirit's activities as helper, guide, advocate, comforter, or person who convicts of sin, which so clearly point out the personality of the Holy Spirit.

3.2.6 Man

Man was made by God about 42,000 years ago and given dominion over the earth. For the Witness, a man does not *have* a soul that is separate from the human body and can exist independently, but man *is a soul*. This soul is *not* immortal and thus death is the end of existence. Immortality is given as a reward for faithfulness. This concept is in sharp contrast to the orthodox understanding of **Genesis 2:7**

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Jehova's Witnesses point out that in this passage man *became* a living soul. But the body, made from the dust of the ground, is mortal and subject to death, while the soul – the breath of life – entered the body and gave it life. The breath of life is God's breath and indestructible. It will leave the body during physical death.

Man sinned and was expelled from the Garden of Eden lest he gain immortality of the *body*, as stated in **Genesis 3:22–23**. Jehova's Witnesses maintain that Adam would have lived forever on earth in his mortal state if he had not sinned. But because of his disobedience, death came into the world.

Since Jehova's Witnesses view body and soul as inseparable, their explanation of death and resurrection becomes quite complicated. For them, the first death is a *soul sleep*, a termination of existence, and resurrection is a re-creation according to the memory of God – not a restoration of the original body and soul.

3.2.7 Salvation

Salvation is the deliverance from the destructive power of sin, a redemption from the ultimate end of sin, which is everlasting death, annihilation.

For Jehova's Witnesses, Christ's atonement for sin is the ransom that overcame the power of sin and death and gave man a new chance – an opportunity to receive the *gift of immortal life*. Jesus Christ willingly gave up his perfect human life on earth and offset the inherited condemnation for Adam's family. He exchanged his human existence for the spirit existence and secured man an opportunity to live in paradise. So far this sounds similar to what orthodox Christianity teaches, although we would possibly express it with different words. But salvation is only available for the *faithful ones who endure to the end*. All other will receive a “*destruction that lasts forever*”, that is annihilation.

Jehova's Witnesses also have a very peculiar interpretation of **Revelation 7:4**:

And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel.

For the Witness this means that only 144,000 will be able to share in heavenly glory with Jesus Christ. We are told that God has set certain requirements and qualifications for this the heavenly class:

First, they have to exercise faith in God's provision, the shed blood of Christ. This includes baptism, which symbolizes dedication and brings the Witnesses into the position to be justified and declared righteous before God. God then causes his active force or holy spirit to act upon them and acknowledges them as his sons.

Second, they must demonstrate their dependability by maintaining integrity and carrying out their dedication faithfully until death.

The majority of Jehovah's Witnesses will not be able to be in that heavenly class. They will enjoy life in paradise on earth, provided that they pass the test of faithfulness during the millennial reign.

So salvation does not come by faith in Jesus Christ alone, but only by being a faithful, obedient, and enduring witness of Jehovah God. There is *no assurance* that you can make it, which explains why Jehovah's Witnesses are so eager to witness to other people and endure the ridicule of the world. They need to work their way into paradise and even that doesn't guarantee heavenly glory for them. On the other hand, there is no eternal punishment because all the unfaithful ones will be annihilated.

3.2.8 Things to come

The doctrine of Things to Come is based on a series of sophisticated calculations by which Jehovah's Witnesses were trying to predict the return of Christ and other details of the kingdom of God, like for instance the number of people who would be part of the heavenly kingdom.

At the end of the 19th century Charles Russell calculated the beginning of the heavenly kingdom to be the year 1914, which is 2520 years after Jerusalem was captured by Babylon. The 2520 years arose from a combination of **Daniel 4:16**, **Revelation 12:6**, and **Ezekiel 4:6** which appears to spell out the time until God is acknowledged. Before 1914, this beginning of the heavenly kingdom was understood as the second coming of Christ and as judgment day.

Now that 1914 has passed without any visible event, Jehovah's Witnesses had to develop a more elaborate doctrine lest they admit that their prediction was wrong. So they say now that the kingdom of God is *entirely heavenly* and that Christ's second coming already took place in the spirit world. At that time the devil and all his demons were hurled down to earth – World War I is viewed as proof for this claim.

Four years later, in 1918, Jesus entered the spiritual temple and began to cleanse it. This marked the period of judgment: The 144,000 were chosen from among those already dead and those who will die subsequent to 1918. The judgment people living in the world were divided into "sheep and goats" according to their individual attitude toward Jehovah's Witnesses and their message. The judgment is still going on as long as people are born into the world.

The battle of Armageddon is the next great event in history. In this battle Jesus Christ and his forces of righteousness will destroy Satan and his demonic and human organizations – such as organized religion and the United Nations – and vindicate Jehova’s universal sovereignty. Armageddon’s survivors will enter the Millenium on earth. During that time the faithful will be raised, as well as those who tried but died without opportunity to learn. The latter will be taught and then – like the others – go through a thousand year test of faithfulness. Only those who pass this millennial test will later enter paradise. The others will, together with Satan and his followers, be thrown into the lake of fire and annihilated.

Failing predictions caused a lot of trouble for Jehova’s Witnesses. Subsequently they put many efforts into re-interpreting the meaning of words in order to support their teachings. Jehova’s Witnesses are not willing to admit mistakes in their interpretation of the Bible – they rather elaborate complicated doctrines that are difficult to justify and twist the meaning of words than submitting to the pure Word of God. Because of a deep distrust in all established religions and worldly organizations they often appear extremely stubborn and indoctrinated when confronted with the truth. It does not make much sense to dispute doctrines on an abstract level.

But you have something which they miss – assurance of salvation. Your individual testimony, coupled with questions about their personal beliefs, may help them to see beyond their narrow horizon and understand what the gospel really says.