

Church History (69): Religious Cults (Part 3)

Having considered Seventh-day Adventism and Mormonism, we come this week to a third nineteenth-century religious cult, Jehovah's Witnesses. We will consider its origins, authority, and major beliefs.

I. Jehovah's Witnesses

1. *Its origins.* "The history of Jehovah's witnesses is very closely tied in with the history of the three presidents of the organization who have so far held office. The first of these was Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916). He was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on February 16, 1852. At the age of fifteen Russell was already in partnership with his father, operating a chain of men's clothing stores. By this time, he had joined the Congregational Church, finding it more to his liking than the Presbyterian" (Hoekema).¹ "In 1868, when challenged on his views of hell, Russell expressed doubts about eternal torment. The following year, he abandoned his church and the Bible. In 1870, Russell attended a religious meeting led by a Second Adventist speaker named Jonas Wendall. Wendall taught that a person does not have a soul and that unbelievers are simply annihilated. This provided a resolve to his concerns regarding hell" (Ankerberg).² "In 1870, at the age of eighteen, Russell organized a Bible class in Pittsburgh, which in 1876 elected him 'Pastor' of the group. Shortly after leaving his position, Russell founded *The Herald of the Morning* (1879), which developed into today's *The Watchtower Announcing Jehovah's Kingdom*" (Martin).³ "The first issue came off the press on July 1, 1879. The new magazine proved to be an important factor in the expansion of the movement. By 1880, some thirty congregations had come into existence in seven states" (Hoekema).⁴ Russell founded *Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society* in 1884, which in 1886, published the first in a series of seven books by Russell called *The Millennial Dawn*, then changed to *Studies in the Scriptures*. The first six of volumes were published in Russell's lifetime, and the seventh was edited from his writings after his death and published in 1917. "Russell married Maria Frances Ackley in 1879. No children were born of this union, and in 1913 Mrs. Russell sued her husband for divorce on the grounds of "his conceit, egotism, domination, and improper conduct in relation to other women" (Hoekema).⁵

"On January 6, 1917, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942), who had been serving as the society's legal counselor, became the second president of the Watchtower Society" (Hoekema).⁶ "Under Rutherford's leadership, the 'Society' became known by its present common name, Jehovah's Witnesses, and its corporate name, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, with its international headquarters in Warwick, New York" (Martin).⁷ "In May of 1918 warrants were used for the arrest of eight of the society's leaders, including Rutherford, charging them with conspiring to cause insubordination and refusal of duty in US military and naval forces. On June 20 the eight were found guilty of these charges, and sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, but after the war ended in November of 1918, on May 14, 1919, the convictions of the eight leaders were reversed, and soon thereafter they were set free" (Hoekema).⁸ "In 1921 the society published *The Harp of God*, the first of a series of books by Rutherford, who proved to be an

¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 223

² John Ankerberg, *What do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe? Answers Christians Need to Know*, 4

³ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 48

⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 225

⁵ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 227

⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 228

⁷ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 48

⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 229

even more prolific writer than Russell had been. Soon the Rutherford books were replacing Russell's volumes as standard expositions of Watchtower doctrine" (Hoekema).⁹

"On January 13, 1942, Nathan H. Knorr was elected to be the society's third president. He was born in 1905 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. At the age of sixteen he had already resigned his membership in the Reformed Church and had associated himself with the Allentown, Pennsylvania, congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses. At the age of eighteen he became a full-time preacher and joined the headquarters staff in Brooklyn" (Hoekema).¹⁰ Under Knorr's presidency, several authoritative books were published: *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (1943), *Let God Be True* (1946), *Theocratic Aid to Kingdom Publishers* (1945), *Equipped for Every Good Work* (1946), *Qualified to be Ministers* (1955), and *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* (1958). "Another important project carried out during Knorr's presidency was the translation of the Bible into modern English. In 1950 the first of these translations appeared: *The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*. The translation of the Old Testament was released in portions from 1953-1960, and in 1961 the entire Bible was published in one volume" (Hoekema).¹¹

2. *Its authority.* As the Jehovah's Witnesses viewed their first two presidents as prophets (Russell and Rutherford), from Knorr onward the collective leadership (under the president's rule) was considered prophetic. This means on a practical level, the two magazines, *Watchtower* and *Awake*, carry a present and formal authority. But at its base, the Jehovah's Witnesses have three primary sources of authority: *Studies in the Scriptures* (Charles Russell), the writings of Joseph Rutherford, and *Let God Be True* (1946). Modern-day Witnesses claim the Bible is their foremost authority. Thus, we read statements throughout *Let God Be True*: "We shall let God be found true by turning our readers to his imperishable written Word."¹² "To let God be found true means to let God have the say as to what is the truth that sets men free. It means to accept his Word, the Bible, as the truth. Hence, in this book, our appeal is to the Bible for truth."¹³ But by the Bible they mean the *New World Translation*. "This translation is by no means an objective rendering of the Bible into English; it is a biased translation in which many of the peculiar teachings of the Watchtower Society are smuggled into the text of the Bible itself" (Hoekema).¹⁴

(1) *Studies in the Scriptures.* The most popular and influential of Russell's writings was his seven-volume set, *Studies in the Scriptures*. He himself said of this set in a *Watchtower* article on September 15, 1910: "If the six volumes of SCRIPTURE STUDIES are practically the Bible, topically arranged with Bible proof texts given, we might not improperly name the volumes The Bible in an arranged form. That is, they are not mere comments on the Bible, but they are practically the Bible itself. 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 aside, even after he has used them, after he has become familiar with 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. On the other hand, if he had merely read the SCRIPTURE STUDIES with their references, and had not read a page of the Bible, as such, he would be in the light at the end of two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures." In his book, *Creation*, Ruther-

⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 230

¹⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 230

¹¹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 232-233

¹² *Let God Be True*, 18

¹³ *Let God Be True*, 9

¹⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 233

ford described the importance of *Studies in the Scriptures*": "The second presence of Christ dates from about 1874. From that time forward many of the truths long obscured by the enemy began to be restored to the honest Christian. As William Tyndale was used to bring the Bible to the attention of the people, so the Lord used Charles T. Russell to bring to the attention of the people an understanding of the Bible, particularly of those truths that had been taken away by the devices of the devil and his agencies. Because it was the Lord's due time to restore these truths, he used Charles T. Russell to write and publish books known as *Studies in the Scriptures*, by which the great fundamental truths of the divine plan are clarified."

(2) The writings of Joseph Rutherford. "Russell's writings were distributed, some fifteen or twenty million copies of them, over a period of sixty years, but Rutherford's in half that time were many times that amount. The prolific judge wrote over one hundred books and pamphlets, and his works as of 1941 had been translated into eighty languages. Thus, he was the Society's second great champion who, regardless of his many failings, was truly an unusual man by any standard. Russell and Rutherford are the two key figures in the Society's history, and without them it is doubtful that the organization would ever have come into existence" (Martin).¹⁵

(3) Let God Be True (1946). "*Let God Be True* is the most widely circulated and perhaps best-known Jehovah-Witness doctrinal book" (Hoekema).¹⁶ It claims that beginning with Russell, and throughout *Watchtower* literature, "Christ feeds His people through publications of a visible instrument or agency on earth."¹⁷ They then quote the *New World Translation* of Matthew 24:45-47: "Who really is the faithful and discreet slave whom his master appointed over his domestics to give them their food at the proper time." They then identify "the faithful and discreet slave" as designating an organization called "the remnant of Christ's spiritual brothers." "This means, in Jehovah-Witness terminology, the 'anointed class,' or 144,000, who play a leading role in directing the Watchtower Society and who hold all the more important offices." (Hoekema).¹⁸ The "domestics" over whom the "faithful and discreet slave" is placed are, apparently, the "other sheep" – Jehovah's Witnesses who do not belong to the "anointed class," but who take an active part in the work. "The great task of the 'anointed class' is that of providing spiritual food for the 'other sheep.' This implies that the 'other sheep' must constantly look to the 'anointed class' for the proper interpretation of the Bible and that they are not allowed to engage in any independent investigation of the Scriptures" (Hoekema).¹⁹

Through a careful perusal of these facts, it is a simple matter to determine that Jehovah's Witnesses have never stopped being "Russellites," no matter how loudly some have proclaimed the opposite. To those who are enmeshed in the Watchtower's web, we can only say that you are not following a "new" theocratic organization; you are following the old teachings of Charles Taze Russell, a bitter antagonist of historical Christianity, who has bequeathed to you a gospel of spiritual confusion. Those who are contemplating becoming members of the Watchtower Society, we ask you to weigh the evidence and judge for yourselves. Jehovah's Witnesses have abandoned practically every cardinal doctrine of

¹⁵ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 60

¹⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 238

¹⁷ *Let God Be True*, 199

¹⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 246

¹⁹ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 246-247

biblical Christianity for the dogmatic doctrinal deviations of Charles Taze Russell and J. F. Rutherford.²⁰

3. *Its major beliefs.* As with other religious cults, the founders of Jehovah's Witnesses believed all other Christian groups were apostate. "For many centuries the world had been deprived of the opportunity of Bible study. That period has well been styled the Dark Ages, during which there prevailed great darkness in the world and gross darkness upon the people" (Russell).²¹ This was slightly altered under Knorr who maintained, while there were Witnesses prior to Russell, it was with Russell that the Church was formally organized. "Although Jehovah God has had His witnesses on earth for about sixty centuries, only in modern times did they draw together for organized world-wide work. In 1872 (A.D.), in America, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Charles Taze Russell began a Bible class that met regularly to study the Scriptures about Jehovah's kingdom and the second coming of Christ Jesus. Ever since Jehovah's witnesses have been and now continue to be an international organization. They are to be found in every nation under the sun."²²

How the divided Church, with clashing creeds, appears to the Almighty, He tells us, calling it Babylon - which signifies confusion. And who can deny the appropriateness of the name? In times past Catholics have applied this name to Protestants, and the Protestants in turn have applied it to the Church of Rome. But when we come to examine the Scriptures on the subject, they seem to include all - the Church of Rome being represented as the Mother Church and the various Protestant Churches as her daughters. The charge of harlotry which the Lord makes against mother and daughters must be acknowledged, although with some this harlotry is more pronounced than with others.²³

(1) Trinity. "As is well known, Jehovah's Witnesses reject the doctrine of the Trinity. They claim, in fact, that this doctrine originated with the ancient Babylonians at about 2200 BC" (Hoekema).²⁴ They believe Christ is His first-born or created Son and the Spirit is "merely a personal force." "Strictly speaking, therefore, Jehovah's Witnesses are Unitarians. For them, God exists only in one Person – the Person of Jehovah. Jesus Christ, though a person, is not a divine Person; the Holy Spirit is neither a person nor a divine Person" (Hoekema).²⁵ Russel said in a sermon entitled, *The Trinity of God*: "For long centuries God's people have been confessing a Divine trinity, taught by the creeds, which was incomprehensible; and meantime they have been neglecting the trinity taught by the Bible, which is more reasonable. If the trinity of the creeds was questioned, holy hands were lifted in horror, and the questioner was told that the subject was a mystery, which he could not possibly understand, but to doubt it would mean his damnation! Therefore, he must profess to believe what he did not understand, and therefore could not believe."

(2) Christ. "Jehovah's Witnesses deny the full deity of Jesus Christ, and His complete equality with Jehovah. He may be called *a god*, but not *Jehovah God*; He is *a mighty one* but not *almighty* as Jehovah God is. He was created by Jehovah as the first son brought forth by Him. Since Christ was the first creature of Jehovah, He had a beginning. It is obvious therefore, that Christ is not the second person of the Trin-

²⁰ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 64

²¹ Charles Russell, *Sermons*, 5

²² *Let God Be True*, 211-212

²³ Charles Russell, *Sermons*, 15

²⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 255-256

²⁵ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 258

ity" (Hoekema).²⁶ "The Scriptures very explicitly declare to us that the Heavenly Father is from everlasting-to-everlasting God. But not so His creatures. From time to time, He has exercised His Omnipotent Power and Wisdom in a variety of creations. Necessarily, however, these had a beginning one was first, and the Bible most clearly and repeatedly and distinctly tells us that that first one, 'The Beginning of the creation of God,' was the Logos" (Russell).²⁷ "Our Lord Jesus' own testimony is that He is the First and the Last, "the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End" of the Divine creation. In other words, when the Father created the Son He never afterwards directly created any other person or thing. The Logos was the First and the Last, and by Him were all things made that were made" (Russell).²⁸ Russell and all other early Jehovah's Witnesses also denied Christ's bodily resurrection. "Our Lord was put to death in the flesh but was made alive in the spirit; he was put to death as a man but was raised from the dead a spirit being of the highest order of the divine nature: (Russell).²⁹ "Jesus did not take his human body to heaven to be forever a man in heaven. Had he done so, that would have left him even lower than the angels. God did not purpose for Jesus to be humiliated thus forever by being a fleshly man forever. No, but after he had sacrificed his perfect manhood, God raised him to deathless life as a glorious spirit creature."³⁰

(3) Salvation. Originally, Russell and the other early presidents, believed only 144,000 people would be saved. This was the Jehovah's Witnesses, the faithful remnant.³¹ But after their numbers exceeded this amount, they created a new system with two distinct destinies for the saints: heavenly and earthly paradises. "If the Watchtower is correct, only 144,000 will reach the 'top level' of heaven. Other devout Jehovah's Witnesses can work toward eternity in the next realm of heaven. Unbelievers will simply be annihilated (destroyed)" (Ankerberg).³² But what must a person do to qualify for a mere earthly paradise? "A person must take in knowledge, believe in the Jesus of the Watchtower, repent, dedicate their life to Jehovah, recognize the Watchtower as God's authoritative organization, conduct life in harmony with the teachings and activities of the Watchtower Society, maintain integrity to Jehovah and to his earthly organization, and then endure faithfully to the end" (Ankerberg).³³

(4) End times. Russell predicted Christ would return in 1914. When this failed, he taught that Christ came spiritually in 1914. Russell himself confessed: "The author acknowledges that he has taught the Lord's saints might expect to be with Him in glory at the ending of the Gentile Times. This was a natural mistake to fall into, but the Lord overruled it for the blessing of His people. The thought that the Church would all be gathered to glory before October 1914 certainly did have a very stimulating and sanctifying effect upon thousands, all of whom accordingly can praise the Lord - even for the mistake."³⁴ This spiritual coming of Christ ended the "Gentile Times" which began with the Babylonian captivity. "From the time of his ascension to October 1, 1914 (when the kingdom was brought forth), Christ was sitting at the right hand of God the Father, and on October 1, 1914, the Father placed the Son on the throne at His right hand. According to Jehovah-Witness teaching, therefore, we need no longer look for Christ's 're-

²⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 257-258

²⁷ Charles Russell, *Sermons*, 25

²⁸ Charles Russell, *Sermons*, 25

²⁹ Charles Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, 5:453

³⁰ *Let God Be True*, 41

³¹ *Make Sure of All Things*, 226

³² John Ankerberg, *What do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe? Answers Christians Need to Know*, 26-27

³³ John Ankerberg, *What do Jehovah's Witnesses Believe? Answers Christians Need to Know*, 27

³⁴ Charles Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, 5:335

turn' because this 'return' has already taken place" (Hoekema).³⁵ "Simply put, Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus Christ has returned to earth AD 1914, has expelled Satan from Heaven, is proceeding to overthrow Satan's organization, establish the Theocratic Millennial Kingdom, and vindicate the name of Jehovah God." (Martin).³⁶ The *first* or *earlier* resurrection took place in 1918, wherein the 144,000, were spiritually raised to reign with Christ. "This 'first resurrection' follows the pattern of Christ's resurrection. As he was 'raised' without a physical body in order to partake of heavenly life, so also are the members of the anointed class. Only Christ and the 144,000, therefore, participate in this 'first resurrection.' They have been raised with 'spirit bodies' to join Christ at the spiritual temple, to have become 'invisible spirit creatures,' and to have entered upon 'spirit life in heaven'" (Hoekema).³⁷ From the spring of 1918 to the Battle of Armageddon is the Judgment of the Nations. "Christ, now seated on the throne of his glory, is busy separating the people of the nations into two classes, called sheep and goats. The basis for this judgment is the attitude people take toward the kingdom message and its bearers, the remnant. The goats are those who have no appreciation for the kingdom and message. The sheep are those who rejoice at the coming of the kingdom and do good to the remnant who bear the message" (Hoekema).³⁸ The Battle of Armageddon will come after "a period of about six thousand years" after the fall of man (Russell).³⁹ "The dead who did not die in wickedness will be resurrected, upon earth, and given a chance to prove their faithfulness to Jehovah in His kingdom, following Armageddon."⁴⁰ Then follows the bodily resurrection and final judgment. Those who proved faithful to Jehovah-Witness teaching will be raised to inhabit the new earth and the others annihilated.

Not all of Jehovah's witnesses expect to go to heaven. Indeed, only a small proportion, a "little flock" of them do (Luke 12:32). Almighty God, who sets all members in his organization as is pleasing to him, has limited to 144,000 the number of the "body of Christ," whose members will reign with Christ Jesus in God's heavenly kingdom. Only a small remnant, sufficient to complete the fullness of that body, now remain on earth. An unnumbered multitude of faithful persons now working as Jehovah's witnesses are sometimes called his "other sheep," or "Jonadabs," because they were foreshadowed by Jonadab, companion of King Jehu (John 10:16; 2 Kings 10:15-28; Jeremiah 35: 8, 18-19). They do not expect to go to heaven. They have been promised life everlasting upon earth, including the privilege of subduing, beautifying and populating the earth, if they, as Jehovah's witnesses, prove their faithfulness to him before his battle at Armageddon. Jonadabs are Jehovah's witnesses, even though they are not of the remnant of the "body of Christ," just as faithful men and women were His witnesses before the "body of Christ" began to be made up by Almighty God with Christ Jesus as its Head. (Hebrews, chapter 11; and 12: 1). Inasmuch as every person consecrated to do the will of Almighty God as a follower of Christ Jesus, and who acts as a witness of Jehovah, can properly be called one of Jehovah's witnesses, it follows that his "other sheep" or Jonadabs, too, are Jehovah's witnesses.⁴¹

³⁵ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 298

³⁶ Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 74

³⁷ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 303

³⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults*, 307

³⁹ Charles Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, 1:132

⁴⁰ *Let God Be True*, 225

⁴¹ *Let God Be True*, 222-223