

# Evangelism: Defending the Faith

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## Jehovah's Witness

### ORIGIN

- Jehovah's Witnesses trace their origins to the nineteenth century Adventist movement in America. That movement began with William Miller, a Baptist preacher who, in the year **1816, began proclaiming that Christ would return in 1843**. His predictions of the Second Coming or Second Advent captured the imagination of thousands in Baptist and other mainline churches. Perhaps as many as 50,000 followers put their trust in Miller's chronological calculations and prepared to welcome the Lord, while, as the appointed time approached, others watched nervously from a distance. Recalculations moved the promised second advent from March, 1843 to March, 1844, and then to October of that year. This date also passed uneventfully.
- After the "Disappointment of 1844" Miller's following fell apart, with most of those who had looked to him returning to their respective churches before his death in 1849. But other disappointed followers kept the movement alive, although in fragmented form. Their activities eventually led to the formation of several sects under the broad heading of "**Adventism**" including the **Advent Christian Church, the Life and Advent Union, the Seventh-Day Adventists**, and various **Second Adventist groups**.
- Jehovah's Witnesses, likewise, trace their roots back to the Adventists. But they do not often admit this to outsiders; nor do many Witnesses know the details themselves. JW's are accustomed to defending themselves against the charge that they are a new religious cult. They will often respond that theirs is the most ancient religious group, older than Catholic and Protestant churches. In fact, their book *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* asserts that "Jehovah's witnesses have a history almost 6,000 years long, beginning while the first man, Adam, was still alive," that Adam's son Abel was "the first of an unbroken line of Witnesses," and that "Jesus' disciples were all Jehovah's witnesses too."
- Charles Taze Russell was originally raised a Presbyterian. Russell was 16 years old and a member of the Congregational church in the year 1868, when he found himself losing faith. He had begun to doubt not only church creeds and doctrines, but also God and the Bible itself. At this critical juncture a chance encounter restored his faith and placed him under the influence of **Second Adventist preacher Jonas Wendell**.
- For some years after that Russell continued to study Scripture with and under the influence of various Adventist laymen and clergy, notably Advent Christian Church

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minister George Stetson and the Bible Examiner's publisher George Storrs. He met locally on a regular basis with a small circle of friends to discuss the Bible, and this informal study group came to regard him as their leader or pastor.

- In 1870, Charles Taze Russell and others formed an independent group in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to study the Bible. During the course of his ministry Russell disputed many beliefs of mainstream Christianity including:
  - Immortality of the soul, hellfire, predestination, the fleshly return of Jesus Christ, the Trinity, and the burning up of the world. In 1876 Russell met Nelson H. Barbour; later that year they jointly produced the book *Three Worlds*, which combined restitutionist views with end time prophecy. The book taught that God's dealings with mankind were divided dispensationally, each ending with a "harvest", **that Christ had returned as an invisible spirit being in 1874 inaugurating the "harvest of the Gospel age"**, and that 1914 would mark the end of a 2520-year period called "the Gentile Times", at which time world society would be replaced by the full establishment of God's kingdom on earth.
- Beginning in 1878, they jointly edited a religious journal, *Herald of the Morning*. In June 1879, the two split over doctrinal differences and **Russell began publishing the magazine *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence***, stating that its purpose was to demonstrate the world was in "the last days", and that a new age of earthly and human restitution under the invisible reign of Christ was imminent.
- From 1879 Watch Tower supporters gathered as autonomous congregations to study the Bible topically. Thirty congregations were founded, and during 1879 and 1880 Russell visited each to provide the format he recommended for conducting meetings.
  - As congregations continued to form during Russell's ministry they each remained self-administrative, functioning under the Congregationalist style of church governance.
- In 1881 *Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society* was presided over by William Henry Conley and in 1884 Charles Taze Russell incorporated the society as a non-profit business to distribute tracts and Bibles.
  - By about 1900 Russell had organized thousands of part and full time colporteurs, and was appointing foreign missionaries and establishing branch offices. By the 1910s, Russell's organization maintained nearly a hundred "pilgrims", or traveling preachers.

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- Russell engaged in significant global publishing efforts during his ministry, and by 1912 he was the most distributed Christian author in the United States.
- Russell moved the Watch Tower Society's headquarters to Brooklyn, New York, in 1909, combining printing and corporate offices with a house of worship; volunteers were housed in a nearby residence he named Bethel.
  - He identified the religious movement as "Bible Students", and more formally as the International Bible Students Association.
  - By 1910, about 50,000 people worldwide were associated with the movement and congregations re-elected him annually as their "pastor". Russell **died October 31, 1916** at the age of 64 while returning from a ministerial speaking tour.
- According to instructions Russell left behind, his successor to the **presidency would share power with an editorial committee and with the Watch Tower Corporation's board of directors, whom Russell had appointed "for life."** But vice president Joseph Franklin Rutherford soon set about concentrating all organizational authority in his own hands. A skilled lawyer who had served as Russell's chief legal advisor, he combined legal prowess with what opponents undoubtedly saw as a Machiavellian approach to internal corporate politics.
- Rutherford uses a loophole in their appointment to unseat the majority of the Watch Tower directors without calling a membership vote. And he even had a subordinate summon the police into the Society's Brooklyn headquarters offices to break up their board meeting and evict them from the premises. (*Faith on the March* by A. H. Macmillan, pp. 78-80)
- After securing the headquarters complex and the sect's corporate entities, Rutherford turned his attention to the rest of the organization. By gradually replacing locally elected elders with his own appointees, he managed to transform a loose collection of semi-autonomous democratically-run congregations into a tight-knit organizational machine run from his office.
- Some local congregations broke away, forming such Russellite splinter groups as the Chicago Bible Students, the Dawn Bible Students, and the Laymen's Home Missionary Movement, all of which continue to this day. **But most Bible Students remained under**

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**his control, and Rutherford renamed them "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931, to distinguish them from these other groups.**

- Witnesses believe that after the death of the apostles, the Church embarked on a "Great Apostasy", diverging from the original teachings of Jesus on several major points. Influenced by Restorationism in the 19th century, Charles Taze Russell and his associates formed a Bible study group in the 1870s in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, developing teachings that they considered to be a revival of "the great truths taught by Jesus and the Apostles". Watch Tower publications claim both the Great Apostasy and Russell's subsequent "restoration" of original Christianity were a fulfillment of Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds at **Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43**.
- Although many of their eschatological teachings have changed over the years, Jehovah's Witnesses have consistently **claimed to be the only true religion**. Based on their interpretation of **Revelation 18:2-24**, Jehovah's Witnesses believe all other religions are part of "Babylon the Great", a "world empire of false religion" under the control of Satan; consequently, they refuse all ecumenical relations with other religious denominations.