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A Short History of the Watchtower Organization

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Jehovah's Witnesses trace their origins to the nineteenth century Adventist movement in America. That movement began with William Miller, a Baptist lay 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. Alas, that date too 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.

An interesting side-note: The Branch Davidians who died at Waco, Texas, under the leadership of David Koresh also trace their roots to the same Millerite source through a different line of descent. In 1935 the Seventh Day Adventist Church expelled a Bulgarian immigrant named Victor Houteff, who had begun teaching his own views on certain passages of the Revelation or Apocalypse, the last book of the Bible. Houteff set up shop on the property at Waco. After first referring to his tiny new sect as The Shepherd's Rod, Houteff and his people in 1942 incorporated and renamed themselves Davidian Seventh Day Adventists. Houteff died in 1955, and in 1961 his wife Florence officially disbanded the sect, but a few followers under the leadership of west Texas businessman Benjamin Roden took over the real estate. Roden died in 1978, leaving behind his wife Lois and his son George to lead the group. Then, in 1987, David Koresh took over the leadership position, and the tragedy that followed is public knowledge.

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 [sic] too." (pp. 8-9)

An outsider listening to such claims quickly realizes, of course, that the sect has simply appropriated unto itself all the characters named in the Bible as faithful witnesses of God. By such extrapolation the denomination is able to stretch its history back to the beginnings of the human family—at least in the eyes of adherents who are willing to accept such arguments. But outside observers generally dismiss this sort of rhetoric and instead reckon the Witnesses as dating back only to Charles Taze Russell, who was born on February 16, 1852, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

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 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 January, 1876, when he was 23 years old, Russell received a copy of The Herald of the Morning, an Adventist magazine published by Nelson H. Barbour of Rochester, New York. One of the distinguishing features of Barbour's group at that time was their belief that Christ returned invisibly in 1874, and this concept presented in The Herald captured Russell's attention. It meant that this Adventist splinter group had not remained defeated, as others had, when Christ failed to appear in 1874 as Adventist leaders had predicted; somehow this small group had managed to hold onto the date by affirming that the Lord had indeed returned at the appointed time, only invisibly.

Was this mere wishful thinking, coupled with a stubborn refusal to admit the error of failed chronological calculations? Perhaps, but Barbour had some arguments to offer in support of his assertions. In particular, he came up with a basis for reinterpreting the Second Coming as an invisible event: In Benjamin Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott translation of the New Testament the word rendered coming in the King James Version at Matthew 24:27, 37, 39 is translated presence instead. This served as the basis for Barbour's group to advocate, in addition to their time calculations, an invisible presence of Christ.

Although the idea appealed to young Charles Taze Russell, the reading public apparently refused to 'buy' the story of an invisible Second Coming, with the result that N. H. Barbour's publication The Herald of the Morning was failing financially. In the summer of 1876 wealthy Russell paid Barbour's way to Philadelphia and met with him to discuss both beliefs and finances. The upshot was that Russell became the magazine's financial backer and was added to the masthead as an Assistant Editor. He contributed articles for publication as well as monetary gifts, and Russell's small study group similarly became affiliated with Barbour's.

Russell and Barbour believed and taught that Christ's invisible return in 1874 would be followed soon afterward, in the spring of 1878 to be exact, by the Rapture-the bodily snatching away of believers to heaven. When this expected Rapture failed to occur on time in 1878, The Herald's editor, Mr. Barbour, came up with "new light" on this and other doctrines. Russell, however, rejected some of the new ideas and persuaded other members to oppose them. Finally, Russell quit the staff of the Adventist magazine and started his own. He called it Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence and published its first issue with the date July, 1879. In the beginning it had the same mailing list as The Herald of the Morning and considerable space was devoted to refuting the latter on points of disagreement, Russell having taken with him a copy of that magazine's mailing list when he resigned as assistant editor.

At this point Charles Russell no longer wanted to consider himself an Adventist, nor a Millerite. But, he continued to view Miller and Barbour as instruments chosen by God to lead His people in the past. The formation of a distinct denomination around Russell was a gradual development. His immediate break was, not with Adventism, but with the person and policies of N. H. Barbour.

Nor were barriers immediately erected with respect to Protestantism in general. New readers obtaining subscriptions to Zion's Watch Tower were often church members who saw the magazine as a para-church ministry, not as an anti-church alternative. Russell traveled about speaking from the pulpits of Protestant churches as well as to gatherings of his own followers. In 1879, the year of his marriage to Maria Frances Ackley and also the year he began publishing Zion's Watch Tower, Russell organized some thirty study groups or congregations scattered from Ohio to the New England coast. Each local "class" or ecclesia came to recognize him as "Pastor," although geography and Russell's writing and publishing activities prevented more than an occasional pastoral visit in person.

Inevitably, Russell's increasingly divergent teachings forced his followers to separate from other church bodies and to create a denomination of their own. Beginning, as he did, in a small branch of Adventism that went to the extreme of setting specific dates for the return of Christ and the Rapture, Russell went farther out on a limb in 1882 by openly rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. His earlier mentor Nelson H. Barbour was a Trinitarian, as was The Herald of the Morning's other assistant editor John H. Paton who joined Russell in leaving Barbour to start

Zion's Watch Tower. The writings of Barbour and Paton that Russell had helped publish or distribute were Trinitarian in their theology. And the Watch Tower itself was at first vague and noncommittal on the subject. It was only after Paton broke with him in 1882, and ceased to be listed on the masthead, that Russell began writing against the doctrine of the Trinity.

By the time of his death, Charles Taze Russell had traveled more than a million miles and preached more than 30,000 sermons. He had authored works totaling some 50,000 printed pages, and nearly 20,000,000 copies of his books and booklets had been sold.

Followers had been taught that Russell himself was the "faithful and wise servant" of Matthew 24:45 and "the Laodicean Messenger," God's seventh and final spokesman to the Christian church. But he lived to see the failure of various dates he had predicted for the Rapture, and finally died on October 31, 1916, more than two years after the world was supposed to have ended, according to his calculations, in early October, 1914..

His disciples, however, saw the World War then raging as reason to believe "the end" was still imminent. They buried Russell beneath a headstone identifying him as "the Laodicean Messenger," and erected next to his grave a massive stone pyramid emblazoned with the cross and crown symbol he was fond of and the name "Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society." (The pyramid still stands off Cemetery Lane in Ross, a northern Pittsburgh suburb, where it reportedly serves as the focal point of an eerie scene each Halloween as modern-day Russellites encircle it, holding hands, in a vigil commemorating the day of his death.)

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 ("Judge") 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. Thus he used 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 his control, and Rutherford renamed them "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931, to distinguish them from these other groups.

Meanwhile, he shifted the sect's emphasis from the individual "character development" Russell had stressed to vigorous public witnessing work, distributing the Society's literature from house to house. By 1927 this door-to-door literature distribution had become an essential activity required of all members. The literature consisted primarily of Rutherford's unremitting series of attacks against government, against Prohibition, against "big business," and against the Roman Catholic Church. He also forged a huge radio network and took to the air waves, exploiting populist and anti-Catholic sentiment to draw thousands of additional converts. His vitriolic attacks, blaring from portable phonographs carried to people's doors and from the loudspeakers of sound cars parked across from churches, also drew down upon the Witnesses mob violence and government persecution in many parts of the world.

Like Russell, Rutherford tried his hand at prophecy and predicted that biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be resurrected in 1925 to rule as princes over the earth. (Millions Now Living Will Never Die, 1920, pp. 89-90) They failed to show up, of course, and Rutherford quit predicting dates. In fact, referring to that prophetic failure he later admitted, "I made an ass of myself." (The Watchtower, October 1, 1984, p. 24)

Vice President Nathan Homer Knorr inherited the presidency upon Rutherford's death in 1942 but left doctrinal matters largely in the hands of Frederick W. Franz, who joined the sect under Russell and had been serving at Brooklyn headquarters since 1920. Lacking the personal magnetism and charisma of Russell and Rutherford, Knorr focused followers' devotion on the 'Mother' organization rather than on himself.

After decades of publishing books and booklets authored by its presidents Russell and Rutherford, the Watchtower Society began producing literature that was written anonymously. But it was not impersonal, since the organization

itself was virtually personified, and readers were directed to "show our respect for Jehovah's organization, for she is our mother and the beloved wife of our heavenly Father, Jehovah God." (The Watchtower, May 1, 1957, p. 285)

A superb administrator, Knorr shifted the sect's focus from dynamic leadership to dynamic membership. He initiated training programs to transform members into effective recruiters. Instead of carrying a portable phonograph from house to house, playing recordings of "Judge" Rutherford's lectures at people's doorsteps, the average Jehovah's Witness began receiving instruction on how to speak persuasively. Men, women, and children learned to give sermons at the doors on a variety of subjects.

Meanwhile Fred Franz worked behind the scenes to restore faith in the sect's chronological calculations, a subject largely ignored following Rutherford's prophetic failure in 1925. The revised chronology established Christ's invisible return as having taken place in 1914 rather than 1874, and, during the 1960's, the Society's publications began pointing to the year 1975 as the likely time for Armageddon and the end of the world.

The prevailing belief among Jehovah's Witnesses today is that the Society never predicted "the end" for 1975, but that some over-zealous members mistakenly read this into the message. However, the official prediction is well documented. See, for example, the article titled "Why Are You Looking Forward to 1975?" in The Watchtower of August 15, 1968, pp. 494-501. Allowing for a small margin of error, it concludes a lengthy discussion with this thought: "Are we to assume from this study that the battle of Armageddon will be all over by the autumn of 1975, and the long-looked-for thousand-year reign of Christ will begin by then? Possibly, but we wait to see how closely the seventh thousand-year period of man's existence coincides with the sabbathlike thousand-year reign of Christ. . . . It may involve only a difference of weeks or months, not years." (p. 499) For several other quotes pointing specifically to 1975, see the book Index of Watchtower Errors (by David A. Reed, Baker Book House, 1990) pages 106-110.

Knorr's training programs for proselytizing, plus Franz' apocalyptic projections for 1975, combined to produce rapid growth in membership, the annual rate of increase peaking at 13.5 percent in 1974. All of this pushed meeting attendance at JW Kingdom Halls from around 100,000 in 1941 to just under 5 million in 1975. Growth since then has been slower, but fairly steady in most years, with the result that nearly 11.5 million gathered at Kingdom Halls in the spring of 1992 for the Witnesses' annual communion or "Memorial" service commemorating Christ's death with unleavened bread and red wine.

During the 1970's changes took place at Watchtower headquarters in regard to presidential power. First it became accepted in theory that the Christian Church (which Jehovah's Witnesses see their organization as encompassing) should not be under one-man rule, but rather should be governed by a body similar to the twelve apostles. The 7-member board of directors of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania had previously been portrayed as fulfilling this role, but in 1971 an expanded Governing Body was created with a total of eleven members, including the seven Directors. The aim was to demonstrate that the leadership derived authority from an apostolic source, rather than from Pennsylvania corporate law.

This new Governing Body was displayed as further evidence of the sect's being the one true church, but in actuality Nathan Knorr continued to rule Jehovah's Witnesses much as Russell and Rutherford had done before him. That is, until 1975, when Governing Body members began insisting on exercising the powers granted to them in theory but that had never really been theirs in practice. Over the objections of Fred Franz the Body that he had been instrumental in creating actually began governing, so that when Nathan Knorr passed away in 1977 Franz inherited an emasculated presidency.

Franz also inherited an organization troubled by discontent over the obvious failure of his prophecies of the world's end in the autumn of 1975. Even at Brooklyn headquarters little groups meeting privately for Bible study were beginning to question not only the 1914-based chronology that produced the 1975 deadline, but also the related teaching that the "heavenly calling" of believers ended in 1935, with new converts after that date consigned to an earthly paradise for their eternal reward.

The hitherto fast-growing sect actually began losing members for the first time in decades, as people who had expected Armageddon in 1975 became disillusioned. When membership loss grew into the hundreds of thousands—a fact masked by new conversions in figures released by the Society, but reported in an investigative article in the Los Angeles Times of January 30, 1982 (pp. 4-5)—president Franz and the conservative majority on the Governing Body took action. In the spring of 1980 they initiated a crack-down on dissidents, breaking up the independent Bible study groups at headquarters, and forming "judicial committees" to have those seen as ringleaders put on trial for "disloyalty" and "apostasy."

By the time this purge culminated in the forced resignation and subsequent excommunication of the president's nephew and fellow Governing Body member Raymond V. Franz (a development Time magazine found worthy of a full-page article, Feb. 22, 1982, p. 66) a siege mentality took hold on the world-wide organization. Even Witnesses who left quietly and voluntarily for personal reasons were denounced as disloyal and were ordered shunned, former friends forbidden to say as much as "a simple 'Hello'" to them.

Thus, although Frederick W. Franz served as the sect's chief theologian for some fifty years-from the start of Knorr's presidency in 1942 until his own death on December 22, 1992-the fact that he outlived his failed prophecies by more than fifteen years required him to impose a mini-Inquisition on the membership in order to keep his doctrinal and chronological framework in force for the remainder of his lifetime.

Milton G. Henschel's selection as fifth Watchtower president on December 30, 1992, is truly significant for the 13 million now attending Kingdom Halls. At first glance the choice of a staunch conservative for the post may seem to guarantee a continuation of the status quo, with little change in the offing for Jehovah's Witnesses. But a closer look reveals this appointment as the conservative old guard's last stand-an indication that radical change in the sect's leadership and doctrines is imminent.

At age 72 Henschel became the second-youngest member of the Governing Body, and he was selected to lead by men several years older than he is. (Both the average age and the median age at the time of Henschel's appointment calculated out to about 82 years.) With members in their eighties known to sleep through meetings and to vote on matters upon being awakened (See eyewitness Raymond Franz's account in his book *Crisis of Conscience*, p. 40.) the Body is losing its ability to provide purposeful and decisive leadership. Henschel was no doubt chosen in part due to his having vitality others lacked. Obviously, these aging leaders will not be able to hold the reigns of power much longer. The men who shared in building the Watchtower into what it is today will soon leave it behind for others to run.

In the decades following the death of founder Charles Taze Russell, his successor J. F. Rutherford found himself forced to re-write many of the sect's major doctrines. Much the same can be expected when JW's of a new generation inherit the positions currently occupied by Milton Henschel and his fellow elderly Governing Body members. When new leaders eventually take over, will they drop the ban on blood transfusions? Only time will tell. But, even if they do, it will make no difference for those who have already died, nor for those Witnesses continuing to die while the teaching remains in place.

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