

# What Happens When A Bethelite Questions the Governing Body

by [Steve McRoberts](#)

My name is Steve McRoberts. I was born in 1956 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was raised, along with my older brother and sister (Tom and Mary), as a Catholic. Tom was adept at skipping church, but Mary and I took religion very seriously: we spent our free time cleaning the church and distributing "holy cards" to bewildered passers-by.

But then we moved, and we started attending public school. Mary made friends at school with Phyllis, who was a Jehovah's Witness. Before long, Mary no longer had time for me; she was busy studying a green Bible.

Our father had left when I was a baby, so our mother worked full-time to raise us. Although we had drifted away from Catholicism, she was bitterly opposed to the Witnesses. I remember her announcing to Tom and I at the dinner table that Mary had decided to be baptized into this strange "Jehovah" religion. We dutifully ridiculed her.

Things between Mary and Mom rapidly went from bad to worse, so shortly after she graduated, Mary moved out to pioneer in rural southern Minnesota with another young lady: Jean. Tom enlisted in the army, and I dropped out of school.

I had been picked on a lot at school, and as soon as I turned 16 I quit. I had had enough. I wanted to go to Alaska and be a hermit and never see another taunting human being again. But before I left I decided to pay a visit to Mary. During my visit, Mary and Jean (thinking they'd never see me again) bombarded me with witnessing. At first I scoffed. But later, back home, when my journey to Alaska was delayed, what they said began to bother me, and I figured I'd look into it and disprove it all to them before going away. Of course, with my limited knowledge at the time, this backfired.

I couldn't disprove the Witness doctrines, and I became fascinated with them. Mary began surreptitiously sending me Watchtower books, which I devoured. When she and Jean came home to Minneapolis to attend the July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1974 convention, I shocked Mom by announcing that I was going along. She called Mary an "evil influence" and said it was just like having the devil in the house. Mary cried. But I went.

Before all this, I had arranged with Tom and Mary to put our money together and send Mom on a vacation to New York (where she had always wanted to go). When I presented her with the ticket she agreed to go only if I promised not to open any of my Watchtower books while she was gone. I promised.

While she was gone I went to my first meeting at a Kingdom Hall. There I met Ron who offered me a Bible Study. The next night he was at our house till 11:00 p.m. answering my questions. I had him over several more times while Mom was in New York, but true to the letter of my promise, I never opened any of my books: just Ron's.

Mom had a couple of ministers come and talk to me, but to no avail. They only succeeded in making me feel rotten and convinced me that I needed to study a lot more. So I did. Not only did I study Watchtower publications, but I also read the Bible from cover to cover.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974 I was baptized. Relations between Mom and I deteriorated from that point, so one month later I moved into the upstairs apartment of Ron's duplex.

I split my days between part-time work and going door to door with the pioneers. In the evening I would compose long letters to Tom about why he should start studying with the Witnesses. He was now out of the army and living in Australia. He wrote back that he regarded the Witnesses in the same light as Mom did. He said he believed that religion should bring families together, not drive them apart. I, of course, showed him in the Bible where Jesus said just the opposite.

Mary lost her pioneering partner and roommate when Jean left to get married, so I moved down to rural southern Minnesota to live with her and witness to the farmers. We bought an old dilapidated trailer that was otherwise going to

be turned into a chicken coop. We moved it onto the farm of a Witness family rent-free, and set out to pioneer.

We were poor but happy. Just as when we were children, we found joy in giving. Instead of "holy cards", we were now giving out Watchtower and Awake magazines and starting Bible studies. We thought we were "doing good", and that thought made us happy.

Then, Tom got interested. He got baptized and began to pioneer in Australia! It was the peak.

Things went downhill from there. The Witness family, who let us put our trailer on their farm, asked us to move. They said it was because they thought we were "watching" them, and that we didn't work as hard as they did. This meant that we both had to go to work to afford the move and to pay monthly rent at the trailer lot: we would no longer be able to pioneer.

In December 1975 Mary went to a convention in Boston and met Mike and fell in love. In a few months she decided to move to Boston to be near him. I was left alone, and I fell apart.

Being a teenager with natural desires, I had a "problem" with masturbation. I was loyal and foolish enough to report this to the elders. They told me I would be withheld from all responsibilities in the congregation and could be disfellowshipped if I didn't change my ways. I think they also believed that there was "bad blood" between me and the family that had kicked us off of their farm. I didn't personally harbor any grudge against them, but I don't know what they were feeling. I believe there were other conflicts between the "friends" at this time. Then people started being "publicly reproved" left and right. The elders told me that our tiny congregation was having a lot of trouble and they advised me to move away.

But before I left, I wanted to help Violet. Violet was an elderly woman who had been a Witness long before anyone thought to establish a congregation in the area. She was poor and a recent widow. She lived in a house trailer out in the middle of nowhere and she needed skirting put around her trailer before winter. Her social worker knew of her involvement with the Witnesses, and knew of their reputation for helping each other out. She told Rod (the ministerial servant who had kicked us off his farm) that she would supply the skirting if he would get some of the congregation together to supply the labor. Since I gave Violet a ride to and from the Kingdom Hall each meeting, I learned about all of this. I also found out that Violet was spending what little money she had on refreshments for all of the brothers and sisters she knew would show up to help her on the big day.

But I wasn't hearing anything about it from Rod or anyone else in the congregation. I asked Rod about it and he said, "She's got sons—let them help her. Why should we do it?" I was aghast. I went to an elder and asked him what to do. He said Rod was right and no one else was going to help her, but since I was so worried about it I should probably go and help her.

I didn't have the heart to break the news to Violet. She had already gone to considerable expense and time preparing for the party to follow the skirting. I left things as they were and hoped and prayed I wouldn't be the only one to show up on the appointed day.

Two of her sons (non Witnesses) and I showed up. That was it. Violet kept peeking out the window looking for her "loving brothers and sisters", but no one came. Finally she said to me, "No one else is coming, are they?" "I guess not," I replied. She was such a sweet old lady, it really broke my heart.

I started wondering if all this stuff about love was just talk. I felt unwanted and out of place without Mary. I sank into a deep depression over the fact that I couldn't seem to overcome my "problem." I felt sure that I had committed the "unforgivable sin" since I knew "the truth" and was choosing not to follow its rules. I also became depressed over the thought that God was soon going to kill Mom, and billions of other good people in Armageddon. Since I couldn't live up to the rules of the "ark", I decided to cast my lot with the outcasts.

I left the congregation and drove back home. I intended to move back in with Mom and forget about the Witnesses as best I could. But when I got home I discovered that Mom was in the process of selling the house and moving into a small apartment. So I didn't tell her my plan; instead I changed my plan. I helped her move and then I drove to

Alaska. I would become a hermit after all!

But when I got to Alaska, preparing for my venture into the wilderness at a rooming house in Fairbanks, I suffered a massive guilt trip. How could I go off into the wilderness when I was supposed to warn others about the coming destruction, and was supposed to be attending meetings? It sounds silly today, but it was deadly serious then. I tried suicide as a way out, but failed even in that. So, I attended the Sunday meeting of the Fairbanks congregation.

I expected to experience the "upbuilding" that we were taught to expect from meetings. I thought that a lot of the "friends" would notice my Minnesota license plates and would ask me about the long trip up there, where I was staying, and so on. One person said "Hi." That was it. That was all I got from "Jehovah's loving people."

I also noticed, during the Watchtower study, that one of the brothers answered a question inaccurately. The brother who was holding the microphone for him shook his head with a very smug smile of scorn on his face that lasted for several minutes. It conveyed such a superior attitude that it enraged me. It sounds like such a small thing, but it was that smug smile which made me start observing things more closely.

I had sent a letter to Mary in the midst of my crisis. She and Mike wrote back and suggested that I go to Bethel. Since I couldn't get past my guilt and become a hermit, and I was unimpressed by the Fairbanks congregation, I decided this was good advice. If any place on earth could "upbuild" me and get me back on track, certainly it would be the headquarters of God's organization! So I went to New York and put in my application for Bethel service.

While I was waiting to get accepted into Bethel I stayed in an apartment with a Witness family: George, his wife, and their three children. I was shocked at the way George whipped his children with his belt when they didn't know the answers during their family Bible study. He also engaged in psychological torture: he would assign his boys an impossible number of sentences to write before the next meeting, and when they didn't meet the quota he would rip up the pages upon pages of sentences they had worked so hard at. Then he would double their quota. I seriously thought about reporting him for child abuse. But since I never had a father when I was growing up, I really didn't know for sure if it was acceptable behavior or not (looking back on it today, I can tell you it certainly was not acceptable behavior).

When they made George a Ministerial Servant I told myself that what he was doing must be okay. But later, when we went to visit another Witness family for several days, I watched in amazement as George engaged in "tickle fights" with the well-endowed 16 year-old daughter of his friend. I even heard George say, in the presence of his wife, that if he weren't married, he would certainly pursue this young girl. If memory serves, they made George an elder.

I was accepted into Bethel in August of 1976. I was put to work in the bindery. Three of us new recruits shared a room which had a maximum capacity of two. At breakfast each morning there were eight bowls for ten hungry Bethelites. I received \$20 a month, twelve of which I had to turn over to Bill Jackson (of the Governing Body) for gas money as he drove me and several other brothers back and forth to our congregation three times a week. But I applied myself to my work and soon had the top quota of books sewn together each day. I was happy again, for awhile.

Then I got a letter from Tom stating that he had been treated badly by his congregation and was leaving. Mom surprised us by saying that she wished he would return from Australia and maybe go to Bethel with me! She said her views were changing and she just wanted whatever would make her kids happy. But in October Tom left Australia and the Witnesses for good, and moved back to Minnesota.

The following month, Mary was ordered to stop sitting next to Mike at the Kingdom Hall. Mike, who was studying, but hadn't been baptized yet, hadn't had his divorce finalized yet, so the elders thought Mary shouldn't even sit next to him at the meetings. Mary defied this petty order and was eventually disfellowshipped for "rebelliousness" (i.e. attempting to live her own life).

For me, It was the last straw. I too began to rebel against petty rules. I decided to skip the Monday night rehash of the Watchtower articles and spend my time at the Bethel libraries. I began looking at the old literature, and what I found there wasn't pretty.

The 1975 Yearbook (which was still fairly new at the time) contained a newly revised "history" of the Witnesses. I began to look up the related incidents in the original Watchtower articles and books. I was amazed to find important discrepancies. I looked back into previous versions of their history and found even more changes. (Years later when I read George Orwell's "1984" for the first time, I underlined the following passage and wrote "Watchtower" beside it: "But by far the more important reason for the readjustment of the past is the need to safeguard the infallibility of the Party.")

I started reading more of the old publications and I was surprised at how the doctrine of the organization as the "only ark of salvation" so totally contradicted the ideas that Russell had started with. In the era of Watergate, I felt I had discovered my own cover-up. I took a week's vacation, and spent it writing a [letter to the Governing Body](#).

In my naïve way I really hoped the Governing Body would address my issues, apologize for their cover-ups, and make constructive changes. Mary said that if they wouldn't do that, then we would know that they really weren't "faithful and discreet."

As I was waiting for a response to my , I received two visits from other important people. The first was my "table head" (the person in charge—if you can believe it—of the breakfast table I was supposed to be sitting at every morning). He wanted to know why I was skipping breakfast (those lovely occasions where you would sit through the Governing Body having yet another rehash of topics you'd heard so many times before, as you'd eye your rapidly cooling eggs). So I told him I had some major doctrinal issues that the Teaching Committee of the Governing Body was reviewing, and till they were settled I didn't feel comfortable going to breakfast and giving mute assent to things I didn't necessarily agree with. He left me alone after that.

The other visit was from the person who conducted the Monday night Watchtower study. As Bethelites, we didn't just have to read the Watchtower article, and then underline the answers before Sunday's meeting (in which we would read the Watchtower article and take turns re-reading the underlined answers). We also had to attend the Monday night Watchtower study, which was essentially a duplicate of the upcoming Sunday meeting we'd spend at our congregations throughout New York. Naturally I was skipping the Monday night Watchtower study, and this person was very upset about it. I explained to him what was going on, extended my hand, and said, "but thank you for your concern." He ignored my proffered hand and continued lecturing me about how I needed to go to his rehash of the rehash before the rehash meeting. Then it dawned on me: this man thought he had power over me. He figured that only he had authority to decide when our conversation was through. He thought he was in control of where I went and what I did. He thought I was a "Watchtower slave"! I was becoming more and more "Awake!" thanks to attitudes such as his.

What happened as a result of the [letter](#) was this: After waiting for a response for several days I finally walked into the office of the Teaching Committee and said, "I wrote you a letter." The person there said, "I'm familiar with your letter." I asked him if I could get some sort of a reply. He set up an appointment to meet with someone at 11:30.

I arrived at the office at 11:27. The brother complained that I was early, and then accused me of being a "perfectionist." He said the other brothers were out there in service while I was dredging up old complaints of the evil slave class. He said I was out of step with the organization and that I should plan on leaving February first. When he had finished lecturing me It was three minutes to noon. He said he had no intention of being late for the noon meal, but did I have any questions. I told him that there was hardly any time left for that. "Nevertheless," he replied, "do you have any questions?" "Well, yes, all the questions in my letter." But then it was time for him to go to lunch.

February first was a few days away, so I went back to work in the meantime (I felt I was under obligation to at least continue working for my room and board). But the Governing Body decided not to leave it at that. They decided to have the "factory committee" (a small group of elders) sit down with me for several hours over a two day period and tell me what a rotten thing I had done by writing the letter.

When I first began studying with the Witnesses I was told over and over again that the Witnesses welcomed questions. Now that I had enough experience to ask some troubling questions I found that none of my questions would even be acknowledged, instead I would be browbeaten. They repeatedly told me what a bad thing I had done. I repeatedly replied: "Yes, brothers, we're all sinners. Now can we address the issues in my letter?" They would have none of it.

Instead, they said things like, "Where is your loyalty?" I thought, 'my loyalty is to the truth, not to an organization,' but I said nothing. ("There will be no loyalty except loyalty toward the Party. There will be no love except the love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy." --George Orwell, "1984")

In my [letter](#) I mentioned how Witnesses ridiculed outsiders. The committee told me this was untrue and must be just something I myself was guilty of. I reminded them of the recent prayer in the Bethel dining room where the brother said he "looked forward to the day when God would wipe out every two-legged germ off the face of the Earth." They replied that this brother was maybe only "in the truth" for a couple of years. I replied: "Maybe, but everyone there said 'Amen' to it!"

The only attempt they made to answer the questions in my letter was when one of the elders tried to dismiss the discrepancies in dates by changing "days" into "prophetic months" of 30 days each, and thereby forcing a few of the counts to come out correctly. Later, back in my room I applied his idea to the other time periods and found that they did not work. Also, I couldn't accept his theory because the Bible specifically counted out "days", not "prophetic months." (In preparing the letter, I had sat down with calendars out of the old Yearbooks and actually counted each day in the claimed prophetic periods.)

In conclusion, they told me I was told I was "out of step" with Jehovah's organization and I should leave Bethel. I agreed and left the following day: February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1977.

I moved back to Minnesota and crawled under a rock for a few years. I was very lonely and depressed. The world I had devoted my life to was not what I had thought and publicly proclaimed it was. I hid from the world, working nights as a janitor and locking myself in my room with my books during the day. I had two more suicide attempts (landing in the hospital for a month after the last one).

But finally I pulled myself together. Mary told me, "There is good out in the world too, find what's good and embrace it." I went back to school and became a computer programmer. I started studying philosophy and cultural anthropology (especially Frazer's "The Golden Bough" and "Folklore in the Old Testament"). This broadened my viewpoint. I had no concept of how narrow-minded I had been while a Witness. I started seeing everything in a new light, and started taking the Bible, Christianity, and even the idea of God into question and into a healthier perspective.

Looking back, I think there were four things that initially attracted me to them: 1. They ridiculed the Catholic church. 2. They provided a way for me to rebel against my mother at my rebellious age. 3. They seemed to have "the truth", and 4. I thought they were doing some good in the world.

All four of these points slowly crumbled away. Mom was no longer opposed to our being Witnesses, so it was no longer a rebellious act to be one. I had learned that they had more lies than truth. From first-hand experience I found out that "doing good" was not one of their priorities. All that left was their ridicule of the Catholic church, and I didn't feel like ridiculing anyone for their religious beliefs after I took a look back at what I had swallowed.

I had one contact with the Witnesses since then. After some detective work, Ron, who had studied with me, found out where I had moved, and came to my door. After speaking to him for a few minutes he said he would tell the elders about me in case they wanted to disfellowship me. I never heard anything more, so I don't know to this day if I was ever disfellowshipped, I don't care enough to find out either. They hold no power over me anymore.

I decided to write a book based on my experiences and examining their doctrines. That seemed to help the healing process along. (The book is called ["Falling in Truth: The Education of a Jehovah's Witness"](#).)

I have long since gotten over them, and gotten on with my life. I have been happily married for 15 years now, and I feel I have settled the question about religion in my own mind. I regard the Witnesses as just another misguided religion, with some good people in it (as well as some of the other type). If it makes people happy to believe in the Watchtower as God's organization, I wouldn't want to take that away from them anymore than I would take away the belief in an afterlife to a grieving widow. But it worries me that some of their beliefs are harmful to their trusting members and their children, and the arrogant attitude of this organization which has been so clearly wrong so often

would annoy even a saint!

[Steve](#)

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back to [Bethel Stories](#)

[Main Page](#)