

What Jehovah's Witnesses Believe: A Sketch

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My parents are Jehovah's Witnesses. They are among the 7,508,050 Jehovah's Witnesses world-wide who spent 1,604,764,248 hours last year in the ministry work they call the "field service". This "service" includes door-to-door work, for which they are well-known, and in-home Bible studies with interested persons¹. According to the National Council of Churches, my parents belong to one of the fastest growing religions in the U.S. and Canada². Recently, the Witnesses have been growing faster than any other single denomination—for instance 4.37% in 2009² and 2.25% in 2008³. That said, they are still relatively small, always hovering near the bottom of list of the 25 largest churches, but they manage to grow in a time when only 6 of those 25 religions posted increases³, and when 15% of Americans report no religion². While my parents have been members for many years, the Witnesses baptized 294,368 new members world-wide in 2010, about 5660 people per week, on average¹.

My Mom says she became one of Jehovah's Witnesses because their teachings are logical and Bible-based. For instance, she knew as a child that she was not good enough to go to heaven, but not bad enough to go to hell. Heaven and hell did not make sense to her anyway . . . she had no desire to go to heaven, for what would she do up there? And she could not fathom why a loving god would burn people for eternity. Also, she liked knowing God's name. The Witnesses believe that God's name is Jehovah, even if it has been taken out of so many versions of the Bible. It is hard to find His name any more, but it still shows up in a few scriptures in most versions of the King James Bible (Exodus 6:3, Isaiah 12:2, 26:4, Psalms 83:18)⁴. The translation of the Bible the Witnesses prefer to use includes the name "Jehovah" wherever it supposedly was in the original manuscripts (Proverbs 18:10, Psalms 68:20, Romans 10:13)⁵. The Witnesses take their name from Isaiah 43:10⁵:

"You are my witnesses," is the utterance of Jehovah, "even my servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and have faith in

me, that you may understand that I am the One. Before me there was no God formed, and after me there continued to be none."

You'll see why the Witness faith appealed to my Mom as you learn a little about what they believe, and what their faith means to them.

For the Jehovah's Witnesses, much circles around God's Kingdom taught in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6: 9–13), which is central to so many other Christian religions as well. They think seriously about what it means, especially the "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" part. They believe that God's will for humankind when He created Adam and Eve—to become fruitful and fill the earth (Genesis 1:27, 28; Genesis 9:1, Isaiah 45:18) and to worship God forever in peace (Psalms 37:27–29, Proverbs 2:20–22)—is still His will; and that the faithful will, after Armageddon, live on an earth that will be restored to a paradise condition (Isaiah, 65:20–25, Matthew 5:5, Revelation 21:3, 4). Thus, they do not believe people go to heaven or hell when they die, but, rather, that they are simply asleep in death (Ecclesiastes 9:5–10, John 11:11–14, Psalms 13:3, Psalms 146:4)—but are alive in God's memory—when they die. Those who died before Armageddon will be resurrected (John 5:28), and will be afforded an opportunity to grow to perfection during the 1000 year reign of Christ (Isaiah 65:17–25, Revelation 20:1–3). Now free from Adamic Sin, how people live in that time will determine whether or not they were resurrected to life or to judgment. So that offers an idea of what Jehovah's Witnesses believe in terms of "thy will be done in earth."

What about the "as it is in heaven" part? While the Jehovah's Witnesses believe most will be resurrected to earth, they do believe that a "little flock" will go to heaven (John 10:16, Luke 12:32, Revelation 7:4, as opposed to the "great crowd"; Revelation 7:9). These will be the 144,000 (Revelation 14:1–3; 20:6) people that Jesus has been choosing to join him since he walked the earth. Jesus, as God's son and "ransom sacrifice", has been entrusted with this duty and, it is worth noting, that the Witnesses do not believe in the Trinity (John 3:17, 14:28, 17:3, Acts 17:31, Philippians 2:6). In accordance with Jehovah's divine plan, Jesus and the 144,000 will rule over current followers and those that will be living on that paradise earth post-Armageddon (Revelation 7:4). After the Millennial Reign, Satan will be released to test perfected mankind one more time (Revelation 20:7, 10). Those who succumb will be annihilated,

and since there will be no more chance for resurrection, the annihilation is called The Second Death, a place of "torment" only in the sense of non-existence. At this time, Satan and his demons, and Death itself, also will be destroyed (Ezekiel 18:4, 1 Corinthians 15:26, Revelation 20:12-14; 21:8). Those who remain faithful will be rewarded with everlasting life (Psalms 37:10, 11; John 17:3) in a peaceful world—God's original plan finally coming to fruition (Genesis 1:27, 28; Genesis 9:1, Isaiah 45:18, Isaiah 55:11).

So what does faith mean to Jehovah's Witnesses? They believe in a God that fulfills promises (Hebrews, 11:1; Isaiah 55:11; Joshua 23:14). They look forward to when there will be no more sickness (Isaiah 35) or death (Isaiah 25:8, 1 Corinthians 15:26), no war (Micah 4:3, 4; Psalms 46:8, 9; 72:7) or crime (Psalms 37:10, 11; Proverbs 2:22), or any of the tragic and horrifying occurrences that happen to people today (Matthew 5:5, Revelation 21:3, 4). They don't fear the happenings on earth, though, as they see them as signs of the "time of the end," meaning the promises will soon be fulfilled (Matthew 24:14, 2 Timothy 3). They look forward to seeing their loved ones again on earth via the resurrection, to helping restore the earth, enjoying its abundance, and building their own homes in paradise (Isaiah 65:17-23). They look forward to a perfect peace, united in one faith (1 Corinthians 1:10), sharing one language (Zephaniah 3:9), with no national borders or partialities (Acts 10:34).

The Jehovah's Witnesses practice that future goal is the here and now by, for instance, considering themselves an international brotherhood in which they serve Jehovah not as people from different countries but as "brothers" and "sisters" (Matthew 23:8). Were you to look into one of their "Kingdom Halls" during a Sunday meeting (one of the two meetings per week, plus daily scriptures and Bible study), you'd find all the Witnesses studying the same article in *The Watchtower*, which is now the world's largest magazine. It has a distribution of over 42 million copies per semi-monthly issue, and is printed in more than 188 languages for distribution in 236 countries⁶⁷ (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). Thus, their doctrine and organizational components are the same worldwide (Psalms 133:1); there are no adjustments for local culture or superstitions (John 17:6-11). Their focus on being a united and peaceful people extends to other choices

today, as I will soon explain. But first, it is important to know how one becomes one of Jehovah's Witnesses.

You do not just walk through the door and declare yourself a Jehovah's Witness. And you aren't baptized at birth. It must be a conscious decision and you must demonstrate knowledge of the heart of the Bible and the organization before you are baptized (John 17:3). Besides studying for a while, you must be able to answer at least 104 questions from your Bible accurately. (That is 35 questions on "Elementary Bible Teachings," 37 on "Jehovah's Righteous Requirements," and 32 on "Jehovah's Arrangement of Things")⁸. Then, at one of the larger semi-annual or annual meetings where subsets of the 107,210 congregations² occasionally gather (called "Circuit Assemblies," or larger still, District Assemblies), you would be fully immersion baptized, as was Jesus (Mark 1:9, 10; Acts 8:38).

At that point, you'd be subject to the shepherding and discipline of God's word through the "elders" of the congregation where you attend, and, higher up the chain through the Circuit and District Overseers to the Governing Body at the headquarters of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in Brooklyn, New York. You'd need to keep the rules because, as my Mom tells me, while Jehovah is a happy God (1 Timothy 1:11)⁵, He is also a God who wants to keep His flock clean (1 Corinthians 5:11-13; Proverbs 3:11). It also means, for instance, letting go of images like the Cross as a symbol of Christian faith, for they believe there is biblical and historical evidence that Jesus was impaled on a tree or stake⁹. Besides that, the Ten Commandments forbid idolatry; so no crosses, or stakes, and no statues of Mary, etc. (Deuteronomy 5:8, 9; John 4:24, 1 Corinthians 10:14). It means letting go of celebrations like Christmas and Easter (Galatians 4:9-11, Matthew 15:3, Mark 7:13), for the Witnesses do not celebrate anything with Pagan roots, and Jesus did not order the remembrance of his birth or resurrection. He only commanded that the Lord's Evening Meal, the night of his death, be commemorated (Luke 22:19).

There is much more to committing to being a Jehovah's Witness than letting go of some holidays and religious symbols. It also extends to letting go of attitudes (Ephesians 4:22-32), beliefs, and practices that would interfere with that peaceful international brotherhood. For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors who will not serve in the military, as killing is forbidden in the Ten Commandments

(Deuteronomy 5:17, Isaiah 2:4, Matthew 26:52, Psalms 46:9, Revelation 13:10; 19:17–19). They are willing to be jailed for this belief and any of their other beliefs (Acts 5:29), as Jesus also advised “loving your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39) and “turning the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39, John 13:35). Beyond that, as part of the international brotherhood, you would never want to be in a situation in which you might be raising your hand against a brother, as you all serve God over man-made governments (Matthew 6:24, James 4:4). It means letting go of voting in political elections, for Witnesses will “render Caesar’s things to Caesar and God’s things to God” (Mark 12:17, Romans 13:7). That is, they pay taxes and obey man-made laws only in so far as they do not conflict with God’s laws (Acts 5:29). They will not recite the Pledge of Allegiance because it is idolatry (Deuteronomy 5:7–9, James 4:4), and because they believe their allegiance is to God’s Heavenly Kingdom (Matthew 6:33, John 18:36). Who comes and goes in political office is temporary, while God’s Kingdom is everlasting (Jeremiah 10:23, Psalms 146:3). Jehovah’s Witnesses avoid anything that would cause divisiveness in the flock (1 Corinthians 1:10)—just as war is the ultimate in divisiveness, espousing political leanings (2 Corinthians 4:4, 1 John 5:19) would tend to cause such as well (Jeremiah 10:23, Daniel 2:44). They belong to a theocracy, regardless of whether they live in a democracy or under any other form of man-made government temporarily in power. These attitudes, beliefs, and practices have made Jehovah’s Witnesses the target of persecution over and over again (John 15:20, 2 Timothy 3:12, Luke 21:12), in current times as in the past. For example, they were hauled off to Nazi concentration camps for their refusal to swear allegiance to Hitler. Unlike the Jewish people whom Hitler would never have released, the Witnesses could easily have escaped experiencing that horror first hand, had they simply signed a piece of paper. But they would not. Like Socrates, they believe in obeying God over men (Acts 5:29), and that it is better to die in the right than live in the wrong¹⁰.

Witnesses get involved in the community and help people through the Kingdom Ministry work—the door-to-door work (Acts 20:20) and the like. Such activities are not limited to missionaries or any particular people. Indeed every Witness is expected to engage in some form of field service or ministry work every month or be considered “inactive.”

Witness is an active verb for them, a way of life (Isaiah 43:10, Matthew 24:14; 28:19–20, Romans 10:13–15). There are no paid clergy; each congregation is run strictly on the well-organized and committed work of volunteers. There is no tithing, pledging, or passing of a collection plate; there are non-descript donations boxes in the back of each Kingdom Hall for local, international, or special fund donations (2 Corinthians 9:7). All of the modestly-sized, attractive, but not ornate or adorned with stained glass or idolatrous images, Kingdom Halls, are also built by volunteers from among the many skilled members. No one is forced to participate, of course, as they minister, build, and maintain their own buildings; they believe in freely giving out of love. Family values are important to them; there is no just cause for divorce save adultery (Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9), and the children are to be kept close and safe (Matthew 19:14, Ephesians 6:4). For instance, there is no Sunday School; the children stay with the parents during all services and are expected to pay attention and participate as they are ready. As they grow up, they are encouraged to do well in school but not to get involved in extra-curricular activities that might lead them to have had associations (1 Corinthians 15:33, James 4:4) or unnecessarily distract them from God’s work or His plan for humankind. The membership is always to, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God,” as the promise is that then, “all these things will be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

It is this laser-like focus and commitment that can cause confusion to those who are not members or who have not seriously studied what their membership believes, as I have. The dedication and self-discipline of most of the Jehovah’s Witnesses I’ve met are unusual in these times. Being different in so many ways can make people think ill of them. Counter to stories I’ve heard that the Jehovah’s Witnesses are, for example, non-Christian or some crazy cult, I’ve learned through my parents that they are not. Some people might think that because they eschew holidays or find them stand-offish because Jehovah’s Witnesses are taught to limit their contact with their non-Witness friends or relatives, that they are anti-social. That can hurt, or make people angry or confused. It is true, that they are only to be friends with others who share their faith. They can, and should, “witness” to “worldly” people (Matthew 28:19, 20; Romans 10:13–15), be Good Samaritans when people are in need (Matthew

5:40-42, Luke 10:29-37, Romans 12:20), and should always be good neighbors (Luke 10:27, Romans 13:10). Likewise, they are to be good, honest workers in any situation, lest it reflect poorly on Jehovah or "the organization" (Colossians 3:23-25). But outside of paid work or the field service, they are to stick with their own, for they are reminded to avoid temptation (Matthew 6:13) and are cautioned, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Next time one of Jehovah's Witnesses comes to your door, think about the fact that if everyone believed as they do there would be no more war. Next time one comes to your door, even if you are happy with your religion, agnosticism, or atheism, please treat them politely, as it just might be my parents standing there with the best of intentions.

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Note: Due to its wider availability, I used the King James Version for all scriptures, except where noted (#5) to be the New World Translation. The Jehovah's Witnesses will study the scriptures with interested people from any bible, but they prefer bibles that are direct "translations" from the original language texts, rather than "versions" which can add even more layers of interpretation. Usually Jehovah's Witnesses use the New World Translation. While some who are skeptical of Witnesses are also skeptical of "their" bible because Witnesses translated it, Jason BeDuhn, a non-Jehovah's Witness and religious studies scholar from Northern Arizona University, conducted a comparative study of nine bible translations, including the New American