

Jehovah Witnesses
A Short History of a Heretic
Dr. Stanford E. Murrell

For many years the Jehovah's Witnesses have been considered a cult by students of church history. One scholar in the study of cults is Dr. Charles Braden, professor of History and Literature of Religions at Northeastern University. Dr. Braden defines as cult as *"any religious group which differs significantly in some one or more respects as to belief or practice, from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expressions of religion in our total culture."* Certainly the Jehovah's Witnesses meet the criteria for they significantly violate the normative expressions of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Christians need to be concerned about cult activities for several reasons.

First, cults will change the historic doctrines of the church.

- Salvation by works will be substituted for salvation by grace.
- The deity of Christ will be denied.
- The doctrines of the virgin birth, the trinity, and the resurrection will be rejected. Because of this, the Lord warned His followers to beware of false prophets. (Matt. 7:15-23)

Second, Christians must be concerned about the cults because eternity hangs on which doctrine is embraced, which Person is followed, and which Book is believed. Those in the cults tend to follow specific individuals and their interpretation of ultimate truth. For example, Jehovah Witnesses are followers of Charles Taze Russell and “Judge” J.F. Rutherford. The Christian Scientist are disciples of Mary Baker Eddy and her beliefs. The Mormons adhere to the doctrines found in the writings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young.

Jesus said that His followers would know the truth and the truth would set them free. People in the cults simply do not believe that Jesus alone can set them free. Therefore, a new emphasis emerges upon autosoteric efforts or the desire to save one’s self apart from the biblical revelation of salvation by grace through faith alone. In contrast, Jesus said, *“If you believe not that I am, you will die in your sins.”*

It has been observed that men are at liberty to reject Jesus Christ and the *Bible* as the Word of God; they are at liberty to oppose the Lord; and they are free to challenge all that Jesus stands for. But they are not at liberty to alter the essential message of the *Bible* which is the good news that God cares for lost souls and sent His Son to redeem many.

The Lord wants people to be realistic. There are false prophets. There are false Christ's. There are false apostles and deceitful workers. 2 Cor. 11:13-15) Paul wrote the Church to "*abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good.*" (Rom. 12:9)

The history of the Jehovah's Witnesses begins with a man named Charles Taze Russell. Russell was born on February 16, 1852, in Old Allegheny (now a part of Pittsburgh). He was one of three children born to Joseph and Eliza Birney Russell. His parents were Presbyterians of Scotch-Iris descent. Russell's mother died when he was only nine years old. His father ran a success clothing store business. New stores were added and at age fifteen Russell joined his father in the family business.

It was when he was sixteen years old life changed for Russell. One day he tried to witness to a friend about Christ but was completely overwhelmed by clever arguments. From that moment on Russell became a skeptic. In particular, Russell was disturbed by the concept of an eternal torment in hell for all unbelievers. He made a study of the oriental religions but they did not satisfy him.

At the age of eighteen Russell saw a glimmer of light which caused a return to some form of Christian faith. His experience has been recorded. "*Seemingly by accident, one evening I dropped into a dusty, dingy hall, where I had heard religious services were held, to see if the handful who met there had any thing*

more sensible to offer than the creeds of the great churches. There, for the first time, I heard something of the views of Second Adventists, the preacher being Mr. Jones Wendell...”

The evidence seems to suggest that Russell received from the Adventist his light on the non-existence of eternal punishment, the Second Coming of Christ, and biblical chronology. He joined the movement. A short time later, Russell and some of his friends got together to study the *Bible*. Their first topic of study was the doctrine of eternal punishment of the soul. Their conclusion? The church was wrong on its doctrine of hell and had been for the past 1800 years. Russell was now twenty years of age. He would spend the next forty-two years spreading this new “*gospel*” or “*good news*” throughout America and the world—there is no everlasting hell.

The Pittsburgh Study Group elected Russell on their own to be their “*pastor*.” Here was a man being called “*pastor*” without formal training in theology, doctrine, the languages, history, or church government. No denomination ever recognized Russell as a proper candidate for ordination and he in turn never recognized any Christian denomination as worthy of respect. Early on Russell began to form what was called a “*Laymen’s Revolt*.” In this revolt all former work of Christians was set aside and ridiculed.

In the year 1879, Russell began to utilize the printing press. He had money to support the printing of his material because he sold the clothing stores he had inherited for more than a quarter of a million dollars. He could underwrite his publications.

The new publication was called “*Zion’s Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Presence.*” With a first printing of 6,000 copies the publishers of the *Watchtower* (renamed Oct 15, 1931) has continued to prosper, today reaching a circulation of 17,650,000 copies per month (as of February 1975).

During 1879 another important event took place, Russell got married to Maria F. Ackley. Maria became very active in the printing endeavor and soon the books began to roll off the press. Converts to Russell were attracted as the main tenets of the Christian faith were attacked such as eternal punishment, the trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, man’s possession of a soul, and the physical return of Jesus to earth.

For several years Russell’s work went unnoticed and unchallenged. Then, after 1910 concerned ministers began to speak out against Russell’s false teachings. When the information was examined concerning Russell’s personal life, a lot of people were shocked. From 1893 until Russell’s death in 1916 there was one event after another involving trials and scandals. One of the more sensational

events was the divorce procedure brought against him by his wife for sexual misconduct.

Russell was accused of many fraudulent schemes. Between 1911 and 1912 Russell made a so-called missionary journey around the world. He was suppose to have spoken in all the major cities and sent back home reports for publication of being met by large crowds and reaching many new converts. It was simply not true.

Then there was the “*Miracle Wheat*” episode of 1913. Russell was charged by *The Brooklyn Eagle* with causing his “*Miracle Wheat*” to be sold at \$60.00 a bushel, an outrageous price. Russell sued for \$100,000.00—and lost the case. Later he was accused of inducing sick people to turn over their fortunes to his organization.

When the Rev. J.J. Ross, pastor of the James St. Baptist Church of Hamilton, Ontario wrote a blistering pamphlet denouncing Russell’s theology and personal life, Russell sued for defamatory libel. On March 17, 1913, his case was examined for evidence to bring the suit for trial.

Besides being exposed as a cheat, a liar, unfaithful to his wife, and a denier of basic Christian teachings, Russell was also a supreme egotist. He believed that along with St. Paul, John Wycliff and Martin Luther he was a great expounder of

the gospel. He told his followers it was better to read his studies and ignore the *Bible* than it was to read the *Bible* and ignore his studies.

The end of this life came for Charles Taze Russell on board a transcontinental train, November 9, 1916. Russell was sixty-five years old.

Unfortunately the “*pastor’s*” dream survived its author and remains today a living challenge to all Christians everywhere. Upon his death the mantle of leadership fell upon Judge Joseph Franklin Rutherford. Like Russell, Rutherford was an amazing individual.

Joseph Franklin Rutherford was born in Morgan County, Missouri, on November 8, 1869. There were five girls and three boys in the family. Joseph’s parents were Baptist. Rutherford studied law as he worked his way through college. At age twenty he became a court reporter. At age twenty-two he was admitted to the bar and began to practice law. He acted as public prosecutor and special judge.

The year 1894 was important for Rutherford because in that year he met some *WatchTower* pioneers. Impressed, Rutherford began to study the biblical literature, and in 1906 he gave himself whole heartedly to the movement. In 1907 he became the legal counselor to the *WatchTower* organization.

Growing in influence Rutherford was elected the new president following the death of Russell. The date was in January, 1917. Immediately Rutherford moved to consolidate his power by deposing of four board members who were causing trouble. Then he published a book entitled *The Finished Mystery* that caused internal divisions and paved the way for governmental action against the Witnesses.

The concern of the US Government was primarily the result of war hysteria. The Jehovah's Witnesses were taught not to be patriotic, not to salute the flag, and not to serve in the military. Rutherford along with eight prominent officials were arrested and put on trial for violation of the Espionage Act in 1918. Found guilty, Rutherford was sent to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary and served nine months. He was released in March 1919.

Rutherford was to be considered a martyr hero. Many other Witnesses were also persecuted, especially those in Nazi Germany beginning in 1933. Adolph Hitler put thousands of Jehovah Witnesses in concentration camps.

Besides his legal expertise, position of power, and willingness to endure persecution, Rutherford had other appealing assets. Physically he was an imposing person. Though he was photogenic he avoided publicity, preferring a mystique of mystery. What he did not avoid was the curbing of an inflated self-esteem. In his book *Why Serve Jehovah?* Rutherford declared that he was the mouthpiece of the

Lord for this age and that God had designated his words as the expression of a divine mandate.

A prolific writer, Rutherford wrote over 100 books and pamphlets which, by 1941, had been translated into eighty languages. One main doctrinal theme was always present: Judge Rutherford was leading his followers toward a delightful and exclusive heaven on earth. It was and is a compelling concept.

On January 8, 1942, Rutherford died from cancer at his palatial mansion called "*Beth Sarim*" in San Diego California. He was seventy-two years old.

The composite picture of the founders of Jehovah Witnesses is not attractive but it is accurate. This short history reveals some very unscrupulous individuals willing to challenge and deny the historic faith of those who follow Christ.