

The Jehovah's Witnesses: A Catholic Response

ISSUE: What do Jehovah's Witnesses basically believe, and how I can effectively evangelize them with the saving truths of Catholicism when they knock on my door?

RESPONSE: The Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) believe that, shortly after the death of the 12 Apostles, there was a great but not total apostasy of the Church, in which only a few scattered Christians kept the "true" Christian Faith for centuries. The "Church" was not fully restored until Charles Taze Russell founded the JWs in 1872. Russell was a Protestant who incorrectly predicted the end of the world in 1914; his followers have made similar failed predictions since.

Though many JWs may live moral lives in many ways, they are not Christians, because they deny basic doctrines such as the divinity of Christ and the Trinity. They also deny other basic articles of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed that Catholics pray every Sunday at Mass. There is also no historical evidence (biblical or extra-biblical) for their version of a "great apostasy," nor is there any evidence that the JWs' religion has ever been espoused by any Christians prior to Russell's foundation in 1872. Measured against orthodox Christianity, there are many errors in the JWs' religion.

DISCUSSION: Raised a Protestant, Russell became particularly interested in Adventism, a religious movement that has focused on predicting and preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. When the world didn't end in 1914 as he predicted, according to measurements of the "Great Pyramid," a model of which marks his grave, Russell modified his position. Russell said that Christ came back invisibly to endorse his work and usher in the end times. (Contrast with Mt. 24:30, where Jesus' second coming is visible.) Since 1914, under different leaders, the JWs have predicted the end of the world, most recently on Jan. 1, 1976. The failure to accurately predict the end times goes hand-in-hand with the JWs' view of early Church history: Neither has any historical basis.

There are many places where Catholics, as well as Protestants, differ from the errors of the JWs. The errors stem from the JWs' incorrect interpretation and translation of the Bible. The JWs created their own flawed version of the Bible: the New World Translation (NWT). We will focus on several of the JWs' most basic and important errors, so that you can respond when they share their beliefs: 1. the Great Apostasy; 2. the JWs' view of Jesus; 3. the Annihilation of the soul; 4. the Last Things. When JWs cannot respond to a refutation of their argument, they will often try to steer the conversation elsewhere, frequently making attacks on the Church. Politely but firmly maintain the focus on these four crucial areas, though other topics could be discussed given adequate preparation. Pray and ask God to bless and direct your efforts.

1. The Great Apostasy

JWs use several biblical passages to argue for a great but not total apostasy of the early Church, such as Mt. 24:4-5:

And Jesus answered them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray" (Catholic Revised Standard Version; cf. 2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 1:19; 2 Pet. 2:1-3 and 3:6).

Notice that Mt. 24 and the other passages referenced do not speak of an apostasy in which the Church would basically cease to exist. Christ assured St. Peter, the first Pope, that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church He founded on him, the chief Apostle (Mt. 16:18). The Holy Spirit through St. Paul teaches us that the Church is "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Jesus also taught that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth (Jn. 16:13) and that He would be with us until the end of the world (Mt. 28:20).

If JW teaching were correct, all of these verses would be false. It is an affront to God to suggest that the devil could prevail over Christ and His Church, particularly after His redemptive death and resurrection (cf. Rom. 5:12-21).

Every time a great controversy has erupted in Church history, a significant written record has been preserved testifying to the crisis, such as the Arian heresy, which denied that Jesus was God, and Martin Luther's break with the Church in the 1500s. Yet, there is no evidence of a great apostasy of the early Church. There are only historical records that the early Christians believed in Christ, His Catholic Church, and Her teachings. In fact, Pope Clement, the fourth pope, exercised and affirmed his authority as the Successor of St. Peter in the late first century, and various Early Church Fathers, such as St. Irenaeus of Lyon, also affirmed the papacy. Meanwhile other Fathers, like St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Justin Martyr, also consistently taught Catholic doctrines like the Eucharist.

Not even the anti-Christian Roman Empire, in its ongoing persecutions of the Church before 300 A.D., ever claimed a great apostasy. The "burden of proof" is on the one who claims there was a great apostasy; that is, one who makes a claim, as in a court of law, must provide evidence for his case. The JWs cannot substantiate their case because, in short, they have none.

2. Who is Jesus?

The greatest of JW errors is found in their Christology, that is, their doctrine of Who Jesus Christ is. Simply stated, the JWs deny that Jesus Christ is God (contrast Jn. 1:1-3, 14; Col. 2:9). Consequently, it is right to conclude that JWs are not Christian. This denial of the divinity of Christ is akin to an early fourth century heresy known as Arianism, which taught that Jesus was merely a creature (contrast Jn. 1:3, Col. 1:16-17) and not of the same eternal divine nature as the Father (contrast Mal. 3:6; Heb. 1:3 and 13:8). Because of this, JWs do not recognize that the one God is a triune deity (contrast Mt. 28:19), denying that Jesus Christ has eternally existed with the Father and the Holy Spirit as the Son of God.

In denying this foundational tenet of Christianity, Christ is reduced to the level of a holy person, the JWs' unique definition for "divine." (JWs call Jesus "a god," but they will say there is only one "God," citing as evidence, for example, Is. 44:6.). If they refer to Him as "the only Son of God," they do not mean that He is the eternal Son who has always existed with the Father in the Trinity, but instead that He was created and made a son. This reduction of Christ harkens to another ancient heresy—Adoptionism—which states that Jesus was a creature who by adoption, not by generation and the divine nature, became the son of God. Either position, though, is unbiblical.

Contrary to JW teaching, the Bible teaches Jesus' divinity as well as His humanity. The entire first chapter of Hebrews is about Jesus' superiority to creatures (human and angelic), based on His divine nature, that is, the fact that He is eternally begotten by the Father. The inspired prophets Isaiah and Hosea both state that God says there is no Savior but God (Hos. 13:4, Is. 43:11); yet, the New Testament message is clearly that Jesus is the divine Savior (2 Pt. 1:1, Tit. 1:3-4). Therefore, Jesus is God. The Apostles John and Paul both state that Jesus created "all" things (Jn. 1:3, Col. 1:16-17), which would be impossible if Jesus were Himself a mere creature. To cover up this fact, the JW Bible changed Paul's words, saying that Jesus created "other things," not "all things."

Scripture affirms Christ's divinity in various ways, including stressing in many passages that He is to be worshipped. But the worship of Christ is forbidden to JWs because they do not believe that He is God. It is interesting that every time the Bible mentions "worship" (Greek root: *proskuneo*) with Jesus as the object of the verse, the JWs change the text in the NWT to read "to do him obeisance," which means to pay Him respect. If anything but Jesus is the object of the same verb, they render the verb "worship." This is inconsistent and simply incorrect.

Again, JW arguments are based on biblical misinterpretation and mistranslation. They will argue, for example, that Judges 3:9 refers to Othniel as a "savior" (Catholic New American Bible translation) and that, therefore, Jesus does not have to be God to be the Savior (Is. 43:11, Tit. 3:6). Othniel, however, does not redeem people from sin, he delivers them from subjection to a king. Likewise, Cyrus of Persia, who is referred to as a "messiah" or "anointed" (Isaiah 45:1), merely frees the Israelites from Babylonian captivity. Only God, however, could save men from their sins against Him, which is the salvation that Jesus Christ, "God is with us" (Mt. 1:23), brings. God alone can be *this kind* of Savior.

Consider Jn. 5:18. This passage clearly states that “by calling God His Own Father He was claiming equality with God.” JWs will argue that this was only the belief of the Jews who were against Jesus. Rather, John uses *his own* words to explain why the Jews thought Jesus was blaspheming. The Jews did not believe God was Jesus’ Own Father, because they did not believe Jesus is God. John never questions that a son has his father’s nature or that Jesus is God’s Son. Both John and the Jews understood Jesus’ claim, but John believed it while the Jews did not. Likewise, consider Jn. 8:58, where Jesus says, “before Abraham was, I am.” In this passage, Jesus uses the name of God (“I am”; cf. Ex. 3:14-15) in reference to Himself. Jesus’ hearers clearly understood this claim, and not believing that He is God, took up stones (8:59) to punish Him for using God’s name (Lev. 24:16). Either Jesus is the one true God, or He is lying or crazy. There is no middle ground.

It was forbidden among the Jews to speak the name of God—“YHVH”—which is more commonly known as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” and means “I am,” conveying that it is in God’s nature to necessarily exist for all eternity. A Jew did not use “Yahweh” because to do so one would apparently ascribe to himself—“I am”—God’s nature. So the Jews would use substitute names when reading the Bible aloud or speaking about God. Among these were “*Adonai*” (“Lord,” translated “*Kyrios*” in Greek and used for Jesus many times in the New Testament), “*Shaddai*” (“Almighty”), and “*Hashem*” (“The Name”). Anytime someone used a phrase like “the Lord” or “The Name” in a theological conversation, the understood meaning was “Yahweh” (“I am”), the name of God. Note what Paul does in Phil. 2:9-11 and Heb. 1:4:

Therefore God also highly exalted [Jesus] and gave Him *the name that is above every name*, so that at *the name* of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord [*Kyrios*], to the glory of God the Father (emphasis added).

[The Son is] as far superior to the angels as *the name He has inherited* is more excellent than theirs (emphasis added).

What name is above every other name? What name has Jesus inherited from His Father? “The Name” (*Hashem*) above all other names is “Yahweh,” and Jesus “inherited” that name (which is God’s Own nature) from His Father. The phrase “The Name” is also used in Mt. 28:19: “. . . in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” All three Persons of the Holy Trinity, which JWs do not believe in, possess a single name, “Yahweh,” the name of God.

Also worthy of note is that Phil. 2:9-11 is a reference to Is. 45:22-23. In Isaiah, these words (“to Me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear”) refer *only* to God, and Paul uses them to refer to Jesus Christ’s name. This would not be possible unless Jesus is God (cf. Jn. 5:22-23).

What about passages which make Jesus seem inferior to God, like Jn. 14:28? Remember that Christians believe Jesus has two natures, divine and human. In His divine nature, Jesus is equal to God (Jn. 10:30, 14:9, 20:28), though “obedient” as a Son. In His human nature, Jesus is also subordinate to God the Father (Jn. 14:28, Lk. 22:42).

3. The Annihilation of the Soul

Contrary to sacred Scripture and Tradition (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 84-87), JWs believe that, when a person dies, his soul is annihilated and that he ceases to exist. In Rev. 6:9-10, John sees a vision of the souls of the martyrs who died for Christ. Additional passages such as 1 Sam. 28, Mt. 10:28, Lk. 16 and 1 Pet. 3:19 validate the existence of one’s soul after death.

Verses that JWs use to the contrary, like Eccles. 9:5-6, must be read *in context*. God had not revealed very much about the afterlife in the Old Testament, and this passage only asserts that the dead will not be remembered in some sense, not cease to exist.

Also be aware that the Bible uses the word “soul” in several ways. Sometimes it is the seat of human emotion (Ps. 42:2), sometimes it is the whole person—“a living being”—(Gen. 2:7), and sometimes it is the immortal spirit which animates a body (Mt. 10:28, Rev. 6:9-10, *common usage*). JWs will try to *limit* the meaning of “soul” to exclude the third (and most common) meaning, but this is not biblical.

4. Last Things

This doctrine of the JWs is erroneous in its understanding of the last things, especially heaven and hell. They believe that heaven is full with the number 144,000. The “Anointed in heaven” began with the Apostles and was completed in 1935. Thus, according to the JWs, no more souls may enter into heaven. The most a JW today can hope for is an afterlife reward of paradise on earth.

As a proof-text for their belief that only 144,000 people will go to heaven, while the rest will spend eternity on an earthly paradise, JWs point to Rev. 7:4 and 14:3. If read in context, however, the number must be either understood symbolically (as Christians understand it) or inconsistently (as JWs do). If the passages are *literally* understood, then they refer *only* to celibate Jewish males—the Greek in Rev. 14:4 is “virgins”—of the 12 tribes of Israel (12,000 from each tribe). The JWs conveniently say that the “144,000” is literal, while “virgins” is symbolic. Furthermore, Rev. 7:1-8 states that the 144,000 are on the earth while there is a number “impossible to count” (Rev. 7:9-10) in heaven around the Lamb’s throne (the location of this throne is made explicit in Rev. 4 and 5:6). All followers of Christ have citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

The JW also maintain that hell is not an eternal domain for the damned. In the end, they teach that hell will be annihilated along with all the devils and wicked souls. Yet this contradicts the teaching of Scripture. Mt. 3:12 says that the wicked (chaff) will be burned with “unquenchable fire” (cf. Mk. 9:43). Other verses that refer to the eternal duration of both heaven and hell, which are included in the JWs’ own Bible translation, can be found in Rev. 20:10 and Mt. 18:8 and 25:31-46.

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