



Class 1:

Who Are Jehovah's Witnesses?

In this class session we will study:

- The origins of Jehovah's Witnesses, including a look at the leaders who put their mark on this religious group.
- The endless chain of erroneous date setting and the unavoidable theological implications.
- The organization of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
- The Jehovah's Witnesses Bible.

Introduction

“Jehovah's Witnesses is a descriptive name, indicating that this group bears witness concerning Jehovah, his Godship, and his purposes.

“The Scriptural account that Jehovah's Witnesses draw on for their name is in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah. There the world scene is viewed as a courtroom drama: The gods of the nations are invited to bring forth their witnesses to prove their claimed cases of righteousness or to hear the witnesses for Jehovah's side and acknowledge the truth. Jehovah there declares to his people: ‘Ye are my witnesses, saith Jehovah, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am Jehovah; and besides me there is no saviour.’—Isaiah 43:10, 11, *American Standard Version*.

“Hence, the more than 3,500,000 persons today [1989] who are telling the good news of Jehovah's Kingdom by Christ Jesus in over 200 lands feel that they properly refer to themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses.”¹

Some key characteristics

Before considering strategies for giving them “all the counsel of God,” we need a general overview of Jehovah's Witnesses, especially the historical factors that influenced their theology.

The Jehovah's Witnesses emerged from the Millerite movement of the 1840s. They are characterized by continual date setting for the final events. The last date set was 1975. After the 1975 forecasts miscarried, they modified their traditional eschatology. The 1922 Ohio Convention approved a plan “to announce, to announce, and to announce the King and his kingdom.” With a world membership less than half that of Seventh-day Adventists, they visit households claiming to be the heralds of the theocratic kingdom of Jehovah.

The founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses was Charles T. Russell (1852-1916), a Presbyterian turned Congregationalist. Russell always showed great interest in fixing dates for the prophetic events related to the second coming of Christ.²

After 1844, the Millerite movement split into several fragments. One of them was known as Church of the Advent of Christ, later known as the Advent Christian Church, also called "Second Adventists." This group had a significant influence on the theology of Russell.

In contrast to the group who became Seventh-day Adventists, the Second Adventists continued fixing dates for the second coming of Christ.

Around 1869 Russell accepted the ideas of a Second Adventist named Jonas Wendel regarding the return of Christ in 1874. When the event did not occur as predicted, he turned to the teachings of one Nelson H. Barbour. Barbour taught that Jesus had come in 1874, but spiritually, not literally, and that His presence was invisible.

The founding father

In January 1876, after reading the magazine *Herald of the Morning*, edited by Barbour, Russell and his companions adopted the belief that Jesus had come spiritually. In 1878 Barbour began advocating the idea that Jesus did not pay a ransom for sin on the cross, and he and Russell split up.³

Russell and Barbour came across an Interlinear Greek-English version of the New Testament by Benjamin Wilson, called *The Emphatic Diaglott*.⁴

This version translates the Greek word *parusia* in Matthew 24 as "presence," rather than "coming," its normal meaning. Disregarding the context that speaks of a real and visible presence, they began to advocate an invisible presence of Christ.

The Greek word *parusia* is translated 22 times in the King James Version as "coming," always in reference to the second coming of Jesus. It is translated twice as "presence." Those two cases refer to Paul and his "presence" in Corinth (2 Cor. 10:10) and in Philippi (Phil. 2:12), referring to a personal presence, real and visible.

The Bible teaches that Jesus has always been with His people spiritually. He was with Israel in the Old Testament (1 Cor. 10:1-4); and with His followers spiritually from His Ascension until the Second Coming (Matt. 28:20). But this presence is not the same as His visible second coming. The biblical teaching about the visible second coming makes nonsense of the theory that the second coming of Christ will be a spiritual coming, or an invisible presence that began in 1874.

Review Who was the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and what were their religious precedents?

What were some of the sources of Russell's beliefs?

In what way was Russell influenced by some segments of the Millerite movement that emerged after 1844?

Sources of Russell's ideas

Russell tapped some other strange sources for his theories. For 35 years he believed that the measurements of the corridors of the great Pyramid of Cheops in Gizeh, Egypt, had prophetic value.⁵ He devoted a chapter to this idea in his book *Thy Kingdom Come* (1891), in which he fixed the year 1914 as the end of human governments.⁶

Russell predicted that Christ would come in 1914.⁷ Given the role he assumed, this prophetic mistake was serious.

During his lifetime, Russell was “the society.”⁸ Jehovah’s Witnesses came to consider him a true prophet.⁹ The sense of appreciation and debt of gratitude felt toward Russell caused many of his associates to consider him the fulfillment of what they translate as the “faithful and discrete slave”(Matt. 24:45).

This point of view appeared prominently in a book published in July 1917, for the Association of the Pulpit of the People of Brooklyn, New York. The book was titled *The Finished Mystery*. On the introductory page, the book is identified as “a posthumous work of pastor Russell that would supply spiritual food in due season, and take care of the Lord’s business.”¹⁰

Russell partially recognized his mistake but did not abandon it.¹¹ He reformulated it. In all likelihood, his position as the foremost prophetic leader made him feel the need of maintaining what had been taught. To accomplish this, he used the same subterfuge as Barbour in 1874, the theory of an invisible coming. This was the beginning of an endless chain of failed prophecies.

The years of World War I constituted a time of perplexities and frustrations for the Jehovah’s Witnesses.¹² Their prophecies of Armageddon, the Gentile kingdoms, and Christianity and the Jews were not fulfilled. Furthermore, the invisible *parusía* idea did not convince everyone. The paradox is that in spite of their prophetic failures, they insisted on setting dates. The last date set was 1975.

The setback of 1975 caused them to modify their witnessing approach, but they still retained the beliefs derived from their unsuccessful eschatology.

An endless chain of prophetic failures

The history of Jehovah's Witnesses is an endless chain of mistakes and unfulfilled prophecies. It could be argued that they are correcting them, but the pretension of being Jehovah's only channel to announce the good news does not permit them to be mistaken. The problem is not God's—it's theirs:

Is anything *secret about the second coming? Christ was with His people from the days of the Old Testament (1 Cor. 10:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:10, 11). During His ministry He said that He would be with the believers, even though the actual groups were very small (Matt. 18:20). Before ascending to heaven, He again said that His spiritual presence would accompany them daily and uninterrupted until the end of the world (Matt. 28:20). Therefore, Christ is always spiritually present among genuine believers. Therefore, it is evident that the second coming of Christ does not refer to a spiritual coming.*

Matthew 24:23-26 warns that some would proclaim a coming of Jesus that would not be visible to all. Jesus said not to believe it.

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming [parusia] of the Son of Man” (Matt. 24:27, NIV). The passage is clear: There is nothing secret or invisible about lightning. Other references of interest on this point are Psalm 50:3-6; Jeremiah 25:30-35; 1 Thessalonians 4:16. Matthew 24:30 says: “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (NIV).

- a. God does not change (Mal. 3:6).
- b. God does not lie (Num. 23:19).
- c. God does not make mistakes (Isa. 46:10).

Let's take a look at some examples of the repeated prophetic failures of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The second coming of Christ. Russell and his group believed and announced that the second coming of Christ to earth would take place in 1874. It didn't happen, so they accepted the idea of Barbour that Christ had come spiritually.

New date for the second coming of Christ. Beginning in 1876, Russell proclaimed that the end of the Time of the Gentiles would occur in 1914.¹³ A great world anarchy would result that would bring an end to the current world systems as we know them. They believed they would be in heaven by the first week of October 1914.¹⁴

The kingdom of Israel would be re-established. It was logical for them to think about the establishment of the kingdom of Israel in 1915.

- a. Palestine was in the hands of Turkey, which was defeated during the years of World War I.
- b. Zionism was fighting for a Jewish state.
- c. They believed that the Time of the Gentiles would end in 1914.

The destruction of the churches and kingdoms. Russell predicted that in 1918:

- a. God would destroy the churches and their members.
- b. Christianity would be abolished and substituted by revolutionary republics.¹⁵

On March 31, 1918, Rutherford articulated for the first time the phrase, “The world has ended. Millions now living will never die.”¹⁶ However, kingdoms continue that have not been substituted by republics, churches continue with their organizations and are not dying, and the last of those who witnessed the events of 1914-1918 are almost gone. The prophetic vision of Jehovah's Witnesses still is not fulfilled.

The restitution of the Jews to God's favor.¹⁷ This did not occur. Shortly after, Hitler exterminated six million Jews.

The resurrection of the saints. As we have learned, Russell and his group established that the year 1874 would be the second coming of Christ.

- a. For 50 years it was maintained that 1878 was the year of the resurrection of the saints.¹⁸
- b. In 1927 they abandoned the belief that the faithful were resurrected in 1878 and affirmed that this occurred in 1918. Since then they had been in heaven with Jesus.¹⁹
- c. However, in 1950 they said that this still had not happened.²⁰

The destruction of republics and the rise of universal anarchy.²¹ They once again said that this was not fulfilled in 1918. Decades have passed, and we are all witnesses to the fact that these forecasts failed.

The year 1925 would be when the kingdom of Israel would finally be re-established. This was announced after the failure of 1915.²²

- a. In 1920 they announced that this would probably occur in 1925.
 - b. Rutherford widened this prophecy in *Millions Now Living Will Never Die*, but was again mistaken.
- Many abandoned their beliefs in 1925 when the prophecy failed.²³

- a. The State of Israel was not established until May 15, 1948, and then not as a kingdom.
- b. The current State of Israel is legally a republic without religious objectives.
- c. In 1955, Jehovah's Witnesses recognized that "the concentration of the natural and incredulous Israelites in Palestine cannot be interpreted as fulfillment of the prophecies."²⁴

How they calculated the time

"In the lecture 'Millions Now Living Will Never Die,' delivered by J. F. Rutherford on March 21, 1920, at the Hippodrome in New York City, attention was directed to the year 1925. On what basis was it thought to be significant? In a booklet published in that same year, 1920, it was pointed out that if 70 full Jubilees were calculated from what was understood to be the date when Israel entered the Promised Land (instead of starting after the last typical Jubilee before the Babylonian exile and then counting to the beginning of the Jubilee year at the end of the 50th cycle), this could point to the year 1925. On the basis of what was said there, many hoped that perhaps the remaining ones of the little flock would receive their heavenly reward by 1925. This year also was associated with expectations for resurrection of faithful pre-Christian servants of God with a view to their serving on earth as princely representatives of the heavenly Kingdom. If that really occurred, it would mean that mankind had entered an era in