

Men's Discipleship

False Religions: Jehovah's Witnesses Part 1

Part 1 – Charles Taze Russell and the Origins of the Watchtower Movement:

Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses portray themselves as a reinstatement of primitive Christianity. They believe that Christianity became corrupted shortly after the apostolic age and that mainstream churches adopted pagan doctrines—such as the Trinity, hell, and immortality of the soul—and worldly practices. Given that many Christians encounter them through door-to-door evangelism, it is essential to comprehend the origins of this movement and understand the reasons for its divergence from biblical orthodoxy. This initial segment of our series adopts a historical perspective from a Protestant standpoint. We will analyze the religious climate of the 19th century that gave rise to Charles Taze Russell, trace the development of the Bible Student movement, and examine the precursors of false doctrine that later evolved into the contemporary organization. Subsequently, we will evaluate these developments in light of Scripture and the historic Protestant confessions.

Early Life and Family Background

Birth and family: Russell was born on February 16, 1852, in Allegheny, Pennsylvania (now part of Pittsburgh), to Scotch-Irish parents, Joseph Lytle Russell and Ann Eliza Birney. journals.ku.edu. He was the second of five children, but three of his siblings died in childhood. kids.kiddle.co. When Russell was nine, his mother died journals.ku.edu. The family briefly lived in Philadelphia before returning to Pittsburgh and joining a Presbyterian congregation.

Childhood tragedies and questions: A JW-produced transcript notes that Russell witnessed the deaths of multiple siblings and his mother during the same year the American Civil War began, and that such suffering prompted him to ponder what happens to the dead jwblindhelper.org. He later wrote that the idea of a loving God condemning the majority of humanity to eternal torment in hell was “lower than that of many men” jwblindhelper.org. These early losses and theological struggles laid the groundwork for his later rejection of orthodox doctrines such as eternal punishment.

Questioning Presbyterianism and Congregationalism

Growing up, Russell memorized the Westminster Catechism and was “indoctrinated from the catechism” journals.ku.edu. Yet he struggled to reconcile doctrines of **predestination** and **eternal torment** with God's love bryanhodge.net. At seventeen, he reportedly tried to convert an atheist, but instead lost his own faith ewtn.com. For a period, he considered himself an atheist or skeptic, ewtn.com. Russell later wrote that he suffered an “utter shipwreck of faith” until he “stumbled upon Adventism,” which restored his confidence in the Bible journals.ku.edu

Historical Background: Adventism and American Millennialism

The Jehovah's Witness movement did not develop in isolation. It originated from the Adventist revivalism of the 19th century. William Miller's prediction that Christ would return in 1843–1844 energized Protestant America. After the "Great Disappointment" occurred, Adventists split into different groups. In the 1870s, Charles Taze Russell established himself as an independent Adventist teacher. Sources like Encyclopedia Britannica note that Russell rejected the belief in hell and embraced a non-Trinitarian theology that denied Jesus's divinity. He saw Christ's second coming as an invisible presence, claiming it had already started in 1874 and would reach a climax in a millennial kingdom in 1914. This mix of millennialist zeal and doctrinal revisionism laid the foundation for the Bible Student movement to grow.

Adventist influences on Russell

- **Jonas Wendell and George Stetson:** Russell was drawn into Adventism after hearing Jonas Wendell, a preacher influenced by the Millerites. He joined Stetson's Adventist Bible study group in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, where he absorbed Adventist chronology and skepticism toward traditional doctrines [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell).
- **Nelson Barbour and the Herald of the Morning:** In 1876, Russell partnered with Nelson Barbour, who convinced him that Christ had returned invisibly in 1874. Together they published *Three Worlds and the Harvest of This World* (1877), which popularized the calculation of a **2,520-year "Gentile Times" ending in 1914**, [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell).
- **Early date-setting:** Russell's writings taught that the "time of the end" began in 1799, that Christ returned invisibly in 1874 and was crowned king in 1878, and that 1914 would bring Armageddon [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell). These dates became central to his movement's identity.

Charles Taze Russell and the Bible Student Movement

Formation of Zion's Watch Tower

After parting ways with Barbour in 1879 over disagreements about atonement, Russell founded his own magazine, **Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence** (later renamed *The Watchtower*). He and fellow Bible Students formed the **Watch Tower Tract Society** (incorporated 1884) to distribute literature and coordinate ministry [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell). Russell taught that formal organization was unnecessary; congregations were autonomous, elected their own elders, and had no membership rolls or creeds [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell). His six-volume series, *Studies in the Scriptures* (originally *Millennial Dawn*), expounded his prophetic chronology and doctrinal views. **1Timothy 4:1**.

Seeds of Doctrinal Error

Russell's theology blended Adventist ideas with his own interpretations:

- **Denial of the Trinity:** Russell concluded in 1882 that the doctrine of the Trinity is unbiblical [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Taze_Russell). He taught that Jesus is a created being and that the Holy Spirit is God's impersonal active force.

- **Annihilationism:** Following Adventist influences, he denied eternal punishment and taught that the wicked will be annihilated britannica.com.
- **Invisible return and date-setting:** Russell insisted that Christ's invisible presence began in 1874 and that 1914 would mark the end of the present world order, britannica.com. *Studies in the Scriptures* declared that the end of earthly kingdoms and full establishment of God's kingdom would occur "near the end of A.D. 1914" jwfacts.com. These predictions were publicized as established truth and became a defining feature of the movement.
- **Rejection of formal organization:** Although he organized a publishing society, Russell opposed centralized church authority and allowed doctrinal diversity. Early Bible Students elected their own elders and practiced a congregational model wikipedia.org.

Transition under Joseph F. Rutherford: Centralization and New Identity

When Russell died in 1916, a leadership struggle ensued. **Joseph Franklin Rutherford**, a lawyer who had served as Russell's legal counsel, was elected president of the Watch Tower Society in 1917. Under his leadership, the movement underwent significant organizational and doctrinal changes.

Consolidation of authority

Rutherford imposed a **centralized administrative structure** on the Bible Students, which he later referred to as a *theocracy*. He required all supporters to **distribute literature door to door** and to submit **weekly reports of preaching activity** wikipedia.org. He instituted training programs for public speaking and shifted the movement's emphasis from a loosely organized Bible study fellowship to a disciplined evangelistic organization wikipedia.org. He also established 1914 as the date of Christ's invisible return and insisted that Christ died on a stake rather than a cross wikipedia.org. Rutherford condemned the observance of holidays, patriotism, and birthday celebrations and redefined Armageddon as God's imminent war on the wicked wikipedia.org.

Administrative changes and the new name

After his release from imprisonment during World War I, Rutherford reorganized the Society. At a 1919 convention he introduced a new magazine, **The Golden Age** (later *Awake!*) and mobilized Bible Students to distribute it door to door wikipedia.org. He expanded printing facilities and reorganized overseas branches wikipedia.org. Conventions in the early 1920s promoted the slogan "Advertise the King and Kingdom" and urged all members to become "publicity agents" through aggressive preaching wikipedia.org.

Rutherford steadily dismantled congregational autonomy. He required weekly reports, appointed service directors for each congregation, and abolished the election of elders, asserting that electing elders was unscriptural wikipedia.org. In 1931, he **proposed the name "Jehovah's Witnesses"** at a convention in Columbus, Ohio, to distinguish his followers from other Bible Student groups wikipedia.org. The Society's publications characterized dissenters as the "evil servant class," and Rutherford introduced the term "**theocracy**" to describe the organization's

governance [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah's_Witnesses). By the time of his death in 1942, the centralized structure and distinct identity of the modern Jehovah's Witnesses were firmly established.

Shift from Russell's teachings

Rutherford's regime abandoned many of Russell's interpretations. The **Editorial Committee** that Russell had appointed was dissolved in 1931, after which Rutherford wrote all leading Watchtower articles [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah's_Witnesses). Russell's *Studies in the Scriptures* ceased publication in 1927, [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah's_Witnesses). Many early Bible Students who opposed these changes left to form independent groups, while new converts filled the ranks. The introduction of radio broadcasts, phonograph "sermonettes," and portable sound cars reflected Rutherford's entrepreneurial approach and expanded the movement's reach [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah's_Witnesses).

So what, what's the big deal?

Sufficiency of Scripture

The Protestants recovered the doctrine of **sola Scriptura**—that Scripture alone is the final authority for faith and life. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* affirms that **"the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men"** [thewestminsterstandard.org](https://www.thewestminsterstandard.org/). Russell's and Rutherford's teachings relied on esoteric chronologies and claimed new revelations about 1874, 1878, 1914, and beyond. Such speculation goes beyond what Scripture sets forth and violates the sufficiency of God's written Word. Christians are called to reject date-setting and prophetic calculations not sanctioned by Scripture (cf. **Matthew 24:36–37; Acts 1:7**).

They reveal marks of a false church

The *Belgic Confession*, Article 29, teaches that the true church is recognized by the **pure preaching of the gospel, proper administration of the sacraments, and practice of church discipline** [crcna.org](https://www.crcna.org/). It warns that the false church **"assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God ... adds to or subtracts from the sacraments as it pleases ... bases itself on humans more than on Jesus Christ"** [crcna.org](https://www.crcna.org/). Early Bible Students were content to be "simply Christians," but under Rutherford, the organization elevated the Governing Body and Watchtower literature to a status functionally above Scripture. Members were required to obey organizational directives and were discouraged from reading the Bible independently. Such institutional authoritarianism mirrors the marks of a false church.

They subject themselves to the dangers of speculative prophecy

Scripture warns that false prophets will arise and mislead many (Deut 18:20–22). Russell's failed predictions—claiming that the "full establishment of the Kingdom of God" would occur by 1914 [jwfacts.com](https://www.jwfacts.com/)—show the danger of prophetic date-setting. After 1914 passed without Armageddon, Rutherford reinterpreted the date and continued promoting new expectations. From

a Protestant perspective, any system built on continually revised prophecies undermines confidence in God's clear Word and distracts believers from the hope of Christ's promised bodily return (Acts 1:11).

Life Application

1. **Beware of movements built on speculative revelations.** Russell's and Rutherford's doctrines developed through extra-biblical chronologies and alleged prophetic insight. Christians must hold fast to the completed canon of Scripture and reject claims that God has given a secret timetable of end-time events.
2. **Examine the movement's origins and development.** Understanding the history of Jehovah's Witnesses reveals how doctrinal errors can grow from speculative beginnings into an authoritarian system. Churches should learn from this history and guard against subtly introducing extra-biblical authority into their life and governance.
3. **Hold to the marks of the true church.** The Belgic Confession calls believers to discern the true church by its faithful preaching, sacraments, and discipline cena.org. When an organization exalts human leaders and unique doctrines above Christ and his Word, it forfeits these marks and should be avoided.
4. **Rest in Christ, not chronological predictions.** Christ warned that no one knows the day or hour of his return. Believers should live in readiness without succumbing to date-setting anxiety. Our hope is anchored in the finished work of Christ and the sure promise of his bodily return, not in speculative timelines.