

Sects and Cults

Jehovah Witnesses

Origin and History

1. Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916)

The founder of the JW, and the first president of the Watchtower Society, as the organization is called, was 'Charles Taze Russell. A haberdasher from Pittsburgh, Russell was first a Presbyterian and later a Congregationalist, who became dissatisfied with the historic Protestant faith, and in particular with the doctrine of eternal punishment. Through a chance visit to a Seventh-day Adventist meeting, his interest in the Bible was re-activated. Russell became enchanted with the Seventh-day Adventist view on Christ's imminent Second Coming. The books of Daniel and Revelation became his favourite hunting grounds. J.K. VanBaalen remarked: "One wonders why Charles Taze Russell was so unwilling to acknowledge his sources when his system of errors reveals so plainly the traces of Mrs. Ellen G. White." It is quite plain that the JW are strongly influenced by the theology of the Seventh day Adventists. By 1872, Russell had come to believe that Christ would set up his millennial kingdom in 1914. When the Lord didn't return in that year, he announced that what he had thought to be a visible event was actually invisible. Instead of the introduction of the millennium, the world saw the beginning of its first Great War.

The year 1879 was particularly eventful for Russell as he married Maria Francis Ackley and launched the *Watchtower* and *Herald of Christ's Presence* Magazine with an original edition of 6,000 copies. In 1884, the Zion's Watchtower Society was officially organized. By 1888, the society had representatives in England, China, India, Turkey and Haiti.

Russell was a prolific writer, who produced a stream of books, tracts and magazine articles. His major work was the six-volume *Studies in the Scriptures* (otherwise called *The Divine Plan of the Ages*) written between the years 1886 and 1906.

His path didn't go over roses. His wife left him in 1897 and sued for divorce on grounds of "his conceit, egotism, domination, and improper conduct in relation to other women." In 1913 he sued a Baptist minister in London, Ont., for saying that he knew "comparatively nothing" about philosophy and theology and was totally ignorant of the Biblical languages. When he took the stand, he was forced to admit that he knew neither Greek, Latin or Hebrew. Russell's promotion of the \$60-a-bushel "Miracle Wheat" and a "Millennial Bean" didn't aid his cause. It ended in a well publicized scandal.

2. Joseph-Franklin Rutherford (1869-1942)

The man who succeeded Russell was Joseph Franklin Rutherford, whose parents were Baptist farmers in Missouri. He became a lawyer, and, for a short while, was a judge in a lower court. "Judge" Rutherford became famous for his slogan, "Millions Now Living

Will Never Die". In 1906 he became a Russellite, and the Society's lawyer. When he took over the movement after Russell's death, it was scandal ridden and nearly ruined by the nonfulfilment of major prophecies. Under his leadership, the Society was reorganized into a smoothly operating organization. He also worked out effective methods of evangelism. He was even more of a prolific writer than his predecessor. Many Scripture laced books and pamphlets have been written by him. The Watchtower presses have produced 300 million copies of the some 100 books written by the "Judge." Rutherford took an increasingly hard line against established churches, political systems and big business. His statements invited strong reaction. In 1920 Rutherford had predicted: "We may confidently expect that 1925 will mark the return of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the faithful prophets of old." His confident prediction followed the way of all human fancy. When he died, he left a rapidly growing sect that was eagerly waiting for the Kingdom that was "just around the corner:"

3. Nathan Knorr (1905-1977)

The successor of the "Judge" was Nathan Knorr, who joined the movement as a teenager, and started to work in the JW's printing plant at the Brooklyn headquarters. His election set a new tone for the sect. There was little doctrinal change. But public-speaking courses were set up for all Witnesses so that they could deliver their own testimonies. A school was also founded to prepare foreign missionaries and sect leaders for their task. The obnoxious criticism of established churches was played down - without surrendering any convictions. New books kept appearing, but now without any indication as to the author. Under Knorr's leadership a new translation of the Bible was produced. The first of the six volumes of the New World Translation of the Hebrew and Christian Greek and Scriptures appeared in 1950; the sixth volume was published 11 years later.

Knorr was an exceptionally able organizer, but not a charismatic and powerful leader. The JW were now following the cause of the Kingdom. Their leader remained in the background.

4. Frederick Franz (1894-)

Knorr was succeeded by an 83 year old bachelor, Frederic Franz, who has lived in the Brooklyn headquarters since 1920. For decades he has been" the Society's theologian. He attended the University of Cincinnati, but dropped out in his junior year.