Jehovah's Witnesses: Working Out Their Salvation

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A caricatured evangelist lurches into the first paragraph of the February 1, 1996, issue of The Watchtower. Cornering a naive ten-year-old boy, the evangelist bellows, "Another soul saved for Christ!" after the young Christian acknowledges Jesus as his Lord and Savior (p.3).

Most Jehovah's Witnesses believe that such stereotypes clearly prove the failing of Christian theology. Modern Christendom, according to the Watchtower Society, believes that a simple statement of faith in Jesus Christ earns salvation and allows the individual to spend the remainder of his or her life in libertine indulgence. The Society then attempts to refute this doctrine by quoting, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

For Jehovah's Witnesses, salvation requires a complicated combination of right belief and right action. This argument has convinced and converted many individuals. It is therefore important to answer three vital questions concerning this teaching:

How are Jehovah's Witnesses to earn salvation?

Does the Bible support the Society's requirements?

If the Society is wrong, what is required for salvation?

The Society explains: "[Belief] involves taking in accurate knowledge of God's purposes and his way of salvation. Then faith has to be exercised in Jesus Christ as the Chief Agent of salvation. This places the Christian in a saved condition, but he must now persevere in doing God's will and continue to adhere to all of God's requirements for the rest of his life. Only then will he be saved to eternal life" (Watchtower, December 15, 1989, p. 30). To prevent any confusion regarding these requirements for salvation, the Society gives four requirements that must be fulfilled by each Jehovah's Witness.

THE WATCHTOWER'S FOUR REQUIREMENTS FOR SALVATION

The Watchtower Society teaches that Acts 16:31 proclaims the method to salvation: "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will get saved, you and your household" (NWT). Christians will readily agree that Paul and Silas clearly present the way to salvation in this passage. However, the Society attaches a vastly different definition of the word "believe" to this passage.

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Requirement One: Accurate Knowledge

The first requirement, as stated above, is "taking in accurate knowledge of God's purposes." Specifically, this is knowledge of Christ's role as "earth's new King" (Watchtower, February 15, 1983, p. 15).

This invisible kingdom includes the members of the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14, select humans, most of whom have already died, who will rule as "kings and priests" over the appropriately submissive Jehovah's Witnesses (Knowledge that Leads to Everlasting Life, p. 92). Notably, the Governing Body (or top hierarchy) of the Watchtower Society are members of the 144,000; following their leadership is thus mandatory for earning salvation (Watchtower, January 15, 1994, p. 16).

Requirement Two: Avoid Debauchery

The second requirement is to refrain from "an immoral, debauched way of life" (Watchtower, February 15, 1983, p. 15). The Society defines this fruitless way of life according to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10: "Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."

The Society, finding this list incomplete, also forbids numerous other activities that are not explicitly forbidden in the Bible: smoking (Keep Watch Over Yourselves and All the Flock, p. 96); blood transfusions (p. 95); boxing (p. 92); participating in a raffle (p. 135); and such "nonneutral [sic] activities" as voting and performing military or civic service (p. 96).

Requirement Three: Watchtower Membership

The Society states, "A third requirement is that we be associated with God's channel, his organization" i.e., the Watchtower Society (Watchtower, February 15, 1983, p. 12; emphasis theirs). In fact, it is "essential" that people become Jehovah's Witnesses in order to be saved (Our Kingdom Ministry, November, 1990, p. 1). The Watchtower teaches that people must belong to the Society because, "By means of his organization, including the elders, [God] provides us with direction and protection" (Watchtower, January 15, 1995, p. 28).

The direction provided by the Society is more than simply biblical preaching and teaching; it is for Jehovah's Witnesses the source of all knowledge pertaining to salvation. The Society proclaims, "Unless we are in touch with this channel of communication God is using, we will not progress along the road of life, no matter how much Bible reading we do" (Watchtower, December 1, 1981, p. 27). Membership in the Watchtower Society is so vital for Jehovah's Witnesses that they believe non-members will receive no guidance from God (Watchtower, July 1, 1965, p. 391).

Requirement Four: Proselytism

The most pronounced manifestation of loyalty to the Society is proselytism."God requires that prospective subjects of his Kingdom support his government by loyally advocating his Kingdom rule to others" (Watchtower, February 15, 1983, pp. 12-13; emphasis theirs), with all Jehovah's Witnesses serving as "loyal spokesmen or proclaimers of God's kingdom" (You Can Live Forever., p. 133; emphasis theirs). Serving as loyal spokesmen for the Society is "a sacred duty, a requirement on which our life depends" (Keep Watch Over Yourselves., p. 35).

This proselyting work primarily involves distributing Watchtower literature. The status of the individual member in a Kingdom Hall is measured according to activity in distributing literature, with individuals referred to as "publishers" (e.g., see Keep Watch Over Yourselves., pp. 98-99). Publishers must "be determined to exert ourselves physically, using our energies and strength in the evangelizing work. [God's] service would be whole-souled. Those whose strength and circumstances permit them to do more need not discontinue their activity just because others cannot stay out longer" (Ibid., p. 51).

Literature distribution is tracked by the Society through a detailed monthly time report submitted by each Witness. These reports are so important to the Society that even notices of expiring magazine subscriptions are submitted to the leaders of local congregations for immediate action (Ibid., p. 61).

Are the Society's Requirements Biblical?

The list of requirements for salvation as a Jehovah's Witness is extensive. The Society claims, "We have to do more than merely accept the Kingdom message in order to be saved" (From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained, p. 249). They then act upon this claim by providing a specific list of works with which Witnesses must build upon the foundation of faith in the Watchtower Society.

Emphasis on an active Christian life is certainly valid. James asked, "What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?.Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone" (2:14, 17). The next verse, however, shows how Jehovah's Witnesses have misunderstood the crucial point made by James: "Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (2:18).

People are not saved by their works; however, their faith is made visible through their actions.

Jesus said that a person's relationship with him would be visible to others as "fruit" (John 15:5). Paul explains that this fruit is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Works are thus a natural manifestation of faith, flowing from an individual's loving relationship with God, rather than a man-made checklist that people must continually fulfill in order to earn salvation.

The futility of an attempt to earn salvation can be seen in the Society's list for an acceptably pure lifestyle. While such an activity as smoking can have harmful physical effects, it is not listed in the Bible as an offense meriting damnation. Still less justified requirements are such inclusions as voting or participating in a raffle. The Society's additional list of non-biblical requirements for salvation ensures the loyalty of its followers.

Unfortunately, Paul aptly described the effect of the Watchtower Society on Christians who join the organization when he said, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another, but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-7).

What is Required for Salvation?

The Watchtower Society unfortunately rejects the biblical passages that clearly answer this question. One of the best-known verses in the Bible is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." It is for this reason that Paul and Silas told the jailer in Acts 16:31 that belief in Christ leads to salvation.

Contrary to the teachings of the Society, belief in Jesus Christ does not involve becoming a Jehovah's Witness and following all the rules established by the Governing Body. Instead, Paul explains, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9-10).

Christians can likewise rejoice in knowing that they are not responsible for earning salvation by adhering to an extensive list of regulations. While actions are a sign of a person's saving relationship with God, Christians know that it is faith in Jesus Christ that leads to salvation (Romans 3:28). In this way, Christians "work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling" by bearing the fruit of their relationship with Christ in the world, and always remaining humble in the awe-inspiring knowledge that God uses his people to accomplish his purposes (Philippians 2:13).

By Jason Barker