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A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT
MORMONS AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Introduction

Time and again, young LDS missionaries are asked “Are you Jehovah’s Witnesses?” No doubt, practicing Witnesses are also frequently asked: “Are you the Mormons?” To many, these two curious sects are indistinguishable. True, in their standards, commitment to their respective faiths, and zeal for missionary work, they *are* similar. However, in history and doctrine, these two fairly modern traditions are rather distinct and utterly unique. The common occurrence of confusing the two only goes to show how very misunderstood these two traditions are.

Does it matter what these two denominations of Christianity believe—particularly for those of other faiths? It should! Both Mormons and Witnesses developed out of the nineteenth-century restoration movement which came on the heels of the Second Great Awakening. Both claim that Christianity, in the post–New Testament era, fell into apostasy and, thereby, became corrupted. Both perceive their tradition as a restoration of (in the case of the Mormons) or a return to (in the case of the Witnesses) primitive Christianity—that which Jesus gave the world in the first century.^[1] Both believe that they have something that the ancient Church *had*, the modern Church has *lost*, and all people *need* for salvation. If their claims are true, their respective messages seem important. If their claims are erroneous, one wonders why their proselyting efforts are so successful. What is it about these two traditions that is so intriguing to so many people? Why is it that, while major Christian denominations (like Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or Anglicanism) are declining in numbers, Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses continue to baptize a significant number of converts annually?

Some readers will be disappointed by the fact that this book is not an exposé of the deep, dark secrets of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Having read a number of exposés on both of those traditions, I can speak dogmatically: such books are unhelpful, unkind, and, almost without exception, grossly inaccurate. This is not to say that I have shied away from the controversial topics associated with these two traditions. That I have not! But I have sought to be fair to both. I have felt the sting of having my own faith grossly misrepresented. Consequently, I have no desire to misrepresent another's beliefs or practices. I'm reminded of a statement made by Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918)—sixth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He noted:

Our mission has been to save men. We have been laboring all these [many] years . . . to bring men to a knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to bring them to repentance, to obedience to the requirements of God's law. We have been striving to save men from error, to persuade them to turn away from evil and to learn to do good. Now if our enemies will only charge us with doing this, all right; and if they wish to oppose us for doing this, that is their business; but when they charge us with doing that which we have not done, believing that which we do not believe, practicing that which we have never practiced, then I pity them. I pity them because they are doing it in ignorance, or because they are wilfully [*sic*] disposed to misrepresent the truth.[2]

As a survey of the literature shows, both Mormons and Witnesses are commonly charged with believing what they do not believe. Because each of these traditions is somewhat of an enigma in the eyes of the world, until recently, tabloid style approaches to Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses have been the norm. I personally agree with Joseph F. Smith: if you're going to reject a faith, or even accuse them of some errors in belief, do so based on what they *actually* teach and do—not on some “straw man” representation of their doctrines or people. In this text I hope to set straight a few misconceptions about these two oft misunderstood denominations. In writing this, I am not seeking proselytes for either tradition. Rather, I am writing in the spirit of Christian civility—and academic honesty. In this age of information, it is shocking to the mind that so much misinformation circulates—even among supposedly enlightened people. Hence, this effort at setting the record straight.

Like any other religion, the doctrines and organizational structure of these two faiths have developed and, to some degree, evolved over time. Thus, what is presented herein represents Jehovah's Witnesses and Latter-day Saints as they were at the time of the publication of this book. While some beliefs or practices might have been different in the past, or may be different in the future, I believe this accurately represents where each tradition currently stands. Additionally, while you might have an LDS or Witness friend who has explained their doctrines differently than what is described herein, I have tried to be true to the "official" positions of these faiths, rather than to colloquial expressions of them. Thus, I have relied heavily upon a number of publications of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, and those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Additionally, I have had scholars from both of these traditions review my work for accuracy and fairness. That being said, I am solely responsible for the content of this work.

A Brief History of Jehovah's Witnesses

Perhaps one of the most interesting and esoteric of Christian denominations is the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society—commonly known as Jehovah's Witnesses.^[3] While they are a relatively small movement, in comparison to Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or many of the world's Protestant denominations, they are one of the highest converting and most doctrinally provocative of Christian traditions.^[4] If you mention “the 144,000,” the “Watch Tower Magazine,” or “blood transfusions,” the vast majority of Christians will instantaneously think of Jehovah's Witnesses.

So who are they? And how did they get started? Even before looking at their nineteenth-century origins, it might be well to highlight their biblical roots. Jehovah's Witnesses see themselves as a continuation of a long line of faithful “witnesses” that began with Abel, continued through Jesus Christ, “the faithful and true witness” (KJV Revelation 3:14), and exists today through their worldwide brotherhood. They see their faith as a “restoration” of pure (or “cleansed”) worship as once practiced by God's ancient covenant people—His nation of “witnesses” in Bible times. They note:

At Hebrews 11:4, Paul identifies Abel as the first witness of Jehovah. . . . Put simply, Abel made the right offering with the right motive and backed it up by right works . . . Enoch remained a faithful witness even to death, for Jehovah “took him,” apparently sparing him a violent death at the hands of his enemies. (Heb. 11:5) . . . Noah . . . demonstrated his submission to God's sovereignty by doing “just as God commanded.” (Gen. 6:22) . . . Despite Noah's bold witnessing, however, that wicked generation “took no note until the flood came and swept them all away.”—Matt. 24:37–39 . . . Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and

Joseph are mentioned as an early part of the . . . pre-Christian witnesses. (Heb. 11:8–22; 12:1) . . . Moses was a witness in the true sense of the word; he testified “repeatedly and forcefully” to the Godship of Jehovah . . . Jehovah made clear to Israel their responsibility. . . . He said: “You are my witnesses.” So Jehovah’s people Israel constituted a nation of witnesses. They . . . could proclaim with conviction that Jehovah is the Great Deliverer of his people and the God of true prophecy.[5]

At the heart of their faith is the belief that God has always had a “dedicated” people who serve as His witnesses. In these last days, those who call themselves Jehovah’s Witnesses are the modern counterpart of God’s ancient people—His dedicated followers. And what does it mean to be a Witness of Jehovah? Among other things, it is to believe, live, and testify of the words and will of Jehovah. It is to set one’s own will and desires aside in deference to God’s will and desires. It is to serve Jehovah with pure and selfless intent and motivations. And it is to testify of Jehovah repeatedly and forcefully—whenever you are afforded the opportunity. In the introduction to their official history, we read, “Jehovah’s Witnesses are known worldwide for their persistence in talking to people everywhere about Jehovah God and his Kingdom.”[6]

Thus, technically speaking, Jehovah’s Witnesses would argue that they are less of a “new religion,” and, rather, more of an ancient society—the society of believers in Jehovah God—returned to the earth again in these last days to testify or witness to others of God’s work and will.

That’s where their story initially begins. But their contemporary story—the one about which we are concerned here—begins in the 1870s with the work of Charles Taze Russell.

Russell was born February 16, 1852 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania.[7] His parents were practicing Presbyterians, although Charles eventually converted to the Congregational Church because he felt more comfortable with their theology. His conversion to Congregationalism, however, was not to be a permanent one. He wrote:

Having been . . . a member of the Congregational Church and of the Y.M.C.A., [I] began to be shaken in faith regarding many long-accepted doctrines. Brought up a Presbyterian and indoctrinated from the Catechism, and being naturally of an inquiring mind, I . . .

gradually . . . was led to see that though each of the creeds contained some elements of truth, they were, on the whole, misleading and contradictory of God's word.[8]



Charles Taze Russell, age 27 (1879)

One official history of Russell's early life says that he was reared to believe that "God is love." However, that belief was coupled with the claim that God had "created men inherently immortal and had provided a fiery place in which he would eternally torment all except those who had been predestined to be saved. Such an idea repulsed the heart of teenage Charles." When Russell was taught this idea he thought to himself that a God who would do such an unfair thing clearly would have standards 'lower than that of many men.' [9]

Russell never turned to atheism, but he did reject many of the Christian doctrines commonly accepted in his day; and he began to believe more and more that much of Christian belief and practice had its origins in paganism. For a time he turned his attentions away from Christianity, and to the study of a number of Oriental religions, but that too left him wanting.

Spiritually speaking, the turning point in Russell's life came in 1869. He was, at that time, a successful seventeen-year-old businessman, owning (with his father) a chain of men's clothing stores. On an evening stroll, near one of his shops, he heard the singing of hymns coming from the basement of a building he had passed. Out of curiosity, Russell dropped in to investigate what was being taught—though he himself acknowledged that he did so in a spirit of skepticism.

The gathering Russell had stumbled onto was a meeting of the Adventist Church. Russell listened intently to the preacher, Jonas Wendell. While he was in no way converted by the content of the message, Russell was changed by the experience. He stated:

Though [Mr. Wendell's] Scripture exposition was not entirely clear . . . it was sufficient . . . to re-establish my wavering faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible . . . What I heard sent me to my Bible to study with more zeal and care than ever before, and I shall ever thank the Lord for that leading; for though Adventism helped me to no single truth, it did help me greatly in the unlearning of errors, and thus prepared me for the truth.[10]

A short time later—fueled by the enthusiasm sparked by Jonas Wendell’s sermon—Charles Russell and several friends started a Bible study class, where each in turn would raise questions that the group would seek to find a biblically based answer for. Once they came to a conclusion they could all agree upon, they would make a record of it. This study group, and its doctrinal discoveries, was the beginning of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society; and is the source of many of the doctrines commonly believed by Jehovah’s Witnesses today.

During those early, formative years, Russell was influenced by a number of individuals. We have already noted the impact of the Adventist Jonas Wendell. But there were others who influenced Russell as he began to develop his theology. Another Adventist, George W. Stetson, left an impact, as did George Storrs, a respected minister and publisher of a religious magazine called *Bible Examiner*.^[11] Of these two men, and their effect upon him, Russell wrote: “The study of the Word of God with these dear brethren led [me], step by step, into greener pastures.”^[12]

One of Storrs’s teachings that strongly influenced Russell was the claim that “eternal punishment” for the wicked was a fallacy. Like Latter-day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses reject the idea that God “punishes” sinners throughout eternity. Storrs also introduced Russell to the concept that only the souls of the righteous were immortal. According to Storrs, those who lived wicked lives would eventually cease to exist.^[13] This teaching resonated with Russell, who ended up adopting it as part of Witness soteriology.^[14]

Finally, one other Adventist known to have influenced Pastor Russell was Nelson H. Barbour. Barbour taught that Christ’s return would be “in spirit” rather than in flesh. Russell already held that presupposition prior to meeting Barbour—but Nelson Barbour exhibited some influence on Russell’s understanding of the timing of the return. Barbour believed that Jesus’s invisible reign on earth had begun in 1874, and convinced Russell such was the case. The two joined forces, and co-published a number of writings until they had a falling out in 1878 over Barbour’s rejection of Christ’s “substitutionary death.” Because of their unyielding opposition to each other’s position of how Jesus had accomplished man’s redemption, Russell withdrew

his fellowship with Barbour, including his involvement in a journal the two had co-published.



Charles Taze Russell in 1911—
about 5 years before his death

For more than four decades, Charles Taze Russell directed the work of the Bible and Tract Society, expanding and formalizing its doctrines, promoting its teachings throughout the world, and gathering believers from all continents. The years between 1870 and 1916 were very fruitful for the organization. Not only did many join Russell and the other believers, but the number of ministers grew dramatically, as did the number of tracts published and distributed. During the forty-six years in which he led the Society[15], he took the organization from a small Bible study group—consisting of a handful of people—to a faith with tens of thousands of members, and with active preaching in some forty-three countries. Some never imagined the faith without Russell at its head—perhaps because many believed they would be taken up into heaven prior to Russell’s death.[16] However, Russell did pass—and rather unexpectedly, at that—and the transition to a new leader was not an easy one.

In October of 1916, Russell and his secretary (Menta Sturgeon) began a lecture tour of the western and southern parts of the United States. They visited Michigan, Illinois, Kansas, California, and Texas. Russell had been seriously ill throughout the trip. On Sunday, October 29, while in Los Angeles, Russell delivered what would be his last public discourse. Two days later, Russell passed away on the train while traveling through the state of Texas. He was only sixty-four years old.

Naturally, the response to Russell’s untimely death was one of shock. Russell’s office assistant recorded that when the telegram arrived informing them that their leader had passed away, there was an audible “moan” throughout the room. Many wept.

From its beginnings, Russell had been “the Society”—he *was* “the Church,” per se. Now he was gone. Prior to his death the work seemed to center around his “dynamic determination to see God’s will be done.”[17] Many wondered

where the Society's focus would be now? And who would be its hub? As with the Mormons at the passing of Joseph Smith, so also with the Witnesses; it was difficult for them to imagine anyone filling Russell's place.

Russell had carefully outlined in writing what should be done in the case of his death. The board of directors of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society selected a committee of three men to supervise the work of the Society until a successor could be appointed. That appointment was made about two months later, on January 6, 1917.

At the death of Joseph Smith, ambitious individuals began to position themselves in hopes of becoming his successor. Others felt that no one could replace the prophet. Similar movements and positions surfaced at the death of Russell. Some campaigned, per se, for the person they thought should be Russell's successor. Others felt so devoted to the deceased leader that there developed "a sort of cult around him."^[18] Many, however, just wanted a successor appointed as quickly as possible so that things could settle down, and so that the work could move forward.



Judge Joseph F. Rutherford, circa 1927

In January of 1917, Judge Joseph F. Rutherford was unanimously elected as successor, and president of the Society^[19]—and initially he was well received.^[20] However, his "warm reception" by the membership was not lasting. Even though Rutherford continued moving the Society in the direction his predecessor had outlined, and even though the movement was growing under the new leadership, Rutherford was a very different kind of leader than Russell had been, and some simply found that hard to accept.^[21]

Those who had the hardest time accepting Rutherford's leadership were individuals at the headquarters who worked with him on a daily basis. Opposition to his leadership grew quickly. Four members of the Society's board of directors tried to wrest administrative control away from Rutherford, and so he removed them from their posts and appointed four others to fill the

vacancies. Initially, this seemed to add fuel to the fire, provoking support for the four ousted board members.[22]

The disgruntled ex-directors began an aggressive anti-Rutherford speaking and letter-writing campaign throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. The result was a split in the congregations. Some supported Rutherford, and others supported the dissenters. Rutherford decided it would be advisable to take a survey of all of the congregations to ascertain where they stood on the matter. According to a report published in the December 15, 1917 *Watch Tower*, Judge Rutherford had the overwhelming support of the Society's members. Thus, the four ousted board members failed to get Rutherford removed as the head of the Society and, therefore, they sought to start their own movements. As a consequence, groups like the Dawn Bible Students Association and the Laymen's Home Missionary Movement sprung up in opposition to the main body of Jehovah's Witnesses.[23]

Historically, these break-off groups quickly splintered into fragmented movements which dwindled in numbers or entirely ceased to exist.[24] But, for a time, they were certainly a force to be reckoned with, and a significant number of Witnesses left the main body of believers over this succession crisis.[25]

Around the time the succession controversy appeared to be blowing over, a new storm arose. In 1918 the Witnesses were distributing a new book titled *The Finished Mystery*. The text experienced unprecedented sales. However, it contained a number of unflattering and highly cutting references to the clergy of other Christian denominations, and their involvement in World War I.[26] As opposition to the book mounted, it was banned in Canada, and Witnesses frequently came under physical attack because of comments made in the book.[27] Tar and feathering a Witness became a somewhat common practice in certain parts. Many were chased by mobs, beaten, whipped, had their ribs broken or their heads split open. Some Witnesses were actually permanently maimed by mobocrats. The Society began a campaign to let people know how unfairly they were being treated—thinking that the world would be shocked and outraged at learning of the mob violence that was taking place simply because the Witnesses had expressed in print their sincere beliefs. However,

efforts to stop the persecution backfired. The attacks on the movement only became more intense and more frequent. On May 7, 1918, federal warrants were issued for Judge Rutherford and seven of his close associates. They were convicted of conspiracy, and seven of the eight men[28] were sentenced to serve four twenty-year concurrent terms in jail.

The claim against Rutherford and his associates was that they violated the US Espionage Act of June 15, 1917. Their accusers said the Watch Tower leadership had conspired to cause insubordination and refusal of duty in the armed forces of the United States by teaching their members that they should abstain from shedding blood by fighting in wars. Additionally, since the society had sent a check to their headquarters in Germany (to be used to fund Bible training of German Witnesses), they were said to be guilty of hostility toward the United States of America by financially supporting the enemy. Upon sentencing them, the judge who had presided over the trial declared: “In the opinion of the Court, the religious propaganda which these defendants have vigorously advocated and spread . . . is a greater danger than a division of the German army.”[29] Obviously, both charges were highly suspect. First, the Witnesses did not seek to keep non-Witnesses from participating in the war efforts (as anti-war protestors traditionally would). They only taught their membership that they did not personally believe in engaging in war—particularly since a Witness might be obligated to kill another Witness. As to sending a check to Germany, the money was not sent to the German government or armed forces. It was sent to other Witnesses to train them in proselyting techniques. There was nothing “hostile” about such an act.

In response to his conviction and imprisonment, Rutherford penned the following words from his jail cell: “There are probably no men on earth today more highly favored and who are happier than the seven brethren now in prison [with me]. They are conscious of their entire innocence of intentional wrongdoing, and rejoice to be suffering with Christ for loyally serving Him.”[30] Rutherford and his associates served approximately nine months in prison before being released on bail.[31] And yet, amazingly, the organization survived that period without direct governance by their elected leaders.

While Jehovah's Witnesses have been the victims of persecution from nearly the day the movement was founded, World War II presented one of the worst episodes of expressed hatred toward the Society in its history.[32] Beginning in 1933, Adolf Hitler launched a campaign to eradicate Witnesses from the nation of Germany, boasting, "This brood will be exterminated." [33] Hitler's concerns about the Witnesses were less doctrinal and more centered on the fact that they refused to render any kind of military service. He saw them as treasonous, and was purported to have said of them: "These so-called . . . Bible Students are troublemakers; . . . I consider them quacks; I do not tolerate that the German Catholics shall be besmirched in such a manner by this American Judge Rutherford; I dissolve [Jehovah's Witnesses] in Germany." [34] Thus, Witnesses in Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and other countries were thrown into concentration camps and tortured, abused, or experimented on throughout the duration of the war. They were told that if they would simply sign a declaration denouncing their faith, they would be set free. Among other things, the declaration they were ordered to sign stated the following:

- I have come to know that the International Bible Students Association [or Jehovah's Witnesses] is proclaiming erroneous teachings and under the cloak of religion follows hostile purposes against the State.
- I therefore left the organization entirely.
- I herewith give assurance that I will never again take any part in the activity of the International Bible Students Association.
- In the event of war I will, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland.

[35]

Hundreds died, thousands endured, but very few signed the declaration of denunciation.[36] Indeed, according to the official history of Jehovah's Witnesses, many found themselves in positions of trust during the war specifically *because of* their trustworthiness and their fidelity to their faith.[37]

The mobocracy against the Witnesses—particularly during times of war—is legendary. Because of the Witness unwillingness to salute flags or serve in the armed services, many a patriot deemed it his duty to discipline any of Jehovah's

Witnesses he encountered. In the late 30s and early 40s, so many Witness children were expelled from US public schools for their refusal to salute the flag that the Society found it necessary to open their own “Kingdom Schools” to educate their children.

The years under the leadership of Judge Rutherford were trying times, but also productive ones. While Rutherford was decidedly different from his predecessor in leadership style, no one can deny him credit for his accomplishments. The young faith grew rapidly under his leadership. The organization’s current name, “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” was officially taken during Rutherford’s administration.[38] In 1935, the name “Kingdom Hall” was introduced (by Rutherford) as the name of their worship houses. A number of doctrinal developments were also introduced by him, including the idea that the “great multitude”—originally viewed as a secondary heavenly class distinct from the “Anointed” (i.e., the 144,000)—were identical to the “Jonadabs” (i.e., those who will live on earth in paradise forever, but who will *not* rule and reign in heaven with Jehovah throughout eternity). In 1924, Rutherford purchased a radio station, thinking that would be a great way to spread the Gospel. In the end, in 1957 it was sold—as face-to-face witnessing was determined to be more effective.[39]

Even though there had been some measure of controversy at the beginning of Rutherford’s tenure as president of the Society, by the end of his life he had endeared himself to the members of the faith over which he presided. When he spoke, thousands came to hear him, and he knew how to select a speaking topic that would excite his hearers.

On January 8, 1942, following a brief bout of colon cancer, Judge Rutherford passed away. He was seventy-two years of age. Five days later, thirty-six-year-old Nathan H. Knorr was unanimously elected the new president of the Society.[40]

One source notes that “Knorr was basically an affable person, capable of warmth.”[41] In his many years of leadership, the members of the Society developed a deep love for him and for his efforts to connect with individual Witnesses across the globe. Indeed, unlike Russell and Rutherford, Knorr traveled extensively, visiting Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the world.[42]



Nathan Knorr, circa 1958

During his years as the Society's president he circled the globe many times in an effort to both connect with the members of the faith, and also to train them and learn of their needs.[43]

Under Knorr's guidance, the movement continued to blossom at a shocking rate. When he took the reins of the Society (in 1942) there were 117,209 Witnesses worldwide. When he died, there were nearly 2.5 million. Additionally, it was during his administration that the New World Translation of the Bible was released, replacing the King James and American Standard versions which, until 1950, had served as the Witness Bibles of choice.[44] The Watchtower Bible School of Gilead[45]—used to train full-time Witness leaders and missionaries—was the brainchild of Nathan Knorr. It began operation in 1942. In that same year, the Witnesses also instituted the practice of publishing all of their literature anonymously “in order to fully credit the author of the Bible, Jehovah.”[46]

It was during Nathan Knorr's presidency that the term “Governing Body” first began to be used with any frequency.[47] That quorum, per se, is made up of a fluctuating number of men[48] who currently function as the highest presiding body in the Witness faith. In authority, they are today a bit like the LDS First Presidency, although in functionality they operate more like the LDS Quorum of the Twelve when a president of the Church has died. During the first seven decades of the organization's existence there was no developed concept of a Governing Body. However, during the latter portion of Knorr's tenure as the Society's president, there was somewhat of a behind-the-scenes power struggle, where members of certain committees began to exercise more control, thereby diminishing the power and role of the society's President.[49] As of January 1, 1976, the organization has been led much less by an individual, and more and more by the Governing Body.[50]

On June 22, 1977—two weeks after the passing of Nathan Knorr—eighty-three-year-old Frederick W. Franz was elected as president of the Watch Tower Society. Franz was a former Presbyterian who had formal training in biblical Greek[51] and was the recipient of a Rhodes scholarship.[52]

One major accomplishment of Franz's administration was the translation of Witness publications into some 111 languages. Materials had been translated prior to Franz serving as president of the Society; however, no previous president had exhibited such a passion for getting the "Kingdom message" into the language of "all nations and tribes and . . . tongues" (NWT Revelation 7:9). In the year 1992 alone, Franz employed some 800 translators to work on making Witness publications accessible to as many people as possible.



Frederick W. Franz, circa 1980s

During Franz's administration the number of Witness congregations worldwide increased by more than 29,000, and the total number of Witnesses nearly doubled in size. There was a need to provide meeting space for the multiplying congregations. So, in the 1970s a building program was inaugurated in the United States. Under this program, hundreds of Witnesses would gather together and erect a Kingdom Hall in just two to three days. The program was so successful in the United States that in the 1980s this same program was implemented throughout the world.[\[53\]](#)

Starting in November 1979, a shakeup took place in the world headquarters that eventually saw the disfellowshipping (or, as Mormons would say, the excommunication) of several members of the headquarters staff—including one member of the Governing Body.[\[54\]](#) No doubt, this was a painful thing for Fred Franz to have happen on his watch, particularly since one of those disciplined was his own nephew. Much has been made of this by those outside of the faith. But, truth be told, like the Mormons after the Kirtland Safety Society scandal and subsequent apostasy,[\[55\]](#) the Witnesses have gotten up, dusted themselves off, and moved on.

Fred Franz died in 1992, at the age of ninety-nine. That marked the end of an era. He was the only Governing Body member to have been baptized before 1914. He was the only one to have known Russell personally. And he was the architect of more of the post-Rutherford doctrine than any other man—including developing the society's policies on disfellowshippment (or church discipline).[\[56\]](#)



Milton Henschel, circa 1992

Milton G. Henschel was appointed to succeed Fred Franz. As previously noted, by Henschel's term, the presidency of the Society no longer carried the "power" it once had.^[57] Franz—as Knorr's successor and as the Society's President—had retained power, not so much because of the office he held (as that had been weakened during Knorr's presidency with the increase of power assumed by the Governing Body). Rather, Franz's power came from the fact that he was seen by most Witnesses as the Society's major scholar.^[58] Henschel did not have that credential and, thus, did not garner the same reverence many felt for Franz.

Milton Henschel traveled more than any other leader prior to his day.^[59] Indeed, Henschel had been traveling on behalf of the Society for years alongside President Knorr, to whom Henschel served as secretary.

During Henschel's presidency, a major restructuring took place—moving the hierarchical structure of the society to an even more Christocentric model. In other words, during the tenures of Russell, Rutherford, and Knorr, there was a definite sense that those men were the leaders of the organization. The presidents had help form a "committee" or the "board of directors." However, those groups did *not* hold the authority they now do. They functioned as assistants to the president—but *not* as members of the presidency, per se. However, during Knorr's administration there began to be a power-sharing between the president and the Governing Body. That transition was likely not evident to the average Jehovah's Witness in the field. Nevertheless, it was real. Six committees were formed^[60] over which the Governing Body presided, and through which it directed the work of the Kingdom. Prior to the 1976 transition of power (under Knorr), all of the administrative responsibilities were vested in the president. However, near the end of Knorr's tenure, all of that changed. The Governing Body began to share some of these powers or responsibilities.

As noted, during Franz's presidency the Governing Body asserted even more control over the society. By the time Milton Henschel became president, the Governing Body really was the presidency—or the controlling body over

the movement, though Henschel remained president, even if his position was somewhat of a figurehead. During the presidencies of Franz and Henschel, the members of the Body included the directors of the Watch Tower Society. Then, in 2000, Henschel and the other members of the Governing Body resigned their positions as directors of the Society and its corporations. Responsibility for each of these organizations previously under their stewardship was passed to others, so that the Governing Body could focus its attention on the spiritual needs of the Kingdom. Thus, at the writing of this book, Don A. Adams—who is not a member of the Governing Body, nor one of the 144,000 spirit-anointed—is the President of the Watch Tower Society. But, unlike his predecessors, Adams’s position is non-ecclesiastical.

The Governing Body today has an annual rotating chairmanship, so that no one man presides over that Body. Thus, over the more than 130 years of its history the leadership of the movement has incrementally moved away from a mortal or human figurehead. Today it is led quietly, with almost no notoriety, by a group of men who seek to be directed by Christ, and who acknowledge Him as the only leader of the Governing Body or the Society they are appointed to direct. Hence, their official history states: “In no way have Jehovah’s Witnesses become a sect built around the personalities of any of these men. Instead, they have but one leader, ‘the Christ’ (Matt. 23:10). He is the Head of these organized Witnesses of Jehovah, the one to whom ‘all authority has been given’ for directing this work.”[\[61\]](#)



Don A. Adams, current president, circa 2005

Other than the movement’s continued growth and the restructuring of the Governing Body’s relationship to the various corporations owned by the Society, the major accomplishment of Henschel’s presidency was the official change in the definition of the term “1914 generation.” Since the 1940s, the Society’s interpretation of Christ’s Matthew 24:34 statement (“This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled”) was that the Lord was speaking of the “generation” alive in 1914. Thus, the assumption was that within thirty

to forty years of 1914 the millennial day would dawn. Interpretations among Witnesses as to what “this generation” means have varied over the years. During Henschel’s presidency, the definition was clarified to mean basically this dispensation (to use an LDS term). Thus, Henschel’s presidency made a significant shift in how the body of believers interpreted this passage—a verse which has traditionally been significant in Witness chronology.[62]

Since Henschel’s resignation as president, a number of noteworthy things have occurred. The number of languages in which the New World Translation is published in has continued to increase. It is currently printed in more than sixty languages, and the *Watchtower* is published in more than 160. In 2002, the Witnesses won a major US Supreme Court case, giving them the right to proselytize without a permit from the local mayor’s office. Witnesses from Louisiana and the surrounding areas performed significant relief and rebuilding efforts on behalf of victims of Hurricane Katrina. Countless other things could be noted. Suffice it to say, since the last transition in leadership, things might be said to have settled down, per se. The movement is less likely to see major doctrinal shifts now that the Governing Body, as a group, is unitedly making any doctrinal pronouncements for the faith. While there are still projected changes on the horizon, particularly as it relates to the Governing Body’s leadership when all of the 144,000 have died; nevertheless, the leadership today is quite cautious in their teachings and in their leadership style. Thus, slight course adjustments rather than major doctrinal shifts are more likely.

In a sense, the Witnesses seem to have arrived at a position in their history that is not unlike where the Latter-day Saints find themselves. For Mormons, Joseph was the prophet of the Restoration. He restored the Church, its major doctrines, its authority, and its sacred rites. His successors, although occasionally clarifying doctrinal perspectives, have been less restorers and more guides to keep the restored Church on track and in alignment with the Lord’s will. Though the Witnesses do not claim to have prophets (in the sense that Mormons do); nevertheless, their major doctrinal development is done. Now the Governing Body simply seeks to keep the ball rolling in a productive direction and in accordance with what they feel God wants.

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