

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Biblical Doctrine of Salvation – Part 4

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Watchtower Denials

Like Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses may stress they do not teach salvation on the basis of works of righteousness. They do this by maintaining an arbitrary distinction between Mosaic works that cannot save and New Testament works that can save. The goal is to attempt to reconcile their doctrine of works salvation with biblical statements denying works salvation. Whenever the Bible denies works salvation, they argue it must be referring to trying to earn one's salvation by outdated Mosaic works, not required Gospel works. In effect, there are dead works of "the Law" and saving works of "the Gospel." In denying salvation by works of the Law¹ while asserting salvation by works of the Gospel,² Witnesses may claim to deny works salvation while in fact supporting it. Thus we find both a denial and affirmation of self-righteousness.³

The difficulty with the Watchtower argument is that, morally speaking, Mosaic law and Gospel law are not so easily separated. Further, the requirements of the Gospel law are considerably more stringent than the law of Moses as the Sermon on the Mount makes clear. In fact, if the apostle Paul describes the Mosaic law as a "curse" relative to salvation, how could he possibly expect people to keep the sinless perfection of the Gospel law? (Gal. 3:10-13). Or, if the Bible teaches that no one could keep the Mosaic law for salvation (Acts 15:10), would the apostle Paul proceed to argue that people must keep the more difficult Gospel law for salvation? It hardly seems credible.

We have now documented the Watchtower teachings relative to salvation by works. At this point, we only need briefly examine their interpretation of Christ's death on the cross to complete our discussion.

The Atonement of Christ

In speaking with individual Jehovah's Witnesses, it may initially seem as if they believe in Christ's atoning death on the cross. Certainly, they claim this. Unfortunately, we encounter the same problems we face with claims to believe in salvation by grace and the doctrine of justification. In fact, the Witnesses oppose the biblical

doctrine of the atonement. Numerous Christian scholars and researchers have recognized this. The late Dr. Walter Martin called their view of the atonement “completely unscriptural.”⁴ Professor Edmond Gruss, a former Jehovah’s Witness and author of the definitive *Apostles of Denial* declares, “The Witnesses’ view of the atonement is very different from that held by orthodoxy and in essence is a rejection of that Biblical doctrine.”⁵ In his *Four Major Cults*, Anthony Hoekema agrees.⁶

Gruss actually points out that during their early history the Witnesses had three entirely *different* views of the “ransom” of Christ:

The teaching of the Society on the ransom of Christ has been confused from the beginning, with C.T. Russell presenting three differing positions on this doctrine in the publications of the WatchTower Society. The teaching on the subject since Russell’s death has also been unsteady as to the extent and application of the ransom.⁷

How does the Witness view of the atonement differ from the biblical view?

In summary, the key difference can be seen in their *limitation* of the atonement. They believe its value atoned for the death of *one* perfect man. Christ died only for *Adam’s* sin, which made *potential* forgiveness available for others by faith and works. Just as Adam’s disobedience brought death, so Christ’s obedience brought life, i.e., resurrection, with the potential to earn eternal life. But Christ’s death alone did not atone for all men’s sins; good works and character finally do this. Thus the Christian concept of a completed atonement of infinite value is denied.

Again, Christ’s death was not sufficient for all men, and practically speaking, its sufficiency varies individually. For some people, Christ’s death has no value whatever because there are some sins that are unforgivable regardless. Apparently, certain murderers and the willfully rebellious receive no benefit. For example, Adam is stated to be exempt from the benefits of the atonement because he was a “willful sinner.”⁸ Thus:

Under the law the deliberate murderer could not be ransomed. Adam, by his willful course, brought death on all mankind, hence was a murderer (Rom. 5:12).

Thus the sacrificed life of Jesus is not acceptable to God as a ransom for the sinner Adam.⁹

What the Watchtower fails to recognize is that *all* people everywhere are “willful sinners”—that is the essence of *being* a sinner, as the Bible plainly declares (Col. 1:21; Rom. 1:18-2:5; 3:9-20; Eph. 2:1-3). In addition, the Bible teaches that murderers can be saved and there are biblical examples such as Moses (Ex. 2:12). Regardless, according to the Watchtower, there are millions of other people for whom the atonement has had no value. These individuals have already been annihilated forever:

Some people have already been judged. They have shown that they do not deserve life. These people will not be resurrected from the dead in the new world. Adam and Eve were judged unworthy of life. They were put to death by Jehovah. The people who died in the flood of Noah’s day received this same kind of unfavorable judgment. God brought the flood that “destroyed them all.” (Luke

17:27) The people of the city of Sodom died by a rain of fire from heaven after receiving an unfavorable judgment. At other times other groups also have received an unfavorable judgment. They proved that they were not worthy of life, and they will not be resurrected.¹⁰

Again, the atonement involved the death of *one* man for *one* man and as such could logically only have the value of one death for one man. But Jehovah's Witnesses believe it could somehow be applied to more than one man. The Witnesses refer to a "corresponding ransom" theory in presenting this idea. As is true in The Way International, another Arian cult, the Witnesses argue Jesus had to be *only* a man in order to be our Savior:

If Jesus, when he was baptized at thirty years of age, had been a so-called God-man...he would have been superhuman and would have had more value than a ransom for all mankind. The perfect justice of God would not unjustly accept more value than that of the thing to be ransomed.... It was the perfect man Adam that had sinned and so had lost for his offspring human perfection and its privileges. Jesus must likewise be humanly perfect, to correspond with the sinless Adam in Eden. In that way he could offer a ransom that *exactly* corresponded in value with what the sinner Adam lost for his descendants. This requirement of divine justice did not allow for Jesus to be more than a perfect man. That is why, in writing 1 Timothy 2:5, 6, the apostle Paul uses a special word in Greek, *antilutron*, to describe what Jesus offered in sacrifice to God.¹¹

The human life that Jesus Christ laid down in sacrifice must be exactly equal to that life which Adam forfeited for all his offspring: it must be a perfect human life, no more, no less. It must be a "corresponding ransom."¹²

What the Witnesses miss here is that one man alone could never atone for the sins of *billions* of sinners. In theory, a perfect man could only atone for one other person's sins, not all of humanities. Only if Jesus were both God and man could His atonement forgive all human sin.

Nevertheless, somehow, Jehovah's Witnesses apply the death of one man to all "capable" of receiving it through good works/character (some murderers and certain others being excluded):

At the time of Adam's sin and his being sentenced to death, his offspring or race were all unborn in his loins and so all died with him. (Compare Hebrews 7:4-10; Romans 7:9.) Jesus as a perfect man, "the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), had a race or offspring unborn in his loins, and when he died innocently as a perfect human sacrifice this potential human race died with him. Thus, Jesus was indeed a "corresponding ransom," not for the redemption of the one sinner, Adam, but for the redemption of all mankind descended from Adam. He repurchased them so that they could become his family, doing this by presenting the full value of his ransom sacrifice to the God of absolute justice in heaven.¹³

Hoekema correctly questions this reasoning:

For, as has been pointed out, there is no real continuity between Christ as he appeared in the flesh and [as] the previously existing Archangel Michael. For the Witnesses, therefore, God did not really send his only-begotten Son (even if one understands this term as designating the created Logos) into the world to ransom man from his sins. Rather, He caused a sinless man to be miraculously

conceived by Mary; this man was not even a “spirit-begotten son of God” at birth, but only a human son. He was different from other men only in two respects: (1) he had been born of a virgin, and (2) he lived a perfect life.... At this point the question cannot be suppressed: Why should the sacrificed life of Jesus Christ have so much value that it can serve to ransom millions of people from annihilation? It was a perfect human life which was sacrificed, to be sure; we must not minimize this point. But it was the perfect human life of someone who was *only a man*. Could the life of a mere man, offered in sacrifice, serve to purchase a multitude which no man can number?¹⁴

The Scripture is clear on this—the death of one man is insufficient to ransom another: “No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough...” (Ps. 49:7-8). Only God can redeem a life, which is precisely why Christ had to be God.

It should be obvious that the “corresponding ransom” theory of the Watchtower is not at all equivalent to the substitutionary, propitiatory atonement of Jesus Christ. The first pays only for the sins of one man, and is of limited value (which again is then somehow applied to others), while the second *actually* pays for the sins of all the redeemed, and is of infinite value. Further, as Gruss points out, the Greek word *antilutron* does not carry the meaning of “exact correspondence” which the Witnesses have attributed to it:

The “corresponding ransom” doctrine should be rejected on the following grounds: First, the Greek word *antilutron* occurs only once in the Bible (I Tim. 2:6) and the meaning need not be much different than *lutron* (“ransom”). After an examination of the words in the *lutron* group in the New Testament, Morris concludes that in meaning *antilutron* “does not seem to differ greatly from the simple *lutron*, but the preposition emphasizes the thought of substitution; it is a ‘substitute-ransom’ that is signified. Such a term well suits the context, for we read of Christ ‘who gave himself on behalf of all’ (I Tim. 2:6). The thought clearly resembles that of Mk. X:45, i.e. that Jesus had died in the stead of those who deserved death. If the thought of substitution is there, we find it here to an even greater degree in view of the addition of the preposition which emphasizes substitution.”

It should be obvious to the reader that what the Watchtower writers convey with the words “corresponding ransom” and what is conveyed by the words “substitute ransom” as explained by Morris and the rest of the Scriptures are not remotely the same.¹⁵

Watchtower writings speak highly of “the atonement.” But, in fact, as to its importance, they relegate it to a secondary status behind human good works. In an ultimate sense, what is it that determines whether or not the salvation benefits of Christ’s death are applied? It is not faith in *Christ* that applies the merits of Christ, but the good works and perseverance of the individual and his faith in the Watchtower Society. For without these, the merits of Christ are worthless. *The atonement is therefore of secondary importance to man’s own works of righteousness*. Apparently then, for the Watchtower Society, what the Bible describes as “filthy rags” (our works of righteousness) has *more value for salvation* than the sacrificial and sancti-

fied death of Jesus Christ Himself!

The Witnesses' doctrine of the ransom largely ignores the Biblical teaching on the subject, by claiming to accept the "ransom sacrifice" which was provided in the death of Christ not as a finished work, but only as a foundation from which man works to provide his own salvation.¹⁶

A former Witness of 16 years points out that, despite their claims to believe in the atonement, they deny this through their demand for works:

As I laid aside *The Watchtower* and other study guides of the Jehovah's Witnesses and read the New Testament with an open mind, I became aware of two things. First, salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ and not by works (Eph. 2:8-10)... I found out that they said one thing but believed another. They will often speak highly of Jesus' sacrifice and yet deny its efficacy by saying that to be saved one must do all the things the organization directs.¹⁷

There is an additional sense in which the death of Christ is secondary. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the primary goal of Jesus was to vindicate the name of Jehovah in response to a challenge of Satan's; it was only Jesus *secondary* purpose to die for Adam's sin. In other words Jesus' principal goal was **not** to die for our sins.¹⁸ Dr. James Bjornstad comments:

His primary purpose was to vindicate (provide a defense for Jehovah's name) and establish Jehovah's kingdom.... After Adam disobeyed God, Satan challenged God to put a creature on earth who could experience all the temptations Satan could give and still remain faithful to God until death.... The burden fell upon His first created being, His son, Michael the archangel. God's son came to earth as Jesus and met all the temptations of Satan, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses. Moreover, he remained true to God until death. In so doing he was able to establish God's kingdom. Thus Jesus was Jehovah's chief witness. Jehovah's Witnesses claim Jesus also had a secondary purpose in being here. He came to sacrifice his human body as a ransom to God for Adam's sin.¹⁹

Finally, Jehovah's Witnesses not only deny a *completed* atonement by declaring its practical application dependent on works, but also deny it by declaring its future application occurs only at the end of the millennium. It is at "the end of Christ's thousand-year reign as King when he finishes applying the merit of his human sacrifice."²⁰ Thus, Dr. Martin correctly observes:

Jehovah's Witnesses argue that the atonement is not wholly of God, despite 2 Corinthians 5:21, but rather half of God and half of man. Jesus, according to their argument, removed the effects of Adam's sin by His sacrifice on Calvary, but the work will not be fully completed until the survivors of Armageddon return to God through free will and become subject to the theocratic rule of Jehovah.²¹

In conclusion, the Jehovah's Witnesses view of salvation and the atonement of Christ must be considered deficient and powerless to save. It does not accept God's teaching about salvation, and therefore cannot have God's blessing. To the contrary— "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:9)

Notes

- ¹ *Things in Which it Is Impossible for God to Lie* (1965), p. 396. [Note: Most Jehovah's Witnesses' materials are published anonymously by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society [WBTS], Brooklyn, NY. Few are listed with a specific author.]
- ² *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1671.
- ³ *Things in Which it Is Impossible for God to Lie*, p. 401; pp. 401-404; *From Paradise Lost to Paradise Regained* (1958), p. 152; pp. 242, 244, 246-247, 249.
- ⁴ Walter Martin and Norman Klann, *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), p. 71.
- ⁵ Edmond Gruss, *Apostles of Denial* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 90.
- ⁶ Anthony Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 276-279.
- ⁷ Gruss, *Apostles of Denial*, pp. 142-143.
- ⁸ *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 33; cf. *Let God be True* (1946), p. 119, cited in Hoekema, p. 277.
- ⁹ *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1373.
- ¹⁰ *From Paradise Lost*, p. 236.
- ¹¹ *Things in Which it Is Impossible for God to Lie*, p. 232.
- ¹² *You May Survive*, pp. 38-39.
- ¹³ *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1373.
- ¹⁴ Hoekema, pp. 278-279.
- ¹⁵ Gruss, *Apostles of Denial*, p. 144.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- ¹⁷ Gruss, *We Left Jehovah's Witnesses*, pp. 37-38.
- ¹⁸ James Bjornstad, *Counterfeits at Your Door* (Glendale, CA: Gospel Light Publications, 1979), p. 85, cites *New Heavens and a New Earth* (1953), pp. 147-148; *What Has Religion Done for Mankind* (1951), pp. 240-245.
- ¹⁹ Bjornstad, *Counterfeits at Your Door*, p. 85.
- ²⁰ *You May Survive*, p. 357.
- ²¹ Martin, *Jehovah of the Watchtower*, pp. 71-72.