

# **Jehovah's Witnesses and the Biblical Doctrine of Salvation: Watchtower Denials—Part One**

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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 Whenever the Bible denies works salvation, they argue it must be referring to trying to earn one's salvation by outdated Mosaic works, not required Gospel works.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 Law<sup>34</sup> while asserting salvation by works of the Gospel,<sup>35</sup> Witnesses may claim to deny works salvation while in fact supporting it. Thus we find both a denial and affirmation of self-righteousness.<sup>36</sup>

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? (Galatians 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."<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> In his *Four Major Cults*, Anthony Hoekema agrees.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>**

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."<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>**

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.<sup>43</sup>**

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.<sup>44</sup>**

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.”<sup>45</sup>

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” (I 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.<sup>46</sup>**

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?<sup>47</sup>**

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.

## FOOTNOTES

Note: All Jehovah’s Witnesses texts are published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (WBTS, 25 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, NY 11021).

34. *Things in Which it Is Impossible for God to Lie* (1965), p. 396.

35. *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1671.

36. *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.

37. Walter Martin and Norman Klann, *Jehovah of the Watchtower* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1974), p. 71.

38. Edmond Gruss, *Apostles of Denial* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 90.

39. Hoekema, pp. 276-279.

40. Gruss, *Apostles of Denial*, pp. 142-143.

41. *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 33; cf. *Let God be True* (1946), p. 119, cited in Hoekema, p. 277.
42. *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1373.
43. *From Paradise Lost*, p. 236.
44. *Things in Which it Is Impossible for God to Lie*, p. 232.
45. *You May Survive*, pp. 38-39.
46. *Aid to Bible Understanding*, p. 1373.
47. Hoekema, pp. 278-279.