

# How Does The Watchtower Organization Differ from the Catholic Church?

By Tom Cabeen

Like many former Witnesses, I was once anti-ecclesial. After having been disappointed by and ejected from the Watchtower Society, I'd had it with religious organizations. I saw them all as essentially the same, merely human constructs, run by men who largely had no clue what God wanted. I saw their purpose to be to get their members to conform to the norms of the organization and to serve merely human ends.

In the early 1980s, I wrote *Does God Work Through an Organization?* In this essay, I argued from Scripture that God deals with individuals only, without any kind of organized group in between. Here is how I summed up:

Do not be misled by the authoritative claims of any man or group of men. Follow only Jesus Christ, who has "all authority in heaven and on earth." (Matt. 28:18) ... Fellowship with other true Christians will result in blessings both for you and for them. Christians are Christ's body, and no Christian wants to miss out on the pure joy of being an active part of that body, learning how to be ever more Christlike in word and deed. May God bless you in your efforts to follow the Lamb "wherever he goes." (Rev 14:4)

My article was popular among exiting Witnesses. It has doubtless influenced many of them. Strangely enough, with a few exceptions, I still agree with nearly all of what I wrote in that essay. God does work with individuals. But it is certainly not the whole story.

There are a number of reasons why people who have had a bad experience in a structured faith community might conclude that disaffiliation is the solution. I once did. But this is the story of how I learned to see the flaws in my perspective, and how I corrected my understanding of what the church of Jesus Christ actually is, and what it is not.

**Where is the church?** By the late 1980s, I had concluded that Christians were meant to worship in community. I could not reconcile the church described in the New Testament with the "singleton" approach to Christianity practiced by so many former Jehovah's Witnesses. So I had concluded that for some reason Jesus had allowed multiple Christian denominations to develop, each with peculiar beliefs and practices.

The "wheat and weed" parable is how many people explain the phenomenon: weeds had overrun the church. The wheat was scattered throughout the many different expressions of Christianity. This idea, the "invisible church theory" seemed to be the most practical way to reconcile the biblical description of the church with what I could actually observe.

Still, a church divided up into denominations is not the church of the New Testament. Did the church change its form sometime after the apostolic period? If so, how and why did that happen? I saw no way to resolve the problem, so I put it on the shelf and directed my energies toward learning to be a better Christian. I wasn't comfortable with Christians being divided up into denominations, but I had no clue what it meant or what to do about it.

About that time, a friend, David Bercot, published a *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. I got a copy and read many of the entries in it. I did not take it very seriously, for the beliefs held by the Christians of the first couple of centuries after Christ was different from that taught in my own church, which I believed to be genuine. At the time, I believed that the church had fallen into apostasy early in its history. What I read seemed to be a confirmation of that view. About

the same time I purchased another book by David Bercot: *Common Sense—a New Approach to Understanding Scripture*. I can say without reservation that reading that book marked a milestone in my Christian perspective. I had argued strongly that God needs no organization, that he can and does work only through individuals. But David's very clear reasoning convinced me of two things: First, that the apostolic Church had not become hopelessly corrupted. Second, that although the teachings of the apostles had indeed been passed down complete, not all of them were recorded in the New Testament. This was my introduction to Sacred Tradition. This possibility opened a large door for me.

Armed with that one piece of information, I set out to learn as much about the early church as possible. I began to purchase history books about the early church. I spent hundreds of dollars and began reading voraciously. I continued to read both secular historical works, and also I also a number of the writings of the earlier ante-Nicene Fathers. I began to rebuild my understanding of the Christian congregation from the ground up. As I read, I was thinking deeply about the meaning of the things I was reading. I was adjusting my whole paradigm about the church and Christian teachings. The historical facts were initially almost shocking to me, but in time, the picture they painted became undeniable. Rather than being preserved only in a book, I was beginning to see that the apostolic church itself, a living community of faith, served as the "container" for the Christian belief and practice.

What I learned about the origins of the Bible reinforced this conclusion. I had always used that book as my standard for Christian teaching and practice, and I of course believed that Christians had preserved it. But I came to see that as an over-simplified view. The early Christians did not simply preserve a book that had been complete and in use since the days of the apostles. The Church actually *produced* the Bible as we have it today, in a process that took hundreds of years.

First, the Church declared the Jewish writings to be authoritative. I hadn't realized that Gentiles in general mostly did not regard them as sacred writings, for the same reasons many persons today complain about them. Even St Augustin, in the fifth century, said that if it were not for the authority of the Church, he would never have accepted the Old Testament as inspired.

Second, the Church sorted out and compiled the Christian writings that would become the authoritative Christian canon all Christians accept today. By the end of the first century there were hundreds of Christian writings, all claiming to be teaching orthodoxy (right teaching). Only in the fourth century did the final process begin by which some writings were declared authoritatively to be "Scripture", and others rejected. One key factor in their selection was that they were used and referred to by Christian bishops and those regarded to be persons who conformed their lives to Christian teaching *as taught by the great universal, "catholic" church*.

This meant that no one had a Bible like we use today until the fifth century. Even then, these books were not available to the common man.<sup>1</sup> So the Bible could not have been the standard for orthodoxy for the first five hundred years of the Church's existence. I was beginning to see the immense corollaries of that fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Two books which describe the process quite eloquently are *Where We Got the Bible*, by Henry Graham, and *The Development of the New Testament Canon*, by Bruce Metzger.

I came to see that the preservation of Christianity and its sacred writings was accomplished within a community of faith *that remained in continuous existence* from the days of the apostles to now. Anyone who says that true Christians went out of existence, or underground, or one in which for any reason the Church became invisible after the apostolic period, has to be wrong, for *once orthodoxy is lost, no one can positively identify it ever again*. Here's why:

Let us assume that Jesus gave a deposit of truth to the apostles, and that the way they decided to preserve that deposit is to write it down in a book. But we find that the book can be understood and interpreted in a number of different ways, so that correct interpretation is needed to understand the book. Certainly the Christians living at the time the book was written understand it, for it was written in a context of that living faith community.

Now if, after the book is produced, that Christian community becomes so corrupt that it no longer contains the "key to the book" the deposit of faith, within itself, so that it no longer knows how to correctly interpret the book, on what possible basis can anyone from that point forward say "This is what the apostles taught?" The Christian faith will forever be a matter of interpretation, opinion and speculation. Rather than being "one", as Jesus and his Father are one, the church will be divided into hundreds of partially competing sects. Which is exactly what happened when some people decided to break with the Church, and began to teach that "all we need is the Bible."

If the Bible was meant to be the only guide to Christian belief and practice, it would have to be written in such a clear way that, even when translated into other languages, it would be self-interpreting. All Christians would believe and practice alike. There would not be so many different Christian denominations claiming to base their beliefs on the "plain truths" of Christian Scriptures. This clearly shows that the Bible is not self-interpreting.

So we have to expect, and look for, a sure-fire way to interpret the Bible. And because the original way was to do so in the context of a living faith community, such a community had to exist continuously, with living links across every generation, otherwise, as pointed out above, the apostolic faith would have been lost.

There is another reason for us to expect a continuous faith community. Christian history shows that the church has unquestionably changed since the first century. For the majority of the apostolic period, the church was Jewish enough that it was not even viewed as a separate religious tradition. In the New Testament, it is referred to as a sect of Judaism. Its members included priests and even Pharisees. The apostles worshiped in synagogues and at the Great Temple in Jerusalem. The many quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in the New Testament testify to the fact that those to whom those writings were addressed viewed the Hebrew Scriptures to be authoritative. This means that they were either Jews, proselytes, "god-fearing men" like Cornelius, favorable to Jewish thought, but not circumcised. These three classes are described by Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian. What they were *not* were ordinary pagan Gentiles who had become Christians.

Viewed from that perspective virtually no Christian church today truly "looks like" the church of the apostolic period. What does that mean? It means that all Christians have to accept the fact that the church has changed since it was founded. That being true, how can we know what the "real" church looks like? If one belongs to a visible, structured Christian faith community which

started later than the time of the apostles, one ought to have some way to know that it is a genuine expression of Christianity. Whose ideas are being taught? What was their origin? Did they come from Christ or are they merely someone's opinion about what Christ taught? Most importantly, how do you know?

In time, I came to see that an approach I could not take was to attempt to analyze the church based on my own understanding of Scripture. Because of the key role played by the Church in the development of the Bible, and the fact that the church of Athanasias' day, when the canon was defined, was significantly different from that of the apostles' day, how could I be sure I was not misunderstanding Scripture? The possibility of this was brought home to me when I began to seriously read the early Christian writings. Many times, I found Scripture applied in a completely different way than I had ever seen withing evangelical Protestantism. This also added weight to the idea that the Bible was "self-interpreting." That was simply not true.

I came to see the impossibility of what men like Lorraine Bottner, Jack Chick, Alexander Hislop and James White attempt to do, for I myself had attempted the same thing. One cannot discredit the Church based on one's private interpretation of a book she produced. That is like trying to prove that the Mormon Church is not a true expression of Mormonism using references from the Book of Mormon, or trying to prove that Islam is false with quotations from the Koran. However good their argumentation, however logical their exegesis may appear, at the end of the day, the best such an attempt can do is to saw off the branch on which the critic sits, for a person who "discredits" the church by this method simultaneously discredits the very book they use to discredit the church. Also, if such an approach were valid, would it not mean that any fellowship of believers with which the critic may be associated could also be discredited on the very same basis?

If we examine historical sources, the New Testament and the writings of the earliest Christians, we see described a faith community which conformed strictly to Jesus' teachings. It was led by the apostles, whom He taught intensively. But which also included many thousands of others who heard him teach and observed his earthly ministry. As St John said, the whole world couldn't contain the scrolls that would be produced if everything Jesus said and did was written down.

Jesus founded the Christian church just as certainly as Pastor Russell founded the Bible Students or Joseph Smith founded the Mormons. And either this united, holy, universal church, described in the first century as "his body", "the household of God" and "the pillar and foundation of the truth" remained in existence, and her teachings and practices were passed down in their fullness, generation after generation, or not. If she has remained in existence, we have very strong reason to have confidence in her teachings.

On the other hand, if that church got corrupted over time to a great enough extent that it was no longer the same church, that fact in itself would have profound implications. The religion founded by Mohammed has remained in existence, essentially unchanged for fourteen hundred years. If that didn't happen to the church Christ founded, it calls into question everything that church teaches, even Jesus' claim to be of divine origin.

For me, this represented the biggest paradigm shift. The historical evidence that the Catholic church is the same church founded by Jesus Christ, viewed from an historical perspective,

finally became overwhelming. For fifteen hundred years, no Christian even questioned that concept.

But my objective here is to compare the Catholic church with the Watchtower organization. Doing so will illuminate many things, I believe. We will compare them in four main areas: authority, teachings, structure and fruitage. We will examine similarities and differences in these areas. Then we will discuss “the rest of the story,” the best part of all.

**Authority:** I define this term to mean source, authorship or origin. What is the origin of the teachings? Where did they come from? And how do we know?

**What is the source of Watchtower authority?** Charles Russell came from Presbyterian and Congregationalist roots. He became fascinated by the calculations of a few Second Adventists, former disciples of William Miller. Miller had predicted that Christ’s parousia or second advent would occur in 1843. When it didn’t, Miller’s movement collapsed. But a few diehards stubbornly tried to find truth in Miller’s failed calculations. They guessing that Jesus actually did return, invisibly. One of these, George Storrs, became Russell’s mentor.

From the very beginning, Russell’s approach was essentially gnostic. His teachings had a strong element of insider information: ‘Christianity is known only by a few insiders.’ Russell built a following from among those whom he was able to convince.

Russell’s approach was in keeping with the religious climate in the second half of the nineteenth century in America, a time of explosive growth among the number of Christian sects. It was widely believed that lay persons without formal religious education could read and interpret the Bible correctly. Any sincere Bible reader was judged to have the capability to both derive sound doctrines and to reject false ones based only on personal reading and “common-sense” interpretation.<sup>2</sup> This perspective undoubtedly influenced Russell as he started on his path as a self-styled Bible interpreter, author and preacher.

Russell made no claim to having been taught by orthodox Christians. In fact, he rejected many orthodox teachings, in particular those dealing with the nature of God and the importance of the Eucharist to Christians.

Russell’s claim to authority was his own ability to recognize among the Second Adventist movement a *valid approach* (predicting when Christ would return), combined with his own conviction that could identify and correct the errors Miller had made. From the very beginning, ***the basis for his authority was his own ability to read and understand Scripture; it was based on the logic of his personal interpretations rather than either historical***

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<sup>2</sup> “The first third of the nineteenth century experienced a period of religious ferment, chaos and originality unmatched in American history. ... Wandering prophets appeared dramatically, and supremely heterodox religious movements gained followings. People veered from one church to another. Religious competitors wrangled unceasingly, traditional clergy and self-appointed preachers foremost in the fray. And new and passionate causes sprang up within the church’s walls around the issues of freemasonry, temperance, slavery, womens’ rights and health reform.” —*The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan O. Hatch, pg 64

**succession or direct revelation.** On this foundation the entire Watchtower belief system is built.

**Let us now examine the source of Catholic authority.** God's commands are of necessity revelations, and in to paraphrase the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman, "if we cannot know what the revelation is, there has been no revelation."

Jesus' apostles were taught by example and orally. Information was not transmitted primarily in writing in the first century. Jesus produced no written documents, but he instructed his apostles to pass His teachings on to the disciples they made. (Matt 28:19)

Later, the apostles and their companions wrote down some of Jesus' teachings. Nevertheless, even after writings were available, Christians did not prefer to learn Jesus' teachings from writings but to listen to people who had heard the Lord for themselves. Here is how Papias, a contemporary and associate of the apostle John, expressed it:

I did not, like the multitude, take pleasure in those who spoke much, but in those who taught the truth; nor in those who related strange commandments, but in those who rehearsed the commandments given by the Lord to faith, and proceeding from truth itself. If, then, any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, — what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples: which things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.— *Fragments of Papias*

Nearly all Christians have confidence that what Jesus taught his apostles was passed down infallibly in Scripture, even though the New Testament as we have it today was not compiled into an authoritative collection until the fourth century. But even when that happened, it did not mean that everyone immediately could obtain their own personal copy. This did not happen even after the Reformation. Affordable Bibles were not available to the masses until the *nineteenth century*, so the simple fact remains that the vast majority of Christian teaching over the past nineteen centuries has been passed down in exactly the same way Jesus taught the apostles, by example and orally. History is quite clear about this. In addition, we have strong evidence that one Christian community of faith has been in continuous existence since the first century. Thus it doesn't require much of a leap of faith to have confidence that Jesus' teachings have been contained within and passed down by that living community of faith since it was founded by Jesus Christ himself.

The record shows that the apostolic faith was not passed down primarily by lay Christians teaching one another, nor even by theologians, but by bishops or overseers of the church. According to St. Hippolytus, a second-century bishop, the very first generation of bishops included the twelve apostles and at least seventy men trained by Jesus himself. The first bishops were distributed throughout a large geographical area, creating a widely-distributed base of orthodoxy.

From the very beginning, *the very first generation of Christians*, knowledge and training was distributed, first among the apostles, then among all bishops. Rather than an increasing centralization of power, with the "official" version of Christianity being entrusted to fewer and fewer men with each succeeding generation, located in an ever-shrinking geographical area, the college of bishops increased in size with each passing generation as the church grew, and

bishops in every place were each instructed to teach his successors with great care, passing down Jesus' teachings *exactly as he had received them*, uncorrupted and complete. All of them were taught to trust in and rely on the Holy Spirit as well as the sacred Christian writings to guide both the teaching process and the preservation of orthodoxy, so that the faith could be handed down uncorrupted.

In addition to simply the promise of preserving the faith "once for all time delivered to the saints", Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would *guide* the apostles and their successors into all truth. The Church was not just to be a static container for the truth, she was to be a Teacher of truth. This meant that the church's understanding of the faith "once delivered" could and would develop with the passing of time. The church would not merely be a preserver of the faith, but it would also be a teacher, applying ancient truths to new situations that would develop over the centuries.

Things seen only dimly in the first century would be seen with ever-greater clarity. But unlike the Watchtower version of "new light", in which interpretations and the doctrines based on them change often and arbitrarily and may even reverse themselves, Catholic teachings *are always build upon clear, unchanging truths*. The development of a teaching never replaces an older teaching, nor does it conflict with it in any way.

An example of this process of development is the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity. Witnesses reject this doctrine because their founder, Russell did. Russell evaluated it using the same tools he used to predict Jesus' imminent return: private interpretation of Scripture, and his own human reasoning. But this method was not the basis for authority that drove the discussion of this doctrine at the fourth-century Council of Nicea. According to Henry R. Percival, M.A., D.D.:

In this, as in every other of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the question the Fathers considered was not what they supposed Holy Scripture might mean, nor what they, from a priori arguments, thought would be consistent with the mind of God, but something entirely different, to wit, *what they had received*. They understood their position to be that of witnesses, not that of exegetes. They recognized but one duty resting upon them in this respect —***to hand down to other faithful men that good thing the Church had received according to the command of God***. The first requirement was not learning, but honesty. The question they were called upon to answer was not, What do I think probable, or even certain, from Holy Scripture? but, What have I been taught, what has been entrusted to me to hand down to others? When the time came, in the Fourth Council, to examine the Tome of Pope St. Leo, the question was not whether it could be proved to the satisfaction of the assembled fathers from Holy Scripture, but whether it was the traditional faith of the Church. —*Historical Introduction to the proceedings of the First Ecumenical Council*

Every Catholic bishop appointed since the days of the apostles has been appointed by bishops who came before him and who trained him thoroughly in both belief and practice. A clear, unbroken line of succession exists for each Catholic bishop, right back to the apostles. Only once did just one individual appoint all official representatives of Christianity on earth, and that one was Jesus Christ.

This arrangement has provided and preserves a method of confirming orthodoxy that is completely independent of the Bible. Because the Bible is *not* self-interpreting, it has been interpreted in numerous ways by persons each claiming to have the "correct" understanding. One Church historian writes,

“[W]here in practice was [the] apostolic testimony or tradition to be found? . . . The most obvious answer was that the apostles had committed it orally to the Church, where it had been handed down from generation to generation. . . . Unlike the alleged secret tradition of the Gnostics, it was entirely public and open, having been entrusted by the apostles to their successors, and by these in turn to those who followed them, and was visible in the Church for all who cared to look for it”—*Early Christian Doctrines*, J. N. D. Kelly, pg 37.

Because Jesus’ true disciples have always believed that He is God’s divine Son, they also believe all his teachings to be divine revelation. No one who truly believed this would dare to alter this precious revelation in even the slightest detail. And, indeed, this attitude toward Christian teaching reigned supreme until the Reformation, when, for no other reason than to justify their separation from the ancient Church, men began to change the historic faith.<sup>3</sup> History clearly shows that once that process starts, it only accelerates with time.

**Content of the Message:** We have looked at the *origin* of the teachings of the Catholic church, and those of Russell. But what about the teachings themselves? What is their focus? What are they about?

**Let us first look at the Watchtower message:** Much of Russell’s unique “message” was based on two ideas: *First*, that God’s plan to repair the damage done in Eden involves some sort of cataclysmic destruction, to be survived by a small group of people in a special relationship with Him, followed by a sort of re-creation of Eden, a “new start.” *Second*, that by some means (they have tried prophecy, chronology, reading and interpreting current events in the light of novel views of Scripture) enlightened humans can predict with some accuracy when this great cataclysm will occur, despite the plain fact that Jesus himself said repeatedly that predicting the time of his return in glory would be impossible.

For Russell, perhaps one reason the “Gentile Times” concept and chronology was so important to his theology is because it provided a reason for which a religious community which came into existence in the nineteenth century might have a credible claim to be genuine. This approach provides a way to explain the apparently delay; why Jesus could receive “all authority on heaven and earth” in the first century, but (according to them) not begin his reign at that time. So it provided a convenient rationale for discrediting the historic church. According to Russell, the apostolic church fell into a great apostasy which lasted nearly nineteen centuries, until 1914. While the clock was still running on the “Gentile times,” according to Russell, God would not allow any descendant of David to rule his kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

Like all Christian fellowships that formed following the Reformation of the sixteenth century,

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<sup>3</sup> In the eleventh century, the Eastern and Western branches of the ancient Church went into schism over what most modern Christians would consider to be but the minutest detail: whether or not the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, or only from the Father only. This shows just how important preserving Christian doctrine was to believers, even a thousand years after the founding of the Church.

<sup>4</sup> A number of evangelical dispensationalist Protestant groups use a similar concept to explain how the end is to come in the near future. They do so with the “great parenthesis”, an interruption of the series of events described in prophetic passages such as Matthew 24 and Luke 17 and 21. But Witnesses are one of the few groups for which still John Aquila Brown’s 2,520 years is a central concept.



the Watchtower Society bears similarities to the ancient Catholic Church in both beliefs and practices. The original Protestants, (Lutherans and Anglicans), might claim to be the Catholic church re-formed; this also explained the many similarities between these fellowships and the Catholic Church.

However, fellowships like the Watchtower Society differ so much from the Catholic church in both belief and practice that they must take a different approach. One approach is to fabricate some model, based on a few biblical proof texts, that the original Christian church was just like them, but that it went completely out of existence at some point, only to be reconstituted in anticipation of the end of the world. In the meantime, they claim, it was replaced by the corrupt Catholic Church (which somehow remained remarkably stable; essentially unchanged since the second century.)

1914 is the only one of Russell's dates still used by Witnesses today. Russell predicted that "the time of the end" would *terminate* in 1914. When it didn't, his predictions were adjusted repeatedly. Now, 1914 is said to be the *beginning* of "the time of the end." During this process, references to Russell's predictions in Watchtower publications were carefully selected and presented so as to hide the fact that he was completely wrong in every respect about his central assumption, which is still the keystone of Watchtower theology. Current Watchtower chronology which supports the "Gentile Times" period is completely different from Russell's. It is based on a whole new series of interrelated and intricate interpretations of Scripture, *each of which must be true* or the entire basis for the sect collapses.

Very significantly, in all his extensive writings, in which he played the role of prophet, announcing God's plan for salvation, Russell almost completely ignored the Eucharist, the sacred meal which has formed the centerpiece of Christian salvation and worship since Jesus initiated it on the night prior to his death. The Eucharist is apparently not mentioned even once in Russell's *Studies in the Scriptures* series, the original foundation for Watchtower teaching.

Russell's focus was tied to current events. His interpretations contained detailed predictions of what would happen in the near future, so they produced a steady stream of failures, resulting in the need for constant reinterpretation. Witnesses have come to expect this, and they actually proudly call these adjustments "new light" (based on their interpretation of Proverbs 4:18). The Watchtower record is one of a nearly constant pattern of 1) making predictions, 2) failure of the predictions, 3) "hindsight" adjustment of the predictions to more closely conform to what actual events, and finally, 4) "track-covering"; misrepresenting what was originally predicted.

This approach has precluded any possibility of unchanging "orthodoxy" viewed as a body of truth, that is, teachings believed, taught and practiced, handed down unchanged from apostolic times. That concept is completely foreign to the Watchtower Society.

Because Watchtower "truth" changes almost so regularly, it requires constant review and reinforcement. This is why Witness meetings are not places where Christians gather to worship God in the traditional sense. Rather, they are largely indoctrination sessions where Watchtower interpretations are systematically taught and reviewed repeatedly through a

highly-controlled process of reading printed materials aloud in a group setting and answering prepared questions about the material to make sure it is understood as its authors intended.

As the people of the Watchtower developed a history of failed predictions, Russell's "type/antitype" approach to interpreting biblical prophecy was pressed into service to connect the bizarre behavior of Witnesses with fulfillment of prophecies given long ago. This had the effect of placing responsibility for the failed predictions on God's mysterious ways rather than the shortcomings of human interpreters.

Proselytizing for Witnesses has always begun with a good hook: the easy solution. For Witnesses, the "good news" of the kingdom is: *"God is going to destroy the whole world and replace it with a new one soon. You were fortunate enough to be born at just the right time in history to get in on the ground floor of that new world order. But you must join us and stick with us for that to happen."* For those who accept this fundamental idea, the uniqueness and novelty of Watchtower teachings serve to reinforce the very gnostic idea of a small group of insiders who know the "real" truth, in contrast to the vast majority of Christians, who are groping in "spiritual darkness".

Other unique doctrines such as rejecting the cross, refusal to salute any national flag, non-involvement in political or community activities, prohibitions against celebration of holidays or even birthdays and refusal to accept blood transfusions or organ transplants were added later. These reinforced the separatist perspective that has characterized Witnesses from the outset.

The origin, content and development of Watchtower teachings can be easily documented, since nearly all Watchtower publications, starting with Russell's own writings, are still extant.

**Now let's examine the content of the teachings of the Catholic Church:** The Catholic church divides its teachings into three broad areas: faith (what Christians believe, based on the Apostles' Creed), morals (how Christians behave, based on the Ten Commandments), and worship (how Christians relate to God, based on the Lord's Prayer).

The sacraments or mysteries of the Catholic faith have remained unchanged from the very beginning. Catholic worship practices revolve around the centrality of the sacred meal inaugurated by Jesus on the night before he died. The celebration of the Eucharist has remained in place, and has been celebrated essentially without change since it was handed down by the apostles.

This practice is so central because it is foundational to all the rest. The belief that bread and wine, when consecrated, become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, is central to the Catholic faith because this is the way in which the benefits of Christ's ransom, and His divine life, is shared with his disciples. All other teachings depend upon our relationship with Christ, and this relationship depends upon the Eucharist.

Catholic teachings are documented in her Catechism, which refers again and again both to Sacred Scripture and also to the writings of holy men and women from throughout her whole history, and the clarifications of Church teachings made by bishops, both individually (by popes) and in council.

The dogmas of the church, documented in writing, *never change or go out of date*. They never need revision to meet changing cultures or developing technology. On a daily basis, a Catholic might read material written by a living priest or bishop, or a saint who died fifteen centuries ago. Both will be equally valid and relevant.

**Structure:** I once believed that a community of faith could function with little or no structure or leadership. I have rejected that idea for two reasons: One is that the church described in the NT clearly had leaders. It had overseers, presbyters and deacons. The second is that groups of people always require leadership to accomplish anything. In comparing the structure of the WatchtowerS to the Catholic Church, we want to know: How is the fellowship governed? What power do its leaders have? From where do its leaders derive their power to govern?

**We will first examine the structure of the Watchtower Society:** For the first century of its existence, all real power rested totally with the Watchtower Society's president. One man or his agents controlled all Watchtower belief and practice. When significant changes or adjustments are made, initiative for them never comes from below, but always "from the top down." Calling their approach "theocratic," Watchtower publications teach that God is working through the man or men at the top. All significant decisions, including appointments of local leaders, is approved by headquarters.

The Watchtower Society's first generation were followers of CT Russell, persons who believed his predictions. Russell poured his family fortune into his religious activities, including a printery to publish his novel ideas in periodical and bound book form. "Colporteurs" (booksellers) sold his magazines and books from door to door. Gradually, independent small home studies of Russell's publications turned into a pseudo-religion composed of disciples of a modern-day "prophet."

Joseph F. Rutherford illegally seized control of the Watchtower organization after Russell's death in 1917 and made significant changes in both doctrine and practice. Under his administration, the headquarters organization slowly became much more controlling of their disciples in the field. Departments were set up to administer the work of publicizing the sect's unique views. Leaders for individual congregations had to be appointed by the headquarters organization rather than being elected locally as was done previously. The president of the Society had complete control over both theology and organizational policy.

Nathan H. Knorr, third Watchtower president, was groomed for the office and appointed by Rutherford prior to his death. Knorr was the last to have complete power over the organization. He delegated most of his authority over doctrine to his vice-president, Fred Franz. Watchtower publications began to be published anonymously, which tended to perpetuate and support the idea that God was directing "the organization" as a whole rather than any specific individual. As a result, more and more faith was transferred from Jesus Christ and directed toward the organization, and the idea of personal relationship with Jesus Christ declined.

In the 1970s, Knorr's declining health and an internal power struggle resulted in a redistribution of power to a small governing body in New York, USA. Local congregations of Witnesses are governed by a board of elders, also called overseers. Final approval of elders appointments still comes from the Watchtower Society's headquarters in each country.

Congregational activities are conducted within strict guidelines established by the headquarters organization. Every local meeting must be conducted according to Watchtower instructions.

Where did the power come from for the Watchtower? Russell's power came from his ownership of the copyrights of his writings, and the printery which printed them. Rutherford gained control over the Watchtower Society by illegal means, a sort of coup, completely ignoring Russell's last will and testament and eliminating those Russell chose as his successors. Rutherford chose Knorr as his successor. Knorr presided over the governing body meetings at which the current committee arrangement was determined and agreed upon. Shortly thereafter, he died of cancer. So the source of Watchtower authority was first money, then criminal activity, and finally, succession.

**What is the leadership structure of the Catholic Church?** The Catholic church has but three broad levels of leadership: deacons, priest/presbyters and bishops. Each bishop has full authority for his diocese. The bishop of Rome is known as the Pope. He provides a center of unity by resolving disputes, making authoritative statements of orthodoxy when heresy arises, and deciding cases where individual bishops cannot agree on some issue that could divide the church. But all authority is not invested in the pope. Not by any means.

Most people are surprised to learn that the Pope has no authority to interpret Scripture according to his own opinion or to change church practices. In this sense, the Watchtower Governing Body, or just about any average Protestant minister has far more freedom to teach his own ideas than does the pope, who is duty bound to keep traditions and teachings unchanged. The bishop of Rome does not have the authority to change any part of orthodox teaching. The most he can do is to clarify some teaching the roots of which stretch back to the apostolic era. He cannot just change things to suit his mood or his personal theology. Even changes in church practice (like deciding to have masses said in the vernacular rather than Latin) are normally done only in council with other bishops.

Instead of being invested in one man, apostolic church authority (remember that the word means "authorship" or origin) has been distributed among her bishops. Since apostolic times, bishops have been trained about the importance of maintaining or preserving the deposit of faith handed down to them by those who came before them, in an unbroken line back to the apostles. (There are currently about 5,000 living Catholic bishops.) There is no question of trying to please some human "boss" or manager, since each bishop, when ordained, receives full authority to govern from Jesus Christ. This means that the bishop ultimately does not have to answer to anyone but Christ. He is not a sort of "vice-president" to a "CEO" pope.

**The Church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.** At the end of the day, I had to face this fact: Either the structured faith community described in Scripture took on a *completely different form* shortly after the death of the apostles, or it was passed down intact from generation to generation, growing and developing.

**Fruitage:** If the church was established by a holy God, we ought to expect that it would be holy, and that a holy church would produce holy people. There ought to be a distinct link between the teachings of that church and the behavior of those who believe and practice them

devotedly. Teachings which originate from God ought to have a healing, beneficial, salvific effect, not only on those who practice them, but on the whole of any human society in which they are practiced. So let us look at fruitage. What effect have the teachings and practices of the Watchtower Society had compared with those of the Catholic Church, both on those who believe and practice them, and on the world at large?

**Let us start by looking at the fruitage produced by Watchtower teachings:**

**A fundamental Watchtower teaching: The imminent *parousia*.** Included in this view is the idea that, rather than renewing and regenerating this world, working through his church, **God's plan is to simply destroy all evil people and start over.** What behavior does this teaching produce in those who believe it?

If God will soon destroy this old world and replace it with a new one, **time spent improving this one is wasted and counterproductive**; it would be better spent publicizing the "truth" that Christ is about to return. Thus, very devoted Witnesses devote many hours to this activity. On the same basis, Witnesses are discouraged or prohibited from involvement in community affairs or politics.

Watchtower prohibitions against involvement in community affairs, politics, voting, saluting the flag, virtually **assure that no JW will ever participate in improving things in his or her community.** All available time and energy is directed toward distributing Watchtower literature, which quickly goes out of date due to ever-changing interpretations. This creates an endless need for new, current publications to replace out-of-date ones, a publisher's dream come true.

A second Watchtower claim is that **God did not protect the apostolic deposit of truth, so the church became hopelessly corrupt as soon as they died.** This, in combination with the frequency of failed Watchtower predictions, followed by their chronic habit for blaming God for their failed predictions, works effectively to break down faith in religious leaders, and ultimately in God. Perhaps this is why so many of those who leave the Watchtower Society become either agnostics or atheists.

Since Watchtower teaching has a certain internal logic, many traditional Christians, even poorly-catechized Catholics, fall victim to the Watchtower "hook" or initial message: **'You were lucky enough to be born at just the right time to see Christ's second coming. Join us and get in on the ground floor of a brand new order.'**

At the very least, this approach directs attention away from Christ and his apostles and toward Watchtower leaders or the anonymous "organization". One's relationship to God is reframed in terms of organizational position or extent of cooperation rather than personal relationship, informed and guided by unchanging teachings.

Witnesses have spent untold billions of hours distributing Watchtower literature. Most of the predictions and teachings they publicized have proven false, making all that effort largely a waste of time, not unlike digging holes and filling them up again.

Another unique Watchtower teaching is their **"two-class" theology**, based on a novel

interpretation of only two or three passages of Scripture (John 10 and Rev 7 and 14). Made up by Joseph Rutherford in the mid-1930s, this theology has been used to legitimize the “theocratic” Watchtower control structure. An ever-shrinking group of “elite” Witnesses are presented as a “channel” through whom God’s ever-changing messages are delivered to the rest of His people.

According to this teaching, only those who profess to be of the “anointed” class would be preparing articles for publication. However, in actual fact, the vast majority of Watchtower theological writings have been produced by persons who do not claim to be members of that elite class. The actual Watchtower leadership structure does not mirror their unique two-class theology. Rather, it is completely pragmatic. This testifies eloquently to the fact that Watchtower leaders do not believe their own teachings. But the elitism doesn’t stop there.

**Russell’s gnostic approach teaches that only a very small group has “the truth”.**

Witnesses as a group, believe that they will form the core of a new world order. Thus they expect to believe and act differently from the “misled” members of the main body of Christians. This divisive perspective creates a permanent barrier between Witnesses and members of all other Christian fellowships. It also opens the door to bizarre and very unorthodox teachings and practices.

Watchtower prohibitions against participating in holidays or commemorations, their encouragement of artificial birth control, blackmail and shunning, all work against building strong family ties. Watchtower doctrines, when followed strictly, **tend to divide families** rather than bring them together in loving unity.

The Watchtower position **condemns higher education**. This promotes ignorance and makes its loyal members ever more reliant on Watchtower publications and meetings for instruction and information about nearly every key life issue.

The Watchtower prohibition against giving or taking **blood transfusions** puts the need for rule-keeping above the sacredness of life. Obedience to Watchtower rules makes those who obey to make a heavy investment in the correctness of Watchtower interpretation. When rules later change, those who have sacrificed loved ones feel deeply betrayed. Often this is key factor in ex-JWs suspicion of churches and their leaders.

**What about Catholic fruitage?:** There is little question that Christianity as expressed and practiced by the Catholic Church has had a huge impact on Western civilization. The apostles’ obedience to Jesus’ command to preach initially produced large-scale conversions among first-century Jews and those who associated with Jews. Around the middle of the first century, Christians began to spread Jesus’ teachings increasingly to non-Jews (Gentiles), not just in the Middle East, but also in Europe, Asia and Africa. There is evidence that the Gospel was preached as far away as England and Japan while the apostles were still living. In spite of heavy persecution and many executions, historians like Phillip Shaff estimate that about one million Christians were living at the end of the first century. By the end of the third century, about 10 percent of the Roman world were Christians (perhaps totaling about 10 million Christians). Yet their influence was both great and good, in the midst of the declining pagan Roman civilization.

Probably most modern Westerners have little or no idea about how many concepts they take for granted originated with Jesus Christ and were spread throughout the world through his disciples down through the centuries. In every important area of civilized society, Christian teachings, preserved and handed down by the Catholic Church, have changed the face of Western civilization for the better. As the pagan world declined, incapable of being perpetuated partly due to the weakness of pagan belief systems, Christian teachings and practices spread.<sup>5</sup>

Distinctly Catholic doctrines, preached from the very beginning, start with recognition of man's sinfulness and need for redemption, and how that redemption was accomplished by Jesus Christ working through his church. The corollaries of His message include: respect for the sacredness of life and the created order, the recognition of all humans, while being members of God's family, are in a state of sin, thus we all have a responsibility to imitate God in showing love and mercy, caring for the sick and aged, for the unborn and young, and even for animals. Christian teachings transformed the world wherever they were preached and practiced.

**Hospitals:** Monks and nuns have taken the lead in tending the sick, founding the first hospitals in Europe.

**University Education:** In the middle Ages, the church showed consistent interest in the preservation and cultivation of knowledge. Even today, Catholic educational institutions form a major part of the education of many countries in which the church operates. Rather than appeal only to ecclesiastical authority to resolve questions about life, she created the age of Scholasticism, which taught logic and clear thinking.

**International Law's** foundations came from discussions among Catholic theologians which arose during the age of exploration and colonization about how to interact with indigenous people.

**Science and discovery:** Monks both preserved ancient manuscripts by copying them, and learned their content. They kept literacy alive during a time when pagan conquerors were bent on destroying much of what remained of classical culture and learning. Monks laid the groundwork for modern discovery, research and the scientific method.

**Art & Architecture:** The church rejected Eastern and Muslim iconoclasm, and by so doing encouraged expressions of art and architecture by a correct understanding of the relationship between creation and Creator.

**Charity:** Catholic relief organizations are typically second only to the government of any given country when it comes to the amount of time, effort and money expended in performing services which directly benefit individuals in need.

**Economics:** Recently, historians are crediting scholastics of the High Middle Ages for laying the groundwork for modern economics.

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<sup>5</sup> See *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, Thomas E. Woods

All these advances must be credited, not merely to an abstract “Christianity”, expressed as a variety of beliefs and practices which differed down through the centuries, but to Christ’s teachings *as preserved and practiced consistently within the institution known today as the Roman Catholic Church*.

Negative confirmation of this assertion is seen when we see the record left by the increasingly fragmented forms of Christianity which began after the Reformation (more correctly, the Revolt) of the sixteenth century. Growth of the idea that each individual could read and correctly interpret sacred writings privately, combined with guidance from self-appointed preachers and other clergy, has been a source of growing differences in belief and practice. These have produced ever-increasing division rather than growing unity and cooperation.

This illustrates an important principle: the unity for which our Lord prayed on the night before he was crucified does not result from willingness to tolerate dissimilar perspectives and philosophies. Only faithful adherence to the teachings and practices taught as divine revelation and protected by a living body of bishops in apostolic succession, could and did do this for sixteen centuries prior to the Reformation, and continues to do so in the great Catholic Church.

**A vision of glory: I finally “see” the church in all its fullness:** It was only when I began to really comprehend the ancient catholic perspective of the church that all the disparate pieces fell into place. All the various descriptions of the church in Scripture fit together to paint a marvelous picture.

**The Church as the means of redemption:** Jesus, starting with twelve disciples, began a project which would remake the world. Jesus did not preach about a mass destruction followed by a new world order inhabited by a tiny group of His followers. Jesus was to begin his active reign *in the midst of his enemies*, exactly as prophesied. His followers were to grow in number and, through them acting in obedience to Jesus’ commands, His influence would grow among all peoples on earth.

Jesus was the new Adam; Mary the new Eve. They become the pattern of behavior, attitude and action for Christians, who are their children, the new creation. The work they do is real, not theoretical or positional. It accomplished real, ontological change. Souls were cleansed and renewed, sins forgiven, divinity shared. Jesus really did free his people from sin! The Church reflects an accurate picture of reality in all its fullness, spirit and flesh, heaven, earth, purgatory and hell, and given specific information as to what is important and what is not, where to exert ourselves, what is possible and what is not.

**The Church as the Body of Christ:** The Eucharist is the celebration, the divinely-established practice by which Jesus disciples are joined to their Lord, and made part of his mystical body. By sharing his divine life and nature with them, they are made new again, empowered to become holy men and women, saints. *This is the key concept of the mystery of reconciliation and salvation*. Jesus is the Bread from heaven, the True Manna, and His Church is the House of Bread (Bethlehem).

**The Church as the Kingdom of God:** There was no waiting after Christ completed his earthly



ministry for him to established his church, his realm or kingdom. He immediately began reigning, and his church began taking her part in Jesus' work of redemption. Centered in heaven, extending through purgatory and throughout earth as the church militant, suffering, triumphant, the Church is a living, growing thing.

**The Church as Pillar and Ground of Truth:** Jesus was Truth personified. Everything he did and said revealed what was real, actual, what exists. He taught his disciples and upon them built a world-wide family, a kingdom of priests, a royal nation. This family of God has preserved, taught, illuminated and live the truth lived and taught by Jesus to the apostles and delivered once and for all to the saints. And because the Church is the literal body of Christ, she cannot tell lies, for Christ cannot tell lies.

**The Church as the New Jerusalem:** The church fulfills all the expectations of ancient Israel, the earthly descendants of Abraham. Since the coming of Jesus, the hope to become part of Spiritual Israel, circumcised in heart rather than flesh, has given rich fulfillment to all the promises made to Israel, in ways never imagined by Moses or the Prophets.

**The Church as a Sacrament:** Jesus took on human flesh, and thus became our relative, our brother, a part of the physical order. His physical flesh was broken, His physical blood shed to accomplish our salvation. They became the means by which grace was shed upon mankind. His church is also His body, so it, too, is mysteriously sacramental, serving as a conduit of grace to his people.

## Conclusion

Despite some similarities between the Watchtower Society and the Catholic Church, in every area which ought to be important to a Christian who is seeking the fullest and most genuine expression of Christianity, the credentials of the Catholic church stand up to vigorous intellectual, historical and logical scrutiny. The closer one looks, the better they stand up. They have produced in those who believe in and try to live them many thousands of holy men and women, saints by any human measure, and martyrs who were gladly willing to die for them.

The Watchtower Society, when subjected to the same kind of scrutiny, reveals that it is based on a few concepts borrowed from the Catholic church, supplemented by the private interpretations of a handful of men at the helm of the organization; concepts which have proven to fail all the tests of authenticity, antiquity, and truthfulness. They are illogical, internally inconsistent and subject to change. Rather than producing healthy fruitage in those who believe in and try to live by them, they inhibit familial and phillial love, while demanding great personal sacrifice on the part of their adherents.