

February 25, 2019

To: The elders of Redwood Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, Napa, CA

Dear Friends,

On Tuesday, January 29, 2019, you asked me to share with you my motives for visiting your kingdom hall. I'm afraid there's no quick answer to that question, so please bear with me as I attempt to answer you as thoroughly as I can.

I have a long-time Jehovah's Witness friend, and when I moved back to this area, he and I became re-acquainted and met a number of times to study the Bible together. The Watchtower teachings he shared with me prompted me to research on my own, so that I could (1) verify whether what he was telling me was biblically accurate (following the practice of the Bereans), and (2) so I could fully understand the Watchtower's doctrine and avoid misrepresenting Jehovah's Witnesses to anybody else, and (3) verify whether the accusations I was hearing from sources outside the Watchtower had any validity. (Regarding #3, I have found that people often accuse Jehovah's Witnesses of beliefs and practices based on rumor and speculation, without verifying the validity of those claims from Watchtower sources.) Not only did I research Watchtower publications and their website (jw.org), but I also attended kingdom hall talks and conventions to get a feel for the Jehovah's Witness culture in live settings, with real people.

When I moved from "upvalley" to Napa, I happened to meet a Jehovah's Witness at his workplace (Safeway), who mentioned that he attended the Redwood congregation. I surprised him by showing up one evening, and it was there that I met a number of other members, quickly becoming quite fond of them. As part of my ongoing research, I would ask the members a few of my most challenging questions, thinking they would have sufficient accurate knowledge, but to my surprise they couldn't give me adequate answers. Practicing what I saw in the booklet *What Does the Bible Really Teach*, I kept asking, like the example of the little child in the beginning of the book. I then began to take my questions to the elders, and even a visiting circuit overseer. To my surprise, they weren't able to answer my questions either.

Here I pause in my account to remind you of my background. I was raised in protestant, evangelical churches (Presbyterian, Baptist, Assemblies of God, Non-denominational, etc.), and so was steeped in the traditional doctrines common to those churches. I was taught all the arguments in support of (1) salvation by grace through faith, apart from works (see Ephesians 2:8-9), (2) the importance of personal regeneration (or salvation) by means of the ransom sacrifice of Jesus (First Corinthians 6:11), (3) the one hope and common destiny of all believers (Ephesians 4:4), (4) the monotheistic, triune nature of God (Second Corinthians 13:14), (5) and the omnipresence and omniscience of God (Psalm 139:7-12), among others. Like Agrippa asking Paul, "Can you persuade me in such a short time?" (Acts 26:28), I could ask the same of

Jehovah's Witnesses. You can imagine how the teachings of the Watchtower would be as foreign to me as to Paul's listeners in Athens (Acts 17:18-21). Unless you, too, came from living a lifetime in solid, Bible-teaching churches, you cannot imagine how much time and effort it would take to convince someone of the falsehood of their ingrained beliefs, and the acceptance of a different Jesus and a different gospel.

As the Watchtower teachings bumped up against my previous studies of the Bible, there were several teachings that were particularly concerning to me. They were (and still are):

1. The two-class system, resulting in the "great crowd" believers being denied many benefits spelled out in the New Testament, including (but not limited to) being adopted as sons (Romans 8:15), being citizens of the kingdom, being sealed with the Holy Spirit, being Abraham's seed, being declared righteous, being priests of God, and being Heirs of Jesus.
2. The "great crowd" being excluded from the New Covenant, resulting in the logical and biblical alternative of being "separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12).
3. The widespread absence among members of the assurance of eternal life, despite the promise found at First John 5:13 and other places.
4. The exclusion of the "great crowd" from the privilege of having Jesus as their mediator, rendering null and void the practice of praying to Jehovah "in Jesus' name" and claiming him as one's ransom sacrifice.
5. The exclusion of the "great crowd" from participating in the Memorial, despite the fact that they are likened to the "foreign residents" who were indeed allowed to participate fully in all the festivals and feasts, including the Passover (which was fulfilled in the Lord's evening meal). (See Exodus 12:48 and Numbers 9:14.) Indeed, I found the practice of passing the bread and wine without eating and drinking to be quite puzzling; if we're only allowed to observe, then the anointed alone should be touching the vessels, while the rest of us look on. That is why I stood aside and did not participate in the passing of the vessels; to handle them would have violated my conscience.

These doctrines and practices, among others, are of great concern to me, not only as an outsider and potential convert, but also as a concerned friend of current Jehovah's Witnesses whom I know and love. Occasionally I will find an "old school" JW, one who is still willing to discuss and dialogue concerning these topics and others. Within the last few years, though, I have found a shift in the directives of the Watchtower and the resulting mindset of the current members. Where I used to find willingness to dialogue, I now find knee-jerk reactions of defensiveness, accompanied by either passive-aggressive

disengagement from conversation, or more actively aggressive labeling, name-calling, and accusations of “questioning the slave.” (Imagine my surprise when I encountered such a reaction when I questioned the existence of a *donkey* not mentioned in the biblical story of Mary and Joseph’s travels, as if I were questioning a major doctrine!)

My immediate reaction, which I have a difficult time tempering with gentleness, is “Of course I’m questioning the slave!” That is exactly what the Bereans did. And in another account, Paul, who at the time was likely the equivalent of a modern circuit overseer (although not commissioned by the leaders in Jerusalem, but by the local congregation in Antioch), “opposed Peter” (one of the Jerusalem leaders) “to his face,” doing so publically (read his account in Galatians 1 and 2). How would such behavior be received in today’s organization?

You asked me to reveal my motives. I hope you have discerned them from the above account. But for clarity’s sake, here they are:

- (1) One motive of mine is that I simply enjoy discussing the Bible, a value I found I had in common with Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- (2) Another motive is to learn all I can about what Watchtower teaches, because I want to learn more about *all* religions, and how their teachings compare with what is taught in the Bible.
- (3) Another motive is to dialogue with pleasant people who claim to have “the truth,” and who should thus have nothing to fear from someone who presents a different opinion. I dialogue with atheists, and am not threatened, even when they ask me tough questions that I cannot answer. A simple admission that “I don’t know,” with a promise to research further and get back to them, is all that is needed. I find that the resulting research strengthens my faith, rather than threatening it. The result is that I keep an atheist friend, who one day may be persuaded to become a theist.
- (4) While my unanswered questions, and the strange reactions I have experienced when I ask them, have so far kept me from seriously considering my becoming a Jehovah’s Witness, my hope is that change will be coming in the form of “new light” that will encourage dialogue “with a mild temper and deep respect” (First Peter 3:15). Therefore I have not given up on attending the kingdom hall. One of my motives in attending is to continue to provide Jehovah’s Witnesses with opportunities to convince me that what they’re teaching is indeed the truth as found in scripture.

If you believe that I have some kind of sinister motive, such as enticing members of the congregation away from the Watchtower, your fear is unfounded. I have only shared with the members what I find in scripture. Examples include (1) that First John 5:1 says that everyone believing that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, or (2) that John 1:12 says that all who

receive Jesus are given the right to become his sons, or (3) that First Timothy 2:5 says that Jesus is the mediator for all who believe. I only encourage those I share with to draw their own conclusions; how they respond to scripture that seems to contradict what Watchtower teaches is up to them. Which leads me to my motive number 5:

(5) My motive is always to strengthen my friends' faith and trust in scripture and its ultimate author, Jehovah. Whether one's organization to which they are loyal (whether Catholic, Baptist, Watchtower, Mormon, Unitarian, Adventist, etc.) agrees with or contradicts the Bible, is beyond my control, and therefore far from my ultimate concern. My motive is never to draw anyone away from anything, but only toward scripture and the God who authored it.

Thank you, elders, for this opportunity to express myself to you in a way more complete than in face-to-face conversation. Having shared with you not only my intentions, but also my heart behind them, I'm sure you will see fit to invite me back to the meetings. Since I have delivered on my promise to spell out my motives and concerns, I ask that you would be willing to reply, stating in writing your reasons for disallowing me from attending the meetings at the Redwood congregation kingdom hall, as well as all others on the property shared by the same.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." (Second Corinthians 13:14)

Sincerely in Christ,

Brian Pope