



That Hideous Strength: The Watchtower Society

The Personal Testimony of: Don Nelson

The year was 1951. I was a math major at U.C. Berkeley, suffering from what we would now call culture shock. My high school had been small and cozy; the campus at U.C Berkeley, immense and disorienting. Most unsettling of all was the required course in Military Science. The professor was a veteran of the Korean War, and he enthusiastically lectured the class on the “art” of war.

Meanwhile, back at home, my brother Lee (a recent convert to Jehovah’s Witnesses) was showing me Bible verses such as Micah’s prophecy that “the nations would learn war no more and they would beat swords into plowshares.” (Micah 4:3) It sounded good to me. Lee described an absolutely paradisiac “new earth wherein righteousness would dwell” (2 Peter 3:13), a breathtaking, green-leafy paradise where there would be no death, sorrow or pain. We could live forever on this rejuvenated earth, if only we were *faithful* Jehovah’s Witnesses – attending meetings and going door-to-door with the message of the kingdom.

Within a month, I dropped out of school and

plunged into the whirligig of Witness activity. Everything the Jehovah’s Witnesses (JWs) told me could be “verified” in the Word of God, they said. They spouted endless lists of “proof texts” on every conceivable subject. Of course, when the Witnesses taught me, they were “writing on a blank slate,” so to speak. I knew nothing of the Scriptures before I met them, and suddenly in a few short weeks, I knew everything about the Bible (so I thought.)

The first day I went witnessing door to door, I “defeated” two Baptists, a Lutheran and three Presbyterians in dialectic combat! I was genuinely shocked by the biblical illiteracy of most Christians.

As a Jehovah’s Witness, I no longer had to worry about anything. The Watchtower Society had all the answers. She was our “mother.” It seemed that the carefree days of childhood had returned. I had been introduced to a cozy, comfortable world of serious, sincere, diligent workers for the kingdom cause.

I found that it was impossible to be an indifferent JW. After all, you always carry in your pocket or purse a card stating that you will not, under any circumstances, accept a blood transfusion. This seemed to be yet another proof of the unshakable and noble faith of the JWs. (Now I understand that every successful cult requires its members to surrender their reason to the cult authority structure. This is part of the hideous strength of the Watchtower Society.)

Baptism followed in 1952. Then the full-time pioneer ministry. I was a very popular member of the local Kingdom Hall. It was easy to go to prison in 1953 for refusing to bear arms. Early Christians didn’t go to war; neither did true Christians today, we were taught. And of course, one had to accept everything one was taught, or one would be disfellowshipped. No Witness is allowed to have any opinion other than that expressed in the Watchtower publications, for these publications were considered Jehovah’s

sole "channel of communication" for His people in the last days.

It was in 1955 at the Watchtower Bible School of Gilead that I experienced the first minor tremors of doubt. By this time the Watchtower Society had finished its "New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures" – purportedly the finest, truest, most scholarly translation ever made. But it was so crude, so wooden, that it was almost unreadable. The beautiful 23rd Psalm was rendered in part, "You arrange before me a table in front of those showing hostility to me. With oil you have greased my head." Now, while I knew nothing of the Bible before I met the Witnesses, I did know some English and I cringed at the mangling of this Hebrew poetry.

At Gilead I met many of the inner circle – the "governing body" of JWs – and also the principal translators of the Watchtower Bible. None of these knew Greek or Hebrew! No wonder they opted for anonymity. These "scholars" of the Watchtower knew no more Greek than I did. This made me a bit uneasy.

In all the religious palaver above, I had not met Christ, nor dealt with personal sin except in the scrub-the-outside-of-the-cup, legalistic sense. My head swam with proof texts. Moreover, I had learned the extra-biblical language of the Society: "Kingdom Hall," "Publisher," "the Heavenly Class," "The Other Sheep," "the organization," and so forth. I had become thoroughly indoctrinated in JW theology.

I want to emphasize that despite my minor doubts, I was for the most part happy during those years. By 1957, I had become a circuit overseer in the mission field of Brazil. I was learning a new language (Portuguese), traveling, and meeting pleasant people who liked me. I had supervision of ten congregations of JWs, and thus a certain prominence. I was having an adventure, the time of my life, never dreaming that I was about to meet the Living God – in the person of His Son.

During the long train rides between the cities in my circuit, I would read the New Testament – not a Watchtower New Testament (which was not yet available in Portuguese), but standard Protestant versions. What I found, or rather what I was shown by the Holy Spirit, was that the New Testament is a Jesus book. I was flabbergasted. Everywhere I looked I saw Jesus. Indeed, "all knowledge and wisdom were hid in Him," (Colossians 2:3), and "He held all things together with the word of His power."

At night I would look up at the vast galaxies and wonder how a mere angel, created slightly higher than man, could hold these heavenly bodies in orbit. Jesus was the object of all manner of extravagant worship. "My Lord and my God," said Thomas. (John 20:28) A comparison of chapters 4 and 5 in the Book of Revelation portrays the angels giving glory, honor and praise to both the Father *and* the Son.

It was obvious as I read Paul's letters that Jesus was the whole message he preached. He "preached Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 1:23) Now, I didn't know that Jesus was God yet, but I became so enamored and enthusiastic about Him that I actually began to preach Him in the Kingdom Halls that I visited. A positively mind-boggling thing soon happened. The JWs, my brothers and friends, couldn't understand what I was talking about. They became alarmed. "Don't you love Jehovah?" They asked mournfully. It was as though they imagined some rivalry or controversy between the Father and the Son.

My superior in the itinerant ministry said, "Don, your Portuguese is very good. You speak clearly, but there's something strange about your sermons." It was Jesus. I was preaching the Lord and the Witnesses were baffled, puzzled. It was as though a veil were blinding them to the glory of Christ. Then I found the text that cleared up the mystery – 2 Corinthians 4:4 – "The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of the Christ, who is the image of God." This

verse had always been a favorite of mine. Now I *understood* it. I had turned to Christ, simply by reading His Word with an open mind, and the “veil had been removed from my eyes.”

Time would fail me if I attempted to relate the story of my ongoing conflict with the JW District Overseers, Branch and Zone Overseers, and innumerable missionaries over the person of Jesus Christ. The struggle was unbearable. Finally, I left the mission field, despondent and confused, yet joyful and at peace.

I spoke at length with Fred Franz, the current president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, about the person of Jesus Christ. After three hours of heated discussion – which focused on *virtually dozens* of Scripture verses relating to Christ – he warned: “Be careful. This kind of thinking may lead you to a belief in the Trinity.”

From 1959 to 1972, I talked to hundreds of JWs about the Lord. JW elders continued to meet with me during this time and tried to discover apostate tendencies in me. This was a time of struggle for me.

A turning point came when two young Witnesses named Peter Hunson and Jerry Mercer met with me, and after hours of debate and exchange, saw the light. They saw the gospel of the glory of Christ. And within a year, some thirty *additional* JWs were meeting for Bible study in my home. How the Holy Spirit was active in our midst. The elders told us to “shut up about Christ,” but the Word was burning in our hearts and we could not contain the joy of knowing Jesus Christ.

In 1974, the year before the end of the world according to Watchtower chronology, about twenty of us were excommunicated from the Watchtower Society for “apostasy.” We refused to “shut up about Christ.” The Good Lord has granted us such ecstasy (and I use that word carefully) since then.

Of course, we found out – now that we could attend

Christian churches and read Christian literature, such as Dr. Walter Martin’s excellent books – that there was a lot more error in Watchtower theology than a misunderstanding of the person of Jesus Christ. It seems to all of us who have escaped from that hideous Watchtower strength that there is scarcely anything salvageable in their entire system of doctrine.

We’ve had to start from square one and build true doctrine on that blessed and only true foundation, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that my wife and I have lost family and those we thought were our friends. But we say with the beloved apostle Paul: “Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3:7)

All is well. All is well with our souls. Praise Him whose “divine power is sufficient for the destruction of fortresses and strongholds and speculations,” yes, every hideous cultic strength “raised up against the knowledge of God.” (2 Corinthians 10:4,5)

witnessforjesus.com is especially grateful to Don Nelson for sharing his life and testimony with us. We hope this witness to the love of Jesus will bear fruit in your heart, so that you “call on the Lord and be saved.” (Romans 10:13)

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