

piously praise. (John 13:5) We have-like it are not three million Jehovah's. Witnesses who are also watching us. We can't afford to let the satanic. forces of sectarianism back into our lives and thinking fear that some of us may have changed our interpretations of Scripture without changing our religion. Cult bashing becomes a cult and the false teachers go on their merry way, devouring the sheep as they go. It is not your understanding of the nature of Christ or his Father

that counts for your salvation. It is not your particular interpretation of difficult Scriptural passages which decides your eternal destiny. It is, instead, your absolute trust and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and your obedience to him that determines whether or not you belong to him. (Matt.7:21-23) If everybody is willing to lay down their swords, I know where we can pick up some crosses. □

The Problem of Moving Forward by Former Jehovah's Witnesses

(Number 40. Originally published November, 1987)

Those leaving the Watchtower religious system suddenly find themselves in a strange new world~ religiously speaking. If they reach out to explore new possibilities of fellowship and community they are confronted with doctrinal concepts and liturgy quite foreign to what they accepted and experienced as Jehovah's Witnesses. It is a disheartening experience for many. The loss of a rigid religious framework and sense of belonging is often coupled with the breakdown of family and social ties. The emotional shock alone is extremely difficult to deal with. It is at this very point in time that one needs the comfort and support of others-especially spiritual brothers and sisters. But reaching out for that support and comfort is not possible for many and they tend to remain emotionally and religiously where they are in a sort of "no-man's land." Although they have broken away from a form of religious tyranny they still carry considerable "baggage." The "baggage" consists of preconceptions formed during years of sectarian indoctrination. During their Watchtower experience they surrendered (willingly or unwillingly) the ability as well as the responsibility to reason and think as an individual. The end product is a person incapable of functioning as a mature Christian. Having emerged from a religious system that, of necessity, must hold its people in a perpetual state of infancy they are ill-equipped to deal with matters requiring spiritual maturity and balance. (Hebrews 5: 13, 14)

In view of the above I am reminded of something that appeared in the local newspaper some weeks ago. There was a picture of a little boy about to board a school bus for his very first sojourn into public school. His little head was bowed sadly and his mother was tenderly trying to reassure him that everything would be okay. The story went on to say that the mother finally conceded to ride the school bus with him that first day. I am sure we can all relate to that little boy's fears and his mother's understanding concern. We've

all been there one way or another. We are discomfited and often fearful of that which is overwhelmingly new and strange. The little child's introduction to kindergarten represented a whole new social experience foreign to what he or she had known and very frightening. Gone forever is that safe, private and comfortable world dominated by mom and dad.

The comparison is an appropriate one, I believe, for many of us who have left the Watchtower Society and are trying to find our way religiously and spiritually. As adults we can appreciate that in the example of the little boy and his fears over the first day of school that it is all a part of the growing up process. We can even smile to ourselves knowing that his fears will soon dissipate in his new experience as he forms new friendships and becomes acclimated to the daily school regimen. The youngster who would plead with his mother to ride the bus with him on the first day of school would be humiliated to have her do so later on. We need to appreciate that the little drama played out at the open door of the school bus is replayed many times throughout life. Growth is often accompanied by pain and a sense of fear-fear of the unknown.

There is, however, a difference between our situation and that of the lad alluded to above. In his case it was not a matter of personal choice On his part or his parents. Our state law mandates school attendance and, like it or not, children and parents must comply. Overly protective parents may also experience a feeling of apprehension at the prospect of their child entering the public school system for the first time. But, as mentioned above, It is all part of a necessary growth process. But it is different with us experiencing religious disorientation. No one will force us to take risks by reaching out for spiritual community. We may feel the need but be afraid to act on the need. Or, if we crank up enough courage to visit a fellowship (church) we may hear and see things that open the floodgates

of anxiety. Our religious pre-conditioning may also make us feel guilty, even unclean, for having walked into the place. There are many Witnesses reluctant to sever their relationship with the Watchtower organization because of what they perceive on the horizon as a Babel of religious confusion. To walk away from what they have, even though it no longer fulfills their spiritual needs, would be like "jumping from the frying pan into the fire," so to speak. When one adds to this dilemma the very real danger of disrupting, if not destroying, their entire social structure. It is little wonder that many ask:

"Where are we to go?" The question is as much an excuse for not acting as it is a sincere plea for help.

The root problem lies in the failure of having built a strong personal relationship with the Father and the Son. While the Watchtower Society gives lip-service to this concept they actively seek to prevent it. Those within the organization that begin to grow in this intimate relationship soon find themselves out of sync with their fellow Witnesses. The Society has created a community of organizational dependents--people who have no spiritual identity or security apart from them. They have calculatingly indoctrinated people to believe that no relationship, no discipleship, is possible apart from them. The investment of faith and trust in God and Christ must be brokered through them! By doing this the Society has committed the cardinal sin of a spiritual shepherd. The intent of religious shepherding should always be to help people become spiritually mature--not perpetually dependent on others. When our Lord Jesus Christ first "gave gifts in men," it was to facilitate this individual growth.

"And he gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelizers, some as shepherds and teachers, with a view to the readjustment [*Gr. katartismos*; denotes a fitting or preparing fully, a process leading to a consummation.--- *Vine's Expository Dictionary*] of the holy ones, for ministerial work for the building up of the body of the Christ, until we all attain to the oneness in the faith and in the accurate knowledge of the Son of God, to a full grown man, to the measure of stature that belongs to the fullness of the Christ; in order that we should no longer be babes, tossed about as by waves and carried hither and thither by every wind of teaching by means of the trickery of men, by means of cunning in contriving error. But speaking the truth, let us by love grow up in all things into him who is the head, Christ." -Ephesians 4: 11-15 *New World Translation*

We note that the growth was to be "into him who is the head, Christ." ~not an organization or church. All during one's life as a Jehovah's Witness the focus was on one's relationship to the organization. If one had a good relationship with the organization then they were allowed to think that they had a good relationship with God. As the Watchtower Society one-sidedly determined what constituted a good relationship with them they, in effect, determined what it meant to have a good relationship with Christ. It produced nothing more than behavioral Christians policed by the Watchtower Society and its agents. The focus was always on behavior i.e., meeting attendance, field service, grooming and conduct. The measure of people was taken by these externals. In this kind of religious environment the work of the Spirit of God on human hearts is largely lost sight of.

To begin to overcome the crippling effects of sectarian indoctrination-whether by the Watchtower Society or some other such religious group there needs to be a change in focus. The focus needs to be on a person: CHRIST! The very scriptures used by the Society are contextually provided to enable us to cultivate the mind of Christ. While they continually appealed to the Bible for support and authority the Bible was always considered in the organizational context. This negated both the intent as well as the force of the Scriptures considered. It was rare to have a truly Biblical presentation in Watchtower literature free of the organizational overlay. One such exception can be found in *The Watchtower* of April 15, 1979 pages 12-16, in an article titled: "Can You Have an Intimate Relationship With God?" The following points were developed: (1) God is not far off from each of us. (Acts 17:27) (2) God provides the means for intimacy through Christ. (Romans 4:25;6:9-11) (3) God draws us to Christ. (John 6:37;39,4~) (4) Christ saves us completely. (John 10:28) We are not left inactive in the salvation process. We need to: (1) Have a desire to be put right with God... (Acts 16:30) (2) Put faith in God's promises. (Romans 10:11) (3) And make a request to God for a good conscience" through baptism. (1 Peter 3:21)

In the above article the writer did not inject the "coming to God's organization for salvation" concept. He allowed the scriptures discussed to stand on their own and speak for themselves. Such a presentation is rare in Watchtower publications. That is what we must consistently do: allow the Bible to speak for itself and allow the scriptures to stand by themselves. They do not need to be propped up by human wisdom or imag-

ination. Resource material that helps us better understand the culture and the languages in which God's intervention in human affairs was given and written is, of course, valuable and ought to be utilized. But all of these things, including the Bible, are in the public domain. It is not and has not been "channeled" through anyone group or organization despite what men may claim. (Romans 8:31-39)

In answer to the question: "Where are we to go?" it needs to be appreciated that we do not GO anywhere. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ simply means that we have responded to the Gospel (in faith) and are seeking to be led by God's Spirit. (Romans 8: 14) It is not so much a matter of *where* we are but *what* we are that counts with God and Christ. If we keep our focus on Christ we will not stray far from the path of truth and righteousness. When the Lord inquired of the disciples if they, too, would leave him the apostle Peter responded: "*whom* shall we go away to? *You* have the sayings of everlasting life; and we have come to know that *you* are the Holy one of God." (John 6:68,69) We might ask ourselves if it is any different today? Has Jesus ceased to be the one who has "the sayings of everlasting life?" Where are those "words" to be found? Can any religious group consign to themselves exclusive control as to who and under what circumstances those "words" become valid? Some may presumptuously do that but it is nothing more than an extreme form of the sectarian spirit.' The Bible does not urge us to put faith in men. It urges us to put faith in the Father and the Son. (John 14: 1) We need to have confidence that the God who has begun a work in us is also able to bring that work to a successful conclusion. (Hebrews 7:25)

Having said this, however, we need to realistically face the problems presented in any religious fellowship. We are not going to find perfection. Moreover, the spirit of sectarianism does not begin and end with organizations like the Watchtower Society. It is alive and well throughout Christendom. For the record, it should be noted that the Watchtower religion is as much a part of Christendom as any other religion. The term "Christendom" merely identifies that part of the world wherein the Christian faith is predominately professed. It has nothing to do with the spiritual quality of the many sects found within this domain. The Society tries to put some distance between itself and other organized religions by arguing that it is not a part of Christendom. They write: "What, though, do we mean by the term Christendom? Among the definitions given in Webster's Third New International

Dictionary is this one: 'The portion of the world in which Christianity prevails or which is governed principally under Christian institutions.' But the religion that Christendom practices in her hundreds of religious sects is far from the Christianity of the Bible. Therefore her religion is a professed Christianity; and so Christendom must be the portion of the world of mankind which is governed under professed Christian institutions. Hence Christendom misrepresents true Christianity. That is why she will duly be desolated and disappear forever." - *The Watchtower*, Dec. 1, 1970, page 713.

When the Society speaks of "*professed* Christianity" she uses the term in the sense of being false - not genuinely Christian, hence apostate. By creating her own definition she is able to place herself outside the realm of Christendom-at least in the minds of the Witnesses. The dictionary, however, is not addressing itself to the merit or validity of the claim to Christianity. It is used as an umbrella under which all religions are embraced. For any organized religion laying claim to the Christian faith to say it is not a part of Christendom is to defy logic. It is akin to the practice of some years ago when the Watchtower Society denied that it was a religion. Back in the 1930s the Witnesses shared in "information marches" using placards and signs that read: "RELIGION IS A SNARE AND A RACKET." In this case, too, they gave a sectarian definition to a common word that made it *unclean*. It wasn't until the early 1950s that they learned what everyone else always knew, namely, that the word religion was a generic one and, like an umbrella, covered any and all forms of worship without regard to its rightness or wrongness. Words conjure up mental images and trigger emotions that dramatically color our world view. When false images are created by sectarian semantics our ability to think objectively is severely hampered if not completely destroyed.

Once a person is able to break free of the sectarian spirit they are free to seek the spirit of Christ. Our desire to worship God and interact with the family of believers ought to give us the courage to explore other religious communities. Having experienced the manipulative nature of a dictatorial hierarchy we are armed with the knowledge of how it is applied. If we find that a particular group shows the same characteristics that we came to reject in the Watchtower system we can reject it as well. But we should not allow the fear of being taken advantage of prevent us from reaching out for fellowship. Those who have done so most often find a Christian community

willing to accept them without trying to live their lives for them. This does not mean that we must *join* a particular church. Some have found satisfying association in small, unorganized groups. The size of the fellowship is not as important as the need to focus on worshiping God in spirit and truth. Some former Witnesses have found their way into mainline churches; others have not. Some have come to accept the more common protestant traditions, others have not. Each one must take responsibility for what they believe and practice. However, once having been set free of sectarian bondage one would want to avoid coming under its spell once again in a different setting. (Galatians 5: 1)

As stated before, we will not find doctrinal perfection. Moreover, individuals within a community of believers will vary greatly in their Christian growth and commitment. Some will display a remarkable love for God and Christ. Others will be only perfunctory in their service to Christ. We must remember that "the wheat and the weeds" grow side by side. (Matthew 13:24-30) This should not discourage us. It is only the human condition we are witnessing—a condition that exists everywhere—including the ranks of Jehovah's Witnesses. It is not new. From the beginning (even in the days of the apostles) the "wheat and the weeds" have been present within the *bona fide* Christian ecclesia. Notice how the following scriptures indicate this: "If it is the Lord's will, I hope that I will be able to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be encouraged by news about you. He is the only one who shares my feelings and who really cares about you. Everyone else is concerned only with his own affairs, not the cause of Jesus Christ. ",...-Philippians 2:19~21 *Good News Bible*. "I wrote a short letter to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to be their leader, will not pay any attention to what] say. When I come, then, I will bring up everything he has done: the terrible things he says about us and the lies he tells! But that is not enough for him; he will not receive the Christian brothers when they come, and even stops those who want to receive them and tries to drive them out of the church!"-3 John 9,10 *Good News Bible*. "Of course some of them preach Christ because they are jealous and quarrelsome, but others from genuine good will. These do so from love, because they know that God has given me the work of defending the gospel. The others do not proclaim Christ sincerely, but from a spirit of selfish ambition; they think that they will make more trouble for me while I am in prison. It does not matter! I am happy about it—Just so Christ is preached

in every way possible, whether from wrong or right motives." - Philippians 1: 15-18 *Good News Bible*.

The scriptures above are only a sampling of the many texts which reveal to us that the early Christian fellowship was no spiritual paradise. Peter warned of false prophets; Jude alerted the brothers to deceitful workers; and John's Revelation reveals the many spiritual diseases that affected the seven congregations in Asia Minor. But amidst the weed-like ones there was genuine wheat. It was true then and it is true now. Paul went so far as to say: "In the first place, I hear that when you all come together as a community, there are separate factions [*Gr.schisma*: schism] among you, and I half believe it—since there must no doubt be separate groups [*Gr.hairsis*: heresies, sects] among you, to distinguish those who are to be trusted."-1 Corinthians 11: 18, 19 *The Jerusalem Bible*.

These situations existed during the lifetime of the twelve apostles as well as many other spirit-gifted disciples. The authority of the apostles was not dictated to the congregations through some governing body. The sword of excommunication (disfellowshipping) was not widely used to silence heretical or schismatic talk. Warnings were given, however, and the disciples were urged to avoid being misled but there was still considerable tolerance within the Christian community towards troublesome ones. It should not seem strange, then, that there is a great deal of diversity within the community of believers today. And, as the apostle Paul seems to be saying, there are some good results to be had even in the face of divisions. It gives people the freedom to act out and speak out their true thoughts and attitudes. The only way to avoid such things is to outlaw the them. as does the Watchtower Society. But in doing this the Society bears no resemblance to the apostolic church they claim to represent. The only reason that the Society can boast about having neither divisions or sects within its ranks is because it is a religious police state. It is this police state that they define as a "spiritual paradise" :

"Jehovah's anointed people today have entered a spiritual paradise indeed! How well this is described in Isaiah 35: 1-7! It is comparable to what the apostle Paul describes at 2 Corinthians 12:3,4, referring apparently to his own experience: 'Yes, I know such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, God knows— that he was caught away into paradise and heard unutterable words which it is not lawful for a man to speak.' But it is lawful, today, to speak of the spiritual paradise that now exists among

God's anointed remnant, and in which a 'great crowd out of all nations' has also come to share! There thrives among them a delightfully prosperous organization, the global society of Jehovah's Witnesses, united in the bond of love and oneness of purpose and action. A spiritual paradise indeed!" -*The Watchtower*, November 15, 1983, pages 28,29.

One will have to make his own judgment about an organization bold enough to compare Paul's vision of heavenly paradise with their own experience. The public image of Jehovah's Witnesses as unified in thought, speech, purpose and action is deceptive. What visitors to the well maintained Kingdom Hall fail to see is that everything is orchestrated by the Society. The Society prepares all materials used in congregational meetings. Even Sunday sermons are the product of extensive outlines or manuscripts provided by the Society. Few elders, if any, know what it means to develop a talk just using the Bible and developing their own thoughts. Congregation question and answer meetings are all predetermined from printed materials provided by the Society. They even determine the pace of such discussions by dictating how many paragraphs are to be covered in a given meeting. Time is never set aside for unrehearsed give-and-take discussion. It does result in the appearance of Christian unity but appearances can be deceiving.

There is a certain comfort in not having to think things through for oneself. It is easier to let someone else do the thinking for you. It is comforting to have all the answers. Not having to deal with doctrinal

controversy within the religious community is also desirable. That is what we would all like to see. Coming out of a restrictive environment is like that little boy not wanting to get on that school bus and leave mom. Our growth as Christians is something like that. We will experience discomfort and a measure of fear. We may be sad at times-even lonely. We may become frustrated and disappointed at times but that, too, is part of the maturing process. These things should work to soften and humble us. Above all we must have the faith that God will not abandon us. We can trust the shepherd Jesus Christ to lead us if we have the faith to follow. Loving brothers will also be there to help share our load if we allow them to.

You are not alone. Others, from other religious traditions have experienced the destructive effects of hierarchical religions as the following insightful observation clearly shows: "I remain a Christian, but I have come to see that the Church as it exists and works at present is an obstacle in the lives of the committed Christians I know and admire. It is not the source of the values they cherish and promote. On the contrary, they live and work in constant tension and opposition to it ... For me Christian commitment is inseparable from concern for truth and concern for people. I do not find either of these represented by the official Church. There is concern for authority at the expense of truth, and I am constantly saddened by instances of the damage done to persons by workings of an impersonal and unfair system." -*A Question of Conscience*, by English Catholic theologian Charles Davis. □