DISFIGURING THE GOSPEL: 
THE EFFECT OF ARIANISM ON THE SOTERIOLOGY OF JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

Introduction

In AD 325, a presbyter named Arius was declared a heretic by the first ecumenical council of Nicaea for claiming that there was a time when the Logos did not exist. Well over a billion Christians confess the decision of that council each week as part of the historic liturgy of the Church. Yet, there is sometimes a failure to see the contemporary significance of this condemnation. This failure is highlighted in a recent theological survey, where three out of four American Evangelicals agreed to the statement “Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God.”¹ While it would be wrong to conclude that 75% of Evangelicals are actual proponents of Arianism, it does demonstrate that the vast majority are incapable of detecting it and its potential impact upon theology. This heresy is the formal confession of the sect known as Jehovah's Witnesses, who are well known from their worldwide distribution of literature published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.

This denial of the deity of Christ does not remain isolated from the rest of the Watchtower's thinking. Instead, the Watchtower Society's fatal misstep in Christology demands a corresponding series of fatal missteps in the doctrines of the atonement and the reception of salvation. If there is a direct correlation, then it should be evident in the manner in which these doctrines are explained. However, if it is hard for many Christians to detect Arianism, it is surely hard for the average Christian to wrap their mind around the Watchtower's divergent and unconventional theological system. Once we briefly review their doctrinal positions on

Christology, the Atonement, and the reception of salvation, we'll be in a better position to see that the connection between them is the Arian Christology. It is vital that we recognize the disastrous consequences an Arian Christology has upon their soteriology, if we are to begin to correct the average parishioner’s theological discernment.

Who is Jesus?

J. N. D. Kelly notes that Arianism rests upon the premise of “the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God” – a God so utterly transcendent that his essence and deity “cannot be shared or communicated.”² It appears that Arius believes that God cannot possibly share his substance with the Logos. Arius infers from this that the Logos is a creature, who had a definite beginning, who can only understand and know God insofar as his finite capacity can allow, and who is theoretically liable to change and sin.³ “The net result of this teaching was to reduce the Son to a demigod.”⁴

According to the Watchtower, the man Jesus of Nazareth had an existence before his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary.⁵ For countless billions of years he existed alongside the Father, Jehovah.⁶ This pre-existence however is not an eternal one. On the contrary, the pre-existent Jesus is identified with Michael the Archangel.⁷ God created him first before creating

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anything else. Michael the Archangel was the only thing that Jehovah created directly.

Everything else was created through the pre-existent Jesus, who functioned like a master worker. This does not make him a co-creator, but simply an instrument through which Jehovah God created everything else. The pre-existent Jesus, being an angel, does not have the power to create, since that power comes only from God himself. Michael and Jehovah God had a special relationship, wherein Jesus worked alongside God, and imitated him and his qualities. By the fact that Jesus is called the Word and Michael it is noted that he served as Jehovah God’s chief spokesman to the patriarchs and prophets.

The life of Michael was taken and transferred into the womb of the Virgin Mary. This prevented sin from being passed on to Jesus from Adam. The Watchtower Society explicitly says that this is not an incarnation. Jesus is not “true God and true man.” Instead, he was born as a perfect human. He was the greatest man who ever lived, but still only a mere man. At his baptism, he was born again, receiving the memory of his time in Heaven before his birth along with the right to return to angelic life after his death. He died after he was nailed to the torture

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10 “Jesus Christ” in Insight on the Scripture, Vol. 2, 52.

11 “Who is Jesus Christ?” in What Can the Bible Teach Us?, 45.


13 “Jesus Christ” in Insight on the Scripture, Vol. 2, 56.

14 “Jesus Christ” in Insight on the Scripture, Vol. 2, 56.


stake, an upright pole without a cross beam. On Sunday morning, he was not raised to bodily human life, but restored to his angelic existence as Michael the Archangel.

In this case, the terms “Son of God” and “only-begotten” are understood to refer being directly created by God. Additionally, the term “Son of God” is understood as it is applied angels, kings, judges, and Israel. It is also used to highlight the kind of relationship Jesus has with Jehovah God. It becomes clear that the Watchtower Society explicitly rejects the Trinity in favor of an Arian Christology. Their translation of the Bible is notorious for translating John 1:1c (NWT) as “and the Word was a god.” Jesus is not God, but “deutero theos”, a second lesser god. He is a divine spirit-being but not God himself. They attempt to defend their teaching from the Bible by citing phrases which call Jesus “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15 NWT) or “the beginning of the creation by God” (Rev. 3:14 NWT). Jesus is also identified with the personified Wisdom of Proverbs 8. These and several other proof-texts used

18 “The Ransom – God’s Greatest Gift” in What Can the Bible Teach Us?, 55. “Is Jesus the Archangel Michael?” in The Watchtower, (April 1, 2010). Actually, since the Watchtower does not believe in the existence of the soul, when Jesus dies he actually ceases to exist. Thus, he is not resurrected as much as he is recreated. This represents a significant departure from Christian teaching, the scope of which is beyond this paper.
21 “Who is Jesus Christ?” in What Can the Bible Teach Us?, 45.
23 Citations marked NWT are taken from the New World Translation as it is found in: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, The Kingdom Interlinear Translation of the Greek Scriptures (Brooklyn, NY: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1985).
26 “Jesus Christ” in Insight on the Scripture, Vol. 2, 52.
by Jehovah’s Witnesses were also used by Arius himself.\(^{28}\)

**What did Jesus Do?**

In order to understand how Jehovah’s Witnesses conceive of the atonement, we first must look at the problem it intends to solve. God’s original purpose was for humanity to live forever in an Eden-like paradise upon earth.\(^{29}\) The fact that we do not now live in a paradise means that the problem traces its way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Adam was made perfect, and able to completely reflect God’s qualities.\(^{30}\) However, when Adam disobeyed God and ate from the tree, the sentence of death was enacted. Adam was no longer perfect. Not only did Adam lose this perfection for himself, but he passed on his imperfection, sin, and death to all his children.\(^{31}\) Additionally, God could not simply forgive humanity, as that would not be just.\(^{32}\)

Adam’s sin was an act of flagrant rebellion.\(^{33}\) Behind that act, was the work of Satan the Devil. The Devil challenged God’s right to rule creation by accusing God of lying to humanity and restricting their freedom. With humanity now enslaved to sin and death, Satan declared God a failure.\(^{34}\) Moreover, he claimed that humans only served God for selfish motives, and that,

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\(^{28}\) Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, 229-230.


\(^{30}\) "The Ransom – God’s Greatest Gift" in *What Can the Bible Teach Us?*, 52-53.

\(^{31}\) “Jehovah’s Purpose Will Be Fulfilled”, *The Watchtower* (February 2017), par 12.


\(^{33}\) “Jehovah’s Purpose Will Be Fulfilled”, *The Watchtower* (February 2017), pars. 10-11.

they would not remain faithful when faced with bitter trial and death. According to the Watchtower then, these challenges put God under obligation to respond. A failure to respond would make it look like the Devil was correct in his accusation.

In order for God to commute the death sentence and begin to restore humanity to its originally intended condition, humanity had to pay back to God what it had lost: a perfect human life. Humanity born of Adam had lost the prospect of everlasting life, with no hope of buying it back due to our inherited imperfection. The payment, or ransom, must have an exact correspondence to what was lost, no more and no less. Thus Jesus, “gave himself a corresponding ransom for all.” (1 Tim. 2:6 NWT). Here ἀντίλυτρον and כפר its Old Testament equivalent are understood to mean a directly corresponding exchange in which one life is redeemed by another. This coupled with the Adam-Christ parallel in Romans 5:15-17, provide the foundation of their doctrine. Only another perfect human, one not descended from Adam, and thus not affected by sin could pay the ransom. This was provided by the man Jesus, who was a perfect man by virtue of his virgin birth. During his life he was always faithful to his God and Father Jehovah, just like a human should be. Thus, God has a legal basis to forgive humanity and restore them to the way he intended. By his death upon the torture stake, he proved once and for all that Satan was wrong and that a human could be faithful to God even to death.

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36 “Jehovah’s Purpose Will Be Fulfilled”, The Watchtower (February 2017), par. 11. “Jehovah provides ‘a Ransom in Exchange for Many’” in Draw Close to Jehovah, 139.
38 “Jehovah provides ‘a Ransom in Exchange for Many’” in Draw Close to Jehovah, 142.
41 “Jehovah’s Purpose Will Be Fulfilled”, The Watchtower (February 2017), par. 11.
43 “Jehovah provides ‘a Ransom in Exchange for Many’” in Draw Close to Jehovah, 143-144.
was then resurrected to be the angelic being Michael, where he is able to offer his perfect human life as a ransom for the entire human race. 44

**How Can I Receive the Benefits of Jesus’ Ransom?**

According to the Watchtower, one benefit from the ransom of Christ by exercising faith. Faith makes both forgiveness of sins and the eternal life a possibility. By adding the word “exercise” they intend to convey that faith should motivate a person act in harmony with God’s will. 45 Faith is not thought of as either assensus (believing the facts), or fiducia (trusting the promises), but fundamentally as an ongoing motivation towards obedience. 46 Faith is action. 47 The basis for my hope for the future is one’s own obedience. 48 The obedience called for is moral and ethical purity, as well as standard works of Christian piety like prayer, proselytization, and bible reading. 49 And on top of this, faith must be kept strong if one is to enjoy eternal life. 50

Predictably, the proof-text used to support their definition of faith is James 2:17ff. 51

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44 “The Ransom – God’s Greatest Gift” in *What Can the Bible Teach Us?*, 55.
46 "Exercising Your Faith In Jehovah's Promises" in *The Watchtower – Study Edition* (October 2016), par 10
How does one obtain faith? God sees some good in us despite our fallen condition, and opens our hearts to hear the good news. Faith is grown by looking at the biblical evidence. By building one’s confidence in the Bible as God’s word and learning the Bible from the Watchtower’s particular perspective, one strengthens their faith. The object of faith is not God or Jesus, but the entire revealed Word of God and his promise for a coming millennial paradise. Upon exercising faith one is declared to be righteous. One obtains both forgiveness when they err and a clean conscience before God. Additionally, the ransom benefits two different groups in two different ways. Those who are born-again are part of the 144,000 who will be raised to angelic life in heaven. The countless millions of others are restored to perfect human life progressively during the millennial reign on the earth. This hope of the overthrow of the current age and the establishment of a millennial paradise explicitly constitutes the content of the Good News.

The Leaven of Arius

A deep connection runs from the Watchtower’s Arian Christology to their conception of the atonement and the reception of salvation. One cannot hold to an orthodox, catholic, Chalcedonian Christology and yet maintain the soteriology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Arianism is like leaven and it infects the whole lump.

54 "Faith" in Insight on the Scriptures, Vol. 1, 804.
However, an objection may be raised. The thesis supposes that the Watchtower Society has a coherent system of thought. There is evidence that the opposite may be the case. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses never worked out a system of theology. Instead, all of his doctrines formally developed from others in the Adventist movement in which he found himself. For example, George Stetson, and a minister in the Adventist Christian Church, taught Russell the Arianism of Henry Grew.\(^{58}\) Meanwhile, Russell received his doctrine of the ransom from George Storrs, of the Life and Advent Union.\(^{59}\) Russell himself even admitted his “indebtedness to the Adventists.”\(^{60}\) Being “the heirs of Adventism” the theology of the Watchtower is incorporates an assortment of views inherited from their theological and historical ancestors.\(^{61}\) Thus, it any attempt to decipher a consistent view is bound to fail.

Two responses to this objection can be made. First, despite the fact that Russell drew from various Adventist sources, it is not likely that these remained mostly unconnected doctrines in his mind. That he did make a systematic whole out of his views can be seen in his massive six volume work *Studies in the Scriptures* which Russell asserted “was virtually the Bible in topical form.”\(^{62}\)

Secondly it must be asserted that form precedes content: a right view of Jesus identity absolutely affects what he does on our behalf. Prominent theologian and Oxford professor Alister E. McGrath notes that the distinction between Christology and Soteriology, while maintained for didactic purposes, is unhelpful because “they are really two sides of the same coin.”\(^{63}\) This

\(^{58}\) Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 15.
\(^{59}\) Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 17.
\(^{60}\) Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 15.
\(^{62}\) Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed*, 42.
realization dawned upon Melanchthon who asserted that Christ can only properly be known if we understand why he took on flesh and was crucified and how that benefits us.⁶⁴ The person of Jesus becomes revealed through his work.⁶⁵ If you have either an Arian, Nestorian, or Chalcedonian view of Jesus, you will have a correspondingly different view of his work. McGrath notes as an example that the Nestorian conception of Christ is logically connected to a Pelagian view of man and a exemplarist soteriology.⁶⁶ A Jesus who is just a perfect man can not do all the things that a Jesus who is both God and Man can do. This connection is going to be there, even if it is not always evident.

We begin to see this immediately when we look for the connections between the Watchtower’s Arian Christology and their view of the atonement. As has been noted above, they view the sacrifice of Christ as a corresponding ransom – an exact life for life exchange. While some ancient fathers did use the idea of Ransom to talk about the Atonement, it remains the case that the Jehovah’s Witness’ conception is unique.⁶⁷ Jesus in the Watchtower system only pays for Adam’s sin. He does not pay for our sin nor the sin of the entire human race. In their system, Jesus pays for Adam, and that has indirect effects upon the rest of us. This understanding of the atonement is only sensical if you deny the Incarnation and the Hypostatic Union. Jesus is merely a perfect human. Since he is just one finite man, he simply cannot bear the sin of everyone. If Jesus was both True God and true man, united in his person, then his death would not be a corresponding ransom. Instead, it would be overpaying. As noted, the problem for Jehovah’s Witnesses is that humanity has lost its perfection, and only a corresponding perfect human life

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⁶⁵ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 283.
⁶⁶ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 284.
⁶⁷ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 323.
can make it up. It should be noted that they do not view our sin as a crime and offense against an almighty and infinite God. If God is infinite and we sin against God, then we offend him in an infinite number of ways. Thus, as Athanasius argued against Arius, only God himself is capable of saving, not a creature.\textsuperscript{68} By recasting the issue to be the loss of human perfection in Adam, they avoid needing to have Jesus be God Incarnate.

While it is true that certain denominations with otherwise orthodox Christology deny that we are saved \textit{sola fide}, that is, by only trusting in the favor of God on account of Christ, the manner in which the Watchtower has explained the reception of salvation remains unique to them. Faith has to be conceived of as something other than \textit{fiducia}, since by faith we are united mystically to Christ himself.\textsuperscript{69} If Christ is a mere man, union with Christ makes no sense. Additionally, as a result of being a mere man who only bore Adam’s sin and not the sin of the whole world, it makes perfect sense why obedience is stressed. McGrath astutely observes in this case, “The ontological gap between Christ and ourselves is contracted, in order to minimize the discontinuity between his moral perfection and ours.”\textsuperscript{70} Since the obedience which Jesus offered to God is simply the obedience of a perfect man, the distance between us and him is far lessened. Sin is thus not quite as serious. There is some good, some spark left inside. According to the Watchtower, regeneration and being born again is not necessary to be able to begin to obey God because only Jesus and the 144,000 are born again. Thus, because Jesus does less in the atonement, man is capable and required to do more to make up for the deficit. Jesus “does less” because he is not God.

\textsuperscript{68} McGrath, \textit{Christian Theology}, 276.
\textsuperscript{69} Cf. Luther’s Works, American Edition, 26.109
\textsuperscript{70} McGrath, \textit{Christian Theology}, 284.
Conclusion

The atonement and reception of salvation as understood by Jehovah’s Witnesses bear the marks throughout of being directly impacted and thoroughly moulded by an Arian Christology. A corresponding ransom which exchanges one perfect human life for exactly one perfect human life only makes sense if Jesus is only a human and nothing more. A reception of salvation which claims man is capable of obeying God and is required to do so only makes sense if Christ’s atonement was not enough. It is insufficient because Jesus is a mere creature. Thus, Christology affects soteriology. Who you say Jesus is has direct consequences on what you say he does for you. This means that for those Evangelicals who cannot identify a confession of Arianism are in danger of embracing a disfigured Gospel which has been leavened by the poison of Arius.
APPENDIX:
RESOURCES FOR RESPONDING TO JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES

Time and space prevent me from making a response to the Watchtower Society and a defense of the historic and orthodox Christian views. However, below is a list of some of the best resources which I would recommend and use to make such a response.

Defending the Deity of Christ


The Atonement


The Reception of Salvation


Other Resources

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Christology


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Soteriology


Other Resources


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