The Psychology of Getting in And Out of The Watchtower

By Jay Hess

Often when I explain the serious errors of the Watchtower Society to others, they ask ‘How could anyone join that religion?’ Or ‘How could anyone stay in that religion?’ And ‘When a JW sees the errors, why is it so hard for them to get out?’ Yet every day more people join the Watchtower religion and many stay with it although they are unhappy in it.

What attracted me to the Watchtower was their expertise at handling almost any Bible question posed to them. They appeared to have all the answers. I liked having all the answers. Experienced Witnesses usually have no trouble overwhelming the average churchgoer and tying them in knots. It was not uncommon for Witnesses (without any seminary training) to challenge pastors. Prior to baptism I went in the door-to-door ministry with experienced JWs and observed their skills. I thought ‘surely this is the truth’! After being convinced that the Watchtower Society had the “truth” (as JWs call it) I got baptized. I was very happy to be part of “God’s Organization”.

Soon after baptism, as I approached graduation from high school, I realized that the Watchtower was opposed to attending college. At that time (1969) the JW community was emphasizing that the year 1975 would probably be the end of this‘ system of things’, that is, the end of imperfect human society and the start of Jesus’ 1000-year reign over the earth. Thus there was no reason to be concerned with a higher education because the world would soon end. But my parents felt college was right for me and I had no other prospects for work, so I agreed.

The next four years or so was a period of growth for me, learning more about the beliefs of “Jehovah’s Witnesses”. This was also a transition period where I, like all JWs, went from a life of relative freedom to one of being controlled by the Watchtower Society.

The Watchtower uses several techniques to control their members:

Their drastically different religious customs cause a cultural barrier with other religions. Watchtower meeting places are not called “churches” but are called “Kingdom Halls”. The buildings look more like lecture halls than religious buildings. The average, loyal JW is involved in around 11 hours every week in religious activities, studies, or meetings. They reject the image of the cross as an evil object that could not possibly represent Christ.There is no collection plate passed around, instead there are stationary “contribution boxes” in which members deposit contributions either before or after the meeting. Their songs are not borrowed from traditional Christian but are uniquely their own. Instead of being “inspirational” and praising Jesus, the songs emphasize the Father (Jehovah) and the “organization”. Their book Revelation - Its Grand Climax At Hand! (1988) page 36 comments “But in the latest songbook of 1984, Jehovah is honored by four times as many songs as is Jesus” (likewise see 8/1/91 Watchtower p.9; but compare John 5:23).

Normally the congregations are deliberately kept at a size of 80-140 persons. This makes it difficult for someone to ‘disappear in the crowd’. Three of their five meetings require audience participation and each member is addressed as “Brother so-and-so” or “Sister so-and-so”, always giving the last name. Because of the relatively small size of the congregation it becomes immediately obvious to all if someone is not participating. This non-participation would be interpreted as meaning that either the person did not prepare as they were supposed to or they have a bad attitude. In this way the members are woven into a community where everyone is visible and pressured (or “encouraged”) to participate and conform.

All baptized adult males are “encouraged” to “reach out” in the congregation to become more active in administrative and teaching “privileges”. This terminology gives the impression that the individual only needs to volunteer and be available. But in reality it is not up to the individual to take on more responsibility, rather it is up to the body of elders to offer these highly sought responsibilities. Because most of the privileges are visible, if any male does not have some job to do, it is painfully obvious to all that either this person has a bad attitude or has been somehow disqualified by the body of elders. Either way, the person does not fit in and is not fully accepted. The result is that the congregation uses the barometer of the body of elders and what privileges they bestow to decide to what extent a male will be accepted.

A member is accepted by the elders and the congregation to the extent that the person conforms to the Watchtower Society’s rules and practices that they print in their four magazines a month, their five meetings a week and their internal newsletter Our Kingdom Ministry. This flow of regulations is usually repetitive but some change is always expected, or as they like to say, ‘the light gets brighter and brighter’. Thus a JW must keep abreast of the latest understanding from the Governing Body and continually conform in order to keep any congregational appointment.

All JWs are continually reminded of 1 Corinthians 15:33 and the Society’s interpretation that says friendships with non-JWs are unwise. So as a JW continually conforms to the ‘encouragement’ of the Watchtower, old non-JW relationships are allowed to die and no new relationships are formed.After a few years the JW finds that all friendships are within the organization.

Every member knows that if one disputes the Society’s doctrines one is subject to being totally cut off from the fellowship by disfellowshipping.Except for immediate family members living in the home, no other JW is allowed to greet or converse with a disfellowshipped JW.For the ostracized member all religious identity is gone, all friendships and habits evaporate. With this disciplinary tool the Watchtower controls every JW religiously, socially and psychologically.

Since the Watchtower was so strongly against college, I left college in the summer of 1971 and renounced my scholarship, vowing never to return. The two years of mathematics that I took, including some Graduate studies, did not give me a direction in life. I felt that only God through the Watchtower could give me that. I started working by cleaning homes and mowing lawns. It is not uncommon for JWs to choose unskilled jobs in order to maintain a living while waiting for this system to end. I soon married another JW who had three children by a previous marriage. I was having great difficulty supporting my family so after being out of college for four years I realized I needed to go back and finish my schooling.

Quickly I felt the sting of not conforming to the Watchtower’s ‘suggestions’.While attending college all my congregational privileges were removed. The elders were not pleased that I went back to college in the fall of 1975, especially since the end of this system was so close. For the first time in my life I experienced the wrath of the organization for doing something that I was sure was right. After attending a little less than two more years in college, I emerged with a Master’s degree in applied mathematics. This degree became a permanent mark that I had rejected the advice of the Watchtower. Evidently I was not letting the Governing Body govern my thoughts and actions.

I hungered for mentally stimulating association. Although JWs normally do not join organizations or clubs that put them in contact with non-JWs, I joined Mensa (a society for those that score in the top 2% of the population in a standardized IQ test). Through this I came in contact with other JWs that seemed to share my interests in researching the Bible and defending the Watchtower’s teachings. I started a ‘Special Interest Group’ within Mensa just for JWs interested in sharing Bible research and began publishing a newsletter defending the Watchtower’s doctrines. What I did not realize was that the Watch tower Society wants to be the only source for ‘spiritual food’.

By my efforts to publish my research I had unknowingly trespassed into ‘holy ground’. The Society was alerted to my actions by other ‘loyal’ JWs and the elders were ordered to investigate. Although the elder body read all of my newsletters (almost 200 pages) they could not find anything that disputed the Watchtower’s doctrines. The elders allowed me to keep my congregational privileges but I realized that the ‘Organization’ was not the happy place I thought it was.

Even though I had lost some acceptability in the congregation due to going to college and publishing research, I was proud to be one of “Jehovah’s Witnesses”. The Society always kept us equipped to effectively present controversial doctrines to the public and deal with almost any religious or philosophical argument. This added to my conviction that I had the “truth”. I debated seminary graduates and atheists with ease. Because of my skill at teaching Watchtower doctrine and dealing with ‘opposers’ I acquired a reputation as a ‘hired gun’, one that is called in to handle tough situations.

The two doctrinal challenges that interested me most were the Trinity doctrine (JWs are Arians - they do not believe that Jesus is one God with the Father) and the accusation that JWs are false prophets. I felt compelled to investigate these issues and write up a convincing response. At first I put my research in my newsletter, later I made a 7-hour video. I tried to address every Trinitarian argument.

One that captured my interest was whether Jesus was to be worshiped. Initially, Hebrews 1:6 in the Society’s Bible (The New World Translation) had said that angels “worship” Jesus. Later, in 1971, the Society changed the rendering to say “obeisance”. Yet the November 15, 1970 Watchtower page 702 clearly said that Jesus could be worshiped. ‘Opposers’ to the Watchtower Society often reasoned that only God should be worshiped (Exodus 34:14) and since Jesus is worshiped (Matthew 28:9; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 5:13,14) that meant Jesus was God. Few JWs were able to respond to this, but through many hours of research I came up with an explanation that said Jesus could be worshiped and yet he was not God. How good I felt to have an answer that, I thought, defended the Society’s position! Oddly enough, this is what eventually led to my being ejected from the JWs.

The research I did on the subject of whether JWs are false prophets was also extensive and in 1989 and 1990 I produced a small book entitled Jehovah’s Witnesses are not False Prophets. It was privately published without my name on it and distributed by JWs in the U.S. and the U.K. Many liked the book, but it violated the policy that only the Watchtower is supposed to distribute ‘spiritual food’. I had strayed into ‘holy ground’ once more.

By this time I had made a couple friends that were being used by the Watchtower Society to produce their literature. One suggested that I send my book to the Watchtower’s Writing department. As a result the Writing Department requested that I submit an article on refuting the Trinity for use in The Watchtower. I did write that article and volunteered a few others and sent them in using the special addressing labels they gave me. Now I was sure that I would be accepted and safe in God’s organization!

The next project that I felt compelled to pursue was to write a book entitled How to Maintain Joy in God’s Organization. I wanted to share my experiences with other JWs and help them stay in God’s organization despite any problems. But soon after I finished it, I was in big trouble.

In March of 1990 two things happened that spelled doom for my career in the Watchtower. During the week of March 19, in one of their meetings (the ‘Theocratic School’) they announced in all congregations that Jesus was not to be worshipped. Secondly, in the March 15, 1990 Watchtower, there were two articles that supposedly proved that the Watchtower Society was chosen in 1919 as God’s faithful human channel of information. Several items were presented to support their claims and two issues on page 13 caught my attention. First, they claimed that they had been politically neutral during and since World War 1. Secondly they claimed they had understood back then the true prophetic significance of the year 1914. Yet I knew from personal research that both of these claims were false.

During World War 1 the Society’s staff bought war bonds to support the war and when members that wanted to remain neutral left the organization, they were criticized for leaving. They also praised the League of Nations, which the Society now says was the first part of the “image of the wild beast” as described in Revelation 13:14-18.

As for the second claim (that the Watchtower had understood back then the true significance of 1914), they had just been disappointed that 1914 had not brought about the final destruction of the wicked, and the beginning of Jesus’1000-year reign. Instead of what JWs now believe (that Jesus returned invisibly in 1914), the Watchtower taught from 1879 until1943 that Jesus returned invisibly in 1874! So everything that the Society predicted for 1914 failed to happen, and what they then believed about the timing of Jesus’ invisible presence they now say is apostasy!

I had persuaded a JW (an elder at the time) that Jesus was to be worshiped, a belief that he made known to many JWs. We were both shocked with the Watchtower’s bold statement that Jesus was not to be worshipped. The lies in the March 15, 1990 Watchtower were the final blow that broke my connection with the Society. Soon after, the Society started to investigate me and my friend about our claims that Jesus should be worshipped. A religious court (“Special Committee”) was set up and we were charged with “causing divisions” by telling JWs that we worshiped Jesus. We were both found guilty. The court punished my friend by announcing to the congregation that he was found guilty but would be allowed to stay in the organization. I appealed their decision claiming that I did not feel it was wrong to do what I had done. I was found guilty again and disfellowshipped on February 3, 1992.

My family was nearly destroyed that night. My wife progressively became more angry and opposed to me. My daughter moved out of the home, intending never to speak to me again. If she ever gets married I will never be allowed to fellowship with her, her husband, or any children they may have.

My downfall in the Watchtower Society was a result of thinking independently, something that JWs are warned not to do. Ironically the same March 15, 1990 Watchtower that convinced me that the Watchtower was lying tome, also speaks of the advantages of doing “independent investigating” (page 23).

In my view of what should and should not happen, I could not explain why I was out of the only religion that I had ever believed in. I had been told that by God’s standards I was wicked. How could this be since I felt sure that I knew God’s standards and any serious sin should be easily discernable?Yet I could not see anything in my actions that looked even remotely wicked. This lead to my feeling disoriented and confused.I was uncomfortable with this and wanted answers and quickly.

Through the help of other ex-JWs and their publications, I found some general answers to my psychological and theological questions. Through personal research and, I believe, through the help of God’s Holy Spirit, I have resolved all the doctrinal issues that troubled me. I have now fully recovered spiritually and understand how I was seduced into the Watchtower and why its hold was so strong. I now know a spiritual joy that is beyond anything I ever experienced in the Watchtower Society. Although I have lost my family and my former culture, Jesus has opened my eyes and allowed me to see the One I was seeking to worship (John chapter 9).