

MEMORIAL NUMBERS PROBLEMATIC FOR WATCHTOWER

Jehovah's Witnesses have always been proud of escalating figures: annual membership increases and the number of copies and translations of books and magazines they print, to name a couple of examples. During the past four years, however, there is one figure that has shown a consistent increase against all logic: the number of partakers at their annual "Lord's Evening Meal" memorial.

Once a year, on the date designated as Nisan 14, Jehovah's Witnesses gather around the world to celebrate "The Lord's Evening Meal." Last year, in 2009, the Watchtower recorded its highest figure ever with 18,168,323 reportedly attending the service. According to the Watchtower's two-class system, only those who have a heavenly calling are permitted to partake of the bread and wine at this service. The Watchtower teaches that only the 144,000 (of Revelation 7:14), also known as "the little flock," will live in heaven. The millions of other Jehovah's Witnesses, who are designated as "the great crowd," will live in an earthly paradise. The remnant of these 144,000 spiritually elite members — the "joint heirs with Christ" who are presently alive on earth — are the ones permitted to receive the elements at the service. Everyone else can only observe.

The Watchtower's second president, Joseph F. Rutherford, said that in the 1930s, the number of heaven-bound Witnesses — the 144,000 — was fulfilled. In 1995, the Watchtower maintained, "Logically, the calling of the little flock would draw to a close when the number was nearing completion, and the evidence is that the general gathering of these specially blessed ones ended in 1935" (*The Watchtower*, Feb. 15, 1995, pg. 19). As the members of this closed class grow older and many of them are now approaching the century mark, it is logical that they would be dying off and the number of memorial partakers decreasing every year. Between 1992 and 2004, however, the figure of those who took the bread and wine held a steady course from year to year, hovering between 8,795 (in 1997) and 8,570 (in 2004).

In 2005, the number reached its lowest total ever: 8,524. Then, in 2006, there were 8,758 partakers reported; in 2007, the elements were received by 9,105; in 2008, a reported 9,986 took the bread and wine; and last year the number of memorial partakers worldwide was said to be 10,857, the highest total in more than 40 years.

Yet for all the Watchtower inconsistencies, there is one constant the Society has been known for: changing doctrine. As the Watchtower leadership faced figures that remained steady and which long should have been on a substantial decline, and now are confronted with numbers rivaling an earlier generation, the organization has been forced to state, "Thus it appears that we cannot set a specific date for when the calling of Christians to the heavenly hope ends" (*The Watchtower*, May 1, 2007, pg. 31). So the gates to heaven, once closed in 1935 by Watchtower leadership, have been reopened as a result of additional Jehovah's Witnesses who lay claim to a future heavenly existence.

As the Watchtower grapples with facts and figures that demonstrate the incongruity of its beliefs, Jehovah's Witnesses will continue to suffer the consequence of being blown about by every wind of doctrine.

—MKG

ORAL ROBERTS DIES AT 91

Oral Roberts, the televangelist and faith healer who attracted adoration, controversy, and ridicule, died last Dec. 15 of complications from pneumonia. He was 91.

Roberts said that when he was 17 years old, he was healed of tuberculosis at a revival meeting. From that experience came his own healing ministry. He was ordained by the Pentecostal Holiness Church in 1936 and pastored several churches between 1941 and 1947. In 1947, he founded the Oral Roberts Evangelical Association and took his healing revival campaigns across the United States and later around the world.

In the mid-1950s, Roberts raised his public profile when he began a weekly television broadcast that exposed millions of viewers to his healing messages. Roberts made a further name for himself when, in 1965, he launched Oral Roberts University, a coeducational liberal arts college. The school was built on a 500-acre plot of land in Tulsa, Okla., and was officially dedicated by Billy Graham in 1967.

This university eventually caused Roberts his most notable failure. Despite fierce opposition, Roberts pushed forward with his plans to build the City of Faith, which included a 60-story medical clinic, a 30-story, 777-bed hospital, and a 20-story research tower on the university's campus. The complex was completed in 1981 at a cost of about \$150 million, but it was never anything more than a façade. Only four floors of the hospital were

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