

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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in Himself and that “there are nine of them” — “them” being members of the Godhead.

In years gone by, words had specific meaning and when people approached the Bible it was with the understanding that grammar, cultural and historical setting, and the intent of the author really meant something.

Emil Schürer reminded us in his *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ* that, “No incident in the gospel story, no word in the preaching of Jesus Christ, is intelligible apart from its setting in Jewish history, and without a clear understanding of that world of thought-distinction of the Jewish people” (Vol. 1, pg. 1). That world of thought is now totally ignored and only my subjective world of thought matters. Existentialism is alluring because it is so compatible with the old self-esteem ideas and humanism (that man and not God is central in the universe). People love to be the center and central actor in their own cosmic drama with God only having a bit part that always enhances them.

R.C. Sproul explains the meaning and ramifications of existentialism. After explaining the grammatical-historical method of finding the meaning of the text by studying the historical setting and properly defining the words used, he informs us that existentialism “says that God speaks through the Bible to each person directly, regardless of what the text actually says and meant when it was written. This completely relativistic approach denies all absolutes and abiding principles” (*Before the Face of God*, pg. 249).

So it is not all so mysterious after all. People are exchanging the truth of God for a human philosophy. Those who were born and grew up in the 1980s do not even know what happened. They have been nurtured on existentialism and self-centeredness, thinking the Bible only means what it means to them. It is a terrible loss as so many twist the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

—GRF

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used and the typical patient load was 75-85 people. It was a financial disaster and drain on the school, despite Roberts’ claim that God personally told him to build it.

In spring 1986, Roberts needed \$8 million to keep the medical program solvent. After raising only half that amount by the end of the year, Roberts took to the airwaves and said God had told him unless he raised the remaining \$4.5 million, his death would be imminent.

“Please help extend my life,” Roberts begged in January 1987. A Florida dog track owner donated the money, but those funds kept the City of Faith going only briefly. It closed in 1989 and sat vacant for several years before being sold to a group of commercial real estate investors.

Roberts is said to have written more than 130 books, including *The Miracle of Seed Faith*, which has more than 8 million copies in circulation. The book’s thesis — sow a financial seed out of your own need to experience a miracle harvest — has been used by many Charismatic and Pentecostal evangelists.

Roberts is preceded in death by his wife, Evelyn, who died in May 2005, and a daughter, Rebecca Ann Nash, who died in a small-plane crash in February 1977. He is survived by a son, Richard, and a daughter, Roberta, as well as by several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

—MKG

MOON PASSING TORCH TO CHILDREN

The Rev. Sun Myung Moon, 90, recently announced he will give four of his children responsibility for day-to-day operations of the Unification Church.

Three sons and a daughter will inherit various duties in the worldwide church, whose operations include a New York City hotel and a Washington, D.C., newspaper. All three sons, Hyun Jin Moon, 40, Kook Jin Moon, 39, and Hyung Jin Moon, 30, hold degrees from Harvard University. Hyun Jin Moon will manage the theological and business aspects of the church within the U.S. and South Korea. Moon’s daughter, In Jin Moon, will carry on the church operations in America. Worldwide, day-to-day, church functions are reportedly now being handled by Hyung Jin Moon.

Despite the announcement, the elder Moon says he remains in charge. Moon founded the church in May 1954 in Seoul, South Korea.

Hyung Jin Moon has a goal of increasing church membership. He also expresses a desire to be transparent as to the fund raising activities of the church. In the 1970s and 1980s, Moon’s church found itself a target of persistent and harsh criticism for its proselytizing and fund-raising efforts, which some called “heavenly deception.”

While Moon claims his church is Christian, its primary message is that Jesus Christ failed in His messianic mission and that God sent Moon to finish the job. Moon practices spiritism and other occult activities and claims that he has direct and repeated communication with the “spirit world.”

In spite of unbiblical beliefs and practices, Moon is regularly honored by religious and political leaders. On several occasions, the late Jerry Falwell spoke at events sponsored by Moon. In March 2004, Moon was crowned