

The Watchtower Understanding of the Knowledge of God

Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Watchtower Society, as they call themselves, seek to bear witness concerning Jehovah, the one true God, his character, and his purpose. So committed are the Jehovah's Witness to the Watchtower organization that they spend countless hours in Bible study, door-to-door witnessing and devotion. The purpose in the Witnesses devotion can be seen in their declaration of Psalm 83:18, "That men may know that thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the most high over all the earth."

In his book The Knowledge of the Holy, A.W.Tozer writes: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹ The Christian orthodox position concerning the characteristics and attributes of God, hold to the firm belief that God is by his very nature, Omnipresent (everywhere present), Omnipotent (All powerful), and Omniscience (All knowing). While on one hand, a cursory reading of Watchtower literature may lead one to believe that the Watchtower society espouses all of these attributes, in reality, they do not. This paper is presented in four parts: The first part attempts to present the Watchtower view of the omniscience of God. Secondly, this paper will demonstrate how the result of the denial of the omniscience of God affects the other attributes of God. Thirdly, this paper will attempt to present the orthodox Christian understanding of God's omniscience in two parts: First, what God knows, and secondly, How God knows. Finally, this paper will answer some of the common objections and misunderstandings made by the Jehovah's Witness and Watchtower society.

The Watchtower Position on God's Omniscience

The Knowledge of God

According to the Watchtower Society, Jehovah is self-contained, lacking nothing. In fact, they go on to state that nothing in God's creation can add anything to His knowledge or contribute any desirable quality to Him for He is unchanging not only in His qualities, but also in His standards.² However, The Watchtower teaching on the knowledge of God is far removed from the historical orthodox Christian position. God's knowledge of the past and present in Watchtower theology are far from perfect.

The difficulty in discussing the knowledge of God with the Jehovah Witness is that the Watchtower society is inconsistent with what they teach about it. According to the Watchtower, "the true God is infinite and beyond the mind of man fully to fathom". They also promote that "He is all powerful, being the Almighty God. (Gen 17:1; Rev 16:14), "all things are naked and openly exposed to the eyes of him," and He is the One telling from the beginning the finale". (Heb 4:13) His power and knowledge extend everywhere, reaching every part of the universe."³ However, they also teach that God does not directly or immediately know all things:

Before the perfect Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden there was no need for God to purpose the ransoming of the world of mankind by a perfect human sacrifice. **But as soon as that first human pair sinned God knew it or learned it, because now they felt guilty and hid them selves from sight.** God extracted their confession of sin. Immediately he formed his purpose of ransoming the world of Adam and Eve's descendents. He revealed this purpose by saying to the serpent who stood for the Tempter, Satan the Devil: "I shall put enmity between you and the woman and between

your seed and her seed. He will bruise you in the head and you will bruise him in the heel.”

Not only are present and past events not immediately known to God, but the future is yet to be known as well. The Society explains that: “Jehovah God created Adam in his image and likeness. Adam therefore had not only a perfect organism, but also the inclination to do the right thing. Only as a result of his sin did his offspring acquire another tendency. **Therefore, God had no reason to look into the future suspiciously to ascertain what man would do. Nor was it necessary for God to look into the future so as to prepare himself for any eventuality,** God’s creatures being unable to frustrate his purposes.”⁴ In fact, the God of the Watchtower inquires information in various ways including a host of heavenly angelic hosts.⁵ Early Watchtower literature once taught that “God’s knowledge of our affairs and interests is gained by methods with which we are not acquainted. However, it may be assumed that the medium used is largely the angelic messengers.”⁶

The Foreknowledge of God

Foreknowledge according to the Watchtower is defined as “knowledge of a thing before it happens or exists.”⁷ Before a proper understanding of the foreknowledge of God can be established, there are three basic factors the Watchtower stresses must necessarily be recognized: 1) God’s ability to foreknow is clearly taught, 2) the free moral agency of man, and 3) God’s moral standards and qualities. “The question then arises: Is his exercise of foreknowledge infinite, without limit?”⁸ The conclusion is no, God’s foreknowledge is selective and discretionary, using it only when there is a reason

to.⁹ The Watchtower defines selective foreknowledge as God's ability to "choose not to foreknow indiscriminately all the future acts of his creatures."¹⁰ As an example, the Watchtower points to the account of the fall of Adam and Eve pointing to the fact that God did not suspiciously intrude into their affairs as one seeking to find flaws in their minds and hearts, looking for trouble."¹¹ In fact, there is absolutely "no Scriptural evidence that Jehovah foreknew this trio's transgressions, on what basis can it be argued that he did? No sound basis. He would not have to foreknow the rebellion of these three in order to cope with it."¹² The Jehovah's Witness reasons that the implication of such a view would mean that God foreknew from all eternity all that would result from his creation, including the fall of Lucifer, the rebellion of the first human pair in Eden, and all the wickedness and evil that resulted as a consequence of sin throughout history. If so, concludes the Witness, "then the full weight of all the wickedness thereafter resulting was deliberately set in motion by God."¹³ In even stronger words, the Watchtower argues that "if God knew that Adam and Eve were doomed to failure, placing everlasting life before them would have been a cruel hoax."¹⁴ The answer, the Watchtower suggest is that God withholds knowledge from himself. They reason that the selective and discretionary use of God's power of foreknowledge best harmonizes with what we know of God's standard and is consistent with what he reveals of himself in his Word.¹⁵ So in the case of Adam and Eve, God knew or learned of their sin because they felt guilty and hid themselves from his sight.¹⁶ Realizing how serious the situation was, "God acted immediately, before man had an opportunity to get to the tree of life and eat of it."¹⁷ Other means by which God foreknows and foretells future events of individuals is on the basis of observing already evident thought patterns, responses, and in some cases, by

knowing the genetic makeup of humans before birth, God can perceive the personality and temperament of persons.¹⁸ An example cited by the Watchtower Society is that of Abraham. When God said that he “knew” Abraham, “he [Jehovah] was not simply saying that he was aware that Abraham existed but, rather, that he had become well acquainted with Abraham, for he had observed Abraham’s obedience and interest in true worship over many years.”¹⁹

In summary, while the Watchtower society recognizes Jehovah as the source of all knowledge and perfect in all of his qualities and standards, that perfection does not necessitate the infinite exercise of foreknowledge. Rather, God’s attribute of foreknowledge is used selectively and discretionally. By selective, the Watchtower explains, God choose not to foreknow indiscriminately all the future acts of his creatures. They go on to explain that this way God does not intrude on the free moral agency of men nor fix forever the fate of men and the consequences of sin from all eternity.

Watchtower View of Omniscience and the Attributes of God

The omniscience of God is important to the historical Christian faith, because a denial of God’s omniscience ultimately leads to the denial of every other attribute of God. The metaphysical attributes of God describe how God exist by nature. Ultimately, a denial of God’s omniscience reduces God to a creature rather than the creator.

God's Pure Actuality

God, as the uncaused cause of all things exists as pure actuality. As human beings, we are created with potential. We have the potential to learn, grow, change, etc. When we learn grow and change, we move from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality. Think of a pile of bricks, they have the potential to actually become a building, so they are comprised of actuality and potential.

God however is Pure Existence with no potential to be actualized. For everything that has potential, needs an actualizer to actualize its potential. But God is uncaused and therefore must exist necessarily with no potential to be anything other than what He is, namely Pure Actualization. According to the Watchtower organization, God does not know all things and in fact comes to learn new things over time. But anything that comes to know moves from a state of potentiality (to know) to actuality (knowing). Therefore, if the Watchtower view of God's omniscience is correct, God would not be generator of all things, but in reality would be dependent on another to actualize his potential.

God's Immutability

What ever changes moves from a state of potentiality to actuality. God, as Pure Actuality, has no potentiality to actualize, therefore, God cannot change. Further, in order for change to be possible, something must remain the same through the change. In other words, there must be a part that changes and a part or identity that remains the same. But God as a simple being does not have parts, therefore God cannot change. If the Watchtower's understanding of God's foreknowledge is correct, Jehovah God would

have to be a complex being (composed of parts) with the potential for change, and need a cause to adequately account for that change, which is impossible.

God's Eternality

The word eternal comes from two words meaning “no time” or non temporal. Classical Theism affirms that God is Eternal. The Bible teaches us that “In the Beginning there was God (Gen 1:1; John 1:1). He is the creator of time, space and matter and therefore is above and beyond his creation. In contrast to the Watchtower view of God's knowledge, God has no potential to be actualized and therefore cannot “come” to know anything. Further, to learn something new implies there was a time when God did not know it. However, time is a measurement of change, and God as an immutable being can not change, therefore if the Watchtower position is correct, then God could not be eternal. As a result, God would need a first cause to account for His existence.

God's Infinity

The word infinity comes from two words meaning “not finite” it conveys the idea of being without limits. This is not to be understood abstractly or mathematically for God is not an infinite series of real things or moments. God is an actual infinite being and has no parts that can be added to. As a Being of Pure Actuality, God has no limits. Potential is what limits actuality, similar to how a container limits the potential of how much actual substance it can contain. Since God has no potential, there is nothing to limit His actuality; therefore He is without limit or infinite. According to the Watchtower society, God does not know all things, and in fact, comes to know new things over time.

However, without the potential to learn something new, God as pure act must know what He knows in a limitless way. Therefore if the Watchtower is correct, God can not be infinite.

In summary, a careful examination of some of the metaphysical attributes of God in relationship to the Watchtower understanding of the God's omniscience reveals that the omniscience of God is not just a good suggestion, but essential to our understanding of God's nature. A denial of the complete omniscience of God results in a view of God that resembles a creature rather than the creator. The third section of this paper will attempt to present the orthodox Christian understanding of the Omniscience of God in two parts: 1) What God knows, and 2) How God knows.

God's Omniscience

What God Knows

God knows all things (1 John 3:20). He knows every act and thought of man (Ps.139:2-4). Nothing is hidden from God's sight for all things are uncovered and lay bare before Him (Heb. 4:13). In the book of Isaiah, God makes a distinction between Himself and the pagans based on the fact that He alone knows the past, present, and future. The Lord states: "Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come – yes, let him tell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and tell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?"

No, there is no other Rock; I know not one (Isa. 44:7-8).” He goes on to say that “I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done...(Isa. 46:10).”

Unlike the Watchtower understanding of God’s knowledge, God knows all things past, present and future. The Bible affirms God’s direct knowledge of all things. He does not need to learn or come to know any thing in any way.

How God knows

Much of the Watchtower society’s misunderstanding of God’s knowledge is based on their univocal use of the word “know.” They improperly assume that not only does God know “what” we know, but also “how” we know it. “God knows the same things we do, but he does not know them the same way we know them. Our knowledge is discursive, moving from premises to conclusions. In human knowledge there is twofold discursiveness: One thing is known after another, and one thing is known through another. But God cannot know things sequentially, since he is timeless and knows all things eternally at once. Nor can God know things inferentially, for he is simple and knows all things through the oneness of himself.”²⁰

All knowledge involves an apprehender and a thing to apprehend. However, God as the uncaused actualizer of all things has no such duality. He knows according to His mode of existence. Therefore, God is not a Being who has anything, He simply is. So what God “has” He “is” in accord with His very nature. So since God is an Eternal, Unchanging, Infinite Being, He must know in an Eternal, Unchanging, and Infinite way.

Properly speaking, God does not “fore-know” things “out there.” He does not have to peer into space and time to “see” the affairs of man. God’s knowledge is in Himself as the efficient cause of all things. “An effect pre-exists in the mind of its efficient cause. Hence, whatever exists must pre-exist in God, who is its efficient cause.”²¹ Imagine a painter who steps back to admire his creation and says perfect. He says this because he has modeled the painting after the perfect painting in his mind. While you and I had to see the painting in order to enjoy or know its beauty, the painter knew it before he ever painted it. In fact, the painter would have known the painting whether it ever actually existed in reality or not, because the painting existed potentially in the mind of the painter. Similarly, all knowledge of all things pre-existed in God. He does not know things “out there” or by seeing them, but in and through Himself perfectly, intuitively, and directly.

Responding to Watchtower Objections and Misunderstandings

Does God Learn?

Jehovah’s Witness claim to believe in the omniscience of God. However, they present God as having to learn of the transgressions of Adam and Eve. In the Watchtower publication it states that “as soon as the first human pair sinned God knew it or learned it, because now they felt guilty and hid themselves from sight.” Another example offered is that of Abraham. Witnesses point out that after Abraham proved his willingness to obey God and offer his son Isaac, God spoke to him in Genesis 22:12

saying: “**Now I know** that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” How are we to respond to the idea of God being able to learn?

Response

First, Scripture must always be carefully considered in its context and in accord with what God has revealed of Himself in the rest of Scripture and in His nature. A careful reading of Gen. 3, does not present God as having learned of Adam and Eve’s sin, but addressing their actions by the question “Where are you?” This is similar language that a parent would use when they ask a child “what have you done?” This best fits the passage and what we know in Scripture of the nature of God. In Genesis 22, God tested Abraham. “There is nothing here about God’s desire to learn anything. Rather, God wanted to prove something (cf. 2 Chronicles 32:31). What God knew by cognition, He desired to show by demonstration. By passing the test, Abraham demonstrated what God always knew: namely, that he feared God. God, who knows all things cognitively from the beginning, could appropriately say after Abraham had proven his faith, “Now I know [demonstratively] that you fear God.”²²

Does God select what He wants to know?

While the Bible presents God as all knowing, The Watchtower presents God’s knowledge as selective and discretionary. By this the Witness means that God can choose to exercise His power of foreknowledge at His will and pleasure. In defense of this view the Witness suggest: “To illustrate this, God’s almightiness is undeniably perfect and is infinite in capacity. (1 Ch 29:11, 12; Job 36:22; 37:23) Yet His perfection in strength

does not require Him to use His power to the full extent of His omnipotence in any or in all cases. Clearly He has not done so; if He had, not merely certain ancient cities and some nations would be destroyed. Similarly, if, in certain respects, God chooses to exercise His infinite ability of foreknowledge in a selective way and to the degree that pleases Him, then assuredly no human or angel can rightly say: “What are you doing?” It is not a question of ability, but the question is what God sees fit to foresee, foreknow, and foreordain, for everything that He delighted to do He has done.”

Response

This illustration points out the Jehovah’s Witness misunderstanding of God’s nature and how God knows. Properly speaking, God does not “decide” or “choose” what to know, He simply knows. The Bible presents God as being able or “can” do all things because He is omnipotent, similarly, God “knows” all things because He is omniscience. It doesn’t say that God “can” know all things, but that He by His nature does know all things. As pointed out earlier, God does not “exercise” His knowledge as one who has to look outward to see things. As the creator of all things, God sees the past, present, and future in one eternal “now.” Knowledge is not a property or power that God has, but an attribute of his very nature. Further in order for God to “select” what not to know, He would have to know the very things He selectively chose not to know.

Wouldn't God's foreknowledge "intrude" upon the free will of men?

The Jehovah's Witness argues that if God already knows what a person will do, then the future is fixed and impossible to change. If this is the case, then it is impossible for a person to do otherwise, therefore, free will is a hoax.

Response

Since God is an eternal, infinite, all knowing Being, He knows eternally how we will use our freedom. "If God has infallible foreknowledge of the future, including our free acts, then everything that will happen in the future is predetermined, even our free acts. This does not mean these actions are not free; it simply means that God knew how we were going to use our freedom – and that He knew it for sure."²³ So from the standpoint of God, the future is known, presently and perfectly. It is not a good idea that might happen, but is a declaration of what will happen. God's foreknowledge is not coercive, but merely knows the future free will choices and actions of all mankind. Jehovah's Witness confuse God's ability to know the future free acts of men with determining what men must do. Both are true from the standpoint of two different relationships, man and God's.

Is God Responsible for Evil?

The Jehovah's Witness reasons that the implication of God foreknowing from all eternity all that would result from His creation, including the fall of Lucifer, the rebellion of Adam and Eve, and all the wickedness and evil that resulted as a consequence of sin suggest that He is responsible for evil.

Response

First, a proper understanding of what evil is should be defined. Evil is a real privation or the absence of what should be there. Blindness is a privation of sight, darkness is a privation of light, and likewise, evil is a privation of good. God did not create human kind like a robot. He created human beings in His image, with the ability of free will. In doing so, God is responsible for making evil possible, but man with free will is responsible for making evil actual. Free choice is good, but with it comes the potential for evil. The fact that God knows the free will choices of His creation does not necessitate that He be responsible for their free choices.

Conclusion

The Jehovah's Witness that confronts you at the doorstep sincerely wants to share with you what it is that they believe. They have spent many hours in study and are delighted to share with you the importance of knowing Jehovah God. They have biblically prepared themselves to discuss with you the pagan origin of the concept of the Trinity and the inferiority of the Son of God. After all, the Witness points out, how could Jesus be God, when He didn't even know when he was coming back again? Doesn't God know all things? Interesting enough I have had this very experience with Jehovah's Witnesses at my home. But how would the Jehovah's Witness respond to learn that Jehovah God Himself doesn't know all things? As witnesses of Jehovah, shouldn't it be important to know what kind of God they are witnesses of?

Jehovah's Witness at your door is very prophecy conscious and stresses the importance of prophecy and knowing the future. Yet according the teachings of the Watchtower Society, Jehovah God does not know all things. Jehovah God learns of past and even present events by various avenues. He had no way of knowing Adam and Eve would sin and it fact learned about it after they hid themselves. God's foreknowledge of future events are exercised selectively and discretionarily. According to the Witnesses, God is not in the business of prying into the affairs of men. This they believe intrudes upon the moral free will of mankind. For God to know the future free will of mankind, according to the Watchtower, leaves God responsible for evil and destroys the idea of free will.

However, the denial of God's omniscience ultimately leads to the denial of every other attribute of God. The metaphysical attributes of God describe how God exist by nature. Ultimately, a denial of God's omniscience reduces God to a creature rather than the creator. It is important to address the objections and misunderstandings that the Jehovah's Witness may have. Jehovah Witness' are confused about what God knows with how God knows. They improperly apply a univocal sense to the word "know." They assume God knows what we know, the way we know. The Jehovah's Witness understanding of God's knowledge is inconsistent not only with regard to Scripture, but also with many of there own teaching. If it is the case that Jehovah God is Almighty, Eternal, Uncaused and the creator of all time, space and matter; it seems to follow that they would believe that He would have all knowledge of past, present and future events.

The implication of the Jehovah's Witness teachings on the knowledge and foreknowledge of God reduces God to a creature rather than creator and presents a God

that is untrustworthy and undependable. The Jehovah's Witness who approaches you at the doorstep is unaware of many of these implications and puts their faith, trust and hope in a God who cannot save them.

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 9.

² *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 2 p.14

³ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1 p.969

⁴ *Awake*, 22 October, 1967, 28.

⁵ *The Watchtower*, 1 August, 1970, p. 471.

⁶ *The Watchtower*, 15 February 1915, p. 57.

⁷ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1 p. 851

⁸ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol.852

⁹ *The Watchtower*, 15 July 1984, p.5.

¹⁰ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol. 1 p.853

¹¹ *The Watchtower*, 1 June 1953, p.340

¹² *Ibid.*, p.341

¹³ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol.1 p.853

¹⁴ *The Watchtower*, 15 July 1984, p.5

¹⁵ *Insight on the Scriptures*, Vol.1 p. 853

¹⁶ *The Watchtower*, 12 January 1964, p.52

¹⁷ *Deliverance*, 1926, p.30

¹⁸ *Insight on the Scriptures* Vol.1 p. 857; *Is this Life all there is?*, 1974, p.58

¹⁹ *Insight on the Scriptures* Vol. 2 p.181

²⁰ Norman L. Geisler., *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich, Baker, 1999). 287

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.286

²² Norman L. Geisler., *Creating God in the Image of man* (Bethany House Publishers, Minn, 1997). p.88

²³ Norman L. Geisler., *Chosen But Free* (Bethany House Publishers, Minn, 1997). p.45

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Elwell, Walter A. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Baker, 1984

Geisler, Norman L. *BECA*. Grand Rapids, MI. 1999.

_____. *Chosen But Free*. Bethany House, MI. 1980.

_____. *Creating God in the Image of Man*, Grand Rapids, MI. 1997.

_____. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, Bethany House. 2003.

_____. *The Roots of Evil*, Zondervan, 1978

Insight on the Scriptures, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1988

The Watchtower, Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society.