

Does God Work Through An Organization?

Does God have an organization?

Has He always had an organization?

Was Israel God's organization?

Are Jehovah's Witnesses His organization today?

Can an organization serve as God's prophet or spokesperson?

Does the Bible tell Christians to identify or be loyal to God's organization?

The material in this publication was prepared especially for persons who are or have been associated with Jehovah's Witnesses. It examines Biblical evidence which bears on the questions raised above, all of which arise from the assertions made in Watchtower Society publications to the effect that God has always worked through an organization. It also explores the idea that Jehovah's Witnesses, in whole or in part, have scriptural authorization to be a "channel of communication" between God and mankind.

Unless noted otherwise, Bible quotations are from the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, 1971 edition. Quotations from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1983 edition, are noted as (NIV). Revised May, 2000

Does God Work Through An Organization?

THE WATCHTOWER asserts that God has always communicated with and directed his servants through an organization. It teaches that God directs all his interests on earth through that organization, and that outside it there is no possibility of either salvation or divine favor. Today, it teaches, God's organization is identified with Jehovah's Witnesses. It represents their governing body and its legal agent, the Watchtower, Bible and Tract Society, as a divinely-appointed "channel of communication" between God and man. Recognizing the authority of the "spirit-directed organization" is even included in Jehovah's Witnesses' requirements for baptism.

Through printed publications and representatives, the Watchtower Society headquarters staff gives regular, detailed direction to thousands of congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide. They coordinate field activities, adjust explanations of doctrinal or organizational subjects, provide rules and regulations to govern religious and secular matters, and specify disciplinary procedures for those who fail to conform. The headquarters staff also receives regular reports from representatives in the field.¹

As used in Watchtower publications, the term "Jehovah's organization" means more than just a group of worshipers, for it also teaches that God has always authorized either an individual or a small group within the entire body of His people on earth to interpret, pass on or distribute information and instructions from God to the rest of his approved servants. It also teaches that God has no independent dealings with individuals apart from this approved "channel of communication."

This is the question to be considered herein: Does God work through a visible earthly organization, directed by a small group of His appointed representatives, which may not be ignored or bypassed? What does the Bible show?

From Adam to the Flood

God spoke directly to Adam and Eve. He blessed them and told them what he expected of them. (Gen. 1:28-30) After they sinned, he questioned them and pronounced judgment directly upon them and the serpent. (Gen. 3:9-19) God judged sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel individually. When Cain showed an incorrect attitude, God gave him personal guidance and a warning against sin.

After he murdered his brother, God judged him as an individual.—Gen. 4:6-15

During the long patriarchal period, obedience to God's command to mankind to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth would mean his servants would spread out rather than gather together. Consistently, there is no mention of any group of God's servants who either worshiped in a central location or regularly received messages *as a group* from God to pass on to others.

When God decided to cleanse the earth of unrighteousness by means of a flood, he selected Noah to carry out the instructions that would preserve both the human and animal families. God spoke directly to Noah.² A "preacher of righteousness" (2 Pet. 2:5), Noah acted as a prophet, one who communicates divine messages. After the flood, Noah, as patriarch, made sacrifices to God on behalf of his family, a pattern that was to last for many centuries. (Job 1:5) Family heads represented their families before God as priest or mediator in that limited sense.

From the Flood to Sinai

After the flood, God repeated his command to "be fruitful and become many and *fill the earth*." (Gen. 9:1) He continued to speak directly to individuals. He communicated through angels, dreams, visions and prophets, who received messages from God and were compelled to deliver them to their recipients. When a group of rebels conspired to build a great city and a tower, partly due to fear that they would be "scattered over all the surface of the earth," Jehovah God confused their languages, which forced them to obey, at least for a time, his command to fill the earth. — Gen. 11:4, 8

Hundreds of years later, God promised his friend Abraham, an outstanding man of faith, that he

would become “a great nation.” (Gen. 12:2) This marked the beginning of something new. A favored family would receive special attention and produce a promised Messiah. Did this mark the beginning of a new, more “organized” way of communicating with mankind?

As Abraham’s family grew, God continued to communicate directly with his servants. Yet it appears that no one, even the prophets, had the whole picture, nor did God always speak through only one “channel” at a time. For example, while still a boy living with Jacob his father, Joseph dreamed inspired dreams that foretold the future. Joseph was sent by Jehovah to Egypt to prepare the way for the growth of Jacob’s family into a nation. But Jehovah did not reveal to Jacob what He was doing, although he was a patriarch and prophet. (Gen. 42:36) Under God’s guidance, seventy-five descendants of Abraham moved down to Egypt. When they came out over 400 years later, they likely numbered in the millions.

When God was about to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt, he spoke personally to Moses through a burning bush. He commissioned Moses to perform miracles to show both the Israelites and the Egyptians the meaning and power behind Jehovah’s name. However, their readiness to accept and worship a golden calf on the plains of Sinai, for example, and other signs of weak faith suggests that while in Egypt they had not, *as a group*, practiced the pure worship of their ancestor Abraham.

The Israelites entered into a special covenant relationship with God after they left Egypt. They received the Law, which would guide them in moral, civil and religious matters. *The Watchtower* presents these events as a parallel of how Jehovah’s Witnesses were brought out of the “world,” especially Christendom, and received centralized direction through an earthly “channel of communication,” resulting in their being built up into their current organized form. Israel is used as a “type” or picture of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Does the picture hold true? Did the Mosaic Law create a centralized administrative structure like the Watchtower Society?

How Was Israel Organized?

Moses truly was a “channel of communication” between God and the Israelites. He is referred to in scripture as a “mediator.” (Num. 12:7; Gal. 3:19) In that role, he foreshadowed Jesus Christ. (Deut. 18:18,19; compare with Acts 3:19-23.) Moses led Israel and he was a prophet. His successor Joshua was a leader, but not a mediator or a prophet like Moses. Moses’ brother Aaron, his descendants the priests, and the other members of their tribe, the Levites, were only to carry out religious functions, not executive or prophetic ones. Who, then, directed things in Israel?

The nation of Israel was actually a single family. It was “organized” along family lines. In Israel, elders and “chieftains over hundreds and thousands” were not elected by popular vote nor appointed by God. They were relatives of the people they represented. Each tribe was a family group, descended from a common ancestor.

The Mosaic Law gave moral and religious guidance to the Israelites. It provided extensive definitions of sinful thoughts or actions that could occur in every facet of everyday life, along with specific procedures for dealing with that sinfulness. But it did not set up any human form of government or administrative body. Under the Law, the Israelites were to be guided by personal conscience rather than human rulers who enforced governmental power through police or other armed forces. The people themselves, under the supervision of the elders, carried out sanctions against sinners or lawbreakers in each community. The priests supervised the accompanying offerings and other religious procedures. Each individual was responsible for his own behavior before God, his family and the community. This was a theocratic form of government in its true sense: *God himself acted in place of any earthly king*. Did this form of government work?

From Sinai to Samuel

After entering the Promised Land, the Israelites lived under this arrangement for over 350 years without either human king or centralized government. “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did

as he saw fit.” (Judges 21:25) This theocratic arrangement did not result in anarchy. The evidence shows that it produced excellent results.

God selected and appointed judges from time to time, as needed. They acted more as military leaders than administrators or governors. At times more than one judge was active. At times no judge was active. Judges had no special executive authority, for God was to be their only ruler. The final chapters of Judges contain an interesting and unusual story of how justice was administered under this arrangement in the case of a particularly violent crime.

The Bible record shows that during over two thirds of the period of the Judges, there was peace in the land. Following occasions when judges appeared to deliver Israel from enemies, there were three periods of forty years and one period of eighty years when the land had “peace.” (Judges 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28) There were never so many times of peace after the period of the Judges ended. In fact, during that time, the Bible only reports that one prophet, the woman Deborah, was sent to Israel. What happened to change the situation?

A Bad Idea Takes Root

In Samuel the prophet’s day, the Israelites began to clamor for a king. They wanted a visible centralized government. Why? Was it because the theocratic form of rule that had brought peace and prosperity for generations wasn’t working? No. Was it to protect them from apostasy? No. Why was it? In their own words: “Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” (1 Sam. 8:20) It was so they could be just like the pagan nations around them. It was a selfish, worldly and untheocratic idea. And God said exactly that. Samuel thought that Israel had rejected him as prophet, but Jehovah corrected him. He said that their request *was a rejection of him as their king*. God warned Israel that a centralized form of government would lead to many difficulties, but they continued to insist that God give them a human king. — 1 Sam. 8-10

God granted their request. He chose a good and capable man, Saul, as their first king. With the passage of time, the good qualities for which Saul was chosen became corrupted. God rejected Saul and chose another king for Israel, the boy David, who grew up into a man “agreeable to [God’s] heart.” (1 Sam. 13:14) Even a man with this wonderful quality was not without serious faults. David’s reign was marred by scandal and tragedy.

David’s son Solomon, also selected by God himself, was called “the wisest of all men.” His forty-year reign was marked by peace, prosperity and happiness. In old age, he became unfaithful to God. (1 Ki. 11:4-6) As a result, when Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, took the throne and followed his father’s example, Jehovah split the nation forever into two kingdoms: ten tribes in the north (Israel) and two tribes in the south (Judah).—1 Ki. 11:9-13

Centralized government over all Israelites failed miserably. It lasted only three generations, *even though God himself selected their kings*. From this point on in Jewish history, comparing the Israelites with Jehovah’s Witnesses in the twentieth century becomes even more difficult and complicated.

Two Kingdoms, One Organization?

After the division into two kingdoms, things were never the same for the Jews. The kingdom of Judah continued to have David’s descendants as kings, while the kingdom of Israel had multiple dynasties, at times changing through bloody warfare. The two kingdoms fought wars with outside enemies, and they fought each other. Each had its own line of kings. The northern kingdom set up a center of worship in Samaria, largely replaced the Levitical priests with non-Levite priests and increasingly adopted the practice of false worship.

It is hard to imagine how the governmental situation for the Jews could be compared in any way to a single harmonious organization with a central administrative structure. It is not as if one of the kingdoms

was faithful to God and the other unfaithful. God did not refuse to deal with one kingdom or the other. He sent prophets to both kingdoms, pleading with them to repent. When there were unrighteous kings in either kingdom, wickedness flourished. But under righteously-inclined kings, there was generally a return to a more pure form of worship and blessings.

The northern kingdom, Israel, fell at the hands of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser in the middle of the eighth century before Christ. In time, some of their descendants returned to their former capital, Samaria, in northern Palestine. In Jesus' day they were known as Samaritans, and their Jewish cousins hated them.

After the fall of the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, Judah, continued to have both good and bad kings. In the sixth century before Christ, God finally allowed them to be taken captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar due to their unfaithfulness. After the captivity, a relatively small group did return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and reestablish themselves in their Jewish homeland. But most never returned to Palestine.

Almost twenty centuries passed from the time God promised his friend Abraham that his offspring would become a nation until Jesus came. Israelites did worship together faithfully from time to time, especially in the centuries before they had a king. But they *never* had a central administrative body that even remotely resembled today's Watchtower organization, either in form or function. Yet *during the entire time*, they were still God's chosen people. How do we know this?

Jesus Sent To The "Lost Sheep Of Israel"

By the time Jesus appeared on the scene, Israel as a nation was anything but highly organized. The majority of them (what was left of the ten-tribe kingdom, plus the descendants of the large number of Jews who didn't return to Palestine after the Babylonian captivity) were scattered throughout the earth. Foreigners governed them. They did not practice pure worship. They were divided in their beliefs. They had embellished and added to the Law to the point that even simple commands such as the Sabbath were very burdensome to obey. Commercialism, meaningless rituals and formalities corrupted the worship carried on in Jerusalem.

In spite of this situation, however, Jesus' ministry was directed to Jews and Samaritans rather than Gentiles. Why? In his own words, he was only sent "to the lost sheep of ... Israel." (Matt. 15:24) In spite of unfaithfulness and apostasy, *they were still God's chosen people*. It was only after they rejected Jesus as Messiah that their 'house was abandoned to them.' —Matt. 23:38, compare Matt 21:33-43

How Did God Communicate With Israel?

The Bible is filled with examples of how God communicated with his people. He spoke to some directly (Gen. 46:1-4; Josh. 8:1) or through angels. (Judg. 6:11-24; chapter 13) Others received visions or dreams. (1 Ki. 3:5-15; 9:1-9; Isa. 1:1; Amos 7:1-9; Ezek. 1:1) But most messages to God's people were delivered by prophets. As Hebrews 1:1 states: "God...long ago spoke on many occasions and in many ways to our forefathers *by means of the prophets*."

Prophets usually appeared in Israel when the people were unfaithful. These prophets simply received messages from God and passed them on. Those messages from God (prophecies) warned the people to turn away from false worship and encouraged them to obey the Law. Who appointed prophets? They were not chosen by national leaders, priests or even by other prophets. They were appointed by God himself. (Num. 11:24-29)

The job of prophet as described in the Bible offered little prestige or power. Prophets were usually unpopular. Most of them were treated poorly by God's chosen people. Many were brutally persecuted or killed by the leaders of the nation.

Since there was no arrangement in the Law for appointing prophets, nor any official procedure to authorize them, *it was left to each individual* Israelite to determine whether someone who called himself a prophet was truly speaking God's message. So the Law specified three signs of true prophets and prophecies: 1. the prophet spoke in the name of Jehovah, 2. the prophecy came true, 3. the prophecy promoted true worship.—Deut. 18:20-22; 13:1-4

Were God's prophets ever organized into a central body that gave direction to the nation of Israel? The Bible mentions groups of prophets in a couple of places, such as 1 Sam. 10:5, 10; 2 Ki. 2:3, 5 and 4:38, but they *never* acted as any type of regular "channel of communication" from God. In fact, at times prophets were not in contact with other prophets or even other true worshipers.

For example, during one of the periods of the northern kingdom's unfaithfulness, the prophet Elijah believed himself to be the only person in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal. Yet God revealed to him: "I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." (1 Ki. 19:18) Those faithful persons would doubtless have been considered disloyal to the anointed king that was in power. Yet they were obviously not organized into any type of group. They lived in quiet personal faith to God while surrounded by God's unfaithful (but still chosen) people.

Throughout the entire pre-Christian period, the Bible mentions faithful individuals who were loyal to God, regardless of whether or not the nation's leaders were faithful. This was true right up until Jesus appeared. A righteous prophet named Simeon saw the young child Jesus, in fulfillment of a prophecy given him by God. A faithful prophetess named Anna is also mentioned.—Luke 2:25-38

The Christian Era Begins

Jesus' arrival involved a new *spokesman* rather than a new *way* of communication between God and man. Hebrews 1:2 says, "in these last days, [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." Would Jesus establish a visible organization to represent his interests on earth, or would each individual Christian be an "ambassador substituting for Christ?"—2 Cor. 5:20

When Jesus encouraged watchfulness, "Peter asked, 'Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?' The Lord answered, 'Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.'" Jesus then showed that there were various possibilities for disobedient slaves. He concluded: "That slave that understood the will of his master but did not get ready or do in line with his will will be beaten with many strokes. But the one that did not understand and so did things deserving of strokes will be beaten with few. Indeed, everyone to whom much was given, much will be demanded of him; and the one whom people put in charge of much, they will demand more than usual of him."—Luke 12:41-48

The Watchtower uses Jesus' rhetorical question in the parallel passage in Matthew 24:44-51 as the basis for assuming authority as "the [one and only] faithful and discreet slave" in charge of "all [the master's] belongings." But it is hard to imagine that this parable (especially as Luke recounts it) refers to multiple religious organizations, each having more or less accountability based on what each did with the knowledge each had. It makes much more sense as an exhortation to individual Christians to be constantly aware of the importance of proper behavior toward others, especially other Christians, always remembering the fact that one day everyone will have to answer to a higher Authority.

Were The Apostles A "Governing Body?"

If Jesus wanted to establish a "channel of communication" through which increased understanding of the Scriptures would be revealed, surely we could expect that his faithful apostles would be that

“channel,” the ones to whom “new light” would be revealed. However, the record shows that not to be the case. Some of the apostles appear often in the inspired record of the growth of Christianity. But only three wrote part of the Bible: Matthew, Peter and John. Others of the twelve did not figure nearly so prominently in the growth and spread of Christianity as did Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy. And the majority of the inspired Christian scriptures were written by persons other than the twelve, most notably Paul, but also Mark, Luke, James (Jesus’ brother) and Jude.

Jesus’ life, death and resurrection fulfilled many prophecies in ways not anticipated by religious teachers of the apostles’ day. Christians needed help to understand them. How was the truth of Jesus’ role as Messiah revealed to early Christians? According to Luke 24:13-35, Jesus, on the same day he was resurrected, appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, a man named Cleopas and another disciple. “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to *them*” (not to the eleven) “what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.” (NIV) This complete explanation of how the Hebrew prophecies applied to Jesus was an outstanding example of divine revelation. Jesus shared a meal with them and left. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, found the eleven apostles, and told them about their meeting with Jesus. While they were telling the story, Jesus appeared to the assembled group.

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus clearly told the eleven that *he had already been given authority* to take personal responsibility for everything: “All authority *has been given me* in heaven and on the earth. Go therefore and make disciples of people of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy spirit, teaching them to obey all the things I have commanded you. And, look! I am with you all the days until the conclusion of the system of things.”—Matt. 28:18-20

Jesus had told his disciples before his death that he would send a helper or counselor to take his place on earth after he returned to heaven: “I will request the Father and he will give you another helper to be with you forever, the spirit of the truth.” (John 14:16) Speaking later of the work of this helper, Jesus continued: “when that one arrives, the spirit of the truth, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak of his own impulse, but what things he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things coming. That one will glorify me, because he will receive from what is mine and will declare it to you.”—John 16:13, 14

Was this “helper” simply to work during a short interval, a generation or so, after the start of the Christian congregation, until Jesus could organize them into a worldwide organization to take over the duties of feeding the disciples, “guiding them into all truth”, and speaking on Jesus’ behalf? No. Jesus said that the “helper” would with them “forever,” needing no replacement.

Jesus promised to be with them “all the days until the conclusion of the system of things” so there was no reason for them to expect the development of any centralized human organization to give guidance or direction. Even if they were to gather together in small groups to encourage each other, they could be *assured* of Jesus’ presence and blessing. Jesus said: “... where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”—Matt. 18:20

The Jerusalem “Council”— Source of “New Light?”

The Watchtower suggests that the elders of the congregation at Jerusalem, the city from which the Gospel began to spread to all the world, acted much like the governing body of Jehovah’s Witnesses, deciding matters of importance for Christians in other congregations, and acting as a source of increased understanding of truth. It states that the elders in Jerusalem acted in that capacity when an issue arose involving circumcision. Is this really what the Bible teaches? What was the role of the Jerusalem congregation in this matter? Let’s examine the record, found in Acts 15:1-35 and Gal. 2:1-14.

According to Acts, an issue was raised when some men came from Jerusalem (“from James,” see Gal. 2:12) to Antioch and started teaching something new, something Paul hadn’t taught these Gentile believers. What was this “new truth” from Jerusalem? “You cannot be saved unless you are

circumcised as the Law of Moses requires," they said. This was in direct conflict with what Jesus himself had revealed to Paul, that it was by faith, not works of law, that one could be saved. Paul took strong issue with this "new teaching." But the men from Jerusalem insisted they were right, so Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to "see the apostles and elders about this question." Paul's account in Galatians shows that he went to Jerusalem at the direction of the Lord himself, "as the result of a revelation." As it turned out, certain Jewish Christians *did* believe that circumcision (and keeping the Mosaic Law) was necessary for salvation.

Paul's account of this situation given to the Galatians shows that he went into a private meeting with those "who seemed to be something" in the congregation, prominent elders. He "set before them the Gospel that [he preached] among the Gentiles, and did not give in to them for a moment." Those godly men recognized that they were in error, accepted the correction given by Jesus through Paul, and spoke up in a larger meeting with the other elders, reading from the Scriptures and guiding the meeting so all arrived at a proper viewpoint. They then wrote a letter of apology *addressed specifically to the Gentiles in Antioch*, saying: "For the holy spirit and we ourselves have favored adding no further burden to you." (Acts 15:28) then suggesting some things they should avoid to contribute to peace between Jews and Gentiles, as well as to their health and prosperity.³

There is certainly no evidence that any new understanding came out of this meeting. The elders at Jerusalem received correction rather than giving direction. This account does not even suggest that a "governing body" of men in Jerusalem made rules and regulations to pass on to all other Christians. Quite the opposite is the case. The evidence clearly shows that God's spirit worked through faithful individuals, to guide the Christian congregation away from error.

God's Spirit Works With Early Christians

Jesus told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they had been "clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:49) This occurred at Pentecost. Peter spoke on that occasion, applying Joel's prophecy to what had happened. Included in that prophecy, to be fulfilled throughout the Christian era, was the prediction that "I shall pour out some of my spirit upon every sort of flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams; and even on my men slaves and my women slaves I will pour out some of my spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (Acts 2:17, 18) This prophecy indicates that God would communicate with Christians *in exactly the same ways* he had during pre-Christian times: directly, by visions, dreams and through prophets. Does the scriptural record show that this happened?

The book of Acts is filled with accounts that clearly illustrate the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. It shows the very active involvement of Jesus personally, as well as the holy spirit, angels, visions and dreams in the early Christian congregation. This included the conversion of individuals, the expansion of the congregation, selecting and guiding apostles and missionaries, keeping the congregation from corruption by falsehood, encouraging and assisting Christians through trials and hardships, and guiding the recording and preservation of all essential information that Christians would need in the coming centuries, that is, the Christian Scriptures. There was no essential part of the growth of Christianity that Jesus or the holy spirit did not guide and direct.

Consider the case of Philip and the Ethiopian. Philip was preaching in Samaria. An angel sent him to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch. The spirit sent Philip to his chariot. After Philip baptized him, God's spirit led Philip away. — Acts 8:36, 39, 40

Consider Cornelius, a devout, God-fearing man. He had a vision of an angel of God, who told him to send men to Joppa to get Peter. Meanwhile Peter, on the roof praying, fell into a trance, and was told by a voice that things formerly considered unclean were now clean. The spirit told him about the men sent by Cornelius. Peter went to Cornelius' house, where he proclaimed the Gospel to a large group of

people, who became Christians. — Acts 10:1-46

Jesus himself converted Saul. (Acts 9:3-6; 15) Saul (Paul), under the influence of holy spirit, was outstanding among the apostles for carrying the Christian message to non-Jewish persons. He started many congregations. Who authorized him to do so? Was it the congregation at Jerusalem or even Antioch, from which he left on his missionary journeys? No. Saul and Barnabus were commissioned as missionaries and sent out at the specific direction of the holy spirit. — Acts 13:1-4

The record shows that persons to whom Paul preached were directed to look to Christ himself for guidance rather than any group of elders, in Jerusalem or elsewhere. When Paul spoke to a jailer in Phillipi, he simply spoke God's word to the man and "all those in his house" shortly after their miraculous release, sometime after midnight. Before dawn, the jailer and his whole household (possibly including children and servants) were baptized. Did Paul direct their attention to the local congregation to finish their "training?" No, for there was no congregation there, only another recent convert, a woman named Lydia. — Acts 16:30-34

There are many other examples that could be cited, but the message is clear: Jesus Christ himself and the holy spirit, rather than any man or group of men, played the most active role in guiding early Christians. The spirit guided Paul and his companions during his missionary tours (Acts 16:6-10; 18:9-11; 20:22, 23; 21:4), rescued them from danger, inspired them to write letters to congregations, and appointed overseers. — Acts 20:28; 32, 33

Like the Israelites, Christians must take the responsibility as individuals to learn how to distinguish between true and false prophets and their teachings. The apostle John, addressing this issue, did not suggest any sort of organized approval process. Rather, he said to test the "inspired expressions" ("spirits," *NIV*): "Every inspired expression that confesses Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh originates with God, but every inspired expression that does not confess Jesus does not originate with God. Furthermore, this is the antichrist's inspired expression, which you have heard was coming, and now it is already in the world." (1 John 4:1-3) John did not focus on the source of the prophecy or the behavior of the prophet as the criteria for judging the spirit or intent of messages that supposedly come from God. Rather, a prophecy is judged by its focus. If the focus is on Christ and his redemptive work, it is from God. If not, it is from the antichrist. (Compare Rev. 19:10)

Does God Work With Individuals *And* An Organization?

In view of the overwhelming evidence that God has always communicated his will through individuals, someone may ask: Is it possible that God communicates certain things to us individually and other things through an approved organization, which acts as a prophet? This concept is based on the idea that an organization can act like a person. Association with an organization can influence its members to copy the viewpoints of its leaders, express themselves in a similar way, or act in a uniform manner. It may appear that the organization has a "mind" of its own. But that is not so. An organization has no capability for independent thoughts, feelings, or opinions. It is not a separate entity like a person.

Organizations are formed when individuals wish to pool their efforts to accomplish a task, achieve an objective, or share fellowship. The organization may be small or large, tightly or loosely knit. Members of the group may form a legal corporation in order to conduct business. They will likely appoint leaders or spokespersons for the group and assign jobs to various members. They may establish rules of conduct and operational methods to be followed as they go about achieving their objectives. But, although it is common to speak of an organization as accomplishing something, no activity attributed to an organization is actually done independently of the individual members, working alone or together. *Every thought or action comes from an individual.*

Apart from its members, an organization is absolutely incapable of generating, communicating or carrying out ideas. This means that any communication that comes from "the organization" is really

coming from one or more individuals, even though each one may be sincerely attempting to speak on behalf of the group. It also explains why it is so hard at times for sincere Witnesses to determine just what “the Society’s viewpoint” is on certain matters, since written or verbal communications may be contradictory. This happens because they reflect the differing viewpoints of the individuals who produced the communications.

An organization simply provides a way to get things done. It has no viewpoint, memory or conscience of its own. It can neither love nor hate. It has no emotions or feelings. It cannot do right or wrong. An organization can do nothing of itself. Only *people* can do things. And only a person can have a relationship with God or anyone else.

After World War II, the Nazi organization never went on trial for war crimes. But *individuals* who were associated with it did. An organization cannot commit nor be punished for crimes. It bears no accountability. But *people* do. That is why Jesus said, referring to his arrival in glory, that he would... “separate *people* one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” He continued, showing that he would base his judgment on personal conduct rather than blind loyalty to organizational rules or beliefs. — Matt. 25:31-46

This is not to say that organizations are wrong or bad in themselves. But they must be seen for what they are and what they are not.

Does God Need An Organization?

The English word “organization” comes from the Greek word *organon*, which means an implement, instrument or tool. So, by definition, an organization is more than just a group of people. Like tools or instruments, organizations are formed to fulfill some purpose or influence some group that exists outside the organization itself. The term is most often connected with business, political activity and labor movements, all of which derive their power from the collective resources of many individuals and use it to accomplish some purpose which would be impossible for just one individual.

A concordance will show that *organon* never appears in the Bible, nor does the concept of individuals acting as a collective instrument. Hebrew words meaning “tool” or “implement” are literal, and such terms are never applied in Scripture to a group of God’s approved worshipers. The Bible speaks of Christians as a “congregation,” “church” or “body” whose purpose for existing is within the body itself. Although they may influence those outside the body, true Christians live only because of and for the head of the body, Jesus Christ. The intensely personal relationship between each believer and Jesus the head is emphasized again and again in the Christian Greek Scriptures.

In contrast with Bible references to the body of believers, the concept of a “visible organization” which God uses as if it were a tool or instrument for preaching, announcing judgment and other work is very strongly emphasized in Watchtower publications. There it always includes a feature found in business, political and labor organizations: a small group of leaders authorized to give direction and make decisions on behalf of the other members, who are expected to obey without complaint or question. And, as is also the case in business, politics and labor unions, loyalty to the organization itself becomes a key concept. In this environment, personal conscience and individual judgment must become less important than obedience or “unity” (actually uniformity), for unless its leaders are obeyed, the organization has no power.

This means that *the only authority that organizations have is in the minds of individuals who obey the organizational rules and regulations.* (Compare Rom. 6:16; 2 Pet 2:19) Obedience to directives given by representatives of an organization may be perceived as obedience to the organization. But it is not. It is simply obedience to the will of the individuals who made up the directives. An organization has no will of its own. Organizations are not personalities or entities with independent wills, intellects or capabilities. It is easy to lose sight of this simple fact when confronted with evidence of the enormous accomplishments

that are possible when individuals pool their resources and efforts. But huge buildings and other material achievements do not impress God nor indicate his favor and blessing.—Gen 11:6

We should not be intimidated or fooled when the leaders of a religious organization point to visible marks of “success” as an indication that God has blessed them or is backing their work. God has absolutely unlimited resources and abilities. He has no need for any buildings, broadcasting facilities, printing presses, money, or any type of organizational structure to multiply his resources, as if there were things he could not do by himself.

God has none of the limitations associated with organizations. For example, organizational rules and regulations that may be the best possible compromise to govern the behavior of people as a group may be unfair to individuals within the group. God, on the other hand, can give personalized attention to each one. We can rely on the fact that our heavenly Father knows our individual needs and will supply them in the best possible way.—Matt. 6:31-33; 1 John 5:13-15, 20.

“Come to Me”

In the centuries since the death of the apostles, many religious organizations have been formed, often with very sincere intentions, to provide fellowship, escape persecution, and attempt to protect believers from false teachings. However, in time, the original founders die and the membership grows. Active, influential members of these organizations may sooner or later lose sight of the original purpose of forming the fellowship or organization. Lacking faith in Jesus’ ability to meet his disciples’ needs, or moved perhaps by a sense of responsibility, or by opportunities for financial gain, power or prestige, they may hide behind the lofty stated goals of the organization or an impressive authority structure and maneuver things so they gain increasing control over others. The terrible consequences that ultimately result when this process matures are written in blood and tears across the pages of history. Leaders of these organizations may claim to represent Christ, and insist that they have authority to speak in his name. Declaring that they have the right to interpret the Bible, they vilify or expel anyone who disagrees with those interpretations. They may substitute their own views for the pure message of the Bible, and increase organizational membership by human means such as the promise of security or reliable guidance. Or they may maintain their membership through blackmail, coercion or threats, dictate rules and regulations to their members, demand loyalty and financial support, and browbeat sincere persons with the tyranny of authority.

All these actions bring great dishonor to Jesus Christ. After describing at length the type of loving conduct that his true followers would produce, Jesus warned: “Be on the watch for the false prophets that come to you in sheep’s covering, but inside they are ravenous wolves.” He said “those men” could be recognized by their conduct or “fruits,” not as an organization but *as individuals*. (Matt. 7:15-20) This is why organizational growth or size does not necessarily show God’s approval and blessing, for Jesus said “*many* false prophets will arise and mislead *many*.”—Matt. 24:11

Organizations are not wrong in themselves. They can provide a way to channel resources such as time, energy or money. However, the leaders of any religious organization may become corrupted and use these resources for purposes other than to honor Jesus Christ and his redemptive work. If that happens, individuals within the organization who choose to follow their consciences may find themselves at odds with the leaders or other members of the organization. In that case, the organization’s leaders may threaten them, label them as “dangerous” to other members, or expel them.

This is nothing new. If members of a religious organization hate us or call us “apostates” because we conscientiously choose to follow God and his Son Jesus Christ rather than the leaders of an organization, and exclude us from their fellowship as a result, we can remember Jesus’ words of comfort: “Happy are you whenever men hate you, and *whenever they exclude you* and reproach you and cast out your name as wicked for the sake of the Son of man. Rejoice in that day and leap, for, look! your reward is great in

heaven, for those are the same things their forefathers used to do to the prophets.” —Luke 6:22, 23, compare 3 John 9,10.

Peter stated: “God is not partial, but in every nation the man that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34, 35) Paul added: “[God] is not far off from each one of us.” (Acts 17:26-27) Our response to God can occur in any place, at any time, and must happen on a personal basis. God bought each of us *as individuals* with the blood of his Son. He wants each of us to *personally* come to Jesus, repent of our sins and accept forgiveness: “Come to *me*,” Jesus said, “...and *I* will refresh you.”—Matt. 11:28.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Bible says that God primarily spoke to mankind through prophets in pre-Christian times, and through his Son in the Christian era. There is absolutely no evidence anywhere in the Bible that even suggests that God ever established or worked through a small group of special representative administrators who revealed his messages or expressed will to the rest of his faithful people. That is why *there is not a single exhortation* in the Bible for God’s servants to identify such a group or to be loyal, faithful or obedient to any organization

We cannot transfer our personal accountability before God to another. As we have seen, an organization cannot take responsibility for anything. Paul said: “Each of us will render an account for himself to God.” (Rom. 14:12) On the day when we must render an account to God for how we lived, a record of loyalty to an organization will be no substitute for a record of faith in God and resulting Christian conduct toward others, especially Jesus’ followers.

The conclusions presented herein, if accepted, may create a problem for you if you are considering whether to continue to associate with the Watchtower organization. If you choose to leave, you may wonder where you can go. Even if you have serious doctrinal disagreements with the Watchtower organization, you may consider simply staying with it, since the consequences for leaving, especially on doctrinal grounds, will almost certainly include rejection by friends and family, plus slander and gossip. Leaving may not seem worth that abuse, especially if you search for doctrinal “truth” in another group or church, only to find that the new church has some, even many, doctrines correct, but not “the whole truth.” If you sincerely examine religious organizations to find “truth,” you may find your search fruitless and frustrating. But this is certainly not the only, or the best, alternative. Actually, the decision shouldn’t be about choosing between organizations at all. Why not?

In the Watchtower view, “truth” consists of “correct teachings” or “accurate explanations” or interpretations that can be supported or “proven” by human reasoning. Watchtower publications teach that the “true religion” must teach *all the truth*; that if just one teaching is incorrect, the entire body of teachings is suspect. This fits their organizational objectives, for uniformity of thought among its members makes an organization much easier to control. Watchtower publications use Bible references to support teachings in the same way that a scientist or mathematician might support theories about the operation of the physical universe by reasoning on established physical facts or procedures or mathematical axioms.

This approach cannot be used to know God. Paul warned against such a view: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone thinks he has acquired knowledge of something, he does not yet know [it] as he ought to know [it]. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by him.” (1 Cor. 8:2, 3) Paul makes clear that loving God is far more important than what you know about facts or Bible passages. No individual or group of individuals, and thus no organization, church or religious group knows everything about God or his ways. So no one can find “the truth that leads to eternal life” by searching for the “correct” explanation of Bible passages or “proving” doctrinal positions. “Truth,” in the Bible sense, simply isn’t found there. (Compare John 5:39)

Jesus said: “*I am* the way and *the truth* and the life. No one comes to the Father *except through me*.” (John 14:6) Knowing “truth” in the Bible sense begins by forming a relationship with God’s Son, Jesus Christ. Simply accept him as Savior, Mediator, Lord and King, and invite him to come into and influence your life. (1 Cor. 3:11; Rev. 3:20) When many of Jesus’ disciples left him because they didn’t understand some of his teachings, he asked the twelve “you do not want to go also, do you?” Peter replied: “Lord, *whom* would we go away to? You have sayings of everlasting life; and we have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:68) Jesus’ apostles were not about to leave him and go elsewhere in search of “truth.” Peter’s reply to Jesus’ question shows that he understood that the question was not about *where* to go, but about *whom* to trust. The apostles knew that they could trust no other person or group of persons to give them teachings that would lead to eternal life.

The apostle John assures us that we have been given “understanding so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.” (1 John 5:20)

John continued: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” (vs 21) Why this warning? It is so easy to follow other persons or religious systems in place of Jesus Christ. Watchtower publications refer to the organization in the same terms the Bible uses to refer to Jesus Christ. Witnesses say they are “in the truth” to mean they are “in the organization.” The organization is presented as handling “all the King’s interests” on earth, things Jesus said he would handle personally. To attribute to an organization such capabilities as being a channel of God’s message, direction and blessings, and the only source of pure teaching, approved leadership and protection from enemies, amounts to nothing less than idolatry. (Compare Ex. 32:4) Persons who direct attention to an organization instead of Christ Jesus are clearly false prophets.

Do not be misled by the authoritative claims of *any* man or group of men. Follow only Jesus Christ, who has “all authority in heaven *and on earth*.” (Matt. 28:18) Building on that firm foundation, by all means seek fellowship with other Christians. Jesus is reigning as king. He has faithful followers all over the earth, and will certainly help you find them if you sincerely look for them. Do not expect them to see all matters as you do. Christians grow throughout their lives. Behavior is a much more reliable indicator of a follower of Jesus Christ. (1 John 3:18) Fellowship with other true Christians will result in blessings both for you and for them. Christians are Christ’s body, and no Christian wants to miss out on the pure joy of being an active part of that body, learning how to be ever more Christlike in word and deed. May God bless you in your efforts to follow the Lamb “wherever he goes.” (Rev 14:4) §

Notes

¹An organization which receives regular reports from widely dispersed members and through which a small centrally located group of managers exercises control over members who live in many different countries was not possible even two centuries ago. The very concept of a “world-wide organization” is quite recent, made possible mostly as a result of vastly improved communications within the last century or so.

²*The Watchtower* compares their organization to Noah’s ark, as God’s “provision for salvation” into which all the righteous on earth at the time gathered to be saved from destruction at the flood. (W3/1/97 pg. 12) It is worth noting that in the Genesis account and Jesus’ and Peter’s references to him, Noah himself is the only one specifically mentioned as righteous. (Gen. 6:9; Matt. 24:38; 2 Pet. 2:5) Although his wife, three sons and three daughters-in-law were saved through the flood with him, the Bible makes no special point of mentioning that they were saved *because* they were righteous, or that only righteous persons were allowed on the ark. After the flood, at the time of Canaan’s sin, Jehovah is referred to as “Shem’s God” (Gen. 9:26), which is a bit unexpected if Jehovah was worshiped by everyone as God. So, it is possible that at least some of Noah’s family was not spared specifically because they were righteous, but rather for Noah’s sake and to carry on the human race. Later, all of righteous Lot’s family and in-laws were offered salvation from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, even though only Lot himself seems to have shown a strong commitment to true worship, based on the Biblical accounts of their actions. (Compare Gen 19:12-36; 2 Pet.

2:7)

³In the letter, recorded at Acts 15:23-29, Gentile Christians are encouraged to abstain “from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication.” Later, however, Paul discusses eating meat sacrificed to idols, and makes it clear that avoiding them was a matter of conscience, not a hard-and-fast rule. To Christians, not doing things that might stumble others was to be a much greater motivating factor. (Compare Rom. 14:14, 20, 21; 1 Cor. 10:19-33)

This material was prepared by Thomas Cabeen, a former Jehovah’s Witness and a member of the Watchtower headquarters staff in Brooklyn, NY from 1968 to 1980.

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