

The Two-Witness Rule: Does it truly have basis in the Bible?

INTRODUCTION

“Child abuse is abhorrent to us.” That’s the official view according to the Office of Public Information for Jehovah’s Witnesses. This is “in harmony” with a principle at Romans 12:9:

Let [YOUR] love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is wicked, cling to what is good.

According to the same view, “Even one abused child is one too many.” But as will be demonstrated by this series of articles, the current policy in place throughout the organization which has failed indeterminate thousands of children, gives ample incontrovertible proof that the “public” stance that “Even one abused child is one too many” is insufficient to motivate those who are able to make the changes necessary to correct the situation in Jehovah’s organization. This series of articles will rely on information published by the Watchtower Society, as well as releases from the Office of Public Information, which acts as the Watchtower Society’s PR liaison to the public and news outlets. And, more importantly, it will rely on the Bible itself, which stands as the foremost authority in dealing with matters even as horrendous as child molestation.

Some of the information in this series of articles will be difficult, even challenging, to consider for loyal Witnesses of Jehovah, because it requires one to reconsider certain understandings as they are currently in place, and return to the Bible as the sole authority on matters that govern and affect our lives. In that way, it is with deep respect for the sensibilities of such ones who take the time to read this series of articles that I will endeavor to provide ample evidences so as to demonstrate that we can both meet scriptural requirements in handling cases of such an abhorrent nature *and* give victims of such diseased evil the justice they are due, not to mention afford us the capability of keeping the congregation clean.

THE CURRENT POLICY... On CHILD ABUSE

The current policy operates in the following way, which can be found in the media release titled “Jehovah’s Witnesses and Child Protection,” located at www.jw-media.org:

“When any one of Jehovah’s Witnesses is accused of an act of child abuse, the local congregation elders are expected to investigate. Two elders meet separately with the accused and the accuser to see what each says on the matter. If the accused denies the charge, the two elders may arrange for him and the victim to restate their position in each other’s presence, with the elders also there. If during that meeting the accused still denies

the charges and there are no others who can substantiate them, the elders cannot take action within the congregation at that time. Why not? As a Bible-based organization, we must adhere to what the Scriptures say, namely, “No single witness should rise up against a man respecting any error or any sin...At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses the matter should stand good.” (Deuteronomy 19:15) Jesus reaffirmed this principle as recorded at Matthew 18:15-17. However, if two persons are witnesses to separate incidents of the same kind of wrongdoing, their testimony may be deemed sufficient to take action.”

The news release goes on further:

“However, even if the elders cannot take congregational action, they are expected to report the allegation to the branch office of Jehovah’s Witnesses in their country, if local privacy laws permit. In addition to making a report to the branch office, the elders may be required by law to report even uncorroborated or unsubstantiated allegations to the authorities. If so, we expect the elders to comply. Additionally, the victim may wish to report to the authorities, and it is his or her absolute right to do so.”

If the accused confesses, what follows is to occur:

“If, when confronted, the accused confesses that he is guilty of child abuse, the elders take appropriate congregational action. If he is not repentant, he will not be permitted to remain a member of the congregation. Even if he is repentant—is cut to the heart and is thus resolutely determined to avoid such conduct in the future—what was stated in the January 1, 1997, issue of *The Watchtower* applies. The article said: “For the protection of our children, a man known to have been a child molester does not qualify for a responsible position in the congregation. Moreover, he cannot be a pioneer [full-time missionary of Jehovah’s Witnesses] or serve in any other special, full-time service.” He would not qualify Scripturally. (1 Timothy 3:2, 7-10) We take such action because we are concerned with maintaining Bible standards and protecting our children. Everyone in our organization is expected to meet the same requirements, namely, to be clean physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually.—2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 4:17-19; 1 Thessalonians 2:4.”

On the surface, this seems to be a reasonable, powerful policy with a sound basis in the Bible, does it not? Unfortunately, that serenity is only upon the surface.

THE TWO-WITNESS RULE: Deuteronomy 19:15

Since a significant part of the policy rests upon the Watchtower Society’s reliance on a “two-witness” rule to establish evidence before taking action, we need to first examine the two verses which are looked to for guidance.

First, let us examine Deuteronomy 19:15:

“No single witness should rise up against a man respecting any error or any sin, in the case of any sin that he may commit. At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses the matter should stand good.”

It seems pretty understandable as we read it, does it not? “At the mouth of two...or three witnesses, a matter should stand good.”

Having read the verse, let us take a few moments to reflect on that principle, and while we are doing so, let us look at how it might have been applied to some crimes that were addressed under Mosaic Law.

In Leviticus 18, various laws were enacted which forbade incest and other sexual deviancies. According to verse 26, compliance with Jehovah’s statutes was not an option if one wanted to approved before him, and Jehovah often punished the entire nation in response to the actions or sins of a few. Verse 29 is blunt when it comes to the seriousness of such offenses:

In case anyone does any of all these detestable things, then the souls doing them must be cut off from among their people.

Yes, without question, without hesitation, the person was to be “cut off” from the rest of the people.

When one reads the list of sexual crimes of Leviticus 18, one can’t help but realize that many of those crimes are “private” crimes, in that there are only two people involved in the error: a perpetrator and the victim. How would one apply the punishment REQUIRED for the sin and avoid bringing the displeasure of Jehovah upon the people? Especially so when there may be only one willing confessor to the crime: the victim.

As a person who has come to know the deep love that Jehovah has for mankind, as a person who has dedicated his life to serving Jehovah, I find it impossible to believe that Jehovah would create such unwavering laws which demanded a hefty punishment for their infringement, KNOWING that in nearly every case there would only be one person that would speak of the transgression, much less confess to being the one that instigated it.

That would mean, then, that added weight would have to given to the person who brings the crime to light (the victim being the most likely person to speak of the matter), BASED ON THE NATURE OF THE CRIME. The person or persons judging the matter would logically reason that, BY NATURE, a person guilty of such a transgression will not confess, either, as the punishment was a “cutting off,” death.

Well, one might be inclined to ask, what about cases of false accusations? What if someone just wants to get even with someone? What better way to succeed than to create an elaborate scheme of alleging incest, for example? Do we simply take it upon the word of a single witness that such a crime took place? Isn’t that why Deuteronomy 19:15 is such a sound principle?

That verse does contain a sound principle. But when we read the entire *context* of that verse, which we can do by then reading the verses which follow it (specifically, verses 16-21), we see that same possible issue being addressed. If there is a SINGLE witness (verse 16) making an allegation, then both would be called before the body of authority (the priests AND judges, as well as Jehovah God) (verse 17). The judges (not the priests) would then make a THOROUGH search of the matter (verse 18). Can *thorough* be merely engaging in a he-said-she-said discussion where one denies what the other says, and the matter is put to rest?

Based just on the Scriptures that have been mentioned, something MORE is required. EVERY avenue must be explored in order to establish the matter as true or false. In addition, based on the NATURE of the crime, the accuser's word is lent more weight, which in turn lends seriousness to the consequences of a false charge, which will be explored later.

So, let's go back to one of the crimes mentioned in Mosaic Law:

In Leviticus 18:10, the serious case of child molestation is addressed (one scenario of it):

“As for the nakedness of the daughter of your son or the daughter of your daughter, you must not lay bare their nakedness, because they are your nakedness”

Now, at face value, how might a judge do a THOROUGH examination of this particular incident? Clearly, there would be little, if no ACTUAL evidence (and certainly not to the extent that such evidence can be gathered in our times!). But their THOROUGH EXAMINATION of evidences available, the allegations and denials, and everything else related to the situation would aid the judge(s) in making a determination. They might ask around the family to determine if there were any witnesses, someone who might have seen inappropriateness, or something suspicious. They might ask if there were wounds or injuries, spilled blood. They may investigate the scene of the incident, having each person relate what they could offer, even the parents. These are just a few of the steps which would aid the judge(s) to work towards the determination of the case, establishing guilt or innocence.

Once the determination is made, once the judge(s) has utilized EVERY MEANS at hand, the case is deemed either factual or false, and punishment is doled out accordingly. If the accused is found guilty, then they are “cut off” and if the accuser is found a liar, then they have done to them “just as [they] schemed to do to [the accused].” In this case, they would be “cut off” (verses 18 and 19). The punishment was to serve as a testimony to anyone else who even THINKS of doing something like that. (Verse 20)

In principle, those “judging” today have a responsibility, yes, an OBLIGATION to do the same. They are obligated to use EVERY MEANS at their disposal. This, in many countries, obviously includes utilizing the law of the land, since we have at least advanced far enough as humans to have secular laws banning those crimes that Jehovah's people have had forbidden to them for centuries.

There is yet another reason why the judging process would include utilizing the law of the land: according to the principle cited by the Watchtower Society, only “judges” could determine guilt or innocence. While “priests” could accompany the process, they were to not engage in any aspect of the incident.

That the Watchtower Society recognizes this part of the principle in Deuteronomy 19:15-21 can be seen by the statement made by Witness spokesman J.R. Brown, as quoted in *Christianity Today*, January 26, 2001: “We’re not getting into law enforcement. We’re just going to handle repentance.” However, recognizing the principle and actually acting on that recognition are two different issues. In nearly every instance of child molestation that occurs among Jehovah’s Witnesses, the crime is handled by local elders, that is, “priests,” who are disallowed according to the principle at Deuteronomy 19:18 to investigate and enforce punishment. The “judge” or “Caesar” is never brought into the matter to determine the matter, contrary to Bible principle in that passage.

Even if the local elders somehow found legitimate right to handle a criminal case, and child molestation is a crime in nearly every nation upon the face of the earth, they still fail to abide by even the most rudimentary aspects of the principle at Deuteronomy 19. How so?

If a judge must “search thoroughly,” then EVERY avenue must be explored, every tool at their disposal must be utilized. This would clearly include making use of human courts and organizations and governments to help establish a matter, as Paul points out to us at Romans 13:1-7):

“Let every soul be in subjection to the superior authorities, for there is no authority except by God; the existing authorities stand placed in their relative positions by God. **2** Therefore he who opposes the authority has taken a stand against the arrangement of God; those who have taken a stand against it will receive judgment to themselves. **3** For those ruling are an object of fear, not to the good deed, but to the bad. Do you, then, want to have no fear of the authority? Keep doing good, and you will have praise from it; **4** for it is God’s minister to you for your good. But if you are doing what is bad, be in fear: for it is not without purpose that it bears the sword; for it is God’s minister, an avenger to express wrath upon the one practicing what is bad. **5** There is therefore compelling reason for YOU people to be in subjection, not only on account of that wrath but also on account of [YOUR] conscience. **6** For that is why YOU are also paying taxes; for they are God’s public servants constantly serving this very purpose. **7** Render to all their dues, to him who [calls for] the tax, the tax; to him who [calls for] the tribute, the tribute; to him who [calls for] fear, such fear; to him who [calls for] honor, such honor.”

According to verse 6, this is the reason we pay taxes, because they are “God’s public servants constantly serving this very purpose.” What purpose is that? Verse 4 tells us that their purpose is to mete out punishment and wrath upon those doing badness, even Jehovah’s people. So, they are in their “relative position” (Verse 1) for the purpose of justice, right? Utilizing their services, then, is a facet of ensuring justice even among Jehovah’s people, because it can EMPOWER the judge(s) of a matter to arrive at an appropriate decision in a matter, and then carry out the necessary punishment.

[The Watchtower Society even recognizes the power of Jehovah’s “public servants” because the Society appeals to that “public servant” when they are wronged or when a

law needs to be changed, in effect, “running ahead of” Caesar’s laws rather than simply waiting for such wrongs to be righted or such laws to change in due time and according to the determinations of that body of authority. If there isn’t a law that addresses a concern or issue that the Watchtower Society faces, they expend tremendous amounts of resources into pushing for such changes, especially in relation to the right to practice Witness beliefs as they deem appropriate. Compare with J.R. Brown’s statement in *Paducah Sun*, January 28, 2001: “...we do not think, as an ecclesiastical authority, we should run ahead of Caesar’s laws.”]

In some cases, this may cause the elders (if it were somehow appropriate to act as “judge” and as “priest,” which it is not, according to Deuteronomy 19:18) to *pend* their own determination until AFTER Jehovah’s “public servants” are able to see to the matter. But if they (the elders) do not utilize Jehovah’s “public servants,” then how can it ever be claimed that they have complied with the principle of Deuteronomy 19:18, and made a THOROUGH examination of the accusation and its relevant facts and evidences? This wasn’t even an option, according to Verse 19: Jehovah said that they “MUST” do so.

In yet another example of how the Watchtower Society’s current policy on child abuse fails to abide by the actual principle at Deuteronomy 19:15, let us now examine the actual *context* of that verse.

Deuteronomy 19 is primarily a discussion of the issue of manslaying as well as the handling of bloodguilt. Various aspects of these crimes are handled in the chapter’s beginning, all addressing actual action being taken.

But when we get to Verse 15, how does that tie in with the previous discussions of manslaughter? The verse itself provides the answer, and again, let us present it for examination:

“No single witness should rise up against a man respecting any error or any sin, in the case of any sin THAT HE MAY COMMIT. At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses the matter should stand good.” (Emphasis added)

Verse 16 further clarifies what was just said:

“In case a witness SCHEMING VIOLENCE should rise up against a man to bring a charge of revolt against him...”

Indeed, what exactly is being discussed here?

Why, it’s the same problem that confounds even the human secular legal system today: how to handle *threats of violence*. In other words, what should happen if one person threatens another? Sensibly, you go to the authorities. But, there is little that they can do unless OTHERS heard the threat (and even then, they might not be able to do anything).

It is the same situation here, speaking in context. THREATS could not be established simply on the claims of someone that they had been threatened (and thus the examination/trial described in verses 17-19). But if OTHERS had also heard these threats,

then the “matter” (threat) stood good, and there was no need for further investigation. Punishment would then be meted out.

Having examined one of the Watchtower Society’s “Scriptural” basis for the “two-witness” rule, and finding it both out of context and incorrectly acted upon, what about the other scripture that Witnesses rely so heavily upon to maintain the “two-witness” rule? Surely that would shed further light that Jehovah’s Witnesses have a sound policy in place, right? After all, Jesus himself gave that instruction!

THE TWO-WITNESS RULE: Matthew 18:15-17

Jesus’ words at Matthew 18:15-17 are used to support the organization’s current policy and understanding of the principle at Deuteronomy 19:15, in that there has to be at least two or three witnesses before action can be taken. But is that a correct application, as the Watchtower Society indicates?

Jesus, in Matthew 18, was describing how important those who have become “lost” or strayed were to their shepherd, and how there was a rejoicing when a strayed or lost sheep was found and brought back to the flock. He then related in verse 14 that Jehovah similarly rejoices, because Jehovah does not anyone to perish:

12 “What do you think? If a certain man comes to have a hundred sheep and one of them gets strayed, will he not leave the ninety-nine upon the mountains and set out on a search for the one that is straying? **13** And if he happens to find it, I certainly tell you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that have not strayed. **14** Likewise it is not a desirable thing with my Father who is in heaven for one of these little ones to perish.

In Verse 15, Jesus builds on the example set by Jehovah by making it the duty of his followers to correct someone that strays (“commits a sin”) through a step-by-step process which was meant to restore that lost or strayed sheep, just as an actual shepherd would make a systematic effort to recover an actual sheep:

15 “Moreover, if your brother commits a sin, go lay bare his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take along with you one or two more, in order that at the mouth of two or three witnesses every matter may be established. **17** If he does not listen to them, speak to the congregation. If he does not listen even to the congregation, let him be to you just as a man of the nations and as a tax collector.

Notice the order of steps that were to be followed in order to establish the matter:

First, the person was to be approached *privately*. If, as the Watchtower Society implies, this passage is applicable to the handling of child molestation, then we have to assume that they think it is appropriate for the victim to approach their molestor—after all, this instruction was given by Jesus himself. (Compare this with Matthew 5:23-24) But even secular authorities warn against this, so surely the Watchtower Society is not saying that this is appropriate, are they? And in any case, the first step of this process omits the supposed requirement for TWO or more witnesses, as is made abundantly clear in Verse 15.

It is also improbable that Jesus could have been discussing any of the manslaughter issues that Deuteronomy 19 addresses. After all, what reasonable person that had been THREATENED by another with VIOLENCE would want to PRIVATELY approach the person issuing the threat (compare with Genesis 4:8), and anyone else acting in that person's behalf could not do so, because the matter would still be hearsay, a he-said-she-said situation... and since that representative was not a witness to the sin, they cannot start the process of restoring the person as given by Jesus. And if they WERE a witness to the sin, then there are then at least three witnesses, and two can testify against the one. So, there are various points to consider in looking at Matthew 18:15, just by itself, all of which address how to PROPERLY handle a sin.

If the person remained in sin after privately meeting with him, then the person that was witness to the sin was to bring along "one or two more" so that then the matter was established. Then, if THAT still didn't work, the sin was to be brought before the remainder of the congregation, so that they were both aware of the sin and could see if the person then stopped sinning or persisted, at which point, the person was to be "cut off."

[While it is outside this article's focus to further address that particular point, it is interesting to note once again that the WHOLE of the congregation was told of the sin committed and allowed to listen in to the proceeding, and then the congregation took action if the sin continued. This is especially interesting because the Watchtower Society, which prides itself on how closely it emulates the first century congregation's operations does not adhere to this standard of operation.]

As servants of Jehovah God, we must be ever vigilant to ensure that we are not quoting Scripture to excuse wrongdoing and errant policies when we should be taken firm, unwavering action to keep the congregation clean. Our concern should be that we are constantly making an examination that we are abiding by the Wisdom of Jehovah, even when such an examination may also require us to publicly declare our error and a begging of forgiveness from those that our errant policies and doctrines have cut to the heart and even stumbled from the faith.

If it requires others to point out our "straying" because we cannot see it ourselves, we should be quick to acknowledge their words, and even more so if the number of those trying to lay bare the fault increases from not just a mere two or three, but into the hundreds and then thousands.

Leaders of a religious organization that claims it belongs to Jehovah God should be even MORE desirous to follow such a commendable course, lest those that look upon them and recognize them as "those taking the lead," should be stumbled and begin to follow them in their error. Such humble leaders can draw comfort not only by looking at those who had been in positions of authority such as Moses, David, and Peter yet were called to account and lovingly but sternly disciplined for their error, but also in the whole-hearted love within the hearts of those within the organization who, like that shepherd that Jesus

described, desire that none shall perish, but rather, turn away from error. The outpouring of such love that would be offered those leaders would, indeed, cover any transgressions, and remind us exceedingly of the undeserved kindness of Jehovah God towards all of us.

[Further aspects of the child molestation issue among Jehovah's Witnesses will be examined in future articles, including the issue of forgiveness, treatment by one's congregation when a parent decides to go to the "judge" to seek justice, as well as numerous other facets of this troubling topic.]

History of Changes and Updates:

October 7, 2002 Changed "levity" to "weight." Inappropriate word for the text and its meaning. Thanks to a sharp-eyed reader for letting me know!