

One Flock One Hope

*Answering the Watchtower's Division of Christians into a Heavenly 144,000
and an Earthly "Great Crowd"*

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I. Two Hopes, or One?

At the heart of the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses lies a division of all faithful Christians into two classes with two different destinies. A small group of exactly 144,000—the “anointed,” the “little flock”—are said to have a *heavenly* hope: they will be resurrected as spirit creatures to rule with Christ in heaven. Everyone else—the “great crowd” of “other sheep,” which is to say the vast majority of Witnesses—has an *earthly* hope: they will survive Armageddon, or be raised, to live forever on a paradise earth, but never to see heaven. The two classes are marked off in practice: only the anointed may partake of the bread and wine at the annual Memorial, and, on the Watchtower's teaching, only for the anointed is Christ a mediator.¹

This is not a minor point of prophecy; it shapes how a Witness understands his own relationship to God. And it has a history. The hard line between the hopes dates only to 1935, when at a convention J. F. Rutherford asked all who hoped to live forever on earth to stand and announced, “Behold! The great multitude!” From that moment the “great crowd” was assigned to earth and the heavenly calling treated as all but closed. Before that, the Watchtower had taught something quite different—that the “great company” was itself heavenly. The doctrine, in other words, is a twentieth-century development, not an apostolic inheritance.²

The question this essay asks is simple: does the New Testament know two classes of Christian with two destinies, or one people of God with one hope? The answer the Scriptures give—read plainly, and as the Church has always read them—is one. “One flock,” Jesus said; “one hope,” Paul wrote; “one body.” The two-class system divides what the gospel was given to unite.

II. The “Other Sheep” Are the Gentiles

The whole “earthly class” is hung on a single verse. In John 10, the Good Shepherd says: “I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). The Watchtower takes the “other sheep” to be its earthly class—a body of Christians who, on their account, would not even begin to be gathered until the 1930s.³

But put the question the way a first-century disciple would have heard it. Why would Jesus mention, in passing, a class of Christians his hearers would never meet in their lifetimes—and then say nothing more to explain it? The far more natural reading is the one the apostles would themselves arrive at within a few years: the “fold” is Israel, and the “other sheep ... not of this fold” are the *Gentiles*—the nations soon to be brought into

the one people of God. The very grammar points this way. Jesus says these sheep are not *of* (Greek *ek*, “out of, from”) this fold—language of *origin*, not of destination. The contrast is not between sheep bound for two different places, but between sheep drawn from two different starting points, Jew and Gentile, who are then made *one*. And the setting confirms it: Jesus speaks these words to Pharisees who took it for granted that the Jews alone were God’s flock (John 9:40–10:16). To such hearers, “other sheep not of this fold” could only mean the nations.

When Peter baptized Cornelius and his household, and the gospel went out to the nations, the disciples would have remembered exactly these words—the more so as Christ had given Peter “the keys of the kingdom” to open the door first to Jews, then Samaritans, then Gentiles. John himself supplies the interpretation a chapter earlier, telling us that Jesus would die “not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:51–52). This has been the Christian reading from the first; even a modern Catholic reference work glosses John 10:16 as Christ’s announcement of “the future extension of his Kingdom” to the nations. The “other sheep” are not a second class with a lesser hope; they are the Gentiles, gathered with believing Israel into *one* flock.³

III. “One Flock, One Shepherd”

The decisive word stands in the very verse the Watchtower relies on. Jesus does not say there will be two flocks, or one flock in two divisions with two destinies. He says the opposite: “there shall be *one* flock, *one* shepherd” (John 10:16). The entire point of bringing in the other sheep is that the two become *one*. To read the verse as the charter of a permanent two-class system is to make it say the reverse of what it says.⁴

An older English rendering, “one fold,” once blurred this; the Greek is unmistakable—*mia poimnē*, “one flock.” There is one Shepherd, and there is one flock that heeds his voice. The Watchtower’s own favorite verse, rightly read, is one of the clearest refutations of its doctrine: the sheep of both folds are joined into a single flock under a single Shepherd, with one life and one hope between them.

IV. One Body, One Hope

What John states in the image of the flock, Paul states in the language of the body. To the Ephesians he writes the great sevenfold confession of Christian unity: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the *one hope* that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” (Eph. 4:4–6). One hope—named explicitly, for all the baptized. A doctrine of two hopes, a heavenly one for the few and an earthly one for the many, runs straight against the text. Paul does not say “two hopes

according to your class”; he says *one* hope, set in the middle of a confession that hammers the word “one” seven times.⁵

And the unity Paul means is precisely the joining of the two folds. A few chapters earlier he had described it directly: Christ “has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two ... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:14–16). The Gentiles, once “strangers to the covenants of promise,” have been “brought near” and made “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:12–19). The whole movement of the gospel is from two into one. The two-class system runs the gospel backward, rebuilding inside the Church the very dividing wall that Christ tore down—now not between Jew and Gentile, but between a heavenly 144,000 and an earthly multitude.⁶

V. Are the 144,000 a Literal Number?

The doctrine requires that the 144,000 be counted with absolute literalness: exactly that many, and no more, will ever reign with Christ in heaven. Yet the number comes from one of the most intensely symbolic books in all of Scripture, and the immediate context will not bear a literal reading. The 144,000 are “sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel,” and John lists twelve tribes of 12,000 each (Rev. 7:4–8). If the figure is a literal census of heaven, then heaven is open only to *Israelites*—and, since Revelation 14:4 says these are men “who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste,” only to celibate Jewish men. The Watchtower does not actually believe this; it reads the tribes and the celibacy as symbolic while insisting the number alone is literal. That is special pleading.⁷

What the number positively signifies is a further question, and here something should be said plainly: the Catholic Church has never defined it. Interpreters have read the 144,000 as a figure for the whole people of God, as the Jewish believers of the apostolic age, as the martyrs, as the Church sealed against a coming trial. Each reading has serious defenders, and the Church requires none of them. Nothing in the Creed, the councils, or the Catechism binds a Catholic to one identification, and a Catholic may hold any of them, or leave the question open, without his standing being touched in the least.

That freedom is not indifference. It is the ordinary distinction between what has been revealed and what has been inferred: where Scripture speaks plainly and the Church has defined, the faithful are bound; where a figure in an apocalyptic vision admits of several readings, the work is left to scholars and the question stays open. The contrast with the Watchtower is exact. There, one interpretation of one number in one symbolic book is not merely taught but required, and it settles who may hope for heaven, who may eat the bread and drink the cup, and who must decline them year after year. To turn an image of

fullness into a numerical ceiling, while treating everything around it as figurative, is to mistake the genre of the book; to make that reading the measure of a man's standing before God is graver still.

VI. Where Is the Great Crowd?

If the 144,000 are in heaven and the great crowd on earth, the two should appear in different places. In Revelation 7 they do not. The 144,000 are sealed (vv. 4–8); then John sees “a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation ... standing *before the throne and before the Lamb*” (v. 9). “Before the throne” is exactly where the 144,000 are said to be (Rev. 14:3). And the scene is unmistakably heavenly: “all the angels stood round the throne ... and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God” (7:11). Either the angels and the throne are on earth with the great crowd, or—far more naturally—the great crowd is in heaven with the angels and the throne. The vision is one continuous scene; it cannot be split down the middle, the 144,000 lifted to heaven and the great crowd left on earth, without doing violence to the text.⁸

Two further details settle it. The great crowd “serve God day and night *in his temple*,” and God “will spread his tabernacle over them” (Rev. 7:15). But Revelation itself tells us where God's tabernacle is: those who “ *dwell in heaven*” are his tabernacle (Rev. 13:6). And in Revelation 19:1 John hears “the loud voice of a great multitude *in heaven*.” Read as it stands, Revelation places the great crowd exactly where it places the 144,000: before the throne, in heaven, worshipping the Lamb.⁹

The Watchtower's escape is to read “temple” in 7:15 as merely an outer, earthly courtyard. But the Greek will not permit it. There are two words for the temple. *Hieron* means the whole temple complex, including the outer courts open to all worshippers; *naos* means the inner sanctuary itself, which only the priests could enter. Revelation 7:15 uses *naos*. The great crowd are not in an outer court; they are in the sanctuary—the holy place, in heaven, with the 144,000. The Watchtower knows this distinction well: its own publications explain that *hieron* is the whole complex and *naos* the sanctuary proper, and its New World Translation elsewhere renders *naos* in Revelation as “temple [sanctuary].” Only at 7:15, where the rendering would place the great crowd in heaven, does it quietly drop the bracketed word.¹⁰

The attempt to prove otherwise has not gone well. In 1980 the Watchtower argued that *naos* could mean the outer court, citing as proof the cleansing of the temple—claiming that the money-changers Jesus drove out were in the *naos*. But the Gospels use *hieron* for that scene, not *naos*; the proof-text said the opposite of what it was quoted to say. By 2002 the Watchtower itself conceded, in its “Questions From Readers,” that the great crowd are in the *naos* and not in any “Court of the Gentiles”—yet still, without explanation, kept

them on earth. The lexical evidence had been granted; the conclusion that follows from it had not.¹¹

There is a further confirmation. Every descriptive phrase John uses of the great crowd in Revelation 7 is applied, elsewhere in Revelation and by the Watchtower's own reading, to the heavenly ones. They are "before the throne" (7:9)—so are the 144,000 (14:3) and the angels (7:11). They wear "white robes" (7:9)—so do the martyred souls under the altar (6:11). They cry "salvation to our God" with a great voice—which is the cry of "a great multitude in heaven" (19:1). Term for term, the great crowd is described exactly as the heavenly company is described. The two are not in two places; they are one worshipping multitude before the throne.¹²

VII. The Table Withheld

The two-class system is not merely an idea; it is enacted, painfully, once a year. At the Watchtower's annual Memorial of Christ's death, the bread and wine are passed—but only those who profess the heavenly calling may partake. Out of the millions who attend, only a few thousand eat and drink; everyone else watches the emblems pass by untouched. The great majority of Jehovah's Witnesses have never once received the body and blood of the Lord.¹³

Set this against the words of Christ himself: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have *no life in you*. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:53–54). Jesus makes partaking the very *condition* of life—not a badge worn by a spiritual elite. And his command at the Last Supper was given to all his disciples: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). And when he sent the apostles to make disciples, the commission was to teach them "to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20)—the command of the Supper included. A system that forbids most of its members to obey that command, and tells them they have no need of the table at which life itself is given, has inverted the gospel. What Christ gave as the bread of life for all, the Watchtower reserves for a few thousand—and in doing so withholds from millions the very thing he said they could not live without.

VIII. One Mediator for All

The division reaches even to the mediation of Christ. The Watchtower has taught that Jesus is the "mediator" of the new covenant only for the 144,000; the "other sheep" relate to him as "friends," benefiting from his ransom but not standing within the covenant he mediates. Whatever the refinements, the effect is a tiered access to Christ.¹⁴

Paul allows no such tiers: "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom *for all*" (1 Tim. 2:5–6). The

mediation is “between God and men”—not between God and 144,000 men—and the ransom is “for all.” To restrict Christ’s mediation to one class is to contradict the apostle at the point where he is most emphatic about its universality. There is one Mediator, and he mediates for all who come to God through him.

IX. No Room for the Martyrs

The doctrine collapses under the simple weight of history. If only 144,000 human beings in all of time are taken to heaven, and the heavenly calling was essentially closed by 1935, then the number must somehow contain the entire company of the redeemed from Abel to the twentieth century. It cannot. In the first three centuries alone, hundreds of thousands of Christians went to their deaths rather than deny Christ. Were they not in heaven? Revelation itself shows them there: under the altar, “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God,” crying out and given white robes (Rev. 6:9–11). Tertullian, near the year 200, already read the “blood of the saints” with which Babylon is drunk (Rev. 17:6) of the Christian martyrs.¹⁵

Ask the question the early Christians’ own writings force: whom did they believe those martyrs to be, and where did they believe them to be? They believed them to be faithful Christians, and they believed them to be with Christ in heaven. A 144,000-seat heaven, mostly filled long before the modern “great crowd” was ever identified, simply cannot accommodate the saints whom the New Testament and the earliest Church already place before the throne. The arithmetic of the two-class system fails against the witness of the martyrs.

X. Heaven Is the Vision of God

What, then, is heaven for? Not, in the first place, to *rule* — though Scripture does promise the saints will reign with Christ — but to *see*. The deepest word for heaven in the Christian tradition is the vision of God: the direct, face-to-face knowledge and love of God himself, in which the whole longing of the human heart is at last fulfilled. “Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus says, “for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). “We shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). “Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).¹⁶

And this hope is held out to *everyone*. The Beatitude does not say “blessed are the 144,000”; it says “blessed are the pure in heart.” And the apostles write to whole congregations as though the hope of every member were heavenly: “the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:5); an inheritance “kept in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4); “our commonwealth is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20); “holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call” (Heb. 3:1). These are letters to ordinary Christians at Colossae and Philippi and across Asia Minor, not to a headquarters staff. The Watchtower’s answer is that these writings

were meant for the anointed in the first place. Its own reference work says the Christian Greek Scriptures are “of universal importance, interest, and concern primarily to spiritual Israel, which is the congregation of God, but, additionally, to all persons who seek the approval of God.” That is a costly answer. If those letters were addressed chiefly to a class of which the great crowd is no part, then their commands about marriage, work, speech and forgiveness were addressed chiefly to that class too—yet every Witness is taught to obey them as written to him. The rule shifts with the subject: the epistles are read as speaking to every Christian until they speak of heaven. The vision of God is not a privilege rationed to a class. It is the end for which every human being was made, offered to all who will receive it.

XI. But the Prophets Promised the Earth

The strongest appeal the Watchtower makes for an earthly class is not to the New Testament at all. It is to the Hebrew Scriptures. The righteous “will possess the earth, and they will reside forever upon it” (Ps. 37:29). The faithful will “build houses and live in them” and “plant vineyards and eat their fruitage” (Isa. 65:21). Every man will sit “under his vine and under his fig tree” with no one to make him afraid (Mic. 4:4). These are concrete, bodily, earthly promises, and the argument is that they would be left empty if every faithful person were taken to heaven. The promises are real, and the argument deserves a real answer.

The answer is that these promises were addressed to a nation, not to individuals about their eternal destiny. The subject throughout is Israel in the land God swore to Abraham. Psalm 37 is a wisdom psalm about the prosperity of the wicked, and its refrain that the righteous will inherit “the land” is the covenant land, held in contrast to the evildoers who will be “cut off” from it. Isaiah 65 is spoken to a people returning from exile, promising that they will not again build for another to inhabit or plant for another to eat. Micah 4 pictures the nations streaming up to Zion and the security of a people who have known siege and deportation. Not one of these texts is answering the question of who goes to heaven, because in their own setting that question is not yet being asked. What God promised a landless and exiled people, in the covenant terms they could then receive, was a home, a harvest, and safety in it.

And the New Testament tells us how the men who received those promises understood them. The patriarchs held the land-promise in hand and still “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth,” seeking a homeland they plainly did not identify with Canaan: “they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13–16). Abraham himself, the man to whom the land was given, “looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). If the earthly promise had been the whole of the hope, the epistle could not have argued the opposite from the

very texts in which it was made. The land was never less than a gift; it was always more than a destination. It was the pledge of what God intended to give His people in the end.¹⁷

Nor does the Christian hope despise the earth, and it is worth saying so plainly, because the caricature runs the other way. Scripture does not end with souls escaping matter. It ends with “a new heaven and a new earth” and the holy city coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:1–2). The creation itself is to be “set free from its bondage to decay” (Rom. 8:21). The renewed earth belongs to the Christian hope entire. What Scripture never does is divide the redeemed into those who receive it and those who do not. One renewed creation, for one redeemed people.

XII. Conclusion: The One People of God

Scripture does divide humanity at the last—but not into a heavenly class and an earthly class. It divides them into those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life and those whose are not (Rev. 20:15). For all the redeemed there is one destiny, and it is neither a disembodied heaven for a few nor a merely earthly paradise for the many, but the union of the two: “a new heaven and a new earth,” “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,” where at last “the dwelling of God is with men” (Rev. 21:1–3). The biblical hope is not heaven-or-earth, sorted by class; it is heaven and earth made one in Christ, for the one people of God.¹⁸

“Fear not, little flock,” Jesus told his disciples, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). The flock was “little” because, at the first, the disciples were few—not because it was one tier of a two-tier people. As the other sheep are brought in, the little flock becomes the one flock of the one Shepherd, called to the one hope, baptized into the one body, fed at the one table, saved by the one Mediator. That is the gospel’s own arithmetic, and it has no place for a second-class Christian.¹⁹

To the Witness who has been told all his life that he may hope only for earth, and may not eat the bread of life, the New Testament holds out something immeasurably greater: a place in the one flock, a share in the one hope, and a seat at the table where Christ gives himself “for the life of the world” (John 6:51). There are not two kinds of Christian. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism—and one flock, gathered from every fold into the household of God.

Endnotes

1. For the Watchtower's own statement of the two-class doctrine, see "Who Really Have a Heavenly Calling?" (*The Watchtower*, and the chapter "The Great Crowd to Live in Heaven? Or on Earth?" in *Jehovah's Witnesses—Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Watch Tower, 1993), 159–167. The 144,000 "anointed" (the "little flock," Luke 12:32) are said to have a heavenly hope; the "great crowd" of "other sheep" (Rev. 7:9; John 10:16) an earthly one. The terms "anointed class" and "other-sheep class" are Watchtower coinages; neither phrase appears in Scripture.
2. On the dividing of the hopes from 1935, see *Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (1993), 165–166: at a 1935 convention J. F. Rutherford asked all who hoped to live forever on earth to stand, and declared, "Behold! The great multitude!" From that point the "great crowd" was identified as an earthly class and the heavenly calling treated as all but closed. The earlier Watchtower position had been the opposite—that the "great company" was itself a *heavenly* spirit class: "all the facts and the scriptures ... show that those who form the great multitude constitute a spirit class, born on the spirit plane" (*The Watch Tower*, January 15, 1927, 19–20); "must be spirit creatures" (*Vindication*, vol. 3, 1932, 204). Founder C. T. Russell's associates had even numbered the "Great Company" in the hundreds of millions in heaven (*The Finished Mystery*, 1917, 103). The reversal to an earthly class came only with Rutherford in 1935.
3. John 10:16. The "other sheep ... not of this fold" are most naturally the Gentiles, who together with believing Jews become "one flock, one shepherd." The Greek "not of" (*ek*) this fold denotes origin, not destination: sheep *from* a different starting point, not bound for a different place. The words are spoken to Pharisees who assumed Israel alone was God's flock (John 9:40–10:16), and John supplies the interpretation: Jesus would die "not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51–52). The reading is as old as the Fathers; see Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 47.2–4, who identifies the other sheep with the Gentiles called into the one Church. So too the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Christianity," which reads John 10:16 as Christ's announcement of "the future extension of his Kingdom" to the nations (cf. Matt. 8:11; 28:19).
4. John 10:16, "one flock, one shepherd" (Greek *mia poimnē, heis poimēn*). The verse the Watchtower cites to *establish* two classes in fact declares the opposite: the bringing in of the other sheep produces *one* flock, not a flock of two permanently distinct destinies. The older Bishops' and King James rendering "one fold" obscured this; the Greek is "one flock."

5. Ephesians 4:4–6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the *one hope* that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Paul names *one* hope for all the baptized, not two. A system of two hopes—heavenly and earthly—cannot be squared with this sevenfold confession of unity.

6. Ephesians 2:11–22, esp. 2:14–16: Christ “has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two ... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross.” Paul’s gospel is the abolition of the wall between Jew and Gentile into a single Body. The two-class doctrine re-erects a dividing wall the cross was meant to destroy.

7. Revelation 7:4–8. The 144,000 are “sealed out of every tribe of the sons of Israel,” and the list names twelve tribes of 12,000 each. If the number is pressed as a literal census of all who go to heaven, then by the same literalism the saved are exclusively Israelite, male (cf. Rev. 14:4, “not defiled with women”), and celibate—conclusions the Watchtower itself does not draw. The Church has defined nothing about the identity of the sealed, and commentators differ. Some take them as a figure for the completeness of God’s people; others identify them with Jewish believers of the apostolic age, or with the martyrs of Revelation 14. None of these readings is binding, and the Church has never proposed one. What tells against the Watchtower’s use of the number is not a rival identification but the book’s own manner: Revelation’s numbers are consistently symbolic, and nothing marks this one as an exception.

8. In Revelation 7 the 144,000 (vv. 4–8) and the great crowd (vv. 9–17) are shown in the same place and the same act of worship: both stand “before the throne and before the Lamb” (7:9; cf. 14:3, the 144,000 “before the throne”). The continuous vision (7:11, “and all the angels ... fell on their faces before the throne”) is a heavenly scene; to place the great crowd on earth while angels, elders, and the throne are in heaven breaks the single setting. See the argument of Lorri MacGregor, “Who Are the Great Crowd of Revelation Chapter 7?”

9. Revelation 7:15, the great crowd “serve him day and night *in his temple*, and he who sits upon the throne will *shelter them with his presence*” (literally “will spread his tabernacle over them,” *skēnōsei ep’ autous*). Revelation 13:6 locates God’s “tabernacle” (“those who dwell in heaven”) in heaven; and Revelation 19:1 hears “the loud voice of a great multitude *in heaven*.” The Watchtower’s restriction of *naos* to an “earthly courtyard” is an interpretive device unsupported by the text, which knows no outer court here at all.

10. The New Testament distinguishes two words for the temple. *Hieron* (Strong’s 2411) denotes the whole temple complex, including the outer courts open to all worshippers; *naos* (Strong’s 3485) denotes the inner sanctuary—the Holy and Most Holy—which only

the priests could enter. Revelation 7:15 uses *naos*. The Watchtower acknowledges the distinction in *The Watchtower*, August 15, 1960, 493 (“*Hieron* referred to the entire temple grounds, whereas *naos* applied to the temple structure itself”), and its New World Translation renders *naos* as “temple [sanctuary]” elsewhere in Revelation (e.g., 11:19; 14:15; 15:5–8), dropping the bracketed “[sanctuary]” only at 7:15. The scholar Jason BeDuhn, whom the Watchtower elsewhere cites approvingly, likewise identifies *naos* as the inner chamber and *enōpion* as “face to face” before the throne.

11. In *The Watchtower*, August 15, 1980, 14–16 (“The ‘Great Crowd’ Renders Sacred Service Where?”), the Society argued that *naos* could mean the outer court, asserting that Jesus drove the money-changers from the *naos*. But John 2:14–15 (with Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15) uses *hieron* for that scene, as the Society’s own *Kingdom Interlinear* shows. In “Questions From Readers,” *The Watchtower*, May 1, 2002, 30–31, the Society conceded that the great crowd are in the *naos* and not in any spiritual “Court of the Gentiles,” while still placing them on earth. A later article (March 15, 2010, 26) reverted to the “outer courtyard” language without addressing the lexical point.

12. Each term describing the great crowd in Revelation 7:9–17 is applied to the heavenly company elsewhere: “before the throne” (7:9; cf. the 144,000 in 14:3 and the angels in 7:11); “white robes” (7:9; cf. the souls under the altar in 6:11); and the great-voiced cry of “salvation to our God” (7:10; cf. “a great multitude in heaven” in 19:1). The cumulative effect is that every descriptive marker the text gives the great crowd is, by Revelation’s own usage, a marker of those in heaven.

13. John 6:53–57: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Christ makes partaking the *condition* of life, not the badge of an elite. Yet the Watchtower forbids the “great crowd”—the overwhelming majority of its members—to partake of the bread and wine at its annual Memorial, restricting the emblems to those professing the heavenly calling. Of the millions who attend, only a few thousand partake. On the institution and the universal command, see Luke 22:19–20 (“do this in remembrance of me”) and 1 Corinthians 11:23–26.

14. 1 Timothy 2:5–6: “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom *for all*.” The Watchtower has taught that Christ is mediator only for the 144,000, the “other sheep” relating to him as “friends” rather than as those for whom he mediates the new covenant (see *The Watchtower*, April 1, 1979, and the discussion in *Insight on the Scriptures*, “Mediator”). Paul says the ransom is “for all” and the mediation “between God and men” without qualification.

15. If only 144,000 in all of history are taken to heaven, and the calling was all but closed by 1935, the count cannot accommodate the Christian dead of the first three centuries alone, when hundreds of thousands suffered martyrdom rather than deny Christ.

Tertullian already reads Revelation 17:6—Babylon “drunk with the blood of the saints”—of the Christian martyrs (*Scorpiace* 12); the martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6:9–11 are in heaven, crying out and given white robes, long before any modern “great crowd.” The two-class arithmetic cannot find room for the very saints the New Testament already places before the throne.

16. Scripture makes the vision of God the universal hope of the blessed, not the privilege of a class: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8); “we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2); “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12); “that where I am you also may be” (John 14:3). The Church calls this the beatific vision (Catechism of the Catholic Church §§1023–1029): the direct, face-to-face knowledge and love of the Triune God, which is the essence of heaven and the end for which every human being is made. On the heavenly hope held out to congregations at large, Colossians 1:5; 1 Peter 1:3–4; Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 3:1; and Hebrews 12:22–23, where the readers are told they “have come” to “the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven.” The quoted statement that the Christian Greek Scriptures are of concern “primarily to spiritual Israel, which is the congregation of God, but, additionally, to all persons who seek the approval of God” is from *Insight on the Scriptures* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1988), Vol. 1, entry “Christian Greek Scriptures,” 444; “spiritual Israel” is the Watchtower’s term for the anointed 144,000.

17. On the land-promise as national and covenantal, see Genesis 12:7 and 17:8, where the land is sworn to Abraham and his descendants, and Deuteronomy 30:1–5 on exile and return. Psalm 37 contrasts the righteous inheriting the land with the wicked being cut off from it (vv. 9, 22, 28–29); Isaiah 65:17–25 addresses the returning exiles; Micah 4:1–4 pictures the nations streaming to Zion. On the patriarchs’ own understanding of what they had been promised, Hebrews 11:8–16. For the Watchtower’s use of these texts as proof of an everlasting earthly class, see *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (Watch Tower, 2005), ch. 3, “What Is God’s Purpose for the Earth?” and *Insight on the Scriptures* (Watch Tower, 1988), under “Earth.”

18. Scripture knows a single division of humanity at the last, not two tiers of the saved: those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life and those whose are not (Rev. 20:15; 21:27; cf. 3:5). All the redeemed inherit the same consummation—the new heaven *and* the new earth united, “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven,” where “the dwelling of God is with men” (Rev. 21:1–3). The biblical hope is not heaven-*or*-earth for two classes, but the marriage of heaven and earth for the one people of God.

19. Luke 12:32, “Fear not, *little flock*, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” The Watchtower takes “little flock” as the 144,000 over against the “other sheep.” But in context Jesus addresses *all* his disciples; the flock is “little” because the

disciples are then few, not because it is one tier of a two-tier people. John 10 envisions the *joining* of the folds into one, not their permanent separation.

For Further Reading

To Whom Shall We Go?—The Biblical Case for the Catholic Church, by Thomas J. Nash.

Tractates on the Gospel of John, by St. Augustine. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701047.htm>.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§1023–1029 (heaven), 1042–1050 (new heaven and new earth). Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2>.

Who Are the Great Crowd of Revelation Chapter 7?, by Lorri MacGregor.

Great Crowd and Other Sheep, jwfacts.com.

* * *

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. — Ephesians 4:4–6

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of the Catholic faith, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of

the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.