

1914 AND “THIS GENERATION”

For the couch has proved too short for stretching oneself on, and the woven sheet itself is too narrow when wrapping oneself up.—Isaiah 28:20.

FOR more than three decades the year 1914 was pointed forward to as the *terminal point* for the Watch Tower organization’s time prophecies. Now, for some eight decades, that same date has been pointed backward to as the *starting point* for the time prophecy that constitutes the major stimulus to “urgency” in the activity of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Perhaps no other religion of modern times has so much invested in, and dependent on, a single date. The Witness organization’s claim to be the unique earthly channel and instrument of God and Christ is inseparably linked to it, for the claim is that in that year Christ began his “invisible presence” as a newly enthroned ruler, and that thereafter he examined the many religious bodies of earth and selected that which was connected with the Watch Tower as his choice to represent him before all mankind. In correlation to this, he gave his approved recognition of that same body of people as a “faithful and wise servant” class, which he appointed over all his earthly belongings. The Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses derives its claim to authority from this, presenting itself as the administrative part of that “faithful and wise servant” class. Take away 1914 and its claimed significance, and the basis for their authority largely evaporates.

The evidence shows that the Governing Body felt a considerable degree of discomfort as regards this major time prophecy. The time-frame allotted for its fulfillment proved embarrassingly short and narrow as to covering the things foretold. The passing of each year only served to accentuate the discomfort felt.

Since the 1940s the Watch Tower publications have represented the words of Jesus Christ, “Truly I say to you that this generation will by no means pass away until all these things occur,” as having begun to apply as of the year 1914. The “1914 generation” was spoken of, and was presented as referring to the period in which the final fulfillment of the “last-days prophecies” would take place and a new order would enter.

In the 1940s the view held was that a “generation” covered a period of about 30 to 40 years. This lent itself to the constant insistence on the extreme shortness of time left. At least some Bible examples could also be cited as corroboration. (See, for example, Numbers 32:13.)

With the arrival of the 1950s, however, the time period provided by that definition had effectively elapsed. Some “stretching” was needed, and hence in the September 1, 1952 *Watchtower*, pages 542, 543, the definition was changed and, for the first time, the time period covered by a “generation” was defined as representing an entire *lifetime*, thus running—not just for 30 or 40 years—but for 70, 80, or more years.

For a time this seemed to provide a comfortable span of time in which the published predictions might occur. Still, with the passing of the years the application of the term “1914 generation” underwent further adjustment and definition. Note the statements here underlined from an article in the *Awake!* magazine of October 8, 1968 (pages 13, 14):

Jesus was obviously speaking about those who were old enough to witness with understanding what took place when the “last days” began. Jesus was saying that some of those persons who were alive at the appearance of the ‘sign of the last days’ would still be alive when God brought this system to its end.

Even if we presume that youngsters 15 years of age would be perceptive enough



to realize the import of what happened in 1914, it would still make the youngest of "this generation" nearly 70 years old today. So the great majority of the generation to which Jesus was referring has already passed away in death. The remaining ones are approaching old age. And remember, Jesus said that the end of this wicked world would come *before* that generation passed away in death. This, of itself, tells us that the years left before the foretold end comes cannot be many.

When the *Awake!* magazine discussed this more than thirty years ago in the pre-1975 days the stress was on *how soon* the generation of 1914 would be running out, *how little time* was left for that generation's life span. For any of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1968 to have suggested that things might go on for another thirty years or more would have been viewed as manifesting a poor attitude, one not indicative of strong faith.

When 1975 passed, however, the emphasis changed. Now the effort was made to show that the 1914-generation's span was not as narrow as one might think, that it could stretch for quite a long ways yet.

Thus, the October 1, 1978, *Watchtower* now spoke, not of those witnessing "with *understanding* what took place" in 1914, but of those who "were able to *observe*" the events beginning that year. Mere observation is quite different from understanding. This could logically lower the minimum age limit for the ones forming "this generation."

Continuing this trend, two years later, the *Watchtower* of October 15, 1980, cited an article in the *U. S. News & World Report* magazine which suggested that *ten years of age* could be the point at which events start creating "a lasting impression on a person's memory." The news article said that, if such be true, "then there are today more than 13 million Americans who have a recollection of World War I."

'Recollecting' also allows for a more tender age than does understanding, earlier suggested as being found among "youngsters 15 years of age" in the 1968 *Awake!*. (Actually, World War I continued up into 1918, with American involvement beginning only in 1917. So the suggested 10-year-old age given in the news magazine quoted does not necessarily apply to 1914.)

Though different systems of measuring may have gained a year or so here and there, the fact remained that the generation of the 1914 period was shrinking with great rapidity, since the death rate is always highest among those of older age. The Governing Body was aware of this, for the matter came up for discussion a number of times.

The issue arose during the June 7, 1978, session of the Body. Earlier factors led to this. Governing Body member Albert Schroeder had distributed among the members a copy of a demographic report for the United States. The data indicated that less than one percent of the population who were out of their teens in 1914 were still alive in 1978. But a more attention-getting factor had to do with statements Schroeder had made while visiting certain countries in Europe.

Reports drifted back to Brooklyn that he was suggesting to others that the expression "this generation" as used by Jesus at Matthew 24:34 applied to the generation of "anointed ones," and that as long as any of these were still living such "generation" would not have passed away. This was, of course, contrary to the organization's teaching and was unauthorized by the Governing Body.

When the matter was brought up, following Schroeder's return, his suggested interpretation was rejected and it was voted that a "Question from Readers" be run in a forthcoming issue of the *Watchtower* reaffirming the standard teaching regarding "this generation."¹ Interestingly, no rebuke or reproof whatsoever was directed to Governing Body member Schroeder for having advanced his unauthorized, contradictory view while in Europe.

The issue emerged again in both the March 6 and November 14, 1979, sessions. Since attention was being focused on the subject, I made Xerox copies of the first twenty pages of the material sent in by the Swedish elder which detailed the history of chronological speculation and revealed the actual source of the 2,520-year calculation and the 1914 date. Each member of the Body received a copy. Aside from an incidental comment, they did not see fit to discuss the material.

Lyman Swingle, as head of the Writing Department, was already familiar with this material. He directed the Body's attention to some of the dogmatic, insistent statements published in several 1922 issues of the *Watch Tower*, reading portions of these aloud to all the members. He said that he had been too young in 1914 (only about four years

1 See the *Watchtower*, October 1, 1978.

old then) to remember much about it.² But he said that he did remember the discussions that took place in his home regarding 1925. That he also knew what had happened in 1975. He said he personally would not want to be misled regarding another date.

In the course of the session, I pointed out that the Society's 607 B.C.E. starting date had no historical evidence whatsoever for support. As for 1914 and the generation then living, my question was: If the organization's traditional teaching is valid, how can we possibly apply Jesus' *accompanying* words to the people living in 1914? He said: "When you see all these things, know that he is near at the doors," and "as these things start to occur, raise yourselves erect and lift your heads up, because your deliverance is getting near." The publications regularly stated that those words began applying from 1914 onward, to those Christians living in 1914. But if so, then to *whom* among them could this apply? To those who were then 50 years old? But such ones if still alive would now (that is, in 1979, the time of the discussion) be 115 years old. The 40-year-olds? They would be 105. Even the 30-year-olds would be 95 and those just out of their teens would already be 85 in 1979. (Even these would be over 100 if still living today.)

If then those stirring words 'lift up your heads because your deliverance *is getting near*, it's *at the doors*' indeed applied to people in 1914 and meant that they could hope to see the final windup, reasonably that exciting announcement would need to be qualified by saying: "Yes, *you* may see it—that is, provided you are now quite young and live a very, very long life." As an example, I pointed to my father who, born in 1891, was just a young man of twenty-three in 1914. He lived, not just threescore years and ten, or fourscore years, but reached eighty-six years of age. He had been dead for two years by this time and died without seeing the predicted things.

So I asked the Body how meaningful the application of Jesus' words in Matthew 24:33, 34, could have been in 1914 if the only ones who could hope to see them fulfilled were children just in their teens or younger? No specific reply was offered.

A number of members, however, did voice their continued support for the organization's existing teaching about "this generation" and

2 Among the Governing Body members at the time discussed, only Fred Franz (now deceased) was out of his teenage years in 1914, being 21 years old then. As to the present members, Karl Klein (now deceased) and Carey Barber were 9, Lyman Swingle (now deceased) was 4, Albert Schroeder 3, Jack Barr was 1 year old. Lloyd Barry (now deceased), Dan Sydlik, Milton Henschel, and Ted Jaracz had not yet been born, their births coming after 1914, as is true of the five latest members added since to the Body.

the 1914 date. Lloyd Barry expressed personal dismay that doubts existed within the Body regarding the teaching. Referring to Lyman Swingle’s reading of statements from the 1922 *Watch Towers*, he said that he saw nothing to be concerned about in these, that they were “present truth” for the brothers at that period.³ As to the advanced age of the 1914 generation, he pointed out that in some parts of the Soviet Union there are regions where people live to be 130 years old. He urged that a united position be expressed to the brothers so that they would maintain their sense of urgency. Others expressed concurring views.

When later recognized by the Chairman, my comment was that it seemed we would need to keep in mind that what is today taught as “present truth” may also in time become “past truth,” and that the “present truth” that replaces such “past truth” may itself become replaced by “future truth.” I felt that the word “truth” used in such a manner became simply meaningless.

A couple of the Body members said that if the current explanation was not the right one, then what *was* the explanation of Jesus’ statements? Since the question seemed aimed at me, my response was that I felt there was an explanation that harmonized with Scripture and fact, but that anything presented should surely not be some “spur-of-the-moment” idea, but something carefully researched and weighed. I said that I thought there were brothers capable of doing that work but that they would need the Governing Body’s authorization. Was the Governing Body interested in having this done? There was no response and the question was dropped.

At the discussion’s end, with the exception of a few members, the Body members indicated that they felt that 1914 and the teaching about “this generation” tied to it should continue to be stressed. The Writing Committee Coordinator, Lyman Swingle, commented, “All right, if that is what you want to do. But at least you know that as far as 1914 is concerned, Jehovah’s Witnesses got the whole thing—lock, stock and barrel—from the Second Adventists.”

Perhaps one of the most disturbing things to me was knowing that, while the organization urged the brothers to maintain unwavering trust in the interpretation, there were men in responsible positions within the organization who had themselves manifested that they did not have full confidence in the predictions based on the 1914 date.

3 The expression “present truth” was popular in the time of Russell and Rutherford and was based on a faulty translation of 2 Peter 1:12. The *New World Translation* there reads more accurately, “the truth that is present in you.”

As a notable example, at the time of the February 19, 1975, session, in which the Governing Body listened to Fred Franz's taped talk on 1975, there followed some discussion about the uncertainty of time prophecies. Nathan Knorr, then the president, spoke up and said:

There are some things I know—I know that Jehovah is God, that Christ Jesus is his Son, that he gave his life as a ransom for us, that there is a resurrection. Other things I'm not so certain about. 1914—I don't know. We have talked about 1914 for a long time. We may be right and I hope we are.⁴

At that session the date primarily under discussion was 1975, so it came as a surprise that the far more fundamental date of 1914 should be referred to in such context. As stated, the president's words were spoken, not in private conversation, but before the Governing Body in session.

Previous to the major discussion of 1914 (in the November 14, 1979, full Governing Body session), the Body's Writing Committee in a committee meeting had discussed the advisability of continuing to stress 1914.⁵ In the committee discussion it was suggested that we might at least refrain from "pushing" the date. As I recall, Karl Klein reminded us of the practice sometimes followed of simply not mentioning a certain teaching for a time, so that if any change came it would not make such a strong impression.

Remarkably, the Writing Committee voted unanimously to follow basically that very policy in the publications with regard to 1914. This position, however, was short-lived, since the November 14, 1979, full session of the Governing Body made clear that the majority favored emphasizing the date as usual.

That questions about this teaching were not limited to Brooklyn was brought home to me by an incident occurring while I was on a trip to West Africa in the fall of 1979. In Nigeria, two members of the Nigerian Branch Committee and a longtime missionary, took me to see a property the Society had purchased for constructing a new Branch headquarters. On the return trip I asked when they expected to be able to move to the new site. The reply was that, with the clearing of the land, obtaining approval of plans and getting necessary permits,

4 This does not seem to have been just a momentary thought on President Knorr's part, for the same viewpoint was expressed in virtually the same words by one of his closer associates, George Couch. Knowing the two, it seems more likely that Couch acquired the view from Knorr than vice versa.

5 The Writing Committee membership was then composed of Lloyd Barry, Fred Franz, Raymond Franz, Karl Klein and Lyman Swingle.

and then the actual construction, it might well be in 1983 before the move was made.

Because of this, I asked, “Do you get any questions from the local brothers as to the length of time that has passed since 1914?” There was a momentary silence, and then the Branch Coordinator said, “No, the Nigerian brothers seldom ask questions of that kind—but WE do.” Almost immediately the longtime missionary said, “Brother Franz, could it be that Jesus’ reference to ‘this generation’ applied only to persons back there who saw the destruction of Jerusalem? If that were the case, then everything would seem to fit.”

Quite evidently not everything did seem to fit in his mind, the way the existing teaching had it. My reply was simply that I supposed that such was a possibility but that there was not much more that could be said for the idea. I repeated this conversation to the Governing Body after my return, for it gave evidence to me of the questions existing in the minds of men throughout the world, respected men in positions of considerable authority. The comments the men in Nigeria made and the way that they made them indicated clearly that they had discussed the question among themselves before ever my visit took place.

Shortly after my return from Africa, in a Governing Body session on February 17, 1980, Lloyd Barry again voiced his feelings about the importance of the teaching regarding 1914 and “this generation.” Lyman Swingle said that the “Questions from Readers” material published in 1978 had not settled the matter in the brothers’ minds. Albert Schroeder reported that in the Gilead School and in Branch Committee seminars, brothers brought up the fact that 1984 was now being talked about as a possible new date, 1984 being seventy years from 1914 (the figure seventy evidently being looked upon as having some special import). The Body decided to discuss the matter of 1914 further in the next session.”⁶

The Chairman’s Committee, consisting of Albert Schroeder (Chairman), Karl Klein and Grant Suiter, now produced a most unusual document. They supplied a copy to each member of the Governing Body. Briefly put, these three men were suggesting that, rather than applying to people living in 1914, the expression “this generation” would begin applying as of 1957, forty-three years later!

6 Contrary to what is alleged by some, the Governing Body itself never gave importance to the date of 1984 and, as I recall, this occasion was the only time that date was even mentioned, and that only in connection with rumors.

This is the material exactly as these three members of the Governing Body supplied it to us:

To Members of the Governing Body -- On Agenda for Wednesday Mar.5 '80

Question: What is "this generation (genea')?" (Mt. 24:34; Mr. 13:30; Luke 21:32)

TDNT (many Commentaries) say: genea' "mostly denotes the sense of contemporaries." Vol. 1, p. 663

Most all say genea' differs from genos, genos means offspring, people, race. See TDNT Vol. 1 p. 685 (genos at 1 Pet. 2:9)

Answer may be tied to question on Mt. 24:35. What is meant by: "When you see all these things?"

Lange's Commentary (Vol. 8) suggests that "these things" do not refer to C.E. 70, nor the parousia 1914 but to vss. 29,30 the celestial phenomina that we now see began with the space age 1957 onward. In that case it would then be the contemporary generation of mankind living since 1957.

Three Sections

Lange's Commentary divides Matthew 24th chapter into "three cycles."

His 1st cycle-- Matt. 24:1-14

2nd cycle-- Matt. 24:15-28

3rd cycle-- Matt. 24:29-44 (synteleia or conclusion)

(See Vol. 8 pp 421, 424 and 427)

Based on Matt. 24:3 question in three parts.

The Watchtower and God's Kingdom of a Thousand Years (ka)

Have now also divided Matthew 24 into three parts so to speak

(1) Matt. 24:3-22 Has parallel fulfillments in 1st century and today since 1914. (See w 75 p. 273, ka p. 205)

(2) Matt. 24:23-28 Period into Christ's parousia of 1914. (See w 75 p. 275)

(3) Matt. 24:29-44 "Celestial Phenomina" have literal application since the space age began in 1957 and onward to include Christ's erkhomenon (coming as the executioner at the beginning of the "great tribulation.") (See w 75 p 276 par. 18; ka pp 323 to 328)

"All these things" would have to throw back in the context to the nearest items listed in the composite sign, namely, the celestial phenomina of verses 29 and 30.*

If this is true:

Then "this generation" would refer/contemporary mankind living as knowledgeable ones from 1957 onward.

*Confirmed in thought by C.T.Russell in Berean Commentary, p. 217: "Genea, people living contemporaneously which witness the signs just mentioned." Vol. 4 p. 604.

Chairman's Committee, 3/3/80

1957 marked the year when the first Russian Sputnik was launched into earth’s outer space. Evidently the Chairman’s Committee felt that that event could be accepted as marking the start of the fulfillment of these words of Jesus:

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.⁷

Based on that application, their conclusion would be as they stated:

Then ‘this generation’ would refer to contemporary mankind living as knowledgeable ones from 1957 onward.

The three men were not suggesting that 1914 be dropped. It would stay as the “end of the Gentile Times.” But “this generation” would not begin applying until 1957.

In view of the swiftly diminishing numbers of the 1914 generation, this new application of the phrase could undoubtedly prove even more helpful than some person allegedly living to be 130 years old in a certain section of the Soviet Union. As compared with starting in 1914, this new 1957 starting date would give *an additional 43 years* for the period embraced by the expression “this generation” to reach.

Governing Body standards required that for any Committee to recommend something to the full Body there should be unanimous agreement among the Committee members (otherwise the divided viewpoint should be presented to the Body for settlement). The presentation of the novel idea regarding 1957 was therefore one upon which the three members of the Chairman’s Committee, Schroeder, Klein and Suiter must have agreed.

I would think that, if asked about this presentation today, the response would be, “Oh, that was just a suggestion.” Possibly, but if so it was a suggestion seriously made. And for Albert Schroeder, Karl Klein and Grant Suiter to bring such a suggestion to the Governing Body *they must have been willing in their own minds to see the suggested change made*. If, indeed, their belief and conviction as to the Society’s longtime teaching about “this generation” (as applying from 1914 onward) had been strong, firm, unequivocal, they certainly would never have come forward with the new interpretation they offered.

The Governing Body did not accept the new view proposed by these members. Comments made showed that many considered it fanciful. The fact remains, however, that Governing Body members

7 Matthew 24:29.

Schroeder, Klein and Suiter presented their idea as a serious proposition, revealing their own lack of conviction as to the solidity of the existing teaching on the subject.

Despite all this evidence of divided viewpoint as to the validity of the claims regarding 1914 and the “1914 generation,” bold, positive, forceful statements regarding 1914 and “this generation” continued to be published as Biblically established fact by the “prophet” organization, and all of Jehovah’s Witnesses were urged to put full trust in this and carry the message about it to other people earthwide. In an apparent effort to calm concern about the diminishing ranks of the 1914 generation, the same *Watchtower* (October 15, 1980, page 31) that implied that the age limit for that generation’s members could be lowered to ten years of age, also said:

And if the wicked system of this world survived until the turn of the century, which is highly improbable in view of world trends and the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, there would still be survivors of the World War I generation. However, the fact that their number is dwindling is one more indication that “the conclusion of the system of things” is moving fast toward its end.

That was written in 1980. Twenty years later, by the turn of the century, the ten-year-olds of 1914 would be *ninety-six years old*. Still, there might be a few of them yet around and evidently that was viewed as all that was necessary for Jesus’ words to be fulfilled—depending, of course, on the acceptance of the idea that Jesus was directing his words particularly to ten-year-old children. This illustrates the extremes to which the organization was willing to go to hold on to its definition of the “1914 generation.”

More years passed and now no mention was made of “ten-year-olds” but instead the reference was simply to “those living in 1914” or similar. This, of course, allowed for newborn babies to be included in the “1914 generation.” But with the arrival of the 1990s, and with the third millennium about to begin, even this “adjustment in understanding” provided only momentary relief for the problem. Even a newborn in 1914 would be approaching 90 by the year 2000.

One thing I can say with positiveness about the matter is that I personally found the reasoning employed within the Governing Body to be incredible. I found it tragic that a time prophecy could be proclaimed to the world as something solid upon which people could and *should* confidently rely, build their hopes, form their life plans,

when the very ones publishing this knew that within their own collective body there did not exist a unanimity of genuine, firm conviction as to the rightness of that teaching. It may be that when viewed against the whole background of the organization’s decades of date-fixing and shifting of dates, their attitude becomes more understandable.

Perhaps more incredible to me is that the Chairman’s Committee members, Albert Schroeder, Karl Klein and Grant Suiter, within about *two months* of their submission of their new idea on “this generation” listed the teaching about the start of Christ’s presence in 1914 as among the decisive teachings for determining whether individuals (including headquarters staff members) were guilty of “apostasy” and therefore merited disfellowshipment. They did this knowing that just months before they themselves had placed in question the corollary, companion doctrine regarding “this generation.”

Throughout the half century in which the organization promulgated the concept of a “1914 generation,” its span consistently proved like a couch that is too short for comfort, and the reasonings used to cover that doctrinal “couch” proved like a woven sheet that is too narrow, not able to shut out, in this case, the cold facts of reality.

The leadership had made numerous adjustments and now had few remaining options. There was the 1957 starting date for “this generation” proposed by members Schroeder, Klein and Suiter, but that seemed an unlikely choice. There was Albert Schroeder’s idea of applying the phrase to the “anointed” class (an idea that had been floating around the organization for many, many years) which offered certain advantages—there are always additional persons (some fairly young) who each year decide for the first time that they are of the “anointed” class. So this would offer an almost limitless extension of time for the teaching about “this generation.”

There was another option. They could acknowledge the historical evidence placing Jerusalem’s destruction twenty years later than the Society’s 607 B.C.E. date. This would make the Gentile Times run out (using their 2,520-year interpretation) about 1934. But such enormous importance has been placed on 1914 and, as has been shown, so much of the doctrinal superstructure is linked to it, that this also seemed an unlikely step.

The inevitable signs of yet further “adjustment of understanding” began to appear with the February 15, 1994, *Watchtower*. In it the beginning of the application of Jesus’ statement about “signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth anguish of nations” was moved up from the year 1914 to a point following the start of the yet future

“great tribulation.” Likewise, the foretold ‘gathering of the chosen ones from the four winds,’ previously taught as running from 1919 onward, was now also moved to the future, following the start of the “great tribulation” and subsequent to the appearance of the celestial phenomena. Each of the now-abandoned positions had been taught for some fifty years. (See, as but one of numerous examples, the *Watchtower* of July 15, 1946.)

Though heralded as “new light,” the changes simply moved Watch Tower teachings closer to understandings presented long ago by those the organization disdains as “Christendom’s scholars.”

In September 1994, the eighth printing of *Crisis of Conscience* discussed this February 15, 1994 issue of the *Watchtower* and its moving the application of portions of Matthew 24 forward to the start of the “great tribulation.” In that discussion I included the following thoughts:

What is perhaps most notable is that the phrase “this generation”—which the *Watchtower* so constantly emphasizes and which is found in Matthew 24:34 and Luke 21:32—nowhere appears in these articles, being conspicuous by its absence. It is hard to say whether the organization will now be able to assign Matthew 24:29-31 to a point *after* the start of the future “great tribulation” and still continue to apply Jesus’ statement about “this generation” three verses later to the time period beginning in 1914. But as has been shown, it is reasonable to believe that the Governing Body would welcome some means of escape from the increasingly difficult position created by tying the phrase “this generation” (along with the accompanying words that it “will not pass away until all these things have taken place”) to the steadily-receding date of 1914.

Whether this new interpretation is simply preparing the ground for a crucial change in the application of the phrase “this generation” remains to be seen. Undoubtedly, the most desirable escape would come with an explanation that both *retained* 1914 as the “start of the last days” and at the same time successfully *disconnected* the phrase “this generation” from that date. As stated, the organization can hardly give up 1914 completely without undermining a host of teachings based on that date. But if the phrase “this generation” could be unlinked from 1914 and be applied to some future period of unknown date, then the passage of time, the arrival of the third millennium in the year 2000, and even the approach of the year 2014, might not prove too difficult to rationalize, particularly with a membership trained to accept whatever the “faithful and discreet slave class” and its Governing Body may offer them.

As stated, that information in *Crisis of Conscience* was printed in September 1994. Just *thirteen months later* articles appeared in the November 1, 1995 *Watchtower* which did almost precisely what had been pointed to in that 1994 edition of *Crisis of Conscience*. As indicated, they now *unlinked* the phrase “this generation” (Matthew 24:34) from the date of 1914, but still *retained* the date as Biblically significant.

This was accomplished by a new definition of the sense of “generation” in this text. About 70 years ago, *The Golden Age* magazine of October 20, 1926, connected Jesus’ words about “this generation” to the date of 1914 (as did subsequent *Watchtower* magazines). Some 25 years later, the June 1, 1951, *Watchtower*, page 335, in connection with 1914, stated, “Hence our generation is the generation that will see the start and finish of all these things, including Armageddon.” In the July 1, 1951, issue, page 404, “this generation” was again linked to 1914. Of Matthew 24:34, it said:

The actual meaning of these words is, beyond question that which takes a “generation” in the ordinary sense, as at Mark 8:12 and Acts 13:36, or for those who are living at the given period.

It then added:

This therefore means that from 1914 a generation shall not pass till all is fulfilled, and amidst a great time of trouble.

For over forty years thereafter Watch Tower publications continued to assign a *temporal* sense to the “generation” of Matthew 24:34. The aging of the 1914 generation was pointed to again and again as clear evidence of the shortness of the remaining time.

In the revised definition, however, rather than having parameters of time limitations or any set *starting point*, the “generation” is instead said to be identified, not temporally, but qualitatively, by its *characteristics*, as in the reference to an “evil and adulterous generation” in Jesus’ time. “This generation” is now said to be “the peoples of earth who see the sign of Christ’s presence but fail to mend their ways.”

1914 is not discarded, however, something the organization could not do without dismantling the major theological structure and distinctive tenets of the religion. 1914 remains as the claimed date of Christ’s enthronement in heaven, the beginning of his second, invisible, presence, as also the start of the “last days.” And it still figures, though obliquely, in the new definition of “this generation,” since the “sign of Christ’s presence” — which the doomed ones see and reject or ignore — supposedly began to be visible worldwide from and after 1914.

What then is the significant difference? It is that now, to qualify as part of “this generation,” a person need no longer have been *alive in 1914* to form part of “this generation.” *Anyone* can see the supposed sign of Christ’s presence *at any time*—even if for the first time in the 1990s, or for that matter in the third millennium—and still qualify as part of “this generation.” This allows the phrase to *float free of any starting date* and reduces considerably the need to explain the embarrassing length of time that has elapsed since 1914, and the rapidly diminishing ranks of persons who were alive at that date.

Perhaps the most graphic evidence of this change is seen in the masthead of the *Awake!* magazine. Up until October 22, 1995, it read:

Awake!

Why Awake! Is Published *Awake!* is for the enlightenment of the entire family. It shows how to cope with today’s problems. It reports the news, tells about people in many lands, examines religion and science. But it does more. It probes beneath the surface and points to the real meaning behind current events, yet it always stays politically neutral and does not exalt one race above another. Most important, this magazine builds confidence in the Creator’s promise of a peaceful and secure new world before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away.

The statement that “this magazine builds confidence in the Creator’s promise of a peaceful and secure new world before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away,” appeared year after year from 1982 until October 22, 1995. With the November 8, 1995 issue, the statement was altered to read:

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Why Awake! Is Published *Awake!* is for the enlightenment of the entire family. It shows how to cope with today’s problems. It reports the news, tells about people in many lands, examines religion and science. But it does more. It probes beneath the surface and points to the real meaning behind current events, yet it always stays politically neutral and does not exalt one race above another. Most important, this magazine builds confidence in the Creator’s promise of a peaceful and secure new world that is about to replace the present wicked, lawless system of things.

All reference to 1914 is now deleted, presenting graphic evidence of this crucial change—as well as, in effect, indicating that “the Creator” had somehow reneged on his “promise” tied to the 1914 generation.

It remains to be seen what the ultimate effect of this change will be. I would think that those feeling its effects most acutely would be those older, longtime members who had embraced the hope of not dying before the realization of their expectations regarding the complete fulfillment of God’s promises. Proverbs 13:12 says that “hope deferred [expectation postponed, *NW*] makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” (*NRSV*) Any feelings of heartsickness these may now experience are not the responsibility of the Creator but of the men who implanted and nourished in them false expectations tied to a date.

Those younger or more recently affiliated will not likely feel as severely the impact of the change. It is, after all, clothed in language that makes no acknowledgment of error on the organization’s part,

but which shrouds the change in terms of 'progressive understanding' and 'advancing light.' The May 1, 1999 *Watchtower* (page 13) says; "Our progress in understanding the prophecy in Matthew chapters 24 and 25 has been thrilling," this, while contemporaneously discarding one interpretation after another taught for years as divine truth! The many newer ones may not be aware of the intense insistence with which, for decades, the "1914 generation" concept was advanced, how positively it was presented as a certain indicator of the "nearness of the end." They may not realize how adamantly the "1914 generation" teaching was presented as being, not of human origin, but of *divine* origin, not a timetable based on human promise, but based on "God's promise." This 40-year-long, implicit tying of God and his Word to a now-failed concept only adds to the heaviness of the responsibility. One is reminded of Jehovah's words at Jeremiah 23:21:

I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.

This basic change can only have come as the result of a Governing Body decision. As shown, the essential issue involved came up for discussion as far back as the 1970s. One cannot but wonder as to the thoughts of the Governing Body members today, what sense of responsibility they feel. Every member of that body knew then and knows now what the organization's record has been in the field of date-setting and predicting. Through the publications this is excused on the basis of "a fervent desire to realize the fulfillment of God's promises in their own time," as if one cannot have such fervent desire without presuming to set a timetable for God, or to make predictions and attribute them to God, as based on his Word. They know also that, despite mistake after mistake, the organization's leaders kept on feeding its membership new predictions. They know that the leadership has consistently failed to shoulder full responsibility for the errors, to admit that it, the leadership, was simply and plainly wrong. They have sought to protect their image and their claim to authority by endeavoring to make it appear that the errors were those of the membership as a whole. In an article on "False Predictions or True Prophecy," the June 22, 1995 *Awake!* (page 9) said:

Bible Students, known since 1931 as Jehovah's Witnesses, also expected that the year 1925 would see the fulfillment of marvelous Bible prophecies. They surmised that at that time the earthly resurrection would begin, bringing back faithful men of old, such

as Abraham, David, and Daniel. More recently, many Witnesses conjectured that events associated with the beginning of Christ's Millennial Reign might start to take place in 1975. Their anticipation was based on the understanding that the seventh millennium of human history would begin then.

The November 1, 1995, *Watchtower* magazine presenting the new teaching regarding "this generation" follows the same tactic, saying (page 17):

Eager to see the end of this evil system, Jehovah's people have at times speculated about the time when the "great tribulation" would break out, even tying this to calculations of what is the lifetime of a generation since 1914. However, we "bring a heart of wisdom in," not by speculating about how many years or days make up a generation, but by thinking about how we "count our days" in bringing joyful praise to Jehovah. (Psalm 90:12) Rather than provide a rule for measuring time, the term "generation" as used by Jesus refers principally to contemporary people of a certain historical period, with their identifying characteristics.



The leadership thus shrugs off the responsibility that rightfully rests with them, piously counseling the membership on their spiritual outlook as if it were *their* wrong spiritual viewpoint that produced the problem. They do not acknowledge that the membership *originates nothing* and that the membership embraced hopes as to various dates solely because *the leaders* of the organization fed them material clearly designed to stir up such hopes, that every date mentioned and

all the ‘surmising,’ ‘conjectures’ and ‘speculations’ and ‘calculations’ connected to those dates, originated, not with the membership, but with *the leaders*. It is somewhat like a mother, whose children become ill with indigestion, saying of such children, “They weren’t careful about what they ate,” when in fact the children simply ate what the mother served them. And not only served them but *insisted* that the food should be accepted as wholesome, part of a superior diet unobtainable elsewhere, so much so that any expression of dissatisfaction with what was fed them would bring threat of punishment.

The men now on the Governing Body all know that, for as long as any of the organization’s teachings connected with the 1914 date were in effect, any open questioning or disagreement regarding these could and did bring disfellowshipment. They know that the very “heart of wisdom” that the *Watchtower* article now urges—a heart that avoids speculation based on dates and which focuses instead on simply living each day of our lives as unto God—is the very same “heart” that some members of the Brooklyn headquarters staff sought to convey, and that it was their position in this exact regard that formed a principal part of the accusation on which they were judged as “apostate.” What the thoughts of the Governing Body members involved are today I do not know. I can only say that, had I been a party to the presentation now made and its failure to make an open and manly acknowledgment of responsibility for having seriously misled, and for having seriously misjudged other sincere Christians, I do not see how I could escape feeling some sense of moral cowardice.

It is difficult not to be impressed by the contrast between this course and that taken within another religion guilty of making similar time predictions, the Worldwide Church of God. After the death of its longtime leader, Herbert W. Armstrong, in the late 1980s, the new leadership published an article in the March/April issue of the religion’s main publication, *The Plain Truth* magazine. The article was titled “Forgive Us Our Trespasses,” and began by saying, “The Worldwide Church of God, sponsor of *The Plain Truth* magazine, has changed its position on numerous long-held beliefs and practices during the past few years.” In detailing these, it also said:

At the same time, we are acutely aware of the heavy legacy of our past.

Our flawed doctrinal understanding clouded the plain gospel of Jesus Christ and led to a variety of wrong conclusions and unscriptural practices. We have much to repent of and apologize for.

We were judgmental and self-righteous—condemning other Christians, calling them “so-called Christians” and labeling them “deceived” and “instruments of Satan.”

We imposed on our members a works-oriented approach to Christian living. We required adherence to burdensome regulations of the Old Testament code. We exercised a strongly legalistic approach to church government.

Our former old covenant approach fostered attitudes of exclusivism and superiority rather than the new covenant teaching of brotherhood and unity.

We overemphasized predictive prophecy and prophetic speculation, minimizing the true gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

These teachings and practices are a source of supreme regret. We are painfully mindful of the heartache and suffering that has resulted from them.

We’ve been wrong. There was never an intent to mislead anyone. We were so focused on what we believed we were doing for God that we didn’t recognize the spiritual path we were on. Intended or not, that path was not the biblical one.

As we look back, we ask ourselves how we could have been so wrong. Our hearts go out to all whom our teachings have misled in the Scriptures. We don’t minimize your spiritual disorientation and confusion. We earnestly desire your understanding and forgiveness.

We make no attempt to cover up the doctrinal and scriptural errors of our past. It is not our intention to merely paper over the cracks. We are looking our history squarely in the face and confronting the faults and sins we find. They will always remain a part of our history, serving as a perpetual reminder of the dangers of legalism.

Such frank admission and acceptance of responsibility for harm are not found in Watch Tower publications. Knowing them personally, I am satisfied that many of the men on the Governing Body are sincere in the belief that they are serving God. Unfortunately, that belief is accompanied by a parallel belief that the organization they head is God’s channel of divine communication, superior to all other religious organizations on earth—a belief that gives evidence of a state of denial, in which they do not allow themselves to face the reality of the organization’s flawed course and record. Whatever their sincerity in their desire to serve God, it regrettably has not protected them from a remarkable insensitivity to the potential disillusioning effect of their failed apocalyptic predictions, the weakening effect this can have on people’s confidence in the reliability and worth of the Scriptures.