

Jehovah's Witnesses Abandon Key Tenet

■ **Doctrine:** Sect has quietly retreated from prediction that those alive in 1914 would see end of world.

By JOHN DART
Times Staff Writer

The Jehovah's Witnesses have quietly abandoned a prediction that people alive in 1914 would live to see Christ's kingdom on earth—a major doctrine that lent urgency to the sect's door-to-door warnings that a bloody end of the world is imminent.

Some ex-Witnesses predict the change will hurt the "sky-is-falling preaching" of the 4.7-million-member global organization and disturb longtime members who made personal and financial decisions based on the promise that they would soon be living in heaven on earth.

The now-abandoned tenet was based on the sect's interpretation of a biblical reference to a "generation" that the Witnesses connected with the year 1914, declaring that the Kingdom of God would be established on earth before this generation died off. Even the youngest people alive in 1914 are now at least 80 years old, however, and their ranks are swiftly dwindling.

A former leader of the Witnesses calls it a "monumental change" and an ex-Witness in Milwaukee who runs a national phone hot line says calls are coming in from members distressed by the move.

But the biggest buzz so far appears to be among the cross-country network of former Witnesses who watch the sect's magazines for clues to changing policies.

Articles in a recent issue of *The Watchtower*, one of the sect's magazines, drop the tenet that the biblical reference to "this generation" was tied to the year 1914, or even that it meant the life span of one generation.

In the latest issue of its other magazine, *Awake!*, a statement of the doctrine that has long run in the magazine's masthead was replaced with new wording that sets no deadline for the end of the world.

"I've been waiting to see how

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.

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Reference linking a "new world" to "the generation that saw the events of 1914," which appeared in magazine's masthead, top, has been replaced in latest issue with vaguer wording, above.

they were going to wriggle out of 1914," said George Weisman, 62, a Tujunga resident raised as a Witness who left the organization in 1992.

Robert Johnson, a spokesman for Witness headquarters in Brooklyn, N.Y., said that the change came about through re-examination of Scriptures.

"It doesn't change our belief that we are living in the time of the end," Johnson said. He also denied that Witness leadership was under the pressure of an aging generation to adjust its teachings.

Jehovah's Witnesses "are interested why and how this was determined," Johnson said, "but there is no falling away [of members] that I know of, and we don't expect to see that."

Like-wise, Harley Breman of Reese, a circuit overseer for 21 Kingdom Halls in the western San Fernando Valley, Simi Valley and Thousand Oaks said that he expects no problems. "Nobody has raised any questions to me," Breman said.

Johnson downplayed the change, saying the 1914 timetable "has not been a cardinal doctrine of faith." However, that was disputed by Ray Franz of suburban Atlanta, a former Witness who was on the sect's governing board from 1971 to 1980.

"They've been insisting on this as a definite truth for more than 40 years," said Franz, who left the Witnesses in 1980 in what he called "a crisis in conscience."

"This is a monumental change after all this time," Franz said. "Initially, it was taught that 'this generation' started with people who were old enough to under-

Awake!

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JOEL P. LUGAVERE / Los Angeles Times

Ex-Jehovah's Witness Claire Weissman says she thinks most will accept the new tenet.

stand the events of 1914 [when World War I broke out]," Franz said.

"But as the decades passed it began to include anyone born in that year."

Jehovah's Witnesses, a sect formed in the 1870s and eventually incorporated as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, maintained for much of their early history that 1914 would mark the end of the old world, and Christ would return then.

After 1914 came and went, the sect announced that Christ had indeed "returned" by being enthroned in heaven and appointing the Witnesses as his earthly representatives.

Since then, the group's door-to-door missionaries said they were doing Christ's work by identifying the sheep—believers

destined for everlasting life—and the unsaved, or goats.

Eventually, Witness leaders said the final and cataclysmic "great tribulation" of Armageddon would occur before the generation living in 1914 passed away, citing as evidence the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (24:34) and other biblical passages.

But the shift to downplay that year's significance was signaled in the Oct. 15 issue of *The Watchtower*, which presented "an adjusted understanding" of the long-held teaching about the "sheep and goats."

Instead, the magazine said, the heavenly Jesus will judge the good and the bad at some time in the future.

"We had been told for years that this [judgment] is what we were doing," said Weisman.

"This is a super, major change." Then, in the Nov. 1 issue, *The Watchtower* described the doctrine of 1914 as speculation rather than definitive teaching.

Jehovah's people have at times speculated about the time when the "great tribulation" would break out, even trying this to calculations of what is the lifetime of a generation since 1914," the magazine said.

The article continued, "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."

Similarly, the Nov. 8 issue of *Awake!*, the other major Witness magazine, changed the last sentence in its masthead, which for years read: "The end of the world is near. Please see WITNESSES, B5

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WITNESSES: Tenet Dropped

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years has read: "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 new version refers to "a peaceful and secure new world that is about to replace the present wicked, lawless system of things."

The ranks of Jehovah's Witnesses—900,000 in the United States in 1994—dropped after failed predictions of Armageddon in 1925 and 1975, said James Penton, professor emeritus of religious studies at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada.

"They lost roughly three-quarters of the movement between 1925 and 1928, then suffered huge losses after 1975 when the end didn't come as they had implied over and over again," said Penton, an ex-Witness who writes entries on Jehovah's Witnesses for the *Encyclopedia Americana*.

The new teaching about 1914 may not prove to be as disastrous for the Witnesses as those events, "but they won't be able to put the same pressure on Witnesses to go

house to house," Penton said. "It will have a negative effect on their 'sky is falling, sky is falling' preaching."

Ex-Witnesses said that the group has discouraged people from going to college or looking for financial security because paradise was just around the corner.

Those who challenged the teachings risked excommunication, or "disfellowshipping," they said.

Former member Claire Weisman, 69, who was a Witness most of her life and is married to George Weisman, said that she expects many Jehovah's Witnesses will accept the changes.

"They will keep in tune with whatever *The Watchtower* tells them," she said.

Recalling his experiences as a Witness, George Weisman added, "If you have some misgiving about something, [the leaders] tell you, 'This is something Jehovah will take care of and correct if it is wrong.'"