

(Two articles below contributed by Ruth Maillard of Pinellas Park, Florida. Permission to print given by St. Petersburg Times. Issue of Saturday, July 11, 1981—CROSSROADS—Magazine of Religion. Staff Writer—Jeanne Pugh.)

Armageddon's Non-arrival Left Trouble Among the Witnesses

Although it is relatively small, in a relatively small denomination, there is evidence of turmoil within the Jehovah's Witnesses. Some of the critical Witnesses say that the dissension, which has recently become public, may stem from the fact that the world as we know it did not come to an end in 1975. Others attribute the trouble to a new wave of authoritarianism that they say has swept through the hierarchy and resulted in an "oppressive spirit" in the organization. (See story on opposite page).

But say critics, the current ripples of dissent date back to 1975. That was the year that leaders of the group had promised would mark the destruction of the secular world in "the war of Har-Megedon" (Battle of Armageddon) the vindication of the Witnesses.

They had been taught that 144,000 of them, most selected before 1914, would answer the "heavenly call" and make up the first rank of leaders in God's Heavenly Kingdom. The remainder would constitute the "earthly call" and would enjoy the fruits of the Kingdom established on Earth for the millennium, the 1,000-year reign of Christ.

But 1975 was only the most recent of a number of dates set by various members of the Fundamentalist religious group since it was founded near Pittsburgh in 1879. In 1914, thousands of Witnesses had quit their jobs, sold their possessions and devoted themselves to last-minute evangelism in anticipation of The End.

The same scenario was repeated by many in 1918, 1925 and 1941 and to a lesser degree in other years when the editors of *The Watchtower*, the group's semi-monthly magazine and the arbiters of doctrine, intimated that the end was near. The doctrine has since been altered and Witnesses are now taught that 1914 marked the "end of the Gentile Age" and that the end will come before all Witnesses alive in 1914 have died.

But, for many Witnesses, 1975 became the watershed. Even though the leadership toned down its predictions as the year approached and avoided implying that the members should dispose of possessions or take other preparatory actions, the passage of the year without any sign of Armageddon is reported to have disappointed many members.

Unwilling to give up entirely the beliefs that had sustained many Witness families for three generations, and unwilling to accept the dictum that questioning the doctrine was tantamount to heresy, some Witnesses reportedly have been fighting back within the ranks. Attempts to remove dissidents by "disfellowshipping" them are reportedly

meeting strong resistance. Observers say that despite these problems there is little indication of a major schism in the organization. A vast majority of Witnesses remain loyal to the group and show no signs of defection.

Nonetheless, the internal disputes have become public. This year, confrontation between many of the rank-and-file and the hierarchy of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York Inc., the governing agency of the denomination, appears to be erupting across North America in court suits, picketing and a nationwide campaign designed to enlist interest from the press.

For the participants, the battle is crucial to their existence now and forever more. A Jehovah's Witness who is disfellowshipped (a condition similar to excommunication in the Roman Catholic Church) is considered to have lost his or her chance for eternal life. The disfellowshipped, they believe, are doomed to eternal oblivion, although final judgment remains in the province of God.

CRITICS SAY this was not the belief of the small Bible-study group that began its ministry 102 years ago under the leadership of Charles Taze Russell, a clothing-store clerk who taught himself Greek and Hebrew in order to become a better student of the Bible.

Unlike some Christian theologians who believe that the Earth will someday come to a physical end, Russell taught that "the Earth will remain forever and that all persons, living and dead, who will fit in with Jehovah's purpose for a beautiful, inhabited Earth, may live on it forever." Critics say that Russell believed that only 144,000 would enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he did not put limits on who these favored few would be. [Comment: near the bottom of the page, center column is an excellent picture of the Pastor.]

Subsequent doctrinal changes, adopted by the leadership of the movement after his death in 1916, have restricted that number to members of the group who were alive in 1914 (about 9,000 are believed to be still living) plus a few "true Christians" who have come into the faith since then and others who died in earlier centuries without the knowledge or advantage of membership in the Jehovah's Witnesses. Few Witnesses today make public claim to be among the "heavenly call."

Other interpretations of the scriptures by Witnesses also contradict orthodox Christianity. They deny, for instance, the existence of hell and believe that after death those outside their organization will simply vanish into nothingness. Nor do they accept the concept of the Holy Trinity. They view Jesus Christ as a created being, inferior to the eternal, supreme God, but one who will carry out the will of God for the Earth. They view the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force that also acts to carry out God's will.

In current Witness practice, there is no such thing as a “church” in the conventional sense. Their meeting places are called Kingdom Halls and are designed simply, with no religious symbols or ornaments. The believers are organized into “congregations” led by committees of elders, always male, who are unpaid.

Other Christian denominations and ecclesiastical hierarchies are looked upon as aberrations of the faith. Witnesses are encouraged to have as little interaction as possible with non-Witnesses, except for the purpose of conversion, and to shun former Witnesses who have left the fold either voluntarily or through disfellowshipping. However, those disfellowshipped for moral reasons are often given help if there are signs of possible rehabilitation, members say.

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not believe in paying allegiance to any earthly government, although they do not resist payment of taxes. They do not say the pledge to the flag and will not serve in the armed forces of any nation, a belief for which they fought many battles in U.S. courts in earlier years and which still causes them to be persecuted in many nations of the world.

They do not celebrate Christmas, Easter or individual birthdays, believing that such observances are unscriptural. The only annual observance is the Memorial to Christ’s Death, set each year to coincide with the actual date of the Crucifixion.

They are opposed to blood transfusions, believing that the biblical admonition against “eating of blood” applies to the transfusion process as well. Members can be disfellowshipped for adultery, gambling, smoking tobacco or drunkenness. But they do not object to moderate drinking of alcoholic beverages. Divorce is forbidden, except for Witnesses whose spouses are guilty of adultery.

Proselytization, the seeking out and conversion of nonbelievers, is the major activity of the movement. They believe that door-to-door evangelism is commanded in the Bible, although other Christian Bible students say the passage they cite (Acts 20:20) refers only to calls made by the Apostle Paul at the homes of the elders of the early church.

CAREFUL RECORDS are kept of all such activity by members, who are continually urged to make more contacts and bring in more members. Witnesses say that the record-keeping merely indicates the strength of commitment and that evidence of backsliding may indicate a need for help in personal or spiritual problems. Nevertheless, status within the group is often determined by the number of house calls made, converts brought in and copies of *The Watchtower* or a companion piece, *Awake*, that are sold. Members say that they sell the magazines only because “something paid for becomes something of value” and recipients are not as likely to throw copies away unread.

In 1980, the organization's annual report says 2.2 million Witnesses spent 339,427,608 hours preaching and proselytizing. Bible study was conducted in more than 1.3 million homes. More than 250 million pieces of literature were distributed, including 8.9 million copies of each issue of *The Watchtower*, which is printed in 106 languages.

In 102 years, the organization has had only four presidents. Frederick Franz became the president in 1977. His administration has been marked by some dissension including the defection or disfellowshipping last year of about a dozen high-ranking officials of Bethel, the Watchtower Society's headquarters in Brooklyn, N.Y. Among those who departed was his nephew, Raymond Franz, who resigned as a member of the "lifetime" board of governors in what was called a "doctrinal dispute." The younger Franz, who had been considered as a possible successor to the 87-year-old president, is still a Witness.

But some defectors and disfellowshipped are beginning to organize. A group called Ex-Jehovah's Witnesses for Jesus, based in Pennsylvania, has held two national conventions. Another group, organized in San Francisco, has started a ministry to ex-members called Witness Inc. The leaders of these groups say they hope to provide refuge for former members who are suffering emotional, as well as spiritual, problems because of their estrangement from family and long-time friends and fears of joining an established church.

DISFELLOWSHIPED DISSIDENTS COMPLAIN WITNESSES HAVE STRAYED

Ideala Colgate, of Kissimmee, was a Jehovah's Witness for 25 years. She was thrown out—"disfellowshipped" 18 months ago because, she says, she began to question the practices and scriptural authenticity of the Witnesses' doctrine. Since then, she says, she has been denounced by her husband of 44 years and is treated like a pariah by her former friends in the fundamentalist religious group.

Mrs. Colgate, 60, is one of a tiny group of former Jehovah's Witnesses nationwide, who are complaining that the Witnesses have strayed from the doctrine of their founder and have become so authoritative and self-righteous that they are losing thousands of members while keeping others close to the fold by intimidation.

Leaders of the Witnesses deny these allegations. They say that the dissenters are a small group of malcontents who can't, or won't, meet the standards of the denomination and who are trying to water down Witness theology to suit their own purpose.

Nevertheless, the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., the international governing agency of the organization and the arbiter of doctrinal matters, has set “Kingdom Loyalty” as the theme for the 101 district conventions that more than 1.1-million Witnesses are attending this summer in 67 U.S. cities.

The second of two such meetings scheduled this month in St. Petersburg is now underway at the Bayfront Center arena. Tampa Bay area leaders say total attendance at the two-four-day meetings will be about 13,000, representing almost the entire membership of 59 congregations in southwest Florida. Sermon topics for the two conventions have been identical: “Loyalty to the Kingdom of Our Lord and of His Christ,” “Loyally Advocating the Word,” “Your Dedication Calls for Loyalty,” “Jehovah Rewards His Loyal Ones,” are typical. The closing theatrical production is entitled “Beware of Rebellious Talk.”

Similar conventions throughout the country reportedly are being picketed by dissenters. In addition, a suit charging the Witnesses with libel, slander and fraud has been filed in Canada and another is pending in Colorado.

NONETHELESS, the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been one of the fastest growing religious groups in the world. In the decade ending in 1975, while most mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. were losing members, the Witnesses more than doubled their numbers. They reported more baptisms per year than nearly any other Christian denomination. Today, they claim about 575,000 members in the U.S., and more than 2.2 million members worldwide.

The dissidents, however, say the numbers are deceiving. Richard Rawe of Soap Lake, Wash., told *The St. Petersburg Times* this week, that based on the Witnesses’ own reports of baptisms since 1975 and the current membership figures, the Witnesses have lost more than 100,000 members in the U.S. and more than a half million worldwide. He said that, although there were more than 643,000 baptisms between 1976 and 1980, the total membership has remained nearly the same as it was in 1975.

Local spokesmen reject Rawe’s allegations, saying that their records show increases of about 250,000 members worldwide and nearly 70,000 in the U.S. since 1975.

It is for this sort of dispute, Rawe said by telephone, that he has been disfellowshipped four times since 1972; reasons cited include disputing doctrine, expressing doubt about the organization’s statistics or reporting the misbehavior of elders. His fourth appeal for reinstatement is now pending he added.

MRS. COLGATE says she knows of no wholesale defections in Florida, but has been told that hundreds have left the fold in other areas of the country. Like Rawe, she

believes that the membership totals have been maintained simply because of the intensity of the Witnesses' door-to-door evangelism. And, she adds, many members remain in the fold because of their emotional and social ties to the group or because of fear that leaving will cut them off forever from hope of spiritual salvation.

But, she emphasized, "Most Witnesses are sincere, loving Christians who believe strongly in the doctrine and devote their lives to sharing it with others."

Mrs. Colgate's problems with her congregation's leadership began in 1973 nearly 20 years after her baptism as a Jehovah's Witness. She joined in 1954 after becoming disenchanted with some of the teachings in her Presbyterian Church and with what she saw as a lack of commitment among members.

She has been listening to a radio program sponsored by the Dawn Bible Students Association, a group that follows the theology of Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Watchtower Society. She did not know at the time that the Bible Students had split from the Jehovah's Witnesses years before in a doctrinal dispute with Russell's successor, Joseph F. Rutherford.

Then a woman witness came to her door. She made repeated visits over the next five months, convincing Mrs. Colgate that, in submitting to a Witness baptism, "I wasn't joining anything—I was becoming something."

Mrs. Colgate then led her husband and 11 year-old son to conversion. She became an enthusiastic member, rising to the status of "pioneer" (one who devotes at least 100 hours a month to door-to-door evangelism or standing on street corners and offering *The Watchtower* magazine). As it is for many Witnesses, most of her free time was taken up with work, study or socializing with the group.

BUT in 1973, she said, she began to have doubts about the Witnesses' doctrines and practices. "I became discouraged by the oppressive spirit, the demands made upon members, the threats of Armageddon made if you did not attend meetings or fell behind in your quotas (of visits and sales), and the belief they have that only the Witnesses can be saved."

She decided, she said, "to take another look at the Bible Students." She saw an advertisement for their magazine, *The Dawn*, and sent for it.

During the next six years, she continued as a Witness, but she resigned as a pioneer. As a "publisher" (regular member), her obligation for evangelism was reduced to 10 hours per month. On the side, she studied founder Russell's works, along with the Bible Students' magazine. Occasionally, she attended Bible Students' meeting in the Orlando area.

“I learned that Russell did not believe that any particular group is saved. He said there are good Christians in all churches. Not all of them will be among the chosen, but some can be.”

In September, 1979, she says, she was called before her congregation’s three-man committee of elders. “They told me I would have to give up reading Russell’s books and must stop associating with the Bible Students or I would be disfellowshipped. I threw away the books and stopped attending the meetings, but I was very unhappy. It’s a pitiful state when you have to be a hypocrite to stay with a group. I prayed and asked the Lord what I should do.”

A MONTH LATER, she decided to attend a Bible Students’ convention being held in Orlando. Her husband called the elders, she says, and told them of her defection. On Nov. 5, 1979, she was informed she had been disfellowshipped. Since then, she has gone back to her congregation’s Kingdom Hall (as all Witness meeting places are called) only once for a reunion with her former friends. Her husband squelched their welcome by announcing that she had not repented and that “they were not to show me love.”

Mr. and Mrs. Colgate now live in an atmosphere of strained peace. Her husband, now an elder, has no plans for a divorce, she says, since Witnesses are told to remain with spouses who are defectors in the hope that they will return to the fold.

The Colgates do not discuss religion at home. “I love my husband, but I understand how he feels. (Membership in the Witnesses) is his way of Life,” she said.

“If I went back (to the Witnesses), I would be under their control again, and I don’t want that,” she said. “The Lord doesn’t put anything oppressive on anyone. He loves us all.”