

1914 as the start of the "last days" they are making the end times more open-ended-unbounded by the length of the 1914 generation. This will muddy the thinking ability of the Witnesses who always seem more than eager to have a short memory as regards failed predictions and specious arguments.

When one reviews the prophetic speculations advanced by the Watchtower movement from the days of Russell until now one thing becomes evident; and that is that *they have never been where they thought they were in the outworking of God's purposes*. Russell viewed himself as a special messenger for the "last days." His end times ran from 1799 A.D. to 1914 A.D. He believed Jesus returned invisibly in 1874 and began a final "harvest period" as regards his earthly church and the world. Those who did not accept his point of view were judged unworthy of God's approval. Only those who accepted Russell's time feature scheme and his unique role were approved by Jesus. Later, due to the total failure of Russell's timetable, 1914 was said to

be the year that Jesus returned invisibly to judge his church and the world. Now, in order to have God's approval one would have to accept that "truth." Accepting the new speculation became the touchstone for God's approval and submitting to those promulgating this theory.

However, not one of the dates advanced by the Witnesses from Russell's time until now has proved true. Nothing they ever said God or Christ were doing or what would happen within a certain period or on a certain date has ever been established by the outworking of history-not one! Which means they have never been preaching the special message they imagined they were under Christ's direction. They have never held a unique and privileged position as they have always asserted that they held. This means that people have not been separated as 'sheep' or 'goats' based on accepting their message and their supposed elevated position. It has all been delusory-the worst kind of delusion-self-delusion. □

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats-an "Adjusted View"

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As previously mentioned in issues of *The Christian Respondent*, Jehovah's Witnesses have never been in the time period they thought they were in the outworking of Jehovah God's purposes; which also means they have never been doing a specific God directed witnessing work they imagined they were doing. Time and again, for more than a hundred years they have had to "adjust" their "present truth" timetable because of failed expectations. A recent example of this constant reevaluation and reinterpretation of Bible prophecy hit upon one of their cardinal "last days" doctrines. That doctrine was that the end of the present system of things would come to its destructive end before the generation of 1914 passed away. For decades the Witnesses have preached this and distributed millions of pieces of literature to this effect. To have questioned that "truth" anytime during those decades would have been unthinkable and those who openly questioned it would have found themselves in serious difficulty with their congregational elders. Now, however, that "truth" has joined the scrap heap along with their many other miscalculations. While they continue to talk about "this generation" as seeing the end of the world that term has now been "adjusted" in meaning to make it open ended and, for all practical purposes, meaningless.

At the same time they have imagined themselves engaged in a worldwide "separating" work based on their understanding of Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the

Goats recorded in Matthew 25: 31-46. The understanding, at least up until 1995, is summed up for us in the book, *From Paradise Lost To Paradise Re-gained*, published in 1958:

"In an illustration at Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus told us how he would put apart sheep from goats after he became King. Jesus said that when he 'arrives in his glory and .all the angels with him, then he will sit down on his glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will put the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on his left.' -Matthew 25:31-33. When does the King separate people? The King arrived in his glory A.D. 1914. Then he sat down 'on his glorious throne.' So it is now, during this 'time of the end,' that the King separates people. The King puts goats on his left. This means that goats are not in the King's favor. The King puts the sheep on his right. This means the sheep are in the King's favor. To which side of the King are you being separated? Jesus' illustration helps you to know. How does the King, the Right Shepherd, decide whether to put people on his right or on his left? The King rests his decision on how people treat his spiritual brothers and how they accept the good news of the Kingdom that his spiritual brothers preach." - page 200.

Now, since 1995, they say the information taught in *From Paradise Lost To Paradise Regained* regarding the separating work was not truth-this separating work hasn't begun as yet. Before looking at their new "adjusted view" on Jesus' parable it would be good to reflect on those factors ever present in Watchtower literature and the minds of Jehovah's Witnesses. The first factor is that they have always seen themselves in a special moment of time doing a never-to-be-repeated preaching work. The second factor is that accepting them and whatever it is they are currently teaching determines whether you are accepted or rejected by God and Christ. From Charles T. Russell's day until now that has been their religious paradigm.

However, a perusal of their prophetic speculations and claims about themselves clearly shows they have never been right about where they were in the out-working of God's purposes and, therefore, were never preaching some special message that God raised them up to preach.

This mindset and its subsequent fruitage began with Charles T. Russell. As those familiar with the Watch Tower movement know Russell taught that Jesus Christ returned invisibly in October 1874. He believed and taught that with Christ's return in 1874 there was begun a divine examination and judgment of his earthly church. Russell said that this judgment paralleled what took place during Christ's earthly ministry when the Jewish church was being examined and judged. Teaching that Jesus' judgment ministry lasted for three and a half years and ended with his death in A.D. 33. There followed another three and a half years (a sort of grace period) wherein Jews were extended a special opportunity for repentance and adoption into Christ's kingdom. This was viewed as the last "week of years" of the seventy weeks referred to in Daniel's prophecy-Daniel 9:24. Following this period God turned his attention to the Gentiles and began calling them to himself.

In volume 2 of *Studies in the Scriptures*, Russell explained: "Our Lord's ministry covered *three and a half years*, ending with his crucifixion, at the time of the Passover, in the spring of A.D.33. In this he exactly fulfilled the prophecy concerning the remaining or last week (seven years) of promised favor, which says: '*After (7 and 62) sixty-nine weeks shall Messiah be cut off [Douay translation, 'be slain'] but not for himself - 'in the midst of the week [remaining-the 70th] he shall cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease.*'"-*The Time Is At Hand*, 1886, page 68 (italics in original)

According to Russell, the last half of the 70th week (three and a half years following Christ's death and resurrection) was a period of favor extended to the Jewish nation. Concerning this he wrote: "Hence we must look for favor upon that people for three and a half years after the crucifixion, notwithstanding they were then left desolate nationally." -*The Time Is At Hand*, page 70.

Russell taught that following the end of the seventieth week of years the gospel began to be preached to the Gentiles. He concluded that the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius took place at that time. Concerning which he said: "The exact date of the conversion of Cornelius, chronologers can only guess at; and hence it is variously estimated as having occurred from A.D. 37 to 40; but in view of this marked prophecy which we are now considering, we doubt not that it was in the autumn of A.D. 36; for there the seventy weeks, or four hundred and ninety years, of favor upon Israel ended." -*The Time Is At Hand*, page 71.

Whether Russell's interpretation of Daniel's prophecy regarding the seventy weeks and how they ended was correct may be agreed with or disagreed with. For the record, I believe that Daniel's prophecy was climaxed with the coming of Christ and his subsequent death. And it may well be that Cornelius' conversion came soon after the end of the seventieth week of Daniel 9. Where Russell got into serious trouble, however, was in his teaching that the gospel age would end in a *parallel* fashion and that it would be marked by events that paralleled (in time sequence) what happened during Jesus' earthly ministry.

He set forth his view regarding "The Parallel Dispensations". According to his calculations the Jewish system had a *favored* period of 1845 years which extended from Jacob's death to the beginning of spiritual Israel in A.D.33. This was followed by a corresponding period of 1845 of favor towards spiritual Israel-the Christian church. This period extended from A.D. 33 to 1878. The 1878 date was determined by adding three and a half years from the fall of 1874 which concluded in the Spring of 1878, corresponded with the three and a half years from A.D. 30 to A.D. 33. It was further argued that three and a half years after the spring of 1878 would bring one to the fall of 1881. This latter date concluded the gospel age. The opportunity to become one of Jesus' disciples as a son of God and become part of spiritual Israel ended in 1881. Addressing these things in regard to his parallel dispensational reasoning he said:

"Similar periods are marked in the harvest of this age now closing, corresponding to the features of that harvest. The fall of A.D. 1874, where the Jubilee cycles point out that our Lord was due to be present, corresponds to the time of his baptism and anointing by the holy Spirit when he became Messiah the Prince (Dan. 9:25) and began his work of reaping the Jewish harvest. The Spring of A.D. 1878 (three and a half years after) corresponds to the date at which our Lord assumed the office as King, rode on the ass, cleansed the temple of its money-changers, and wept over and gave up to desolation that nominal church or kingdom; and *it marks the date when the nominal church systems were 'spewed out'* (Rev. 3: 16), and *from which time (A.D. 1878) they are not the 11 Wuth-pieces of God, nor in any degree recognized by him.* And the three and a half years following the Spring of 1878, which ended October, A.D. 1881, correspond to the three and a half years of continued favor to individual Jews in the last half of their seventieth week of favor. As in the type that date-three and a half years after the death of Christ-marked the end of all special favor to the Jew and the beginning of favor to the Gentiles, so we recognize A.D. 1881 as marking the close of the special favor to Gentiles-the close of the 'high calling,' or invitation to the blessings peculiar to this age-to become joint-heirs with Christ and partakers of the divine nature." -The Time Is At Hand, page 235 (italics added) Russell believed and taught that A.D. 1878 also ended *natural Israel's* period of divine disfavor and the turning point for a return to God's favor. Another time prophecy was calculated to show that 1878 ended the specific number of years that God had determined for Israel's punishment for unfaithfulness. Following this period the nation was to be restored to his favor once more. Russell had determined that natural Israel had enjoyed 1845 years of God's favor before they were finally rejected A.D. 33. This period was duplicated by a corresponding period from A.D. 33 forward which ended in 1878. This latter year would mark the beginning of their renewed favor before God but wouldn't be fully realized until 1914 when the "troddening down of Jerusalem" would end with the close of the Gentile times. Concerning this he wrote:

"But we must remember that the year A.D. 1878 was but the turning point of returning favor to Fleshly Israel. We have already learned, from our study of 'The Times of the Gentiles,' that Jerusalem and its people will continue to be trodden down-controlled and oppressed by the Gentiles- *'until the Times of the Gentiles be fulfilled,* the Jew will not be received back into *full*

favor until A.D. 1914. Thus their rise again to favor will be gradual, as was their fall from it." -The *Time Is At Hand*, page 221 (italics in original)

The complete harvest period of the Jewish system was viewed as covering forty years (A.D. 30 to A.D. 70) Similarly, the present age would have a forty year harvest period which would in 1914. Russell wrote: "The Jewish harvest, in all a period of forty years, began with our Lord's ministry and ended with nominal Israel's rejection and overthrow, and the destruction of their city, accomplished by the Romans, A.D. 70. And the harvest of this age began with the presence of our Lord at the beginning of Earth's Great Jubilee, in 1874, as shown in chapter vi., and ends with the overthrow of Gentile power-A.D. 1914, likewise a period of forty years-another of the wonderful parallels of the two ages." -The *Time Is At Hand*, page 234.

The foregoing is but a brief summary of what Russell thought Jehovah's timetable was and how he was being used to make these timely truths known. Brick by speculative brick he built an elaborate system he caned "the divine plan of the ages," together with his parallel dispensational views. The problem was, as the outworking of history showed, all of his "bricks" were, in reality, only hypothetical bricks-with no spiritual mass-no substance in truth. The failure of 1914 to see the end of the world proved beyond doubt that the whole structure was built on error.

Nevertheless, he was convinced of their truthfulness and preached and wrote accordingly. He became captive to a religious fallacy that distorted his view of those who disagreed with him. Convinced that the Lord had adversely judged nominal Christendom (translation: every religious group other than his own), he felt justified- even compelled to make that judgment known. He was being used, he thought, to announce the Lord's return and what that meant for the church and the world. He concluded that those who did not accept this truth were also disapproved of God and unworthy of the name Christian. But his basis for making such judgments was false and therefore his conclusions were false. He was the one in error on these matters-not those who did not accept his conclusions.

It needs to be pointed out that much of Russell's criticism of orthodox Christianity and its shameful fruitage was well deserved. The Catholic traditions (East and West) along with the many protestant groups that broke off from these systems were guilty of be-liefs and practices that dishonored God and Christ. Such

systems were reprehensible and continue to be. That does not mean, however, that all believers within those systems or those affected by them shared equally in the guilt. History has demonstrated that there have always been those few who had the courage of faith to speak out against such abuses and these few were always looked down upon and often cruelly persecuted. All this is a matter of historical record. We are helped to understand this deplorable situation by our Lord's prophecy regarding the "wheat and the tares" would grow together until the end of the age - "in the time of harvest." (Matthew 13:24-30 KJV)

We are still in that period of time, before the Lord separates the sheep from the goats. Humans cannot effect this separating before the time and it is presumptuous to try. Our individual obligation is to work out our personal salvation with fear and trembling. (Phil. 2: 12) Efforts by groups like Jehovah's Witnesses and others who engage in a "separating work" only serve to make a bad religious condition worse. I agree with the Witnesses that there is no salvation guaranteed within those thousands of sects all claiming to be Christian. But where the basic biblical teaching of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ is being taught and believed, people have an opportunity to respond and grow in genuine Christian faith. Unfortunately, the Witnesses do not teach this basic truth to the millions of so-called "other sheep" they have gathered into their religious fold. That, above all others, is their greatest sin.

It appears to me that those reformers who start out to correct the errors of others end up creating their own destructive errors and often evolve into the very thing they started out to expose. I believe this is what happened to Russell and the movement he fathered. The basic character of the Watch Tower movement has never changed. The idea that we are in a special moment of time and they have a special message has never changed-it has only been "adjusted". In this endless process of changing doctrine the constant thought is: "we had it wrong before but we have it right now." That convoluted rationale and "Jehovah is behind all of it," pretty much sums up their mindset. While they are not unique in this kind of authoritarianism they are one of the most outspoken and aggressive of their kind which makes them a danger to many.

Concerning the parable of the separating of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46 they now say:

"In other words, the parable points to the future

when the Son of man will come in his glory. He will sit down to judge people then living. His judgment will be based on what they have manifested themselves to be. At that time 'the distinction between a righteous one and a wicked one' will have been clearly established. (Malachi 3: 18) The actual pronouncing and executing of judgment will be carried out in a limited time. Jesus will render just decisions based on what has become evident about individuals. ,., - The Watchtower, October 15, 1995, page 22.

What they don't discuss in this presentation is that all those many years Jehovah's Witnesses thought they were sharing in a life-or-death separating work was a lie! Of course, they don't put matters that way-but that's the reality. Rather, they say: "We have long felt [and vigorously preached] that the parable depicted Jesus' sitting down as King in 1914 and since then making judgments-everlasting life for people proving to be like sheep [those who accepted us and our preaching], permanent death for the goats. But a re-consideration of the parable points to an *adjusted understanding* of its timing and what it illustrates. This *refinement* reinforces the importance of our preaching work and the significance of people's response." -page 19 (italics added) So a radical new view-one that completely refutes their previous view of matters is called a "refinement," "an adjusted understanding." Really!

They conclude their presentation by turning up the pressure on the Witnesses to continue in their lifesaving work: "While the judging as described in the parable is in the near future, even *now* something vital is taking place. We Christians are engaged in a lifesaving work of proclaiming a message that causes a division among people." -page 28. (italics in original)

You'll notice the same mindset in the above that has dominated Watch Tower theology from the beginning: "we haven't been right but we've never been wrong!" The idea that they are special, their timetable is accurate and people's lives depend on accepting them is still the dominant message. That they have never been right about what God and Christ were doing and having been preached in relation to their many chronological speculations means nothing to them. One almost has to admire their arrogant presumptuousness. Almost. □