

Who Is “This Generation”?

Matthew 24:34, the Watchtower’s Five Definitions, and the Prophecy That Was Kept

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I. The Sentence on the Masthead

For decades, nearly every issue of *Awake!* carried this sentence on its masthead: “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.”¹ Not a speculation, not an editorial hope—the *Creator’s promise*, with a deadline: the lifetimes of the people who saw 1914.

The promise rested on a single verse. “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34).² Read as Jesus’ guarantee that the people who witnessed 1914 would live to see Armageddon, the verse became the engine of Watchtower urgency for most of a century: the reason to pioneer rather than study, to defer children, to treat every year as probably the last. Millions of sincere people ordered their lives around it. This essay asks the question the masthead begged: who is “this

generation”? The Watchtower has answered at least five different ways. Jesus, it turns out, answered once.

II. The Watchtower’s Teaching in Its Own Words

Fairness first: here is the current teaching as the Society itself states it. Since 2010, “this generation” has been understood to consist of the *anointed*—and of two connected groups of them. In the Watchtower’s words: “Jesus evidently meant that the lives of the anointed ones who were on hand when the sign began to be evident in 1914 would overlap with the lives of other anointed ones who would see the start of the great tribulation.”³ The generation is thus a single unit spanning two overlapping lifetimes: anointed Christians alive in 1914, and anointed Christians whose lives overlapped with theirs. Governing Body member David Splane has illustrated the idea with Fred Franz, anointed before 1914, whose life (he died in 1992) overlapped with anointed ones still living—so the “generation,” and with it the nearness of the end, remains intact.⁴

The Society does not conceal that this understanding has been adjusted repeatedly; it presents the adjustments as Jehovah’s progressive revelation, citing Proverbs 4:18—“the path of the righteous is like the bright morning light that grows brighter and brighter until full daylight” (New World Translation). Whether the record reads like brightening light is the question the next section puts to the reader.

III. Five Definitions, in Order

Set the definitions in a row, each from the Society’s own publications.

1927: the anointed. The Watch Tower of February 15, 1927, identified “this generation” with the “new creation”—the anointed.⁵

Mid-century to 1995: the people who saw 1914. By the 1950s the generation was the people alive in 1914, and the arithmetic of their aging became a fixture. *Awake!* in 1968: “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.”⁶ *The Watchtower* of May 15, 1984, put elderly faces on its cover under the title “1914—The Generation That Will Not Pass Away,” and reasoned inside: “There are still many millions of that generation alive. Some of them ‘will by no means pass away until all things occur.’”⁷

1995: the wicked who see the sign. As the 1914 generation reached its actuarial end, the definition changed. *The Watchtower* of November 1, 1995: “Therefore, in the final fulfillment of Jesus’ prophecy today, ‘this generation’ apparently refers to the peoples of earth who see the sign of Christ’s presence but fail to mend their ways.”⁸ No connection

to 1914; no time limit at all. The deadline that had driven a century of urgency quietly ceased to exist.

2008: the anointed again. *The Watchtower* of February 15, 2008: “As a class, these anointed ones make up the modern-day ‘generation’ of contemporaries that will not pass away ‘until all these things occur.’”⁹ Eighty-one years after 1927, the original answer returned—the circle closed.

2010: two overlapping groups. The current teaching, quoted in full above: the generation spans the anointed of 1914 plus every anointed person whose life *overlapped* with any of theirs. On this definition a “generation” includes people born decades after the events it is a generation of—people who never met the year 1914, joined to it by the overlap of lifetimes.¹⁰

Notice the timing, which is the argument. Each redefinition arrived precisely when the previous definition ran out of lifetimes: 1995, when the people of 1914 were dying out; 2010, when even the loosened definitions could no longer keep the end near without new machinery. That is not the pattern of brightening light, which illuminates a fixed object ever more clearly. It is the pattern of a deadline being moved by the debtor.

IV. The Masthead That Blinkered

The change of 1995 deserves its own section, because it was not an obscure doctrinal adjustment buried in a study article. The masthead promise—“the Creator’s promise... before the generation that saw the events of 1914 passes away”—ran through the October 22, 1995 issue of *Awake!* With the November 8, 1995 issue it was gone, replaced by “the Creator’s promise of a peaceful and secure new world that is about to replace the present wicked, lawless system of things.”¹¹ The same month, the Watchtower redefined the generation.

No retraction was published. No apology reached the readers who had deferred education, children, and careers on the strength of the promise. A sentence attributed to the Creator was withdrawn by editing, as though God’s promise had a revision history. The reader may weigh which party that reflects on: the Creator, or the men who had put the words in His mouth.

V. What “This Generation” Means in Matthew

Now read the verse where it lives. In Matthew 24 Jesus has just left the temple; His disciples point out its buildings, and He answers: “Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down” (Matt. 24:2). The discourse that follows answers the disciples’ question about *that*—when will these things be?—and

when Jesus says “this generation will not pass away till all these things take place,” the phrase means in chapter 24 exactly what it means everywhere else in Matthew’s Gospel.

“This generation” asked for a sign (Matt. 12:41–42). “This generation” is like children sitting in the marketplaces (Matt. 11:16). Upon “this generation” will come the righteous blood shed on earth: “Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation” (Matt. 23:36)—spoken minutes before chapter 24, in the same conversation that walks out of the same temple. Every occurrence, without exception, means the people standing in front of Him; the same usage runs through Mark and Luke.¹² No reader of Matthew, reaching 24:34, would take the identical phrase to mean a class of anointed persons twenty centuries away whose lives overlap. A definition of “generation” that includes people who never saw the events and never met each other is not an exegesis of the word; it is a repair to a schedule.

VI. The Prophecy That Was Kept

And on the natural reading, the prophecy came true—spectacularly, and on time. Within forty years of the words, one biblical generation almost to the year, the legions of Titus surrounded Jerusalem, and in A.D. 70 the temple went down stone from stone, exactly as Jesus had said, while the generation that heard Him was still alive to see it. Josephus, who watched, records the fire and the leveling in detail.¹³ Luke’s version of the discourse even names the event in advance: “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near” (Luke 21:20).

The discourse also looks past A.D. 70. Woven through it are sayings about the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds, and of that horizon Jesus says, in the very next breath after verse 34: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt. 24:36). This is the double horizon the Church has read in the Olivet Discourse from the beginning: a near event, dated to a generation and fulfilled in one, which is itself the type and pledge of the far event, undated and undatable.¹⁴ Verse 34 belongs to the near horizon and was kept. Verse 36 governs the far horizon and forbids every dating scheme—1914 included. The Watchtower’s system requires exactly the reverse: it moves verse 34 to the undated horizon, and then dates the horizon verse 36 says no one can date.

Here is the irony worth pausing on. Skeptics have long pressed “this generation will not pass away” as Christianity’s embarrassment—a failed prediction of the end. The Watchtower, oddly, agrees with the skeptic that the verse predicts the end of the world, and differs only in relocating the generation. But the verse in its context predicted the temple’s fall within a generation, and the temple fell within a generation. Christians need not explain the verse away. It is one of the best-attested fulfilled prophecies in the

Gospels—and only a religion that moved the prophecy to 1914 has to keep moving the generation.

VII. The Honest Questions

Three objections deserve answers rather than dismissal.

Does genea mean “race”? Some older apologists, wanting verse 34 to reach to the end of the world, read Greek *genea* as “race”—the Jewish people will not pass away. The word normally means a generation of contemporaries, and in Matthew’s other uses (11:16; 12:41–42; 23:36) it cannot mean “race.” The reading is unnecessary anyway: the natural sense gives a fulfilled prophecy. The Watchtower’s current teaching, interestingly, needs *genea* to stretch even further than “race”—to a corporate span of overlapping lifetimes with no lexical parallel at all.¹⁵

Did the first Christians expect the end within their lifetime? Some texts sound that way, and the New Testament itself preserves the correction: “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years,” and the delay is patience, “not wishing that any should perish” (2 Pet. 3:8–9). The early Church lived the tension the discourse itself sets: the near horizon arrived on schedule; the far horizon is deliberately unknown. What the first Christians did *not* do is publish a date, attach the Creator’s name to it, and then redefine the terms when it failed.¹⁶

Is it unfair to judge a religion for refining its understanding? No—development is real, and this site defends it elsewhere. But development clarifies a fixed deposit; it does not retroactively repair predictions. Nicaea did not redefine “Son” because a prophecy about the Son had failed. The generation teaching changed five times, and each change tracked not new insight into the text but the aging of the people the previous definition depended on. The difference between development and revision-under-deadline is visible in the timing.

VIII. The Test the Watchtower Chose

Scripture supplies a test for exactly this situation: “when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously” (Deut. 18:22). The Watchtower accepted that test the day it printed the Creator’s name over the 1914-generation promise. The generation passed. The promise did not come to pass. The organization’s answer was to redefine the generation five times rather than to ask whether the word had been the LORD’s at all.

Set beside that record the sentence Jesus spoke: one generation named, one deadline given, one temple down on schedule, and the next verse renouncing all further dates. The contrast is this essay's conclusion in miniature. A word from God stands; human reasoning under a deadline must keep revising itself. The reader who was taught that Matthew 24:34 belongs to 1914 is invited to do what this essay has done: read the verse in its chapter, check every definition against its date of publication, and ask the question the masthead once answered so confidently—who is “this generation,” and who had the right to say?

Endnotes

1. *Awake!* masthead, as it ran through the October 22, 1995 issue.
2. Scripture quotations, unless noted, are from the Revised Standard Version.
3. *The Watchtower*, June 15, 2010, pp. 3–5 (Annual Meeting report), announcing the understanding first published in the April 15, 2010 issue, p. 10.
4. David Splane, JW Broadcasting, September 2015.
5. *The Watch Tower*, February 15, 1927, p. 62.
6. *Awake!*, October 8, 1968, p. 13.
7. *The Watchtower*, May 15, 1984, cover and p. 5 (quoting Luke 21:32).
8. *The Watchtower*, November 1, 1995, p. 19.
9. *The Watchtower*, February 15, 2008, p. 24 (“Christ’s Presence—What Does It Mean to You?”).
10. See note 3.
11. *Awake!*, November 8, 1995, masthead.
12. Mark 8:12, 38; 13:30; Luke 7:31; 11:29–32, 50–51; 17:25; 21:32.
13. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Books 5–6.
14. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§585–586 (the temple), 668–679 (the Parousia); on prophetic idiom and time-references, G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, ch. 14.
15. On *genea*, see the standard lexicons (BDAG, s.v. γενεά) and the commentaries on Matthew 24:34.

16. 2 Peter 3:8–9 (RSV); Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, on imminence language in the New Testament.

For Further Reading

The Jewish War, by Flavius Josephus—the eyewitness record of Jerusalem’s destruction in A.D. 70.

Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, by Ben Witherington III.

New Testament Theology, by G. B. Caird (completed and edited by L. D. Hurst).

The Language and Imagery of the Bible, by G. B. Caird—on prophetic idiom and its time-references.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, esp. §§585–586, 668–679.

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“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

—Matthew 24:35

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic reading of Matthew 24:34 and the assessment of the Watchtower’s generation teaching*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.