

Witnessing the End

If this turns out to be the last time they all got together, the thousands of Jehovah's Witnesses who gathered last week in New York City's Yankee Stadium for an international assembly will not be a bit surprised. In fact, they fully expect the cataclysm of Armageddon within the next few years. The latest calculations of this energetic, eschatology-minded sect date the end of the world in autumn, 1975.

Fearful as it may be to other religious believers, the end is a prospect that rejoices the hearts of the 323,688 U.S. members of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, as the Witnesses are officially known (worldwide membership: 1,155,826). In 1914, according to the sect's calculations, "God's timetable" ushered in the last days. Ever since then, Witnesses have longed for the end of "this wicked system of things" and the beginning of the millennium. According to their literal interpretation of The Bible, based on *Revelation 14:1*,* the Lord God will then pick 144,000 Witnesses to reign with Christ in heaven. The rest will remain on earth to convert unbelievers; at the end of 1,000 years, the wicked will be annihilated, while the saved will continue to enjoy a worldly Paradise. In his address on closing day to the week-long assembly of delegates from 78 countries, the sect's president, Pennsylvania-born Nathan H. Knorr, confidently discussed "The Approaching Peace of a Thousand Years."

Disciplined Theocracy. The New York assembly initiated a round of uplifting sessions of lectures and Bible dramas that the Witnesses will hold in 25 cities around the world, from Pomona to Paris to Papeete, between now and December. Under the supervision of a disciplined theocracy run by Knorr from Watchtower's sprawling Brooklyn headquarters, the Witnesses claim to preach their version of God's gospel in 200 lands.

More than most religious believers, the Witnesses are in almost constant trouble with the law, in the U.S. as elsewhere. They refuse military service, not on the ground of conscientious objection but on the dubious claim that every baptized member of the sect is a minister; as a result, a survey showed, 300 young American Witnesses were in jail last year for draft evasion. Currently, they are having difficulties with several African nations. In Zambia, for example, 3,700 Witness children were expelled from public schools for refusing to sa-

* "Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads."



KNORR

Soon to depart this wicked scheme.

lute the flag, which they refuse to do anywhere because it expresses the kind of allegiance that is owed to God alone.

Return Visits. With Armageddon so near, the Witnesses waste no time on the social-betterment projects that so concern other churches, instead concentrate on dogged street-corner and door-to-door evangelism. Last year, for example, Witness ministers spent 208,666,762 hours preaching, made 89,903,578 return visits to those interested enough to buy books or magazines, but recorded only 82,842 baptisms—over 1,000 return visits for each convert.

The Witnesses have what they believe is Scriptural proof that the end is coming. For one thing, their interpretation of Biblical chronology reveals that Adam and Eve were created in the autumn of 4026 B.C., or 5,994 years ago. Linking 6,000 years to the six days of God's creation, they believe it fitting that there be a sabbath-like rest thereafter, beginning in 1975—though Witnesses cautiously avoid a flat prediction linked to that year. What is more, Christ's promise that "this generation will not pass away till all these things take place" means that the generation alive in 1914, when the last days began, will see Armageddon. As they eye the thinning ranks of that generation, Jehovah's Witnesses are well aware the time limit is running out.