

A Pastor of Excellence

Eighty years ago on October 31, 1916, newspaper headlines shocked the nation. A world renowned Christian minister died "in the harness" on a transcontinental speaking tour. To thousands of congregations around the world he was a beloved Pastor. Tens of thousands of individuals were encouraged by hearing his hope-inspiring lectures. Hundreds of thousands were greeted by his smiling face as they weekly opened their local newspapers to read his faith inspiring sermons. In the last three years of his life "some eight million people" saw and heard this dynamic speaker on film as Pastor Russell introduced his epic motion picture, THE PHOTODRAMA OF CREATION—the crowning feature of his ministry. Of course, it broke all records in attendance and technology. Never before had sound and color been incorporated into motion pictures. Pastor Russell was dead. An era of excellence in the communication of faith and hope came to an end. Wasn't Pastor Russell the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses? No! Nothing could be further from the truth. Just how popular was Pastor Russell? The Overland Monthly, a noted periodical of that time, reported in 1909 that STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES by Charles Taze Russell, was one of the world's three most circulated works surpassed only by the BIBLE and THE CHINESE ALMANAC.

THE CONTINENT, a publication whose editor often opposed Pastor Russell, once published the following significant statement concerning him: "His writings are said to have a greater newspaper circulation every week than those of any other living man; a greater, doubtless, than the combined circulation of the writings of all the priests and preachers in North America."

George Swetnam, the official historian for the Pittsburgh Bicentennial in 1958 -1959 wrote, "Pastor Russell traveled constantly, covering more than a million miles, delivering more than 30,000 sermons and lectures and talks, writing books totaling over 50,000 pages, which have reached a circulation of more than 20,000,000 copies...his influence has easily been the widest of any man who ever lived in the city, [Pittsburgh] not even excepting Andrew Carnegie." [Swetnam, George WHERE ELSE BUT PITTSBURGH (Pittsburgh: Davis and Warde, Inc., 1958) p. 110]

The LONDON GRAPHIC (April 8,1911) described Pastor Russell as follows: "The advent of Pastor Russell brings to this city and country a man of international reputation, who is known almost as well in Great Britain as he is in America...who is reputed to be the most popular preacher in America..."

And, finally, the CHRISTIAN GLOBE (May 5, 1910) of London, states, "Since the days of Henry Ward Beecher and Dr. Talmage, no preacher has occupied so prominent a position in the United States as Pastor Russell of Brooklyn Tabernacle holds today." The full impact of Pastor Russell's ministry can only be understood against the backdrop of church history.

An Overview of History

Life for the Christian minority in the second century was brutally cruel. The pagan religious leaders and civil leaders demanded allegiance to their multiple gods. By the third century many Christian leaders felt a need to compromise Christian doctrine to make Christianity more acceptable to the rulers of the Roman Empire. For starters, they embraced Plato's "immortality of the soul." There was also the urgent need for multiple gods....The "trinity soon became a hallmark of Christian doctrine. Then Christians succeeded beyond their most extravagant hopes: In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. It did not matter that he did this for his own political reasons. Through the centuries following, the church's "glorious" reign over the nations was written in blood. Historians called it the "Dark Ages."

The world church persecuted any and all who rejected its claims. Millions who were consigned to eternal damnation were then supposedly justifiably tortured in this life. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century helped but a little. Luther's rejection of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul was forgotten. Soon the Protestant churches found it expedient to retain much of the "Dark Age" dogmas, especially the trinity and eternal damnation for all who rejected their gospel.

A tidal wave of infidelity swept over the Christian world in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Modernist theology was born. The only response permitted within the precincts of conservatism was to blindly defend the old creeds of the "Dark Ages." Something had to be done.

Pastor Russell Founded the Bible Students

In 1870 at Allegheny, Pennsylvania, a Bible Class was formed for systematic Bible study. Soon they selected Charles Taze Russell as their Pastor. At that time other earnest Christians were forming independent Bible classes for in-depth Bible study. Pastor Russell became a leader of thought and activity among these congregations. In 1879 Zion's Watch Tower was formed, later known as the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (not to be mistaken as Jehovah's Witnesses). This society did not become the central authority of the Bible Student movement. It could not because all cooperating congregations of Bible Students held strictly to congregational self-government. The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society was basically a publishing house and lecture bureau.

Pastor Russell never claimed to originate Bible truths, but rather to recover the truths held by the First Century church. He succeeded more than any other person, of course not

without controversy. Wearied with the "Dark Age" theories of Christendom, he inspired hope and faith in the hearts of the masses. Like Jesus, the multitudes clamored to hear him.

Clergy Opposition

Why do some ministers today use the same old worn out vilifications that "doom and gloom" ministers in Russell's day concocted in desperation? Sheer jealousy! The people clamored to hear Russell and demanded that the newspapers carry his sermons. His "opposition" lamented that Pastor Russell's writings had a "greater newspaper circulation every week...than the combined circulation of all the priests and preachers of North America." Why? Because Pastor Russell's message gave hope in contrast to those "doomsday preachers."

Every Jew, Hindu, Moslem, etc., and even Christians who do not accept their particular brand of Christianity before death, they say is damned to and eternity of torment. These preachers of "doom" both in Russell's day and today hold in contempt the Gospel of love taught by Pastor Russell and the Bible Student movement he founded. Calvinists especially cringed under the heat of the sunlight of this love. No wonder—they taught that the vast majority were eternally damned before they were even born. Unable to meet Russell's scriptural logic, many resorted to personal attacks on him. All these attacks have been refuted.

Not Founder of Jehovah's Witnesses

After the death of Pastor Russell in 1916 Joseph Rutherford, whom Pastor Russell had recently dismissed from his staff, legally seized control of the Watch Tower, dismissed the majority of the Board of Directors and established dictatorial control. The writings of Pastor Russell were discarded. The Watch Tower became the central head and authority over all congregations willing to yield their sovereignty. Basic doctrines of the society seriously digressed from the teachings of Pastor Russell. The methods of conducting the evangelistic work were altered. The more sensational digressions such as refusing blood transfusions and saluting the flag even caught the public's eye.

Many individuals and congregations refused to surrender their Christian liberty or accept the new teachings. As early as 1917, the exodus from the newly declared sovereign headquarters began. By 1931 over three quarters of those associated with the Bible Student movement in Pastor Russell's day had separated from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and formed independent and autonomous congregations. Today's Bible Students trace back through these separatists to Pastor Russell their founder.

Jehovah's Witnesses Founded in 1931

In 1931, fifteen years after Pastor Russell's death, Jehovah's Witnesses was founded. Its founder, Joseph Rutherford, presented a startling resolution entitled A NEW NAME which was adopted at its international convention on July 26, 1931. The resolution first observed that neither "Russellites" nor "Bible Students" were any longer appropriate names. (This position was ironically true, as over 75% of Bible Students from Pastor Russell's era had already separated.) Henceforth they would call themselves "Jehovah's Witnesses." Joseph Rutherford not Pastor Russell founded Jehovah's Witnesses. Pastor Russell died in 1916. Jehovah's Witnesses was founded in 1931. Pastor Russell founded the Bible Students who still affirm his teachings. Rutherford rejected Russell's teachings, purged Russell's Bible Students from his movement, rejected the name Bible Students and named his new movement "Jehovah's Witnesses."

Pastor Russell vs. Jehovah's Witnesses

The main teaching of Pastor Russell was that Jesus died a ransom for all. (1 Timothy 2:5, 6) Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus died only for some. Pastor Russell taught a future probation because millions have died without hearing the Gospel. Even among many who hear it, uncertainty and confusion exist. (John 5:28-29; Acts 15:14-17; Revelation 22:17) Jehovah's Witnesses, like all fundamentalists, believe that if you reject their brand of the Gospel you are lost eternally.

Pastor Russell believed Bible prophecy taught that the Jewish people would be regathered to the promised land and the State of Israel would be reborn. (Matthew 23:32; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Jeremiah 31:4-12) Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the regathering of the Jews and the birth of the Israeli State is a change of history completely unrelated to Bible prophecy.

Pastor Russell did not found Jehovah's Witnesses. They reject his basic teachings. Pastor Russell founded the Bible Students. Bible Students today, as in Pastor Russell's day, affirm his teachings, which scripturally portrays a Gospel of love that wonderfully reflects the attributes of God.