
Charles Taze Russell:
Pittsburgh Prophet, 1879-1909

by Albert V. Vandenberg

"He did greater work for the cause of Messiah's Kingdom than did any other man that ever lived on the earth."

Joseph F. Rutherford
Watch Tower Society
December 1, 1916

"Reverend Russell is the greatest enemy of the organized church because he does not preach the doctrines of Christ."

Rev. John A. Henderson
Presbyterian Minister
March 5, 1906

UTTERING his final words — "Please wrap me in a Roman toga." — Charles Taze Russell died on a railroad siding in Pampa, Texas. To fulfill his request, aides draped the corpse in a simple Pullman sheet — a strange end for the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, one of America's most active and growing religions. Miles away, Russell's successor, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, sat down in his Brooklyn office to write the eulogy he would deliver a few days later.

Young Charles was taught that God is great and good, yet that He had made all men inherently immortal, and had provided a lake of fire and brimstone in which he would eternally torment all except a few whom He had predestined should be saved. The honest heart of the lad revolted against such a horrible thing; and he in substance said, "I cannot believe that there is a just and wise God who would do such a thing to a poor, unfortunate human being." Forthwith he forsook the religion of the creeds; but while he was investigating other religions his mind was turning to the Lord in an inquiring manner. True to his inborn character, he honestly and prayerfully searched the Scriptures. To his astonishment and joy he found that the Bible

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is God's great Word of Truth; that God has a plan of salvation. . . . Seeing the truths contained in the Bible he said, "I must preach these to my fellow-creatures; I must with all my power try to lead people out of the darkness. . . ." Other Christian people, sadly aware of the fact that they were not receiving spiritual food in the various churches to which they "belonged" had the eyes of their understanding opened by reading their Bibles in the light of the explanations thereof given by Charles Taze Russell.¹

From a single circle of worshippers originating at the Bible House in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, Russell's congregation, called Jehovah's Witnesses since 1931, has experienced a near-meteoric expansion. Austere-appearing Kingdom Halls now occupy neighborhood corners in most American communities. Four or five times a week, eager members assemble to praise the glory of Jehovah.

Outsiders often equate these Witnesses rather suspiciously with the refusal to salute the flag, rejections of blood transfusions, and with persistent, sometimes overzealous, door-to-door solicitors or *colporteurs*, as they are known among the Witnesses. To others, the Witnesses represent an often-persecuted group of sincere and dedicated "truth-hungry" Christians, who since their founding have been condemned for their "half-baked" scriptural interpretations, beaten because of their disdain for things patriotic, and prosecuted for their anti-war protests. Part of the suspicion surrounding Jehovah's Witnesses stems from their preference to remain aloof from organized society and to keep their inner activities and leadership apart from the communities in which they function. The mystique, generated first by their founder, continues largely intact.

Beginning as a Bible study group, the Witnesses developed under the energetic and charismatic leadership of Charles Taze Russell. To many, Russell was "America's best known preacher," the "most prominent pulpit orator in the United States," and a "particularly strong evangelical speaker." As might be expected, much of Russell's oratorical power lay in his consummate familiarity with "God's book."² His knowledge of and devotion to the scriptures was due to the circumstances of his upbringing.

Born to John L. and Eliza Russell in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, on February 16, 1852, Charles was one of three children reared in a God-fearing, hard-working, moderately wealthy, conservative, Presbyterian, Scotch-Irish family — "not imperfect soil for the nourishment

1 *Watch Tower* XXXVII (Dec. 1, 1916): 373.

2 Peter A. Soderbergh, "Jehovah's First Witness, Charles Taze Russell" (unpublished typescript, University of Texas, 1966), 2. Original in Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

of another 19th century prophet.”³ He received his basic education from private tutors after the sixth grade. Russell possessed considerable business skill, and by the time he reached seventeen, he became a junior partner in his father’s string of haberdasheries. These early practical skills, and the \$250,000 he received from the sale of his business interests, proved invaluable to his founding and operating a religious enterprise later on.

At an early age Russell demonstrated great interest in religion, writing “Bible texts with chalk on the sidewalk” at the age of nine, and independently deciding at thirteen to reject his Presbyterian heritage for Congregationalism because the latter appeared more “liberal” in its views of hell. Finally, at seventeen he rejected the Bible and the “creeds of the churches” and became a “skeptic.” Russell claimed that he “was led gradually to see that though each of the creeds contained some elements of truth, they were, on the whole, misleading and contradictory of God’s word.”⁴ Since the traditional Christian concept of hell particularly bothered him, Russell sought a scriptural alternative.

One evening Russell dropped into a religious service in a dingy hall in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, “to see if the handful who met there had anything more sensible to offer than the creeds of the great churches.”⁵ Russell heard something of the views of Second Adventism. A single speech by Adventist preacher Jonas Wendell pushed aside his youthful skepticism and was enough, as Russell recalled, “to re-establish my wavering faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible, and to show that the records of the apostles and prophets are indis-solubly linked.”⁶

Russell, however, could not accept the Adventist belief in the “physical” second coming of Christ, a doctrine that had destroyed the earlier Adventist movement in 1844 when He failed to appear. As Russell could see, Adventism, like historic Christianity, had committed a grievous error. Both had veered from the word of God as revealed in the only source of truth, the Bible. Russell assumed the task of creating a Bible study group to dissect the scriptures to extract the literal word of God. Russell and his “little flock” came to believe they had wrung new truths from the Bible — meanings never before revealed to ordinary man. Traditional doctrines of predestination and

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Watch Tower* XXXVII (Apr. 15, 1916): 170.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Watch Tower* XXII (July 15, 1906): 3821.

eternal punishment of the hellfire-and-brimstone variety were "blasphemous" and, more important, "unscriptural." Denouncing the divinity of Christ and dozens of traditional doctrinal beliefs nurtured a separation between Russell and organized religion. This led to the formation of the Bible House congregation as an independent religious movement. Russell denied that he established a religion, however, claiming in 1884 that "we call ourselves simply Christians."⁷

Encouraged to find reinforcement for his doctrine of the "invisible" presence of Christ, Russell joined forces with a "reformed" Adventist, Nelson H. Barbour, publisher of a magazine entitled *The Herald of the Morning*. This partnership proved beneficial to both, at least for a time. Russell desired a vehicle through which to publish; Barbour needed a financial transfusion. The coalition lasted until 1879 when it split because of Barbour's contention that Christ's death was not "a settlement of the penalty of man's sins. . . ." ⁸ This tenet Russell held most dear. Upon hearing of Barbour's defection from the truth, Russell appealed to him to abandon his wayward doctrine. When Barbour refused, Russell dissolved the partnership, becoming the sect's sole leader.

Russell's decision to give up all secular work and devote his time to teaching the scriptures stemmed partly from Barbour's recalcitrance and partly from the refusal of the Pittsburgh and Allegheny clergy to agree with his Biblical interpretations. In *Studies in the Scriptures* Russell claimed that in 1877 he "called a meeting of all the ministers of Allegheny and Pittsburgh, showed them scriptural 'proof' of our Lord's spiritual presence and urged them to investigate and proclaim that the 'end was at hand.' A large number of ministers of the two cities were present; all of the attendant ministers of the two cities refused to believe."⁹

According to Russellite doctrine, the Kingdom of Jehovah would begin in 1914, a date he calculated based on time prophecies contained in Genesis and Revelation. After 1914, God and Satan would share

7 Soderbergh, "Jehovah's First Witness," 6.

8 *Watch Tower* I (July 1, 1879): 2.

9 *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, Studies in the Scriptures*, VII (1917): 55 (hereafter cited as *Studies*); O. M. Walton also records this meeting in *Story of Religion in the Pittsburgh Area*, authorized by the Committee on Religion of the Pittsburgh Bicentennial Association (Pittsburgh, 1958), 52. No reference to this meeting exists in the minutes of any major denomination for this period. Major denominational minutes were checked with two sets of records cited to substantiate this point; official minutes, Pittsburgh Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 35th and 36th Annual Conventions, 1877 and 1878.

in the rule of the world, as they would continue to do until the onset of the great battle between the forces of Jehovah and the forces of Satan. This joint rule would terminate after the battle of Armageddon, at which time Satan would be defeated in a bloody war and the theocratic millennium would begin.

Russell claimed that scriptural evidence showed Jehovah would divide mankind into two classes: the "heavenly class," consisting of 144,000, and the "other sheep," consisting of all the rest. The "heavenly class" would share governmental power with Jesus during the millennium; it would reside in heaven, and from there direct the earthly theocracy. Great numbers of the "other sheep" would perish during the battle of Armageddon; the rest — presumably those who had accepted Russell's teachings — would live on earth forever.

Scriptural truth, as revealed to Charles Taze Russell, was represented in the Christian beliefs and practices which preceded the Council of Nicea in 325, the point where the Catholic Church erred and slipped from the ranks of God's true witnesses. The Bible students, under the careful editorship of Russell, undertook the cleansing work, the reformation of doctrine, the clarification of the Bible's teachings. The product would be a new society of Christians, united through a new conception of Christianity, or, more accurately, returned to the primitive, original teaching promulgated by Christ himself. All religious beliefs, therefore, must be based, not on individual revelations, Biblical proclamation, or the pretense of human infallibility, but upon scriptural evidence. As God's representative on earth, Russell used the Bible as absolute proof of his views. Russell's creed became all-encompassing, purporting to explain all human history, to predict the course of the future, and to point out to the individual exactly how he must conduct his life to achieve salvation. The Pastor considered God's whole plan for man to be contained in the scriptures, which, properly read, reveal a true and consistent theology. Organized religion's unscriptural dogma convinced Russell's Bible students that they alone served the forces of Jehovah. Russell placed men of wealth and influence, the educated, the churches — in fact, the vast majority of mankind — in allegiance with Satan.¹⁰

Predestination, papal infallibility, purgatory, hell, the veneration of images and symbols, penance, Christmas, Christian marriage, and the general absence of scriptural sanction for the basic tenets of organized Christendom came under relentless scriptural examination. "The

¹⁰ Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, *Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose* (New York, 1959), 107-09.

Church of Rome" and "all Protestant sects as well," which espoused these unscriptural beliefs and practices, were characterized as the nominal church, an extension of the legions of Babylon.¹¹ Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, Christian Scientists, and "holy-rollers" were classified by Russell as belonging to the same "warped family tree."¹²

Russell spared no person, institution, or idea if, in his mind, they were antithetical to his religious orthodoxy. University professors, evolutionists, historians, archaeologists, spiritualists, scientists, philosophers, Tsars and Kaisers, demographers, backsliding Bible students, hypnotists, ouija board operators, and of course, the nominal church came under powerful attack in Pastor Russell's editorials and sermons.

Although not strictly prohibited, the Pastor considered the use of tobacco and alcohol "filthy habits," inconsistent, like attending dance halls, with the modesty, sobriety, and wholesomeness Russell expected of his "little flock." The wholly consecrated Christian had no time for such folly or for involvement as a citizen of a community or nation for that matter. "Let the world manage its own government," he wrote in 1882, "while we wait for ours."

In time, Russell came to believe that the Lord favored his work and wished to use him as His earthly instrument in revealing new scriptural interpretations.¹³ As a result of this belief, Russell began publication of the *Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence* in 1879 and at the same time established the Bible House in Allegheny as headquarters for God's true religion. In 1881 Russell organized the Bible students as a non-profit organization, Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society. Opposition to the Bible students increased as they handed out thousands of controversial, and to some, heretical, *Watch Tower* tracts and pamphlets. By 1902 Witnesses were no longer permitted to speak from church pulpits, a privilege they had enjoyed in the 1870s.¹⁴

Charles Taze Russell had first appeared as a non-denominational Bible preacher whose work would benefit all on an inter-faith basis. The foreword to his six volumes of *Studies in the Scriptures* stated that the Bible studies were written "for Christian people of all denominations to use in lending a helping hand to all perplexed inquirers with whom they may, by God's providence, come in contact."¹⁵

The *Studies* established what remains the basic theology of the

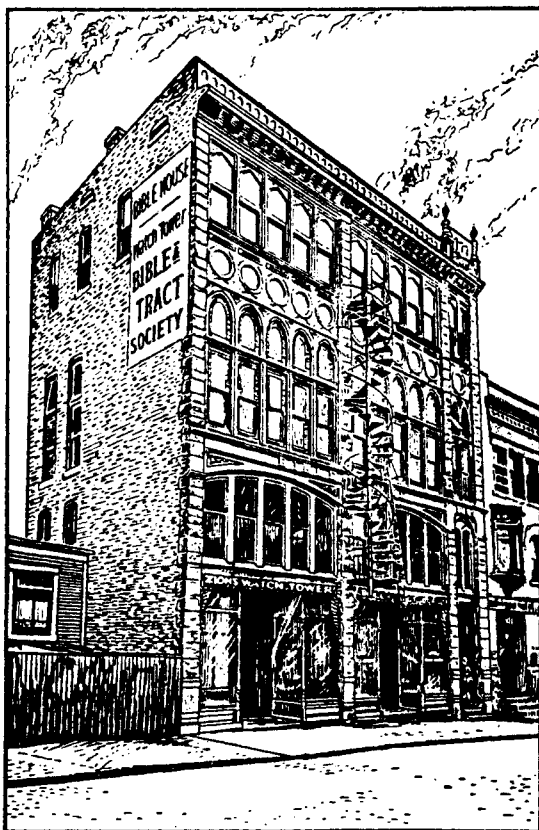
11 *Studies*, III, 154.

12 Soderbergh, "Jehovah's First Witness," 14.

13 *The Divine Purpose*, 19-20.

14 *Watch Tower* LXXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 105-06.

15 *Studies*, I, unnumbered page.



Bible House, 1889 (Jehovah's Witnesses in the Divine Purpose, provided by H. Robert Dawson, Presiding Minister, South Hills Congregation)

Watch Tower Society and helped to set the precedent for its heavy reliance on the printed word. The task before Russell and the Bible students appeared relatively simple. They noted that more than two dozen Christian denominations were represented at Bible House, each parent religion believing its teaching to be "correct." Russell viewed schisms and interfaith divisions as attempts by "nominal" Christians to find the word of God. The hundreds of denominations which existed illustrated to him the intense frustration of honest and sincere people in search of the truth.

The Bible students' movement typified the intense revivalist fervor

which swept through Pittsburgh and the nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Converts were being won to a variety of prophetic religions besides those of Russell's Millennial Dawn. All legitimized their teachings with "Thus saith the Lord." Followers of John Alexander Dowie rejected the findings of modern science, sought the conversion of the Pope, and insisted on the flatness of the earth,¹⁶ while the mid-nineteenth-century Millerites recast themselves as Seventh-Day Adventists. Madame Blavatsky's theosophy linked an individual's past animal form and his present personality;¹⁷ the Bahaists believed in a reincarnated Christ; a Holy Ghost and Us Society even flourished for a time. Of greatest import, of course, were the Eddyists who viewed sin and sickness as "errors" of the mind and the Mormons who were severely castigated for their sanction of polygamy.¹⁸ Russell, like the organized clergy, placed these movements on the "lunatic fringe," as further examples of society's befuddled citizenry. Out of this nineteenth-century confusion, the Bible students knew that they alone penetrated the truth of the Lord's teaching. The *Watch Tower* later declared, "It clearly appears that in those early days Jehovah's hand was upon the small Pittsburgh Bible group under Charles Taze Russell's chairmanship."¹⁹

Despite the "felt presence" of Jehovah's hand, it appears that Russell and his followers were motivated by the same conditions and fears that furthered other proletarian movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They found no ground for hope in the social process. A variety of groups, including such strange historical associates as the Adventists and Marxists, emphasized a doctrine of the last days. The Adventists envisaged that social evils like war, famine and plague exemplified the approaching end of time, when Christ, true to His calendar, would descend suddenly in the midst of flames, shouting, and trumpet blasts, to usher in His millennial reign. The Marxists haunted the world with visions of the nations' industrial giants engulfed in a revolution between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Marxism preached an era of socialism which would end in the peace and eternal serenity of communism. Russell went one step further. He

¹⁶ Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (New York, 1937), 155.

¹⁷ Charles J. Ryan, *H. P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement* (Pasadena, Calif., 1975), 3, 311.

¹⁸ Clark, *Small Sects*, 131, 232.

¹⁹ *Watch Tower* LXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 45; also: Joseph Bram, "Jehovah's Witnesses and the Values of American Culture," *Transactions*, New York Academy of Science, XIX (1956), 51-53; A. H. Macmillan, *Faith on the March* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957), 128.

warned the citizenry of the impending battle between the forces of Jehovah and the forces of Satan. Russell preached a post-Armageddon millennium which ended with Jehovah's rule over an earthly utopia free of disease, old age, and want.²⁰

These utopian visions reveal the more subtle and the less conscious difficulties which the proletarian of the late nineteenth century had with the emergence of an industrial-urban economy. Not surprisingly, Russell and his converts found that society wanting; permeated by wickedness and hypocrisy, it spawned false values. Consequently, like the Marxists of Russell's day, the Bible students worked in, but did not partake of the duties and the responsibilities of, capitalistic society. But unlike the Marxists, Russell preached a religious system that promised his followers transcendence of the rigors, responsibilities, and problems of everyday life.²¹

Ordinarily, little attention would have been paid to a newly-emerged religious "prophet," but by 1881 the name Charles Taze Russell had become a household word. The Bible students distributed thousands of tracts to passersby on street corners and on Sundays to people entering or leaving church services. These tracts and Russell's sermons attracted many Pittsburgh and Allegheny citizens to the Bible House. Russell conducted preaching and worship services every Sunday afternoon at 3:00 p.m., prayer and testimony meetings on Wednesday evenings, and Dawn Circles for Bible study on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings.²² Especially large crowds attended Bible study meetings at Carnegie Music Hall. Six meetings in March 1903 averaged six hundred persons, with some meetings reporting over eight hundred persons in attendance. *Zion's Watch Tower* assessed the audiences as "not aristocratic, but very intelligent," and composed almost entirely of "middle aged or elderly" persons.²³ With his popularity established and sessions well-attended, Russell scheduled his sermons at various places throughout the city in an effort to serve an expanding geographic area.

The chasm between Charles Taze Russell and the Pittsburgh community grew with the increasing strength of the Pastor's oncefledgling movement. He lashed out vehemently at the "false" doctrines

20 William J. Whalen, *Armageddon Around the Corner* (New York, 1962), 89-92; also: Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1963), 137-38, 308-14.

21 Werner Cohn, "Jehovah's Witnesses as a Proletarian Movement," *American Scholar* 24 (Summer, 1955): 287.

22 *Watch Tower* XIX (Mar. 15, 1898): 82.

23 *Watch Tower* XXIV (Apr. 1, 1903): 102.

of the organized churches. Readers of the *Watch Tower* had to note the particular disdain he held for the "Roman Church" and for Calvinist doctrine. In fact, no church or movement escaped his attack, with Mary Baker Eddy, Unitarians, and Baptists all feeling the sting of his pen or his oratory. Only the seed from which the Bible students germinated, Adventism, escaped a direct frontal attack. The trinity and the divinity of Christ came under scrutiny with the New Testament Jesus emerging as one-hundred-percent human.²⁴ As Russell's theology became increasingly clear, ministers accused the Bible students of adhering to un-Christian beliefs and practices, charges that persist to this day.²⁵

Russell's frequent assaults on Calvinism and Christianity's traditional concept of hell brought visible discomfort to the Presbyterian and Methodist clergy. To counter the barrage of *Watch Tower* publications, these denominations published scriptural studies to attack the tenets of Russellism. That the greatest forces against Russell were recruited from the ranks of Calvinists and Wesleyans appears natural. John Wesley rejected pre-millennium theory totally. Consequently, there "had to exist a deep-seated revulsion to Russellism since it rejected Methodism so thoroughly and blatantly."²⁶ Calvinists, of course, had been a favorite target since 1882, when Russell condemned the doctrine of hell, believing its existence to be unscriptural and inconsistent with his understanding of an all-loving God.²⁷

Although denying that he founded a church, Russell eagerly sought converts to the Bible House congregation. If he had been unsuccessful, the clergy no doubt would have ignored Russell as just another religious fanatic operating on society's fringe. There were, however, a disconcerting number of converts from the ranks of Pittsburgh's congregations. Like other minority religious groups in the Pittsburgh area, the Bible students mainly attracted persons who were or had been members of one of the large, established Protestant denominations. Converts rarely came from the unchurched population.²⁸ Since

24 Interview, Albert Schroeder, Elder, Jehovah's Witnesses Congregation, Pittsburgh, Pa., Mar. 20, 1973.

25 William E. Biederwolf, *Russellism Unveiled* (Chicago, 1911), 108. Also: Joseph Kyle, *Russellism* (The Presbyterian Board of Publication, Pittsburgh, c. 1908), 23. Douglass Brackenridge, *A Study of the Jehovah's Witnesses' Interpretation of Scripture Relevant to the Person of Jesus Christ in the Light of Historic Christianity* (unpublished thesis, Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary, 1959), vi.

26 Interview, Reverend William C. Beal, Director, Commission on Archives and History, Western Pennsylvania Methodist Conference, Mar. 6, 1973.

27 Whalen, *Armageddon Around the Corner*, 26-27.

28 Walter E. Steurmann, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Bible* (Tulsa, 1955), 1.

the basis of communication between the Russellites and their potential converts was the Bible, conversion, or even discussion, was based upon this common point of understanding and authority. Strong ethnic ties and, to a lesser extent, a more authoritarian church structure made Catholic conversions almost non-existent.²⁹

As early as 1880, Bible student tracts were widely distributed to expose the errors of "nominal" church doctrine.³⁰ The *Watch Tower* tirelessly cranked out the "good news" of Christ's Second Coming, the battle of Armageddon, and the Millennial Age. Such pronouncements uttered in the name of Jehovah, and Russell's concomitant inflammatory orations guaranteed results — good Christian people listened, and Pittsburgh's clergy mounted a counter attack.

Pittsburgh's Protestant establishment fought hard to stop Russell and his ardent followers. On March 10, 1903, the Reverend Ephraim L. Eaton, D.D., pastor of the North Side Methodist Episcopal Church, addressed a letter to Pastor Russell in which he requested a series of debates on issues on which the two differed. Russellites interpreted the request as a "subtle attempt on the part of Pittsburgh's associated clergy publicly to discredit Russell's scholarship and teaching."³¹ In the light of Eaton's subsequent writings, and especially his book, *The Millennial Dawn Heresy*, the fears of the Bible students were well-founded. Eaton viewed the Millennial Dawnists as attempting to discredit the work of organized Christians by attempting to disrupt "the regular work of the Church in every community where it can get a foothold, to unsettle multitudes of well-meaning people and to withdraw them from spheres of active usefulness and contentment in their communities."³²

The debates established Eaton as the spokesman for a Pittsburgh ministerial alliance whose avowed purpose was to discredit Russell. Eaton seemed to be a natural choice for this assignment since he resided in Allegheny as pastor of the prestigious North Side Methodist Episcopal Church. Such an assignment required a prominent minister and the Western Pennsylvania Methodist Conference went "outside" its jurisdiction to bring him in.³³ Doctor Eaton commanded a mastery of the Biblical subjects debated and, according to Pittsburgh's official Methodist weekly, "he conducted his part of the debate with eminent

29 Interview, A. Schroeder, Mar. 20, 1973; also: Interview, Fr. R. Henry Czarnicki, St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Verona, Pa., Mar. 7, 1973.

30 *Watch Tower* II (Dec. 1, 1880): 8.

31 *Watch Tower* LXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 106.

32 Ephraim L. Eaton, *The Millennial Dawn Heresy* (Cincinnati, 1911), 4.

33 Interview, Beal, Mar. 19, 1973.

ability, defending the Truth to the satisfaction of its multitude of friends who attended the discussions.”³⁴ The debates were conducted with a minister from a different Protestant denomination acting as the moderator during each discussion. In addition, ministers from various area churches sat on the speaker’s platform with the Reverend Eaton, allegedly to provide him with textual and moral support.³⁵ Pastor Russell, of course, stood as a solitary figure in defense of his position. The presence of the ministers gave the debate an interdenominational focus which averted an Eaton versus Russell or Methodist versus Millennial Dawn conflict.

It did not prevent the discussions from becoming personal, however, despite mutual assurances that the “Golden Rule” would be observed. Newspaper accounts indicated that during rebuttal, the contempt Eaton felt for Russell became obvious. When Eaton referred to the Millennial Age as “foolishness” and “nonsense,” and as a “picnic excursion” with “balmy breezes,” Russell replied mildly that “our brother has sneered at the Millennial Age, but we are on the side of the prophets.”³⁶ The debates revealed the animosity of the two factions, and each punctuated the discussions with loud applause for its champion.

The Pittsburgh ministerial alliance represented at the debate continued to speak as the unofficial voice of Pittsburgh Protestantism. The Protestant ministers communicated their “oneness” in condemning Russellite teachings and, at the same time, avoided the risk of martyring the bearded patriarch. That even an unofficial alliance of Protestant clergymen could be formed signified that they feared Russell’s potential to convert members of their denominations. Years later a prominent Methodist minister indicated that the various Christian denominations “did not talk much in those days,” and recalled that the Russell-Eaton debates stood as a rare example of Protestant unity.³⁷

The impact of the debates remained obscure. However, one of Russell’s colporteurs reported that some of Dr. Eaton’s own congregation became members of the Bible student movement.³⁸ Many years

34 *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate* LXX (Nov. 5, 1903): 2.

35 *Watch Tower* LXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 106.

36 “The Rev. E. L. Eaton, D.D., and Pastor Russell Begin Great Debate on Religion,” *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1903; Also: *Pittsburgh Gazette*, Oct. 23, 1903, Oct. 28, 1903, Oct. 30, 1903, Nov. 2, 1903.

37 Interview, E. J. Keifer, D.D., President, Western Pennsylvania Conference of Retired Methodist Ministers and Dean, Senior Ministers Institute, Mar. 14, 1973.

38 Charles H. Capen, “Associated With Jehovah’s Organization for 77 Years”

later the society substantiated this observation, asserting that "soon after this exposure of the false doctrines of the 'Babylonish' church systems, quite a number of Eaton's Methodist congregation became Bible students."³⁹ Pittsburgh's major Protestant denominations, however, had recorded a declining membership prior to the 1903 debates. The Pittsburgh Baptist churches, for example, recorded a noteworthy decline in membership at their 1903 annual session and exhorted ministers to stress themes of practical and aggressive missionary Christianity.⁴⁰ A decline in church attendance and the consequent return to the Bible in some denominations may have been predicated upon the influence of Russell and his followers, but there appears little evidence to support this.

Most Protestant churches did show rekindled interest in the use of the Bible during the century's first decade. In 1903, for example, the Pittsburgh Presbytery in its annual general assembly passed a resolution "to use the Bible in Sunday schools" as a teaching tool, recognizing that church-prepared documents were probably unscriptural.⁴¹ In 1910, the Methodist Church acknowledged the need for a renewed emphasis on the Bible, singling out the effectiveness of the colporteur work in placing Bibles in virtually every home visited. Churchmen recommended "a more general use of the Bible in the churches and for use by their organizations," and further recommended, "as a policy of the future, a Bible in every home, a Bible in every pew, and a Bible in the hand of every participant in the various services."⁴²

While most denominations talked of eternal salvation by faith or by character, Pastor Russell hammered into his followers that only through their missionary efforts, i.e., by canvassing door-to-door, "unto the hour of death itself," would there be salvation. No other test of faithfulness to God existed. Zealous colporteurs invaded neighborhoods, occupied street corners, placed themselves strategically near churches, and travelled over the countryside, armed with their numerous tracts and the Pastor's *Studies in the Scriptures*. The ordained clergy condemned the colporteurs for not preaching to the heathen

(unpublished typescript, 1970), 3. Original in Repository, Jehovah's Witness Congregation, Pittsburgh, Pa.

³⁹ *Watch Tower* LXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 107.

⁴⁰ Pittsburgh Baptist Association *Minutes*, 64th Annual Session, June 9-10, 1903, 32.

⁴¹ General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church *Minutes*, Pittsburgh, New Series, III (1903), 57.

⁴² Pittsburgh Annual Conference of the Methodist-Episcopal Church *Minutes*, Beaver Falls, Pa., Oct. 5-10, 1910, 72.

world and for not leaving the "saved" world alone. In such condemnations, however, they missed entirely Russell's belief that organized Christendom was led, not by Jehovah, but by Satan.

The house-to-house encounters revealed much opposition. Ministers often refused to speak with the colporteurs when called upon (usually by accident). At times ministers led the persistent colporteurs from the houses by the arm. Pittsburgh's oldest and perhaps most celebrated colporteur, Charles H. Capen, avoided ministers as much as possible. Ministers spread much prejudice against the colporteurs and "advised their people to refuse the books when a colporteur came to deliver them."⁴³

The distribution of religious tracts in front of Allegheny churches was never accepted by the Protestant clergy and often brought the arrest of colporteurs and the destruction of their religious literature. The Reverend E. D. Whiteside, pastor of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and an early acquaintance of Charles Taze Russell, destroyed Bible tracts, ordered the Bible students to cease and desist, and, at times, called the police.⁴⁴

The colporteurs realized successes, too. Although Russell recorded no statistics which reveal the number of conversions, the 1909 Annual Session of the Pittsburgh Baptist Association credited the colporteurs with contacting 112,000 homes through house-to-house visitations.⁴⁵ The association recognized the feat as "phenomenal."

Colporteurs found that their doctrine of hell and concept of Jesus Christ commanded the greatest attention of the people they contacted. These "prospective" members often felt some conflict with their own fundamentalist backgrounds and in many cases had difficulty extinguishing a hell-fire that had been inculcated since birth.⁴⁶ Many, however, accepted the new doctrine as a message of hope.⁴⁷ In addition, the colporteurs "sold" Jesus as a perfect man. To follow and emulate a man appeared more feasible than trying to emulate God.

Door-to-door preaching, however, took its toll as some Bible students "could not stand the rigors of salvation through the 'little

43 Capen, "Associated . . . for 77 years," 5.

44 Interview, Dr. Kenneth C. Fraser, Pastor, Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, Pittsburgh, Pa., Mar. 5, 1973; also: Interview, Charlotte Schroeder, Mar. 20, 1973.

45 Pittsburgh Baptist Association *Minutes*, 70th Annual Session, June 10-11, 1909, 71.

46 Interview, H. Robert Dawson, Presiding Elder, Jehovah's Witnesses Congregations of Pittsburgh, Mar. 20, 1973.

47 Interview, A. Schroeder, Mar. 20, 1973.

flock.'" "Those who refused to swallow their pride and follow the example of Jesus and his disciples in the door-to-door ministry soon found themselves out of the organization entirely."⁴⁸ Some members of Russell's "little flock" found it too difficult to remain forever "devout."

Those who possessed the zeal and devotion to Russell's cause found a positive identification in the Bible students' congregation. They actively participated in essential work and found themselves a part of a meaningful segment of Pittsburgh society, probably for the first time. They assumed an importance their social and economic status in the larger society may have denied them. As Bible students they no longer lived on the humbler side of life.⁴⁹ Significantly, by reducing the complexity of world events to the common denominator of Satan's struggle against the will of Jehovah, the movement appealed to people unable to cope with the increasing complexity of life brought about by a rapidly expanding industrial society.

Russell therefore focused his efforts where they were likely to bring the best results — on the ordinary people. The movement provided a spiritual home for those who wanted an active stake in their salvation. The Bible students experienced no intra-faith squabbles or polemics regarding doctrine or the rights of clergy, no problems with a changing liturgy, or disputes about the Bible's message. Questions about why poverty and vice existed for so many of God's people did not plague Russell's theology. The Pastor knew the answers to these questions. To the sophisticated, his answers seemed crude, simplistic, and dogmatic, but to many questioning souls he appeared refreshingly knowledgeable and convincing.

Naturally, the Bible students generally ignored the personal problems that surrounded the Pastor, assigning them to the work of Jehovah's enemies. Russell had a penchant for supporting schemes that, in the public eye, appeared suspicious, if not downright dishonest. Russell's "wonderful cotton seed" guaranteed to revolutionize the industry, and his "miracle wheat" promised a crop exceeding two hundred bushels per acre. The famed "millennial bean" was advertised to outgrow all other varieties. He also sold religious souvenirs and motto cards acquired on trips abroad, and he was involved in the sale of Florida lands. He advertised cures for appendicitis and the common cold. In addition, to those "in the Truth," Russell offered a cure for cancer, available upon request.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Macmillan, *Faith on the March*, 158.

⁴⁹ Bram, "Jehovah's Witnesses and the Values of American Culture," 51.

⁵⁰ Herbert H. Stroup, *The Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York, 1945), 37.

Perhaps the most vexing problem Russell faced concerned his twenty-five-year marriage to Maria Frances Ackley. Married in 1879 after a whirlwind courtship of three weeks, Maria and Charles separated in 1897 allegedly because of differing editorial policies for the *Watch Tower* magazine. In addition, Russell and his wife disagreed about the management of the journal. In 1897, some Watch Tower members objected to Maria's being a member of the board of directors which was contrary to 1 Timothy, 2:12. ("But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, . . .") Their separation, however, allegedly had nothing to do with a later divorce proceeding in 1906, in which she accused Russell of adultery.⁵¹ Maria charged that Charles had an affair with a young female Bible student named "Emily," a charge never proven in court and one never disproven, even though Russell went to court five times in that attempt. In October 1911, a New York court recorded that Russell's conduct toward his wife had been "one of continual domination that would necessarily render the life of any Christian woman a burden and make her condition intolerable."⁵² There was no mention of the adultery charge. The judge indicated instead that he believed that the couple had "irreconcilable differences." The adultery charge stuck in the minds of people outside the "little flock" and irreparably damaged Russell's image among the clergy.

In addition, litigation in a Hamilton, Ontario, court revealed that Russell not only did not know the languages of the Bible as he purported but did not even know the letters of the Greek alphabet.⁵³ These occurrences, however devastating to the Pastor personally, failed to daunt the spirit of his dedicated following. Pittsburgh's clergy capitalized on every opportunity to expose the Pastor for the fraud they believed him to be. Russell's society remained incredibly orderly and tightly knit in the face of these and other Babylonish assaults. To the Bible House congregation these charges only proved that Satan was alive and well in Pittsburgh.

Closing ranks during periods of adversity had become as conspicuous as the Bible students' loyalty to the scriptures. The Pastor had brought a dignity and a depth to his Pittsburgh group that his ordained brethren often failed to communicate. Charles Taze Russell watched his congregation grow from a single "knot" of believers into an international organization. Its success belonged mostly to the

⁵¹ *Watch Tower* LXXVI (Jan. 15, 1955): 46.

⁵² Royston Pike, *Jehovah's Witnesses* (London, 1954), 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Pastor. Besides being a prolific and persuasive journalist, Russell possessed the charisma effective leadership required. He was followed not for any tangible achievements or any special qualifications. His followers, rather, attributed a very personal and extraordinary power to him — one not to be duplicated by anyone else. Even after the three years of total confusion and the near disintegration of the society which followed Russell's death, there appeared little doubt that the Bible students looked upon Russell as a prophet who had special insights into scripture and a special sensitivity to the needs of his "little flock." Various Bible student groups, among them the Stand Fast Movement and the Elijah Voice Society, rejected the leadership of Russell's successor, "Judge" Joseph Franklin Rutherford, final testimony to the force of Russell's personality. Rutherford, acutely aware of the personal popularity and influence the charismatic Russell had over his followers, resolved to publish all Witnesses materials anonymously. He feared that Russell *was* the society, an acclaim that rightly belonged to Jehovah.⁵⁴

Even in death, Russell was surrounded by drama and controversy. For several months prior to his unexpected passing, the Pastor had embarked upon crusades to the west coast, preaching in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Returning to the east from a second western trip in October 1916, Menta Sturgeon, Russell's personal secretary, noted the Pastor's inability to eat regularly and his fitful sleep. While passing through Panhandle, Texas, his condition worsened and Sturgeon summoned a local physician, S. R. Carlton, to examine Russell. Carlton apparently agreed with Sturgeon's fear; the Pastor was dying. Sturgeon telegraphed the society's Brooklyn headquarters, advised them of Russell's impending death, and indicated he would supervise the embalming.

The exact place of death remains obscure. The *Panhandle Herald* published a notice which claimed Russell had been visited by physician S. R. Carlton. On November 15, the Watch Tower Society advised the faithful of the Pastor's passing, stating he had died in Pampa, Texas. Sturgeon failed to mention Pampa in his account of the fateful trip and Russell's death. Subsequent Witnesses literature remains vague on the circumstances and whereabouts of his passing. The society acknowledged that Russell suffered from cystitis, severe headaches, and painful hemorrhoids, but had apparently kept his maladies secret from the "little flock." *The New York Times*, November 1, 1916, cited

54 Macmillan, *Faith on the March*, 122-23, 127-28.

heart disease as the cause of death.⁵⁵ Adding to the uncertainty, the 1916 *Directory* of the American Medical Association, which includes Panhandle, Texas, fails to list the physician, S. R. Carlton.

Charles Taze Russell brought a new dimension to the history of the Pittsburgh area. At the Bible House, Russell infused followers with a sense of belonging and gave them an essential role in life, one that filled the void created by an impersonal, industrialized society. As a result, Russell's *Millennial Dawn* forged its niche in America's religious history. Unlike his ordained adversaries, to the Pastor "It is written" was a battle cry, not a defense mechanism.⁵⁶ Even today, "It is written" remains the *raison d'être* of the "little flock" that continues to occupy street corners and doorsteps with a fervor reminiscent of the Pastor. ■

⁵⁵ Macmillan, *Faith on the March*, 61; also: Soderbergh, "Jehovah's First Witness," 53.

⁵⁶ Soderbergh, "Jehovah's First Witness," 25.