

## HOW DID RUSSELL VIEW HIMSELF? DIVINE PLAN OF THE AGES, CHAPTER 1.

### Standard

- Chapter 1 of the The Divine Plan of the Ages, entitled “Earth’s Night of Sin to Terminate in a Morning of Joy” is a particularly fascinating and important portion of the multi-volume Studies in the Scriptures. In this opening salvo, we can find ideas and tactics that have continued on in the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society up through our present day, albeit in their nascent form.

Notwithstanding Pastor Russell’s portrayal by the Society as a humble Bible student and seeker of truth, this chapter reveals his ludicrous grandiosity. In one fell swoop, he dispenses with modern theologians (“given no weight”) and the church fathers (“omitted”). Tradition also gets thrown out the window by the pejorative phrase “muddy waters of tradition.” Many Christians over the centuries have admired the early church for the zeal of its many martyrs and confessors. Russell only laments its ignorance with his unsubstantiated and bizarre claims that they couldn’t see God’s plan as clearly as those of his time could, understood none of the Book of Revelation, and could not appreciate the words of Paul as fully as himself and his contemporaries! Lest we think that any of the ancient creeds have any insight to impart, Russell handily dispenses with these as well. He castigates them as “contradictory to each other in important respects” and claims that any truth in them is “covered and mixed with error.” He offers no quotations from the creeds, neglecting to give examples. In a tactic used by all who would gain a religious following, established beliefs and doctrines must be dismissed out of hand. (Otherwise, why would we need Russell?)

Would-be cult leaders always emphasize the differences among traditional Christians, rather than the agreement. (“How can anyone figure out that jumble of denominations? Stick with us – we’ll clarify everything!”) However, there has been much agreement over the years in the doctrines considered to be most important and central. The Apostles Creed is accepted by all Christians as an outline of the essentials of the Faith, and a study of the important creeds to follow over the centuries will reveal a consistent affirmation of these basic truths.

Russell’s radical view on the meaning of “sola Scriptura” (Scripture only) was not the same as that of the Reformers and most Protestants. They did not take it to mean the ignoring or setting aside of all Biblical commentary and theology that had gone before. Stephen Wellum, professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is a firm believer in “Sola Scriptura.” In an editorial in the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology, he discusses the importance of church history. “We neglect our theological forefathers to our detriment... Scripture constantly reminds us that none of us function as islands to ourselves; rather we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before, seeking to learn from them, positively or negatively, both in terms of their way of life as well as their theological convictions and formulations.” Commenting on the Creeds, he says, “It has often been stated that the early church councils gave us theological statements that are no doubt subservient to Scripture, but which we neglect and ignore to our peril and which it is very difficult to improve upon no matter how hard we try.” Pastor Russell, on the other hand terms all previous Christian doctrine “prejudice” and exhorts us to divest our minds of it. \*

Regrettably, he did not “stand on the shoulders of giants,” but was undoubtedly instructed and influenced by theological Lilliputians – Millerite Adventists such as George Storrs and Nelson Barbour. (Although he claims to have come to Scripture with no prejudice, Russell was already being influenced by Second Adventists. He also came to Scripture with a strong desire to find verses that might disprove certain doctrines of “Christendom” that disturbed him.)

Now that almost all the usual sources of theology and Biblical commentary have been trashed, let us note what is claimed of this publication itself by the author. It is obvious that Charles Taze Russell sees himself as God’s man for the last days. (a ruinous delusion shared by other would-be prophets throughout church history)\*\* He declares without any proof that more light is “due” now (that he’s here) than at any other time in history! (p 28) Divine revelation can be seen to be “both harmonious and beautiful from THIS STANDPOINT AND NO OTHER,” referring to dispensational frameworks, and inferring his in particular. (p.9) In a subtle gnostic twist, he declares that “In this work we shall endeavor...to set before the reader the plan of God...in a way more harmonious, beautiful and reasonable than is generally understood.” Lest you find this arrogant, he offers the following disclaimer to clarify his humility: “yet that this is the result of extraordinary wisdom or ability on the part of the writer is positively disclaimed. It is the light from the Sun of Righteousness in this dawning of the Millennial Day that reveals these things as ‘present truth’ – now due to be appreciated by the sincere – the pure in heart.” Thus while attempting to prove his humility, Russell suggests that his writings are divine in origin. This is also suggested on page 12, where he says sincere seekers can understand the Bible “by making use of the various helps *divinely provided*. (Eph. 4: 11-16) As an aid to this class of students, this work is especially designed.” On page 20, following a poem trumpeting this special time of new light, Russell once again exalts his own writings. “Such a blessing is now coming to the world through the unfolding of the divine purpose and the opening of the divine Word, of which the blessing and revealing this volume is we trust a part.”

The Watchtower is considered by many to be a rationalistic organization. The Bible encourages the use of reason, but also declares that human reason has its limits, and should never be put above the Scriptures. Reason is mentioned quite a few times in this first chapter. One of Russell’s main goals seems to be to develop a supposedly Biblical scheme that will be completely palatable to skeptics, and devoid of doctrines that are difficult, disturbing, or beyond our reason. In a confusing paragraph at the bottom of page 10, the Word of God is referred to as “the foundation upon which all faith should be built.” In an abrupt about-face two sentences later, reason is the foundation that the Word of God builds upon. “And we have endeavored to do this in a manner that will appeal to and can be accepted by reason as a foundation. Then we have endeavored to build upon that foundation the teachings of Scripture, in such a manner that, so far as possible, purely human judgment may try its squares and angles by the most exacting rules of justice which it can command.” This endeavor is quite problematic, for it says in Scripture that “the natural man does not accept the things of God, for they are folly to him.” (I Corinthians 2:14, ESV) As Siegbert Becker put it, “To make the gospel reasonable to unconverted man in an effort to bring about his acceptance of that gospel is therefore the height of folly. Such efforts can only result in a change in the gospel, consequently a destruction of the gospel.”\*\*\*

In this chapter, Russell attempts to pave the way for acceptance of his novel teachings by using certain Scriptures repeatedly as “catch phrases” to validate the idea of progressive revelation. Perhaps he was hoping that no one would take the time to read the verses and phrases in their complete context in the Bible. According to Russell, “walking in the light” means being open to the truth that is “becoming due” now (through him.) It is not difficult to discern in I John chapter 1, by reading verse 7 in its context, that walking in the light has to do with Jesus Christ and Christian living, not anticipating new revelations and “fresh unfoldings of God’s plan” in future generations of the Christian church. He claims that in I Peter 1:10-13, the Church is exhorted to “hope for still further grace (favor, blessing) in this direction – yet more knowledge of God’s plans,” but a quick reading of this passage will leave one scratching his head, wondering how he got there from here! Rather than encouraging us to look for more “light”, Paul warns the believers in Galatians 1 not to accept any Gospel that is new or different from what they received from him, even if it came from an angel or Paul himself.

Throughout these pages, a propaganda technique called “appeal to...” is used repeatedly. In this case, the appeal is to spiritual snobbery. In other words, the ones who accept all this new light that is “becoming due” (Russell’s teachings) are only those who are the most spiritual, the honest seekers. Russell says on page 10, that this “harmonious, beautiful and reasonable” way of explaining God’s past, present and future plan, is set before readers that are “*interested and unbiased.*” These present truths are “now due to be appreciated by the *sincere and pure in heart.*” His take on God’s plan “must commend itself to every *sanctified* conscience.” (p.11) The real insight on God’s plan, is given only *to the meek and lowly of heart*, those who are *earnestly and sincerely seeking* the Bible’s guidance and instruction. (p.12) While expounding on the failure of the Christian church to have much impact in the world on a global scale, he declares that this issue will “awaken serious doubt in every *thoughtful* mind.” (p.14) Those who do not look for more light are described as having “*little faith*” and are described as *unfaithful and unconcerned.* (p. 21) Those who don’t “expect fresh unfoldings of our Father’s plan are *unprepared* because they don’t understand the ongoing nature of knowledge. (p.25) Those that don’t go with the flow of new light dispensed by Russell are not walking in the light and not making progress, and even worse, they are threatened with the light passing them by, and being left in darkness!! (p 25) The “new light” train is pulling out of the station! If you don’t jump on, you will be left behind!

Several statements in the chapter under consideration have proven to be exceedingly ironic, in light of subsequent Watchtower history. “We trust, however, that a wide distinction will be recognized between the earnest, sober and reverent study of prophecy and other scriptures, in the light of accomplished historic facts, to obtain conclusions which sanctified common sense can approve, and a too common practice of general speculation, which, when applied to divine prophecy, is too apt to give loose rein to wild theory and vague fancy. Those who fall into this dangerous habit generally develop into prophets (?) instead of prophetic students.” (p.13) Of course, the Society leadership tries to save face by insisting that they never called themselves “prophets”, but predicted various end time events and engaged in date-setting repeatedly over the course of their history. On page 21, a Scripture is mentioned that teaches us that the Scriptures are all we need to know salvific truth about Jesus Christ. Russell refers to the verse by saying

“beyond what is written we need nothing, for the Holy Scriptures are able to make wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus – II Timothy 3:13.” By 1910, he must have changed his tune, for he states in the Watchtower magazine of September 15 that “Not only do we find that people cannot see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the Scripture Studies aside, even after he has used them, after he has become familiar with them, after he has read them for ten years – if he then lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he had merely read the Scripture Studies with their references, and had not read a page of the Bible, as such, he would be in the light at the end of the two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures.”

A final irony can be found on page 22-23. Quoted in full, it says, “There came a time however, after the apostles fell asleep, when the majority of the Church began to neglect the lamp, and to look to human teachers for leading: and the teachers, puffed up with pride, assumed titles and offices, and began to lord it over God’s heritage. Then by degrees there came into existence a special class called ‘the clergy’, who regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as the proper guides to faith and practice, aside from the Word of God. Thus in time the great system of Papacy was developed by an undue respect for the teachings of fallible men and a neglect of the Word of the infallible God.” Does not the Watchtower have a very special class called the Governing Body? Do they lord it over God’s heritage? Do they regard themselves as the ONLY proper guides to faith and practice? Do they say you NEED them to learn about God, and to understand His Word properly? Are individual Jehovahs Witnesses led to neglect the Word of God, and pay more attention to the teachings of fallible men, i.e. the Governing Body and the writing department?

“It is vital that we appreciate this fact and **respond to the directions of the “slave” as we would to the voice of God**, because it is His provision.” *Watchtower* 1957 June 15 p.370

In this time of the end, Christ has committed “all his belongings”- all the earthly interests of the Kingdom –to his “faithful and discreet slave”, and its representative governing body. (Matt. 24:45-47) The anointed and their other sheep companions recognize that **by following the lead of the modern-day governing body, they are in fact following their Leader, Christ.** (WT, 9-15-2010, p. 23)

“Without the assistance of the Faithful and Discreet Slave, we would neither understand the full import of what we read in God’s Word nor know how to apply it. (Matt. 24:45-47)” (WT, 9-15-2010, p.8)

\*Where have we heard this before? “Accordingly, he determined to lay aside ‘all commentaries, former views and prepossessions,’ and for two years working from Genesis through Revelation

rationalized and clarified every inconsistency.” — referring to William Miller, as quoted in God’s Strange Work, William Miller and the End of the World by David Rowe

\*\*For a modern-day apocalyptic prophet, check out the Third Eagle of the Apocalypse. <http://www.youtube.com/user/thirdeaglebooks>

\*\*\*The Foolishness of God, The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther, Siegbert Becker