
Charles Taze Russell

1852-1916

Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.
January 10, 2017

Charles Taze Russell founded the Bible Student Movement. He made a systematic study of the Bible the focus of his ministerial effort. His study resulted in publishing a journal, now called *The Watchtower*, in which he made a contrast between what the Bible said compared with what various churches taught. After his death, the Jehovah's Witnesses developed from his followers.

He published a six-volume study of the Bible between 1886 and 1904 titled *Studies in the Scriptures* sold over 19,900,000 copies while he was still living. Always a prolific writer, in 1912 he was responsible for distribution of 35,520,475 free pamphlets, magazines and tracts. His sermons were published in newspapers across America. His last major project was a motion picture project titled *Photo Drama of Creation*, released in 1914. It was in four parts, two hours per part, dealing with the earth's history.

Although a gifted preacher, Russell claimed no special revelation or vision, nor did he claim any special authority to justify his calling. He did not intend to create a new denomination, but rather to gather Christian believers together. Reason alone was sufficient to figure out what the Bible taught.

His early religious exposure made him fearful of eternal punishment while still a teen. He was unable to reconcile this with the love of God, and for a time became a skeptic. By 1870 he concluded that the Bible may be correct, but the competing denominations of Christianity were the culprit in causing believers to err. He wrote, "The various creeds continually conflict and clash; and as each claims a Bible basis, the confusion of thought, and evident discord, are charged to God's word."

After concluding that the Bible was reliable and the various denominations were misrepresenting its content, he decided there was no religious

organization that could be identified as the “true church.” He believed there had been an early apostasy from the truth, writing, “the predicted ‘falling away’ had begun to work even in the Apostolic times.” He taught that the Dark Ages were caused by the neglect of truth and the strife of sectarianism. Despite this, he did not attempt to reorganize the “true church.”

Despite his dislike of denominational Christianity, he thought Martin Luther, John Wycliff, John Knox and other Protestant fathers were bold defenders of God’s words. Apart from this, he regarded clergy generally as weak, ineffective and errant.

Russell searched the Bible for types and he thought 1813 b.c. until 70 a.d. to be parallel to 33 a.d. until 1915 a.d., using his reason as guide to interpreting the Bible. He believed the World’s Parliament of Religions held in 1893 in Chicago was an example of Christians compromising the purity of their beliefs. He believed simplicity was the primary basis for early Christian worship in the Apostolic age.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have described his ministry in these words: “Among that group of sincere Bible students was a man named Charles Taze Russell. While Russell took the lead in the Bible education work at that time and was the first editor of *The Watchtower*, he was not the founder of a new religion. The goal of Russell and the other Bible Students, as the group was then known, was to promote the teachings of Jesus Christ and to follow the practices of the first-century Christian congregation. Since Jesus is the Founder of Christianity, we view him as the founder of our organization.”

Russell explained, “If it is not proper to unite with any of the present nominal churches, would it not be well to form a visible association of our own? Yes, that is what we have—a society modeled after that of the early church. We think we have come back to primitive simplicity.”

In many respects Russell was responding to widespread recognition, shared by many of the leaders of the Protestant movement, that Christianity was deeply flawed and needed to be reconsidered. Christianity once held great power to save souls, and descended into squabbling factions. He sought to return to an original simplicity to avoid conflict.