

The Teachings  
*of*  
Pastor Russell  
—  
CONNER



THE TEACHINGS OF "PASTOR"  
RUSSELL

By W. T. CONNER  
"A System of Christian Doctrine"  
"The Resurrection of Jesus"  
"The Teachings of Mrs. Eddy"

# THE TEACHINGS OF "PASTOR" RUSSELL

By  
W. T. CONNER

Professor of Systematic Theology in the  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
FORT WORTH, TEXAS



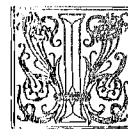
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## THE TEACHINGS OF "PASTOR" RUSSELL



IN this discussion we propose to give, as briefly as possible, some of the leading ideas of "Pastor" Russell. It is difficult, in so brief a space, to give anything like an adequate statement or discussion of his teachings. My main aim will be to state what "Pastor" Russell taught, and some space will be given to criticism. His teachings are so absurd and so contrary to commonly accepted Christian principles that a statement of what he taught is enough. To state his teaching is to refute it.

Mr. Russell put out six good-sized volumes on "Millennial Dawn" or "Studies in the Scriptures." In the first volume he gives a clear general outline of his scheme. My interpretation is based mainly on a study of that volume, and the references in parenthesis are to the pages of that volume, unless otherwise specified.

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1. "*Plan of the Ages.*"

Perhaps the best place to begin a consideration of the doctrines of Russellism is with Mr. Russell's "Plan of the Ages." This idea of dispensations, or "plan of the ages," forms the groundwork of Mr. Russell's whole scheme of doctrine.

According to Mr. Russell there are three great ages or dispensations in the history of the world: from creation to the flood, under the administration of angels; from the flood to the second coming of Christ, under the limited control of Satan; the world to come, under divine administration, the kingdom of God. He claims that his scheme is pre-eminently scriptural.

He makes the governing consideration in his interpretation of scripture his own arbitrary "plan of the ages," which he claims to be divine. Instead of getting this "plan of the ages" out of the Bible he arbitrarily imposes it on the Bible, and interprets the scriptures to fit his "plan of the ages." He claims that in understanding any passage of scripture the first and primary thing is to find out the age

or dispensation to which it refers. This, he says, is the only thing that will enable us to interpret the Bible in harmony with itself.

Of course, there is some truth in this idea of dispensations. Revelation is progressive. There is a progressive unfolding of God's plan, and that plan is unitary. But it is also true that there are great principles underlying God's dealings with man in every age of the world. Instead of one dispensation displacing another in the arbitrary way represented by Mr. Russell, it is rather true that one dispensation takes up into itself the permanent moral and spiritual values and principles of the preceding. Thus we have in the Bible the general divisions of the Old and New Testaments. But even in regard to these we are warned against making too sharp a distinction. Jesus and Paul (as well as other New Testament writers) give us to understand that the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New and the New is the completion of the Old.

Certainly if any principle is to be made our governing idea in the interpretation of the Bible, and of the whole course of human

history as the working out of God's plan for the human race, then we ought by all means to examine that principle with great care to see if it is a sound principle. About the only argument that Mr. Russell offers for his "plan of the ages" is that it harmonizes the scriptures. But as a matter of fact when we examine this principle and its application to the Bible, we find that it will not stand the test. As applied to the Bible, instead of giving the beautiful unity and harmony that Mr. Russell claims it will give, it really tears the Bible to shreds and leaves this book more of a "crazy-quilt" affair than does any of the schemes of radical criticism. It makes the Bible a jumble of hopeless contradictions and brings chaos instead of order out of its teachings.

To illustrate Mr. Russell's method of interpreting scripture with reference to the "plan of the ages," we might take the doctrines of election and freedom. Mr. Russell claims that this is the age of election—the present gospel age. All the scriptures that speak of election then are to be interpreted as referring to this

age, while all those passages that refer to a universal invitation are to be referred to the coming kingdom, or millennial age. He proceeds upon the assumption that election is inconsistent with a universal gospel invitation. Revelation 22: 17, for instance, has no reference to the present gospel age. Only in the millennial age will the Spirit and the bride say come, and whosoever will may respond to the call. In a similar way he disposes of all passages that give a universal significance to the saving work of Christ, or a universal sway to his reign. Thus Mr. Russell flatly contradicts the common Christian conviction that we are now under obligation to give the gospel to all men. His interpretation takes all meaning for us out of Christ's command to preach the gospel to every creature. If Mr. Russell is right on this point, then practically the whole Christian world is wrong and our sense of obligation to carry the good news of salvation to all men is only an illusion.

## 2. *The Present Versus the Coming Age.*

One of the most important applications of this principle of dispensation that Mr.



Russell makes is in regard to the present gospel age as compared with the coming millennial age. The first age from creation to the flood is negligible, as far as his scheme of doctrine is concerned. It is put in only to fill out. (It might be interesting to note that Mr. Russell's whole scheme is based on Usher's chronology. He presupposes that the world is only 6,000 years old. He seems to think that there is no question about this.)

It is important to note that Mr. Russell's chief points of division of human history are at the flood and at the second coming of Christ. The first coming of Christ was an event of secondary importance as compared with these. His second dispensation in the world's history reaches from the flood to the second coming of Christ. This he divides into three secondary ages—the patriarchal age, reaching from the flood to the time of Moses; the Jewish age, reaching from Moses to the time of Christ; and the gospel age, reaching from the coming of Christ to the second coming of Christ. According to this either the flood or the second coming of Christ is an event of greater mean-

ing for mankind than was the first coming of Christ. If Mr. Russell was right in regard to this, then the Christian world has been wrong in thinking that the coming of Christ with the establishment of Christianity was the central event of human history. In that case we ought to count time from the flood rather than from the birth of Christ.

Mr. Russell then makes a great difference between the present gospel age and the coming millennial age. The gospel age is the age of the church. The millennial age is the time of the kingdom. The kingdom has not yet been established. (Mr. Russell does in places speak as if the kingdom had been established in a preparatory way. But in most places he speaks as if the kingdom had not been initiated in any sense.) He holds that the kingdom will not be set up until the return of Christ. Accordingly in Mr. Russell's scheme the first coming of Christ was rather a subordinate event. It divided the Jewish age from the gospel or Christian age, but both of these belong to this "present evil world," while the second coming of Christ will usher in an entirely new dispensation.

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The purpose of the present gospel age he says is not to save the world, nor even to preach the gospel to all men with a view of giving them an opportunity of salvation. Mr. Russell accepts the idea that there can be no salvation apart from hearing and believing the gospel. And he argues as if orthodox theology taught that all except adult believers were eternally lost. So he says that if God's purpose is to save the world, or even to give all men an opportunity to be saved, then the present age is a failure. The purpose, he says, of the present gospel age is to call out the elect few, "the little flock," "the church," "the bride of Christ." The age of universal salvation or universal probation with a view to salvation will be during the coming age. The gospel age and the kingdom age, therefore, are two different ages. The scriptures that apply to the one must not be applied to the other.

Mr. Russell undertook to tell us when the gospel age would end and the kingdom age begin. It is interesting to see how he gets around Acts 1: 7, where Jesus said to his disciples: "It is not for you to know the times or the

seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" ("appointed by his own authority," Mr. Russell puts it), and Matthew 13: 32 where Jesus said, "Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels who are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." He says with reference to these passages: "These words of our Lord cannot be understood to mean that none but the Father will *ever* know of the times and seasons; hence, it no more proves that we cannot know those times and seasons *now*, than our Lord cannot know them now" (Studies in the Scriptures, Series II, p. 18.) On the next page, he calls attention to the fact that Jesus, after saying that no one but the Father knew the time of his return to the earth, enjoined his disciples to watch, and argues that the fact that Jesus warned them to watch implies that the time would come when they could know about the times and seasons.

Now this clever dodger of the meaning of scripture fails to take account of the fact that Jesus said: "Watch and pray; for *ye know not when the time is*" (Mark 13: 33). Jesus



based his exhortation to watch on the fact that we could not know; Mr. Russell argues that his exhortation presupposes that we can know. A good many other people have made the same mistake that Mr. Russell did; that is, they have thought that to watch with reference to the coming of Christ meant to be setting dates for his return and gazing into the sky to try to get the first view of him. The best way to watch for his return is to be faithful in the duties he has assigned us so as to be ready to give account of our stewardship. Mr. Russell had October, 1914, set as the time for the kingdom of God to be set up and the millennium to begin. He had worked out an elaborate parallel between the ending of the Jewish age (and beginning of the gospel age) and the end of the "times of the Gentiles" (the period between the downfall of the Jewish nation and the re-establishment of the Jewish power at the beginning of the millennium). According to his scheme of dates, 6,000 years from Adam ended in 1872; Jesus returned to earth (secretly, of course) in 1874; the Jews began to regain power in 1878; and

the millennium was due to begin, October, 1914. (See Vol. 2, especially chapters IV and VII.) When the millennium did not begin in 1914, I think Mr. Russell gave some explanation and changed the date. But if any one will read the chapters above referred to, he will see that Mr. Russell has drawn such an elaborate parallel and made such a definite argument for the above series of dates that for one of them to fail shows that his whole scheme has gone to wreck. Mr. Russell (writing a number of years before 1914, of course) practically says that none of these dates could vary one year one way or the other. Here is his language: "For be it distinctly noticed that if the chronology, or any of these time-periods, be changed *but one year* (italics mine), the beauty and force of this parallelism are destroyed." And now *be it distinctly noticed* that more than ten years have passed since the date set by Mr. Russell for the millennium to begin and it *has not begun*. According to Mr. Russell's own words then his parallelism between the end of the Jewish age and the end of the























