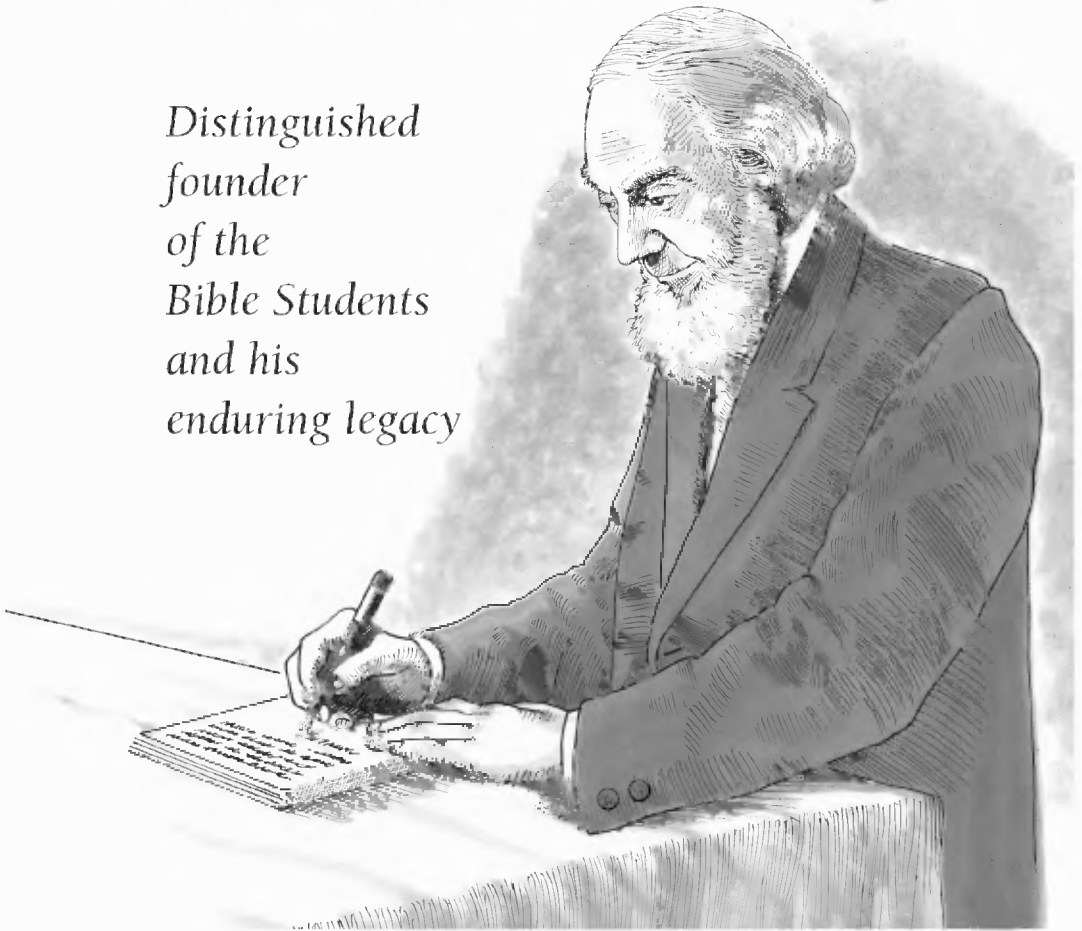


PASTOR C. T. RUSSELL:

*Messenger of
Millennial Hope*

*Distinguished
founder
of the
Bible Students
and his
enduring legacy*



by Charles F. Redeker

PASTOR C. T. RUSSELL:

*Messenger of
Millennial Hope*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

The Kingdom of God, 1961.

The Faith of Our Fathers, 1963.

Sacrifice in the Plan of God, 1967.

A Confirmation of the True Bible Chronology, 1971.

Foregleams of the Messiah, 1982.

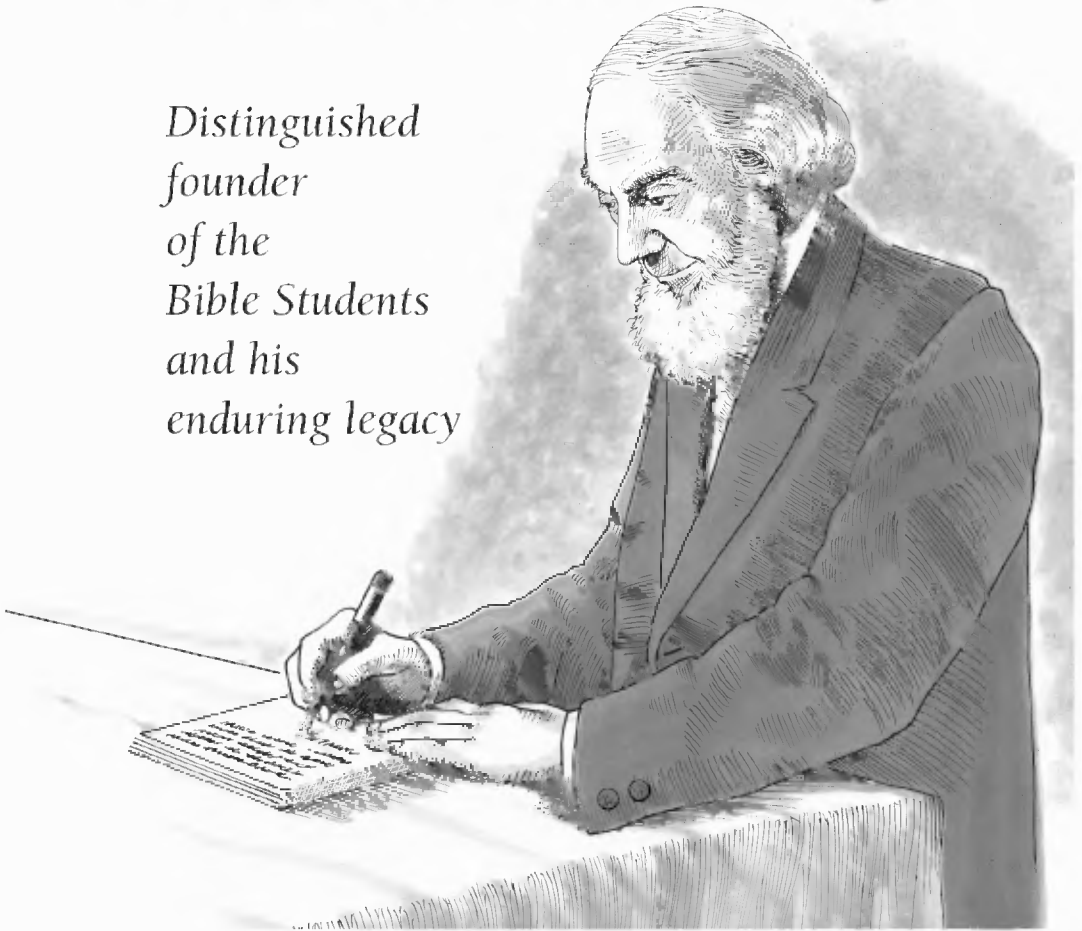
The Seven Churches of Revelation, 1989.

The Biblical 70 Years, 1993.

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by Charles F. Redeker

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Our fervent prayer is that these cooperative efforts of consecrated hearts and hands will redound to the praise of our Heavenly Father and His dear Son, and that His blessing will accompany the circulation of this book. Our heart overflows with thanksgiving for His overruling providences that led us to undertake this work, sustained us through formidable challenges along the way and permitted it to be completed at last.

C.F.R.

Dedication

To my dear mother, Anna Luise, and my beloved wife, Elaine Lois—the two most special people in my life.

It was my mom who about seventy years ago directed me to the Lord, instilled reverence and faith, helped me to memorize Scripture and taught me to pray.

And it is my precious helpmate, at my side now for more than fifty years in our consecrated walk before the Lord, whose cooperation, encouragement and diligent efforts have been instrumental in bringing this work to fruition.

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Introduction

NEARLY ninety years after the death of the illustrious American preacher, Pastor Charles T. Russell, we are prone to ask a number of searching questions. Why is it that so little is heard today of the man who captured the hearts and intellects of so many and inspired faith and hope in the message of the Bible? After all, here was someone who, by any standard, had made a stunning impact on the religious scene of his day.

In 1911, the *London Graphic* wrote that he was reputedly “the most popular preacher in America”; of whom George Swetnam, the official historian for the Pittsburgh Bicentennial in 1958-1959 wrote, “Pastor Russell traveled constantly, covering more than a million miles [by train], delivering more than thirty thousand sermons and lectures ... writing books totaling over fifty thousand pages, which have reached a circulation of more than twenty million copies.” And of whom it was noted by *The Continent*, a publication often opposed to the Pastor, that “His [syndicated] writings are said to have a greater newspaper circulation every week than those of any other living man; greater, doubtless, than the combined circulation of the writings of all the priests and preachers in North America.”¹

How strange, then, that so little should be known today about the distinguished ministry of this figure and that almost a blackout of information has been imposed against him. Until fairly recently, there was hardly a religious guide to churches of America that properly listed either Pastor Russell’s name or the Bible Student group that he founded. Further, most of the standard encyclopedias and reference works ignored him completely. Yet this was certainly not

the case for numerous of his religious contemporaries, such as Dwight L. Moody, John N. Darby, William G. Morehead, T. DeWitt Talmage, Henry W. Beecher, Charles G. Finney, Lyman Abbott, Billy Sunday, and a host of other well-known Christian leaders.²

More pointedly we ask, why did the ministry of this one man arouse the ire and fierce opposition of almost all of orthodox Christendom? What was it about him that caused both Catholic and Protestant leaders alike to close ranks against him? Viewing the intensity of this conflict, Professor S. A. Ellis, a Southern educator who himself was a neutral observer, declared:

“Pastor Russell stands out prominently as a target for the pulpits and religious press of the country today. I believe there is no one more bitterly persecuted, harshly condemned, woefully misrepresented and misunderstood than this fearless, conscientious man of God. No infidel writer, such as Hume, Voltaire or Ingersoll, ever suffered such ruthless attacks as have been made upon Mr. Russell.”³

The details of this controversy and the full answer to the enigma raised will become evident as our story unfolds in the pages to follow. A powerful reform movement was begun which would focus upon areas of belief and practice that were considered sacrosanct and untouchable by the established churches for many centuries. Pastor Russell would also champion the cause of end-time Bible prophecy that had stirred especially in Adventist circles. Thus he would boldly proclaim the nearness of God’s Millennial Kingdom on earth. But such a message held no appeal for the established clergy, who generally considered it misguided, crude, and even fantastic.

Moreover, in carrying out this distinctive ministry and in attempting to restore the spirit of the early Christian believers, the Pastor found it necessary to oppose certain key components of what had become orthodox church doctrine. He considered these a part of the quasi-Christian beliefs that were not introduced until the third and fourth centuries, when Christianity became fashionable to the world. During the Dark Ages, these beliefs were further developed into dogmas and given the stamp of orthodoxy by theologians and

church councils. But Pastor Russell regarded such concepts as God in Trinitarian form, the Immortality of the soul and eternal torture in Hell-fire as corruptions of the original faith that were not supported by the Bible.

This amounted to a direct challenge to the authority of the established churches and, because of the Pastor's widespread influence and popularity, necessitated a vigorous and united response. Such action, without here entering into the pros and cons of the issues, might be considered inevitable under the circumstances. But the disturbing aspect to every fair-minded observer is the nature of the attack that commenced against the Pastor and the seemingly ruthless methods used to destroy his ministry, continuing to this very day.

Later we will be describing some of the highlights in the efforts of the orthodox clergy to oppose the teachings of Pastor Russell. They certainly had a reason to be alarmed over the Pastor's unrelenting attacks on their creeds and beliefs and his characterization of these as being contrary to the noble character of God and not grounded in the Word of God, the Bible. As we shall see, some attempts were made to meet the Pastor's objections along Scriptural and scholarly lines—even in formal public debates—but to little avail. The Pastor was able to hold his ground Biblically and defend the simplicity and purity of the faith of the early church which he upheld, and he continued to gain converts from the various denominations. Thus, something more had to be done by his opponents.

When such straightforward attempts to meet the Pastor on the issues failed, a second line of attack was adopted. If the character of the man could be shown to be blemished, then, in the minds of upright Christian believers, his teachings and works would fall accordingly. But in the pursuit of this objective, were exaggerations, distortions, and even falsifications of facts employed? Was it a fair appraisal of his life and character, or was it a despicable attack which knew no limits, designed with but one goal in mind—to destroy his reputation utterly? The methods employed by the clergy in this regard must be thoroughly explored, to determine whether they were honest and transparent, or basically unjust and unchristian.

The early years of a new century seem to be an ideal time for reviewing the past and placing the ministry of Pastor Russell in its correct historical perspective. Often fondly called “Millennium’s prophet,” he became the leading voice pointing to the nearness of the long-promised Kingdom of God upon earth and the blessings that lay in store. Instead of preaching doom and gloom, the fear of Hell-fire and a cataclysmic ending of the world, he projected a refreshing note of gladness and hope, and called for renewed Bible study without the shackles of church creeds and dogmas.

It is a heart-warming story to recount how the grandson of European immigrants to America forsook a lucrative career in his field and, without the benefit of higher religious education, devoted himself wholly to the pursuit of a knowledge of the true God. Moreover, it is sobering to note how his study of the Bible convinced him that God’s character and Plan had been misrepresented by orthodox Christianity and necessitated a whole new approach to recapture the Truths that had been lost. And finally, it is inspiring to see how he went about proclaiming far and wide the Gospel message—the good news of Messiah’s Kingdom, which he now felt was imminent.

Part One of this presentation will portray the highlights of Pastor Russell’s dynamic ministry. This will include reviewing how he sought to revive the great Truths taught by Jesus and the apostles; depicting the distinguishing features of the Bible Student congregations he organized; and noting his impact upon the established mainline churches. We will see how his vigorous preaching campaigns not only catapulted him into the public limelight but also prompted intense opposition from the orthodox clergy, as already touched upon.

Part Two will explore the distinctive doctrines of the Bible Student movement, noting how they fit into the larger spectrum of Christian belief and church affiliation. Here will be seen how the Pastor emphasized the authority of the Bible itself rather than established church creeds; how his fundamental teachings reflected the simple beliefs of the early church before it became influenced by haughty theologians and politically dominated councils; and how a major emphasis on prophetic expectations provided a unique end-of-the-age character to the movement.

Part Three will give particular emphasis to the innumerable attacks made upon the integrity of Pastor Russell, both during his

lifetime and after his demise. Many of these are cleverly crafted and emotionally charged to discredit the Pastor and dissuade Truth seekers from honestly examining his teachings. Here especially we are convinced that impartial, straightforward research will draw together the actual facts of the case and permit an informed and fair judgment to be made.

In God's sight, the true worth of a man is to be found in his character. Our objective here is to direct the floodlight of truth upon the Pastor, that his real self might be fully revealed. It is our conviction that in so doing the nobility of his attributes and high moral standards will emerge clearly, exposing the misrepresentations of his foes and fittingly matching his zealous and far-reaching proclamation of the Gospel.

Part Four will then focus on the closing days of the Pastor's ministry and its immediate aftermath. His followers had been keenly disappointed by the failure of long-anticipated Kingdom expectations in 1914, then almost crushed by the Pastor's unexpected death in 1916. But no one could have imagined the dramatic consequences that would follow—conspiracy and apostasy within the midst of the directorate of the organization—resulting in new leadership with radical changes in spirit, doctrine and policy.

After following the Pastor's earthly labors to completion, we will pause to note how the Scriptures portray the unique role he carried out. Several distinct pictures, including "that wise and faithful servant," "the seventh messenger" and "the man with the writer's inkhorn," will be examined and discussed.

Finally, Part Five will spell out the enduring legacy left by Pastor Russell. Picking up the historical thread with the major doctrinal and organizational changes that followed his death, we will describe the widespread state of confusion that prevailed, culminating in large-scale withdrawals from the Watch Tower Society. Through it all, the Bible Students as originally founded managed to reorganize and become sharply distinguishable from those who had usurped power and who later became known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Also included will be a sketch of contemporary Bible Student groups, showing how they are carrying forward the original vision and teachings of their founding Pastor. Through various congregations, ministries, publications and other means, their efforts in

edifying the household of faith and witnessing to the world continue unabated. We trust that thus the Bible Students will be seen in their true colors—as highly motivated, vibrant Christians engaged in the work of the Lord in these End Times.

Endnotes: Introduction

1. *Bible Students Congregation of New Brunswick* newsletter, “A Pastor of Excellence,” Oct. 1996, p. 1; quoting from *The London Graphic* for Apr. 8, 1911, *The Continent*, and George Swetnam in *Where Else But Pittsburgh* (Davis and Warde, Inc., 1958), p. 110.

Additional favorable assessments of Pastor Russell’s ministry are found in the *Bible Students Newsletter* article, “70 Years Ago: The Best and Most Widely Known Minister in the World,” Winter 1986-1987 issue, pp. 10-12. Quotations were taken from the *Overland Monthly* for 1909 and subsequent years; *The Dundee Scotland People’s Journal*, May 1911; the *London Daily Mail*, May 1910; the *Christian Globe*, London, May 5, 1910; and the *Kansas City Weekly Post* editorial, 1913.

2. Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada*, pp. 275, 288, 291.
3. W. M. Wisdom, *The Laodicean Messenger*, p. 183.

Note: No author is listed on the title page or is elsewhere stated in the book. Some researchers think it was Menta Sturgeon, Pastor Russell’s traveling secretary on his final speaking tour. However, this is contraindicated by the following:

(a) A 1929 Bible book store ad stated that the “Memoirs of Pastor Russell” (subheading of the book) was compiled “by former Pilgrim W. M. Wilson.” (See *The Arian*, Fall 1996.) This was probably an inadvertent typographical error for “Pilgrim W. M. Wisdom.”

(b) Harry G. Nugent, whose mother fondly called W. M. Wisdom her (step) “grandpa,” reported that she definitely believed him to be the author and that her copy of the work had his name penciled on the title page. (Phone conversation, 8/8/2002.)

PART ONE:

LAUNCHING A DYNAMIC MINISTRY

“Tell us, when shall these things be?
And what shall be the sign of thy coming [presence],
And of the end of the world [age]? ...
This gospel of the kingdom
Shall be preached in all the world [earth]
For a witness unto all nations;
And then shall the end come.”

—Matthew 24:3,14

“Behold, the man clothed with linen,
Which had the [writer’s] inkhorn by his side,
Reported the matter, saying,
I have done as thou hast commanded me.”

—Ezekiel 9:11



Pastor Russell at Age 45 (1897)

At the time of this photo, the Pastor had been studying the Bible and proclaiming its message of Millennial Hope for over twenty years.

1

Birth of the Movement

IN THE latter part of the nineteenth century, the religious movement known today as the Bible Students had its beginning. In some respects, it resembled various earlier independent reform groups that had sprung up across America. However, in many key ways, it added its own energy and uniqueness of character. All of these groups clearly differed from the mainline churches in some important emphases, and the Bible Students were to take the lead in shaping these into a distinctive end-time position of imminent Millennial expectations. Let us note some of the outstanding events that led up to the birth of this group.

Historical Setting

The Reformation of the sixteenth century inspired by Martin Luther and others had struck a bold blow against the medieval church and emphasized the rightful place of the Bible in its stead. This began a sweeping work of doctrinal cleansing with periodic bursts of fervor in ensuing years that was particularly strong in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Especially in the United States, the atmosphere of political and religious freedom stimulated the birth of independent religious movements that contributed to a further refining process.

The time had come for the recovery of yet additional Biblical Truths that had been lost or corrupted since the days of the early church. Diverse groups and various religious leaders took part in these reform efforts which were general in their scope. They were united solely by reliance on the Bible as the only authority for faith, and the desire to return to the simplicity of the original Gospel of primitive Christianity. Active participants were the “New Light Presbyterians” (1803) under Barton Stone, “The Disciples” (1809) under Thomas Campbell (“Where the Scriptures speak we speak; where they are silent we are silent”), “The United Brethren in Christ” (1800) under Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm, “The Evangelical Church” (1803) under Jacob Albright, and “The Unitarian Churches” (1815) under Henry Ware and William Channing.¹

Perhaps the most thorough of all the reforms was brought about in the 1830s and 1840s by the “Millerite movement,” which attracted widespread attention to a literal expectation of Christ’s return. Under the leadership of William Miller, it swept across the Eastern and Middle states and profoundly affected many communities. It has been said of it that “without question it made a greater impress upon the consciousness of the American populace within the short space of thirteen years than any other religious development.” At its height, from fifty thousand to one hundred thousand loyal core believers were attracted from a cross-section of churches. They created a mighty stir across the land and aroused widespread interest in Bible study and the fulfillment of prophecy.² Though ending in keen disappointment in 1844, it left a sanctifying mark upon the believers and providentially prepared the way for fresh revealments of Truth yet to come.

By the year 1846, two contrary forces were at work in the Protestant religious world. On the one hand, scattered small groups of dedicated believers had separated themselves from the larger, established bodies and were in agreement on certain basic points of Bible teaching:

- ◆ The Bible revered as God’s inspired Word and sole source of authority
- ◆ Salvation by faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ
- ◆ Simplicity of church organization

- ◆ The priesthood of believers and their equality in God's sight
- ◆ Immortality a gift of God to the faithful, not inherent in the soul
- ◆ The dead sleeping peacefully until the Resurrection
- ◆ Baptism by immersion, a symbol of full Consecration to God
- ◆ The need for personal holiness in the Christian life
- ◆ The nearness of the Second Coming of Christ
- ◆ The purpose of the Coming to set up God's Kingdom on earth, with blessings dispensed by Christ and his church.³

On the other hand, the Evangelical Alliance had just been formed in London. This was an organization of more than fifty orthodox church groups that wanted to maintain the basic beliefs of evangelical Protestants and to promote interdenominational unity. As such it is often recognized as the early forerunner of the modern ecumenical movement. Some of the nine cardinal points it stressed were:

- ◆ The Trinity and unity of the "Godhead"
- ◆ The Incarnation of the Son of God—Christ appearing in the First Advent as the God-man in the form of flesh
- ◆ The Immortality of the soul
- ◆ The Resurrection of the body
- ◆ The eternal punishment of the wicked in Hell-fire
- ◆ The Christian ministry (clergy) as Divinely instituted—Ordination claimed as an exclusive right of member groups.⁴

Thus some of the very doctrines which were being discarded in the light of advanced Bible study, particularly that of human Immortality, were given new emphasis and held up as the mark of orthodoxy. In this way, the Alliance was perpetuating what some reformers viewed as corruptions of Truth that had been introduced in the great falling away of the third and fourth centuries and had become entrenched during the Dark Ages. It thus tended to bind together the large groups of "nominal" Christians in contrast to the little handful who had been "cleansed" of these errors.

A Leader Is Born

As the nineteenth century progressed beyond the mid-way mark, the stage was set for some rather unique additional developments. In the year 1852, unnoticed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Charles Taze Russell was born on February 16, the son of Joseph L. and Eliza Birney Russell. His parents were both of Scotch-Irish lineage and members of the Presbyterian Church. Being deeply religious, they brought up their children in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Under this godly influence, young Charles became interested in theology, joined the Congregational Church and the Y.M.C.A., and became active in local missionary work.⁵

Charles would later recall that his mother (who died when he was but nine years old) had revealed to him when he was about seven that she had dedicated him to the Lord in the same way that Hannah had committed her son, Samuel, in Old Testament times. Eliza Russell’s prayer was that, “In God’s providence you may become a minister of the Gospel.”⁶

It is evident in this story of Charles’ early years that a good groundwork had been laid to steer him in the direction of Christian service, perhaps even to the ministry. But who could have foreseen that it would soon result in the formation of a zealous new reform group, conservative in theology, but with sharply defined Millennial views and other distinctive beliefs that would set it apart from the mainline churches? This indeed was to be the significant outcome—the opening of a remarkable new chapter on the religious scene in America, as we shall presently see.

Struggles of Faith

Yet, for a time, it seemed most unlikely that Charles Russell would develop such an intense interest in the Bible or pursue the Christian ministry as his main focus. Although he had given his heart to the Lord at age fifteen, he began to experience serious doubts about his religious training and beliefs. In attempting to reclaim a friend to Christianity, he was unable to defend the catechism and especially the belief that a majority of mankind were predestinated to a Hell of eternal torment. He became overwhelmed at