

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE DAWN MEMBERSHIP

Dear Brethren,

Greetings in the name of our present Lord!

As Dawn members we have the privilege of expressing our sentiments relative to the Dawn and its work at the annual membership meeting, which this year falls on November 9. In recent years the actual number of members present at these meetings has been very small in comparison to the total membership. Also, the minutes of the meetings are so brief that the members not attending are unaware of some items that might be discussed.

What I feel compelled to say at this time weighs heavily on my heart and since few of my fellow members would hear it at the meeting, I am writing to the membership instead.

I was literally raised in the Dawn movement. When I was 13 years old, a split took place in the Detroit class over (frankly speaking) the Dawn-P.B.I. issue. This phenomena was happening across the country. I vividly remember the details of each issue. One basic issue was staying with the teachings of that “faithful and wise servant,” Bro. Russell. And the matter was stated just this bluntly by the brethren throughout the country who were taking their stand with the Dawn.

Oddly enough, you didn’t hear the Dawn brethren during the 1930’s and 1940’s saying, “We’re staying with the Bible.” No, they were saying, “We’re staying with the teachings of Bro. Russell.” Why did they word the issue this way? They were keenly aware that some of the brethren opposing the Dawn were using the cliché “staying with the Bible” as an excuse to repudiate many doctrines of Present Truth under the guise that these were the teachings of a man and not the Bible.

Many of the Dawn pilgrims that came through Detroit during this period stayed at our home, and I was thoroughly indoctrinated with the concept that the Dawn brethren were the only ones standing with the Volumes.

Then came the so-called “unity conventions” in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. Their rallying cry was, “The Bible and the Bible alone is the standard of Truth and not the teachings of a man.” The implication again was that the teachings of Bro. Russell were wrong because they were the teachings of a man and not the Bible. Working at the Dawn, I was privileged to observe first hand the reaction of the Dawn brethren. Dawn articles and discourses by Dawn speakers put the axe to this error. They rightly observed that any teaching that claimed to be a teaching of Scripture was in reality formulated in the mind of a man just as much as the teachings of Bro. Russell. The criteria to prove which was right was, of course, the Bible.

During the last year or so, it has been disconcerting, to say the least, to hear prominent Dawn brethren taking these clichés, “We must stay with the Bible,” and “the Bible is our only standard.” And corollary with this, they are presenting views (we might differ as to their importance) that are contrary to what we have proven to be Scripturally taught in the Six Volumes.

It is one thing for individuals to take this position. The problem can be dealt with on an individual level. During the last ten years several Brethren who deviated from the Harvest Message were dropped as trustees. It now grieves me deeply to see that the Dawn Bible Students Association has officially sanctioned and excused these deviations from the teachings of Present Truth. I will give two examples of this.

Example One: The following quotation appeared in a letter on Dawn Bible Students Association letterhead and the letter was signed by the Dawn Bible Students Association. Any questionable material in a letter signed by an individual is a private matter. Questionable material appearing in a letter signed by the Dawn Bible Students Association becomes the legitimate concern of the Dawn membership.

“On page 39 of Volume Two Brother Russell honestly admits that the idea of the seventh millennium from the creation of Adam being the millennial reign of Christ is not taught in the Scriptures, but is a ‘venerable tradition.’ We realize that Brother Russell upheld this tradition as though it were taught in the Bible. But apparently before he died he began to think otherwise, for a number of places in the Reprints we find him putting the thousand years of Christ’s reign, the ‘times of restitution.’ etc., still future. We enclose a number of these statements for your study.”

This paragraph reads Bro. Russell wrong. Compare it with page 39 of Volume II. Bro. Russell does not say as claimed that the idea of the Seventh Millennium from the creation of Adam being the Millennial Reign of Christ is not taught in the Scriptures, but is a “venerable tradition.”

Bro. Russell believed this “venerable tradition” was taught in the Scriptures. See Volume II, page 170, par. 3. What he did say is that “the Bible contains no direct statement” to prove this concept. This is the truth of many doctrines. There is no direct statement of Scripture to prove that Christ is present; however, the united testimony of a number of Scriptures establish His presence.

Obviously, this paragraph refutes three concepts: 1) that we have entered the “Dawn” of the Seventh Day from the creation of Adam; 2) that the “times of restitution” have begun; 3) that the 6000 years’ chronology taught in Volume II proves that Christ returned in 1874. These are concepts Bro. Russell taught to his dying day, notwithstanding the claim of the letter to the contrary. (See Volume II, 1916 Foreword, page viii.) Why the change now?

If we are not in the dawn of the Millennium, the dawn of the Seventh Day, then the very name DAWN Bible Students Association and DAWN Magazine is a misnomer.

Example Two: The following is a quotation from an August 1968 Dawn article that is attempting to set up a criteria for fundamental doctrines that we are to hold fast.

“We know, of course, that there is much in the Old Testament that is of great interest to us which is not mentioned in the New Testament at all. But we are firmly of the opinion that Jesus and the apostles set forth all the fundamental truths of the divine plan, and it is these to which we should hold fast, because they have come to us with such a great weight of authority, even from Jesus and his inspired representatives. The New Testament is the inspired explanation of the Old Testament Scriptures which God’s servants of old miraculously were inspired to write, but only dimly to understand.” (Emphasis mine.)

If “Jesus and the apostles set forth all the fundamental truths,” then the chronology and all time prophecies are nonessential. Indeed, much of the Old Testament prophecies that pertain to natural Israel, the Time of Trouble, the setting up of the Kingdom, etc., are relegated to the realm of the unimportant. If this be true, then over 70% of the Volumes II, III and IV are in reality unimportant. I submit, dear brethren, that this minimum criteria for fundamentals excuses the present divergencies now current among the Dawn brethren and unwittingly can only result in greater digressions from the Harvest Message.

I think that it will be admitted by all that not too long ago the editorial position of the Dawn was that the Times of Restitution has begun, the Reign of Christ has begun, the Millennium has begun, the Seventh Day has begun. Why the change? I am keenly aware that we are 94 years beyond 1874. And this long lapse of time is exerting a tremendous pressure on the doctrinal faith of the brethren. We have to make allowance for the heat of trial. At times we see our brethren waver temporarily in patience, faith, love, under the heat of trial and we can understand and accept this. So there may be times that our brethren temporarily waver doctrinally.

On the other hand, brethren who change their views on certain doctrines of Present Truth should humbly consider the possibility that they are temporarily wavering instead of confidently speaking out on these matters from the platform or in writing. Unfortunately, once a position is publicly stated, retraction is difficult.

Dawn pilgrims and Dawn writings have digressed from concepts of Present Truth where once we had unanimity. This was done without the approval of either the board of trustees or the Dawn membership.

I have many cherished memories of fellowship in doctrine, love and service with my Dawn brethren over the years. It grieves me deeply to think that we have come to a fork in the road where doctrinal digression by the Dawn might cause a parting of the ways.

I plead with the membership to voice their disapproval with these doctrinal changes. I plead with those brethren who have changed their views to enter into dialogue with the membership. And I pray that once again the doctrines of Present Truth as expressed in the Six Volumes will become the rallying point of the Dawn work.

Your brother by His grace,

Kenneth Rawson