

The Christians Of New England

By

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Introduction

The military conflict of the American Revolution came to an end in March, 1783, when news reached America of a preliminary peace treaty and armistice signed in Paris. Although six years of political quarrels ensued before ratification of the constitution brought the United States officially into being, few doubted that the end of the war assured not only the birth of a great nation, but a new era in the life of man. Both its leaders and their European friends and admirers viewed the revolution not as a petty struggle to determine which masters should rule America but as a glorious attempt to establish the people as their own masters and light a beacon of liberty to the world. The greatest experiment of freedom in political history had begun. The experiment in religious freedom which this book partially describes, while bravely endeavoring to sink down roots to the eternal springs of unchanging truth, was profoundly influenced by the soil in which it grew: the new American republic and the character of its people.

The most obvious encouragement to the rise of new religious movements in America came from the declaration of absolute religious freedom contained in the first amendment to the federal constitution and similar expressions in various state constitutions. Although some states, such as Massachusetts, continued for a time to support particular denominations, freedom of worship was almost universally secured, and the last links between church and state soon dissolved. European governments had often grudgingly suffered the existence of religious splinter groups and sometimes used their colonies, as Great Britain did America, as giant quarantines where they might usefully employ unwanted fanatics; but Americans raised religious toleration to the level of religious celebration, cheerfully proving themselves to be wise by allowing their neighbors to be mistaken. This attitude fostered the rise of an army of self-appointed prophets and the proliferation of a bewildering variety of sects ranging from countless religions that did not outlive their founder and never reached beyond his native village, to the great Mormon empire of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Even foreign idealists, such as the professedly irreligious Robert Owen with his model community at New Harmony, Indiana, naturally selected America as the site for their Utopias and New Jerusalems. At the same time, the increasing fragmentation of American religious life produced an inevitable reaction, as thoughtful readers of the New

Testament compared the teachings of Jesus and Paul on church unity with the chaos of competitive strife between the denominations. Men searched for some principle which would restore the unity of God's people and still preserve the freedom of the individual.

The democratic ideal itself proved one of the cornerstones of American religion. It took no great imagination to progress from the idea that men should choose their governors to the decision that they had an equal right to choose their ministers. The doctrine that "all men are created equal" directly opposed the hierarchical view of society that underlay the Episcopal Church of England, which, until the revolution, had been the established church of all the southern colonies and New York. Individuals on both sides felt this philosophical tension. The Anglican rector of Trinity Church in New York and his whole congregation chose to leave the country rather than submit to republican rule; and most of his fellow ministers throughout the colonies remained loyal to the king, the official head of their church. After the war, when the remnant of American Anglicans organized the Episcopal Church and requested the Archbishop of Canterbury to consecrate their bishops, he refused, regarding even Episcopal Americans as traitors to their God as well as to their king. On the other side, radical Patriots, such as Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson, detested the clergy of all persuasions and viewed them as natural enemies to thought, the hired apologists of tyrants, and parasitic leeches on a superstitious public. This anti-clericalism ran deep in America, especially on the frontier; and strong feelings against a "hireling clergy" surfaced again and again in later debates on church organization, when frontier churches grew prosperous enough to afford the temptation. By the force of his remarkable personality, Francis Asbury succeeded in forming the Methodists into a church on the Episcopal model in the 1780's and had himself appointed bishop, but many Methodists on the frontier rejected his authority and assumed the significant name of Republican Methodists. Until the influx of Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth century, American churches remained overwhelmingly democratic.

More important, however, than any influence of government or political philosophy, the very spirit of adventure and boundless confidence which impelled Americans to nationhood and forced them through the Appalachians to master the heart of a continent inevitably led religious pioneers to explore the frontiers of church and creed. It

was a time for beginnings. Congress had placed on the new nation's great seal the Latin motto, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, A New Order of the Ages. This phrase, taken from Virgil's celebration of the Roman Empire's beginning at the time of Augustus, shows clearly the grand vision which America's founders had of her future, and it also expressed rich religious associations, since well-educated Americans would have known that Christian writers had regularly applied Virgil's words to the birth of Christ and the coming of his kingdom. America was meant to be both New Rome and New Zion. The task of reforming European churches to apostolic purity and simplicity had proven impossibly difficult, but America offered the perfect opportunity to make a fresh start and immediately restore the primitive Christianity described in the New Testament. Still refusing to make the break himself from the Anglican Church in which he was raised and ordained, John Wesley hoped his American followers would "stand fast in the freedom wherewith God has so strangely made them free."¹

Underlying the national optimism was the belief of the average citizen that his individual life contained promise of unlimited improvement. If America's old men dreamed dreams and her young men saw visions, they dreamed above all else the American Dream, and each frontier farmer had a vision, like the young Andrew Jackson's, of a house with pillars in front. While he was dreaming, a pioneer might live in a log cabin with no floor, work from dawn till dusk at the backbreaking labor of clearing a farm in the wilderness, endure the incredible harshness of a Vermont winter, and in every material way fare much worse than the average peasant or servant in Europe; but he lived, worked, and endured with hope that his hardihood could realize the dream of wealth and respect. More often than not, the dream killed the dreamer and died with him, but sometimes it came true. Although rooted in the frontier, the American dream reached back into the lives of the cautious citizens who stayed at home in Boston and New York, as the opening of the West brought enormously increased wealth to the cities, and every laborer could tell himself, no matter how low his fortunes, that a whole continent of opportunities lay before him. Because men expected and commonly experienced the fulfillment of personal ambition for economic and social improvement, they more readily believed that a

¹ Letter dated September 10, 1784

successful revolution in religious life was possible, both for themselves as individuals and for the church as a whole.

Thus, America offered liberty, democracy, and hope. This story of the Christian Connection begins in Vermont in the last decade of the eighteenth century, and it should be noted that nowhere were these three great gifts more generously and generally bestowed than in the green mountains of Vermont. Vermonters vigorously asserted and defended their freedom against all comers, including not only the British and Indians, but also their colonial neighbors in New York, with whom they engaged in a long and bitter dispute over land titles. Prevented by the quarrel with New York from joining the infant United States, Vermont existed as an independent republic for more than a decade during and after the Revolution. Along with Pennsylvania's, its constitution was the most democratic of any American state. Around 1800, it enjoyed a boom in population and economic prosperity never equaled there since, and to many poor farmers in Massachusetts and Connecticut, Vermont was the land of opportunity. During this time, Vermonters acquired a bad reputation among religious leaders in southern New England, who regarded them as mainly dangerous free thinkers and irreligious barbarians. In 1784, Ethan Allen, the greatest of Vermont's military and political leaders during the Revolution, scandalized the clergy with a book modestly entitled, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man, or a Compendious System of Natural Religion*, in which he denied the authority of the Bible and the truthfulness of Christianity. Although the great majority of his neighbors wisely ignored Colonel Allen's theories, they did not flock to the established churches either. The forces of the frontier had weakened the hold of the old order and invited religious revolution.

Chapter 1: Beginning

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.
Heb. 11:14

Asa Jones was one of many poor farmers in Massachusetts at the time of the Revolution. Aside from his membership in the then small and despised sect of Baptists, not a single recorded fact of character or circumstance distinguished him from his neighbors. In the winter of 1780, Jones decided to seek a better life on the frontier in central Vermont. Having bought land in the unsettled area west of Woodstock, Vermont, Jones wanted to move in time to make maple syrup, the most famous of all Vermont products, from the trees on his new property, so he loaded up his family and their few movable possessions into a wagon and headed north in early March. Only a very hardy or a very foolish man would want to set up housekeeping in the wilderness of Vermont in the winter, since the trip was long and difficult, its destination wild and desolate. When the family reached Woodstock, they had to unload the wagon and place their belongings on sleds to drag them the last two miles across the snow to their new home, high on a ridge to the north of the present village of Bridgewater. They found the shell of a cabin built for their occupancy, which at least preserved their lives from the elements, and they settled down to the back-breaking toil of clearing the land for farming. Asa Jones's haste to see his new home won for him a small token of immortality, for the future citizens of Bridgewater long after erected a market in tribute to the town's first settlers.

We have no record of how Asa Jones's family felt about their removal to Vermont, but we can easily imagine the mixture of excitement and fear in the heart of his youngest son Abner, then not quite eight years old. The brooding presence of the primeval forest, the harshness of the new home's climate and terrain, the constant labor necessary to preserve life, the almost complete isolation from other human companionship, all made deep and lasting impressions in young Abner's mind, helping to give it an unusual depth of thoughtfulness and intensity of feeling, hardening it with strength of will and self-reliance, and filling it with dark and unreasoning terror. During Abner's first summer in Vermont, Indians raided the neighboring village of Barnard and carried away four captives. The next year, a large war party burnt

the town of Royalton, killed some of its people, and captured many more. Eight-year-old Abner feared death and imagined it all around him. The religion which he learned from his father, far from allaying his fears or offering any comfort, tortured the little boy with the spectacle of the fires of hell that awaited him after the flames of the Indians had done their work. Later, he wrote concerning his childhood, "I do not remember that the thought ever passed my mind that religion yielded any joy, or peace."² Abner went regularly into the forest to pray at a certain rock which he had chosen as a secret altar, where he struggled to propitiate an angry God.

In 1781, a Woodstock man was shot to death in a hunting accident. This reminder of mortality triggered a religious revival that swept through the town like a forest fire through virgin timber, and the previously irreligious inhabitants flocked to hear the itinerant preachers who warned them of judgement to come. The Jones family began attending Baptist church services as part of the revival, and Asa Jones occasionally even gave short talks of encouragement to the congregation. For Abner, although public worship provided a welcome and needed release for his religious feelings, the preaching he heard in these meetings only magnified and embittered his childish fears. His only view of Christianity was that contained in the fearful doctrines of Calvinism; that all people are naturally and completely evil from the moment of their birth, that God for no reason other than blind caprice has chosen to save some souls and damn the rest to an eternal hell, and that penitent human beings have no way to reach out to God, but must wait in prayer to receive a gift of grace, an emotional experience, that brings peace and confidence that God has saved them. If the penitent never received this gift, then he knew that God hated him and wished him in hell. Nine years of age, Abner saw himself as the blackest of sinners and desperately wanted "to get saved." Finally, after a year of struggle, he rose from his private prayers one day with his mind strangely focused on the words from the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:24, "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found." Applying these words to his own life, the little boy's conscience found a measure of peace and hope that he was one of God's elect, although doubts concerning his salvation plagued him for

² Abner Jones, Memoirs of the Life and Experience, Travels and Preaching of Abner Jones, (Exeter, N.H.: Norris & Sawyer, 1807), p.12.

many years. As Abner remembered them, his parents seemed unconcerned by their son's emotional turmoil, even ridiculing his serious piety on at least one occasion. His mother thought he would make a preacher.

Asa Jones died in October, 1786, leaving his family in neither wealth nor poverty. After working on the family farm for two more years, Abner Jones left to seek his way in the world and worked in a variety of jobs in Woodstock and in New York state. Although he had attended school for only a few weeks in his life, he had somehow managed to learn to read and had acquired the habit of reading voraciously any printed material that came his way. He thus gained in time the reputation of a scholar, and his neighbors in Woodstock persuaded him to accept a position as a teacher for their town in 1793. At this time, perhaps influenced by his responsibility to be an example to his students, Jones once more began attending church, a practice he had neglected in his first years away from home. Jones felt guilty over his previous laxness in religious matters and feared that the members of the local church would despise and avoid him as a notorious sinner, but he soon happily discovered that his neighbors judged him much less harshly than he judged himself. Encouraged by the attitude of those around him and more at peace within himself, he grew more confident that God's grace was intended for him and decided to commit his life publicly to Christ by being baptized and joining the church. Elder Elisha Ranson, a Baptist preacher, baptized him in June of that year. After his baptism, Jones expressed both his joy and his commitment by going on an extended journey to visit various churches in New Hampshire. Noteworthy in this trip was a short visit to the Baptist church in New Salisbury and its young preacher, Elias Smith, whose name will appear often later in this history.

In late autumn, Jones exchanged his teaching job in Woodstock for a similar position in Hartland, a much smaller village adjoining Woodstock on the east. As a natural consequence of this move, he changed his church membership to the tiny Hartland Baptist Church. Now a man of twenty-one years, with a secure profession and place in society and relatively at peace with God and man, Jones might have lapsed into a quiet respectability and spent the remainder of his life bound by Hartland's obscure charms, but his restless intellect continued to search and question the limited horizon of books and conversation

open to him, and he now turned to examine in fatal earnestness the most disquieting and challenging book in the world: the Bible. He discovered to his amazement and delight that the Bible did not teach the terrible Calvinist doctrines that had made his childhood miserable and wrapped in cloud the character of God. His Baptist friends for a long while encouraged his studies and taught him to believe that nowhere but in the Bible was eternal truth to be found. He recorded later his feelings at the time:

I felt my mind much tried about what my brethren called the great mysterious doctrines of the gospel, viz. Election, reprobation, decrees, etc. for I plainly discovered that they preached complete contradictions on the subject, and I read that no lie is of the truth and contradictions be lies. Thus my mind was in great perplexity concerning these things; which caused me to review them, and compare them by the scriptures of truth, yea in short I took a review of all that I had professed to believe before, and I found I had embraced many things without proper examination. I then drew up a determination to believe and practice just what I found required in the Bible, and no more. There was a Baptist minister that occasionally preached with us in Hartland who often made use of the following expressions. I have nothing but what I can bring thus saith the Lord, and thus it is written. This put me on search to compare what he preached and practiced with the scriptures.³

His attempt to apply this principle inevitably brought Jones into conflict with the Baptists. When next the preacher visited Hartland, Jones respectfully asked him for Biblical answers to a number of questions: Why did they call themselves Baptists? If the Bible is a perfect rule of faith, why have a creed? Why did the church accept converts only after they recounted their emotional experience and the church voted on their membership? Why did the preacher bless the congregation at the conclusion of services? The preacher, instead of trying to answer the questions, astonished the naive schoolteacher by furiously attacking him as a heretic and troublemaker. More painful to Jones than the reaction of a relative stranger, the other members of the Hartland church rushed to defend the clergyman and did not hesitate to suggest that Jones was unregenerate, not one of the elect, still possessed of a carnal mind, and, in short, no Christian. Corresponding as they did

³ Ibid., p.59.

to his own old fears, these accusations had a shattering impact on the young man's fragile faith. With no reason to believe in others and no confidence to believe in himself, Jones quit the church, soon after gave up the job which he had held for two years, and moved ten miles north to begin teaching in the town of Hartford.

Jones had no outward involvement with religion at all over the next five years. He refused even to discuss it with friends. After teaching from 1795 to 1797 in Hartford, Jones decided to change careers and studied medicine for a year in Grafton, New Hampshire. This meager training was considered at that time and place sufficient to make a doctor, and Dr. Jones began practice in the town of Lyndon, in northern Vermont, some time around November, 1798. Along with his acquisition of medical skills, Jones had gained a wife, the former Damaris Prior. It is in his relationship with his new bride that we glimpse the inner struggle that Jones was now undergoing, for, although wishing to keep his religious sentiments private from all others, he felt compelled to reveal them to one who would share his life, and even warned her that religious convictions might some day force him to give up medicine for the less lucrative profession of preaching. Damaris agreed to run that risk, perhaps without realizing how great it was.

Jones ended his self-imposed exile from church in December, 1800, when he attended a revival in a village near Lyndon. This revival resembled the far larger and more famous camp meeting held the following summer at Cane Ridge, Kentucky; and, indeed, it was but one of many such phenomena along the frontier in the first years of the nineteenth century. While the preacher assaulted their minds with fiery images of judgement and hell, his audience would respond, as they imagine, to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and cry aloud in ecstatic joy or grovel on the floor in ecstatic torment. Impressed by the evident sincerity of the worshippers and their hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jones still had his doubts whether such displays were appropriate to the religion of Jesus. As he later wrote concerning a similar revival, "I fully believe it was a good powerful work of God. But whether the Lord called them to make quite so much noise, I leave with him who knows all things."⁴ Yet, despite his reservations, the

⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

noisy faith of the assembly accused his own silence, and finally caused him once more to own publicly the name Christian. Although not giving himself up to the wild enthusiasm of those around him, Jones confessed his sins to the congregation and promised a life of repentance.

The two years of medical practice in Lyndon had brought Jones a wide acquaintance and a certain measure of prestige. When the town heard that its young doctor had "gotten religion," the news excited considerable curiosity. The rougher and more skeptical class of men in particular regarded with amazement the conversion of one whom they had thought a reasonable and manly fellow. In September, 1801, several such men asked Jones to speak to a public gathering at one of their homes and give his views on the revivalism still raging in a nearby town. While riding to the meeting, Jones nervously opened his Bible at random in hope that he might obtain some guidance on what to say to his irreligious friends, and his eyes fell immediately on the words of Matt. 22:5, "But they made light of it"; describing how sinners rudely rejected the gracious invitation of God. Believing that the Holy Spirit had miraculously directed his choice, Jones took this text for his first sermon. His audience, none of whom attended church, were somewhat taken aback. There were no instant conversions, but neither was there outright rejection. Rather, his friends told him, as the Athenians said to Paul, "We will hear thee again of this matter."

Thus, Jones began preaching to small groups in and around Lyndon. At first, he expected the Holy Spirit to guide him in his sermon preparation as had happened before, but when such attempts led to ridiculous failure, he soon learned to rely more on intellectual preparation than mysterious moving of the Spirit, although he never completely gave up the belief that Providence had guided the selection of that first text. His messages were simple. He offered salvation by the grace of a God who loved everybody, not just an elect few, and wanted all men to have eternal life. He insisted on the need for moral reformation, if Christianity were ever to be more than pious talk. Above all, he called on all who would follow Jesus to give up their party spirit and denominational strife, to avoid the useless theological speculations that aimed at answering questions the Bible did not address, and to become simply Christians, loyal to Christ alone, content to trust the scriptures, and ready to obey their plain commands. His preaching met with

immediate and growing success. By the end of 1801, Jones and about a dozen of his converts felt it necessary to give formal existence to the new religious movement and "covenanted together in Church, by the name of CHRISTIANS only."⁵ As the circle of Jones' influence widened, over the next eighteen months Christian churches sprang up in Bradford, Vermont, and Piermont and Hanover, New Hampshire. The declaration of faith which the young school teacher had sorrowfully kept to himself nine years before had begun its triumphant progress: "As a denomination, I will own none but that of Christian, the Bible shall be my only Articles of Faith, Christ, my only head, and all true Christians my brethren."⁶

During this period, the various denominations did not actively oppose Jones's work. The Baptists, because he taught immersion as the correct form of baptism, looked on him as an uncertain but perhaps valuable ally. Jones sought and obtained ordination by the Freewill Baptists on November 30, 1802, although he made it clear that he did not consider himself a Baptist and acknowledged no claim on him by any denomination. Finding the practice of medicine and the proclamation of the gospel duties impossible to discharge at the same time, he accepted the generous offer of three families in Lebanon, New Hampshire, to support him financially as a preacher, with the understanding that he devote only such time to the fledgling church in Lebanon as he thought appropriate and spend the rest of his energies in wider evangelism. Jones now felt free to bring his plea to the more populous areas of southern New England.

When Jones came to Portsmouth, New Hampshire in June 1803, he found there his old friend Elias Smith preaching for a small church in that city, and delightedly discovered that Smith, totally unaware of Jones's work in Vermont, had independently reached many of the same conclusions and had actually organized a church under the New Testament name of Christian. Before continuing the narrative of the progress of the Christians, let us turn our attention to this second religious pioneer.

⁵ Ibid., p.102.

⁶ Abner Jones, "Sketch of the Denomination Who Claim to be Styled Christians," *Christian Palladium*, Vol. 3 (1834).

Elias Smith's early years closely paralleled the childhood of Abner Jones. Born in Lyme, Connecticut, in 1769, Smith moved with his family to Woodstock, Vermont in 1782, or just two years after the Jones family had first braved the wilderness in Bridgewater. Unlike shy and quiet Abner, who then lived only a few miles away, Elias vigorously expressed his opinion of the family's move: on first sight of the unfinished cabin, he tried to run all the way back to Connecticut. Quickly apprehended by his parents, he resentfully spent his first night in their new home, along with the horse who grazed on its grassy "floor." In later years, Smith remembered his adolescence without fondness as a time of poverty, hardship, and unremitting labor.

Both Elias's parents were religious according to their respective beliefs. His father, Stephen Smith, was a Baptist; and his mother Irene, a very devout Congregationalist. While still living in Connecticut, Mrs. Smith took advantage of a long absence by her husband to have her children, including eight-year-old Elias, baptized by sprinkling in accordance with her church's custom. Calling on the assistance of one of her brothers, a Congregationalist minister, she brought all her children to church without explaining the nature of the service to her very suspicious son. When his turn came to be christened, Elias bolted for the door, but was captured by the long arm of his uncle, dragged to the baptismal fount, and forcibly converted to Congregationalism. The next year, when the little boy witnessed a Baptist minister baptizing his converts in the river, he became frightened that the preacher might be working his way down to him and wanted to leave. His mother's misguided zeal did not permanently drive her son away from religion, however, although he had a long and quite understandable reluctance to be baptized. Elias grew up fearing God, respecting the church, and desiring righteousness.

Although he had only enough formal education to learn to read and write, Smith had some of the same intellectual drive and thirst for knowledge that formed so remarkable a part of Abner Jones' character, and he began teaching in 1787 in Hartland, Vermont, the same village where Jones later taught and began to question the Baptist faith. Smith's early religious life contained no such dramatic crises but rather a fairly steady process of more serious and thoughtful commitment. In 1789, he overcame his childish fears and resentment enough to be baptized and took his place as a member of the Baptist Church. Showing both the

strength of his mind and the depth of his devotion, the new convert set himself to memorize the portion of the New Testament from man to Revelation, a task which he accomplished within a year and a half. In 1790, Smith's religious convictions impelled him to begin preaching, although he was not formally ordained until 1792, and for the next dozen years he served as preacher for various small Baptist churches in New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

During these years, Smith's restless mind grew increasingly troubled at his denomination's doctrines, especially the harsh teaching of Calvin that seemed to base God's majesty more on brute force than on love. More even than Abner Jones, Smith recoiled from the idea that God enjoyed the eternal torment of helpless and innocent people. His anguish nearly caused him to embrace the opposite extreme of universalism, the doctrine that God's grace will ultimately find a way to save all those who have ever lived; but careful study of the scriptures slowly established in his mind a more moderate view. Smith also became soon convinced that the name "Baptist" and the denominational attitude that divided the followers of the Prince of Peace into opposing factions was unbiblical and wrong. He afterwards wrote that as early as 1791, "I believed there would be a people bearing a name different from all the denominations then in this country different, but what they would be called, I then could not tell."⁷

A third major area of disagreement with the Baptists arose out of Smith's strong opposition to the growing tendency of his denomination to become more tightly organized and disciplined. Growing up during the Revolution, he acquired democratic principles to match his personal love of liberty. His fiercely independent spirit would not suffer his conscience to be bound by other men's opinions, and, when the Baptists sought to bring order to their denomination by forming associations, calling their ministers to attend councils, and limiting the ministry to a professional elite, Smith rebelled. Men an open break finally occurred, Smith listed the reasons he left the Baptists:

1. Their name Baptists which is unscriptural. One man was called a baptist, but no churches.

⁷ Elias Smith, The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith (Portsmouth, N.H: Beck & Foster, 1816), p.298

2. Articles, which are an addition to the perfect law of liberty; these they held and I disowned them.
3. Association of churches, which is contrary to the new-testament, and anti-Christian.
4. Holding to the necessity of a college education to be ministers of the gospel. This is contrary to the new-testament.
5. The Baptists held to missionary societies, which is nothing more or less than the old Jesuits plan, invented first by a monk.
6. The Baptists hold to councils to ordain ministers and settle disputes. These are unscriptural.
7. They hold to installing, or re-installing ministers, a practice not intimated in any part of the bible.⁸

Note the lack of any overt reference to his struggles with Calvinism and the overwhelming emphasis on issues of religious freedom and ecclesiastical democracy.

By 1802, Smith had decided to cease calling himself a Baptist and had discovered a name he could honorably and scripturally wear.

In the spring of 1802, having rejected the doctrine of Calvin and universalism, to search the scriptures to find the truth, I found the name which the followers of Christ ought to wear; which was Christians. My mind being fixed upon this as the right name, to the exclusion of all the popular names in the world, in the month of May, at a man's house in Epping, N.H. by the name of Laurence, where I held a meeting and spoke upon the text, Acts 11:26, I ventured for the first time, softly to tell the people, that the name, Christian was enough for the followers of Christ without addition of the words, Baptist, Methodist, etc.”⁹

He preached with this new emphasis for several months in and around Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and that autumn accepted an invitation by friends to become the regular minister for a small congregation in Portsmouth who were receptive to his views. Almost immediately after his move there, however, the building in which the church met burned to the ground in a fire that destroyed a good part of the city on the day after Christmas. This apparent disaster proved a blessing, since it

⁸ Ibid., p. 343.

⁹ Ibid., p. 298.

encouraged the little group of believers, as they made a fresh start in a new church building, to examine carefully their religious principles and make a new spiritual beginning. Smith later described their study and his own excitement.

From December to March, the brethren, five in number, held a meeting every Saturday evening, to examine our articles, that we might be prepared to form ourselves into a church according to the new-testament, and to be called Christians, without any sectarian name added. So great was my desire to see such a church, that I thought a labor of twenty years would be a pleasure, if in the end I might see twenty united walking according to the new test.”¹⁰

Through the winter, Smith also kept a "singing school" to teach religious people how to sing hymns. Instructing the hearts and minds of his pupils as well as their lips, he used the school as a way to contact and bring into the church new converts. The goal for which Smith expressed his willingness to labor twenty years was attained in only three months. In March, 1803, the little congregation, now numbering nearly twenty, formally organized. Smith happily recalled, “We agreed to consider ourselves a church of Christ, owning him as our only Master, Lord, and Lawgiver, and we agreed to consider ourselves Christians, without the addition of any unscriptural name.”¹¹

Such were the church and its preacher that Abner Jones found on his visit to Portsmouth the following June. The Portsmouth "church of Christ" continued to grow rapidly, if unspectacularly, reaching a membership of 150 within one year, and part of this growth can be attributed to the encouragement provided by Jones's unexpected appearance and preaching that summer. This meeting between Smith and Jones proved a decisive point in both men's lives. For Jones, the knowledge that others had on their own recognized and put into practice the lost principles of Christianity which he advocated provided an almost physical relief from his recurrent self-doubts. From his school teaching days in Hartland, he had tormented himself for almost a decade with the question, "If what I believe is clearly right, why do

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 312.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 313-314.

others not see it?" Now here were a group of believers who, without prejudiced teaching from himself, had seen the truth. Although his thoughtful and deep-wounded soul could never know the easy boldness of Smith, he would henceforth have the confidence to face the trials the future held in store. For Smith, contact with the far stronger intellect and character of Jones helped transform what had started as a minor and local struggle with the Baptists into a crusade for widespread revival. Jones' ideas sent Smith's own very active mind driving off into new directions, breaking much of what hold the old theology still held in his life. Smith later called Jones the first free man I had ever seen"¹²; and now he sought that freedom for himself, his church, and all who would listen.

¹² Ibid., p. 321.

Chapter 2: Spreading The News

Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee. Ps.
85:6

Our world throughout its history has known only one perfect human being, and the excellence of all other individual characters has been merely comparative and partial. Just as the worst of men have gentler emotions that restrain their ferocity, so the best of men possess faults that prevent their virtues from full accomplishment. For this reason, lasting and beneficial reformations in the conduct of mankind are not effected by solitary genius and sanctity, no matter how exalted, but rather by the cooperative effort of those who can complement each other's virtues, and palliate each other's vices. The alliance between Abner Jones and Elias Smith was more than a joining of numerical forces; it was a partnership of character. Since their partnership dominates the history of the first decade of Christian churches in New England, it is appropriate to give here a fuller description of the qualities and abilities which each man brought to the joint endeavor.

Jones might have been the most thoroughly and impressively self-educated man in America. With his meager public schooling, he yet attained to a level of scholarship that few college graduates (or even professors) could approach. In an age when frontier preachers sometimes had difficulty in the use of English, he drove himself to master Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. His son later authored a Hebrew grammar. Jones, however, did not confine his attention to any one academic discipline. He loved books, and his mind roamed delightedly over almost the whole range of learning and imagination. Near the close of his life, he described his attitude toward reading:

My library consists of everything in nature, and in whatever knowledge and truth are to be found. I have been captivated by books, since I was eight years of age. I am now sixty-five, and yet I have never had one desire to be released from this happy captivity. I am far from being satisfied; I am as eager as ever to turn and see what the next page will tell me. I have read little, and my stock of knowledge is consequently very contracted. The sacred Bible is above all; I love to read it more

than any other and all other, books, and I suppose I have read as many hours in this precious volume of life, as in all other books besides.¹³

We should be careful to realize that when Jones wrote, "I have read little," he is judging by the standard of his own insatiable thirst for knowledge. He loved poetry, and for many years regularly expressed his feelings by composing poems. Although undistinguished by any remarkable merit, his poems reveal at least a high degree of literary and intellectual activity. He also loved music and helped to edit a book of hymns. During long periods, he practiced medicine and attempted to research cures. Perhaps the greatest proof of his intelligence and learning was his conviction that he needed to know more.

Although possessed of great natural abilities and embarked on a revolutionary course in life that inevitably brought him into the temptations of fame and the passions of controversy, Jones retained the virtues of modesty, gentleness, and sweetness of spirit to such an extreme degree that he sometimes strayed into the vices of despair, weakness, and self-deception. At the age of thirty-five Jones made this gloomy assessment of his life: "On the 28th of April, A.D. 1772, I was born into this world of sin and sorrow, and so wicked have I been, that I have often wished that the day to me had been darkness, wherein it was said, a man child was born."¹⁴ Thirty years later, after a lifetime of religious service, having endured hardships, and having gained the respect and applause of thousands who had come to share his faith, his judgement of himself scarcely brightened.

More than fifty years since, I first knew the sweets of pardon, and the perfect love of God shed abroad in my heart. And for more than thirty-seven years I have been a preacher of the gospel; and how little, very little, have I done in the vineyard of the Lord. I am now in the going down of the sun, and so of course doing less and less. 'Few and evil have been the days of thy servant.' And now behold I am going off of the stage in the evening of my life, having done a poor, very poor day's

¹³ A.D. Jones, Memoirs Of Elder Abner Jones, (Boston: Crosby, 1842), p. 182.

¹⁴ Abner Jones, Memoirs of the Life and Experience, Travels and Preaching of Abner Jones, (Exeter, N.H.: Norris & Sawyer, 1807), p.179.

work. Yet I hope I may have possibly gained one or two talents. 'Cast me not off from thy presence; uphold me by thy free spirit.'¹⁵

No amount of labor or accomplishment could appease a conscience that "knew the sweets of pardon," but had daily fed since childhood on the bitterness of condemnation.

Men commonly judge others far more harshly than they judge themselves, eagerly attempting to clean the speck out of their brother's eye while blinded by the beam in their own. Jones followed the opposite rule, and freely gave to others the understanding and forgiveness which he denied to himself. He was always ready to believe the best about anybody, and his too liberal charity sometimes blinded him to the faults of his friends and the evil intent of his enemies. In later years, he remembered with affection even the "worthy ministers" who had opposed the Christians and tried to silence their preaching. He saw clearly that the religious world continued many errors that opposed and profaned the spirit of Christ, and he spent much of his life trying to correct those errors and restore Christianity to its pristine simplicity, but he had great difficulty accepting that men sometimes hold wrong opinions, not because they have been misinformed and are honestly prejudiced, but because they prefer falsehood to truth. Some lost souls do not wish to be found, and Jones used much of his energy lovingly exhorting those who only wanted to enjoy their hypocrisy in peace.

Nothing could be less surprising than that two men born in the same region within three years of each other, from similar social backgrounds, raised in neighboring villages, possessed of the same inadequate schooling, who both started their adult life as teachers in the same school, both practiced medicine, both became ministers, and who independently arrived at very close religious positions should resemble each other in many points of interest, ability, and character. Therefore, Elias Smith and Abner Jones had a great deal in common. Yet, they also had radical differences.

¹⁵ A.D. Jones, Memoirs Of Elder Abner Jones, (Boston: Crosby, 1842), p.179.

Smith had a brilliant mind, but an unsteady one. Where Jones sometimes let timidity prevent him from forming a decisive opinion on a subject, Smith rashly adopted opinions without sufficient knowledge or thoughtfulness. Over the course of his life, he enlisted in a multitude of causes, both religious and political. Three times he embraced the comforting doctrine of universalism, and three times he repented and rejoined the Christians. Whatever position Smith held, however, he supported with great ability and indefatigable energy. He was a bold and eloquent preacher, adept at the kind of fiery, revival sermons then associated with evangelical religion. Of more long-term significance, he was a forceful and prolific writer, whose many books and countless newspaper articles exerted a wide influence within New England and provoked response from other areas of the country.

While Jones's humility made him a man of peace, Elias Smith was "a man of war from his youth up", embroiled in a continuous series of conflicts from childhood to old age. He rebelled against his parents, quarreled with the Baptists, caused turmoil among the Christians, and engaged in a hundred unrelated business, political, and religious disputes. Abner Jones's son somewhat unkindly, but accurately, described Smith, "He was an exceedingly popular preacher, but he did not wear well with his friends, and soon fell into disrepute with his brethren. It was ever the misfortune of Elder Smith to be, as Elder Jones used to say, 'in hot water.'"¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite the trouble it caused Smith himself and his companions, his fierce love of liberty was his most valuable contribution to the Christian cause. Religions commonly tend toward an irrational authoritarianism. Preachers pronounce the gospel a mystery, incapable of logical examination, and they demand that their fellow human beings accept "on faith" the revelations of a "prophet" or the dogma of a church. Smith adamantly refused to sell his conscience into the keeping of mere men, and, what is rarer, did not wish to bind others by his own opinions. He questioned many of the doctrines of Christianity, but he never doubted that "where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Thus, Smith and Jones enriched and balanced each other's personalities. Smith's boldness encouraged his hesitant companion, and Jones's gentleness soothed the passions of his friend. If Jones's mind produced a wiser and clearer view of Christianity, Smith's persuasive tongue and pen communicated

¹⁶ Ibid., p.64,65.

that view far more widely and effectively than its originator could have done.

In the summer of 1803, these two men began preaching together in and around Portsmouth. As previously noted, they achieved significant success, but they also provoked violent opposition because of their criticism of the professional clergy, their denial of the Calvinist theology that underlay the denominational churches, and their attack on denominationalism itself as an unscriptural and sinful division of the body of Christ.

In a public letter the next year, Smith described the childish (but occasionally dangerous) behavior of their opponents:

They have come round the house when we were meet to worship, with drums, fifes, files, trumpets, and whistles, they have fired guns by the house, and thrown through the windows, when we were in the house, so that our lives have been exposed; they have broken our windows when we were gone, broke down our gate, fastened our meeting house door when we were within, and thrown in things of a disagreeable smell, to disturb us, and insulted us as we passed the streets.”¹⁷

Such opposition probably helped rather than hindered the progress of their work, since it would excite sympathy and inflame the judgment of the general public.

Smith and Jones soon expanded their efforts outside of Portsmouth. At this time, the church in Portsmouth still maintained a nominal affiliation with the Baptists and belonged to an association of Baptist churches known as the Christian Conference. As their organization's name suggests, these churches were already beginning to seek a basis for fellowship as Christians rather than as Baptists. At a meeting of the Christian Conference in Kennebunk, Maine, Smith introduced Jones to his fellow ministers and endorsed his plea for nondenominational Christianity. Several of those present expressed interest in the new ideas, but most shared the feelings of one older man, who complained,

¹⁷ Letter to Daniel Humphreys.

“It is very hard to give up so much all at once.”¹⁸ Undiscouraged, Jones and Smith continued their attempts to persuade the members of the conference to reject denominations and creeds. Jones's relationship with the Christian Conference serves as an example of his early attitude toward church associations. He did not question their piety or the seriousness of their religious convictions, gladly participated in their meetings and contributed to their discussions, but steadfastly refused to give allegiance to a human organization or to bind himself by the articles of their creed. Within a year, patient teaching persuaded the conference to surrender what had seemed so "hard to give up", and, rejecting their creed, they agreed "that the New Testament was the only and all-sufficient rule for Christians."¹⁹

In July, 1803, having heard of the revival taking place in Portsmouth as a result of the preaching of Smith and Jones, the Baptist churches in Boston invited the two men to preach a series of lessons in their city. As later events showed, they did not realize the distinctive nature of the Christians' plea for unity nor their anti-Calvinist offer of salvation to all men who sought it. Apparently expecting an emotional revival, they received instead preaching that directly and powerfully challenged the fundamental doctrines of their denomination and denied that denomination's very right to exist. The infuriated Baptists closed the meeting, which had attracted crowds numbering up to 3,000, and attempted to prevent Smith and Jones from preaching anywhere in Boston. They found the latter impossible to accomplish. A small number of Baptists and others accepted the new teachings and organized a Christian church, which met in a building at the corner of Sumner and Sea Streets. In June of the following year, Jones decided to move to Boston as a new home base, although he continued to preach over a large area of New England. Jones's opponents in Boston, unable by argument to make the Christians see the error of their ways, soon had recourse to more violent expedients, and the Christians felt compelled to petition the Boston board of selectmen in a letter dated September 16, 1804 for protection from harassment by groups of young thugs. Years later, Jones regretfully imagined that he could have avoided antagonizing the Boston church leaders had it not been for

¹⁸ Elias Smith, The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith (Portsmouth, N.H: Beck & Foster, 1816), p.323.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.322.

Smith's abrasive personality, but he was almost certainly indulging in wishful thinking. As both his co-worker and his enemies clearly understood, Jones's teaching itself was inevitably abrasive to any religious establishment that wanted to preserve the ecclesiastical status quo.

While the work in Boston continued its slow and uneasy progress, the Christians' cause in other places enjoyed more rapid, though equally tumultuous, success. From 1803 to 1808, the preaching of Elias Smith met with especially large and attentive audiences in the towns surrounding Portsmouth. In the coastal region extending from Kittery, Maine to Ipswich, Massachusetts, Smith and his allies from the old Christian Conference of Baptists set the leaven of their teaching to work, upsetting the quiet respectability of the established churches and breaking out in great revivals that brought hundreds of new converts into their faith. This period of growth had a powerful impact on the history of the Christians, both because this region became the area of their greatest numerical strength in New England and because it was in these revivals that many of their future leaders were converted, such as Mark Fernald in Kittery, the Plummers and the Rands in Haverhill, and Elijah Shaw and Daniel Pike in Kensington, New Hampshire.

Any attempt to chronicle exactly the progress of the Christians during this time encounters insuperable difficulties, for the Christians did not then regard themselves as in any sense a denomination, nor did they despair of convincing entire denominational churches to reclaim gospel liberty. Thus, those who belonged to the denominations and accepted Smith's teaching often remained in their churches, hoping to convert their friends from within the religious system to which they were accustomed. In some cases, an open break occurred only when the clergy attempted to silence or discipline Christians among their flocks. Also, later historians sometimes confused the Christians with other religious movements and referred to them by a bewildering variety of names, including Free Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Christian Baptists, and Restorers, all of which have been more commonly applied to other religious groups. The Christians did not wish to become a distinct class of Christians, but simply Christians, followers of Jesus, nothing more nor less. This ideal proved extremely difficult for them to preserve among themselves and impossible for their contemporaries to understand.

Despite the attitude mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the Christians occasionally found it either necessary or expedient formally to organize themselves into local congregations. One of the earliest such churches was established in Hampton Falls, New Hampshire in 1805. The church drew its membership from several nearby towns and had as its three principal supporters, William Brown of Hampton Falls, John Lamprey of Kensington, and Theodore Coffin of Hampton. The record of how they came to build a meeting house hints at the kind of childish persecution their opponents directed against them.

In the beginning of the year 1805 we held our meeting on the Lord's day at our brother John Pike's house. This being inconvenient, we have agreed with Mr. Aaron Wells for a house to worship God in, and paid the rent in part. But four of the windows were broken in one night, and said Wells forbid our meeting in such a house. We then removed our meeting to the Widow Anna Brown's house in Hampton Falls.²⁰

On June 28, they raised their own building at a cost of \$360, largely contributed by Brown, Lamprey, and Coffin.

The Hampton Falls congregation served as a center of the Christians' work in that local area. Although the membership of the church remained small, the extent of their influence reveals itself in the large crowds that attended baptisms, ordinations, and revivals. Often, as in the case of the ordination of Ebenezer Leavitt in 1808, services were held in the fields, because the crowds were far too great to meet in the building. Eventually, the Hampton Falls church would produce sister congregations in every neighboring town.

More typical of Christian institutions in the first decade of the nineteenth century was the non-organization that existed in the town of Andover in central New Hampshire. Those who heeded the call for Christian freedom and unity in Andover worshipped together in a group known simply as the "Monthly Meeting." They included among their numbers individuals of sharply divergent views, who agreed to disagree, with each side undoubtedly hoping to win the others to their way of thinking. Finally, after nearly thirty years of such vain

²⁰ Warren Brown, History of Hampton Falls, (Manchester, N.H.: Clarke, 1900), p.92.

expectations, it would give birth to two churches: a Christian congregation and a Freewill Baptist one.

As the presence of Christians in Andover indicates, the progress of the new movement in New Hampshire was by no means confined to the south-eastern corner of the state. One of the first Christian churches to be established in New Hampshire was formed in 1808 in Boscawen, a small community near Concord. Chance has preserved for us the agreement the members made with each other in forming the church:

This church have agreed to lay aside all the party names by which professors are called, with all such things as are called Creeds, Covenants, Platforms, Articles of Faith, with all the commandments of men, and to consider Christ their only master, and the New Testament their only Rule, and to be known by the name given at Antioch which is Christian.

The following are the names of the Brethren and sisters who were Baptized June 16th and being united in love, united in the above agreement and who stand ready to receive into their y all who are willing to unite with them in the glorious name of Christ:

David Sweatt,	Martha Corser,
James Corser,	Mecla Couch,
Petiah Gookin,	John P. Sweatt,
Joseph Couch, jr.,	Mrs. Trumbull,
Martha Gookin,	Betsey Hobbs,
Hannah Hobbs,	Mrs. Corser. ²¹

Of particular interest in this statement is the reference to the baptism of all its signers. Apparently, Boscawen was one place where the Christians found none of their original adherents among the Baptists, since they never re-baptized those who already had been immersed. Within a year, the congregation has more than doubled its membership to 25.

Closer to the center of Elias Smith's activities, the first Christian church in Maine was formed in the town of Kittery on November 20, 1806, partly as the result of preaching by Ephraim Stinchfield and Moses

²¹ Charles Coffin, History of Boscawen and Webster, New Hampshire, (Concord, N.H.: Republican, 1878), p.242.

Safford who had the honor to be the first preacher in his state to call himself only a Christian. To the south, Smith's preaching helped establish a church in Chebacco, a community within the town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. The Chebacco Christians became embroiled in a controversy with Josiah Webster, the local congregational minister. Continued even after Webster moved to Hampton, this quarrel led to the most spectacular of all Elias Smith's altercations, the riot of 1808.

Never a man to avoid opposition, Smith decided to confront his adversary by holding a meeting of the Christians on Hampton's public Green, just in front of Webster's house. On September 8, as a large crowd gathered on the Green, several dozen of Webster's supporters appeared armed with muskets. Smith and his fellow preachers, unwilling either needlessly to provoke violence or to surrender to the intimidation of hoodlums, decided to proceed with the meeting at a less inflammatory site in a field some distance away, but the self-constituted militia of religion marched to the new location and started firing their weapons over the heads of the crowd. When the preachers still attempted to address their audience despite all threats, the defenders of the established order began throwing dirt and potatoes at the Christians, overturned the makeshift pulpit, and finally silenced the speaker by wrestling him to the ground. Pursued to the house where he was staying, Smith had to escape out the back door and returned to Portsmouth glad to be alive. No one was seriously hurt in this affair, the only injury being to the cause of a religion so disreputably championed. History provides few images of human folly so disgraceful and ludicrous as men defending the dignity of their faith by throwing potatoes at those with whom they disagree.

The efforts of the Christians in Massachusetts prospered greatly during this period. Abner Jones had not been idle, and his labors bore fruit in new churches that sprang up around Boston. As early as 1804, Jones helped organize a church in Nantasket, south of Boston, and several congregations began meeting in the next few years north of the city, notably in Salem. However, the greatest accessions to the Christians, both in numbers and in ultimate importance, came as a result of their contacts with the Baptists in the southeastern portion of the state. Both Jones and Smith had become acquainted with Daniel Hix, the minister of the Baptist church in Dartmouth, and Hix invited them to preach to his congregation. Although he harbored private reservations concerning

the stability of Smith's personality, Hix recognized that these men possessed an insight into Christianity that he had lacked. Greatly beloved and influential, Hix led his whole congregation, one of the largest Baptist churches in Massachusetts, to reject their denomination and its creed. Although he continued in fellowship with his Baptist friends, he wished himself to be only a Christian. The disaster to the Baptist cause was compounded by the respect which Hix commanded among the other churches in the area. Horrified at the spectacle of Hix preaching in company with Elias Smith in many of their churches, the denominational leaders in 1807 summoned Hix to stand trial for heresy before his fellow ministers, hoping to discredit their former champion. Hix's answers to their questions give eloquent testimony of his simple faith in the Bible.

On his trial for heresy before the Warren Association, the moderator as usual proceeded to question the supposed heretic:

Moderator: Elder Hix, do you believe in salvation by faith alone?

Hix: I believe James, II, 24; Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

Moderator: Elder Hix, do you believe in the doctrines of foreordination and predestination?

Hix: I believe whom he did foreknow he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified. Romans, VIII, 29,30.

Moderator: Elder Hix, do you believe in the doctrine of the trinity?

Hix: I believe that there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. I John, v,7.

Moderator: Elder Hix, do you believe in total depravity?

Hix: Twice dead, and plucked up by the roots. That is as near total depravity as anything I can think of. Jude, 12th verse.

Moderator: Elder Hix, we are not satisfied with your answers.

Hix: I did not expect the Bible would satisfy you.²²

From this time onward, Hix worked in open and unequivocal alliance with the Christians. At a meeting of Christian preachers in 1808, he jubilantly reported the results of their first year's work: 262 conversions in eleven towns of southeastern Massachusetts. These were in addition to the more than 400 individuals he had led out of the Baptists.

While engaged in his Massachusetts efforts, Jones had neglected the small churches in Vermont and New Hampshire he had helped establish during the first two years of his ministry. As a consequence of this neglect, the churches died out so quickly and completely that no mention of their existence occurs in town records. Nevertheless, family ties, the scattered remnant of Jones's supporters, and the natural desire to preach the gospel in their old home state drew Jones and Smith inevitably back to Vermont.

Having been invited by some local inhabitants, Smith visited Woodstock in February 1806. He preached at various places in the town for the next six weeks and succeeded in gathering thirty-six converts into a church, in the community of English Mills. This congregation, which later moved into Woodstock Village, was the first Christian Church in Vermont to last more than a few years. Indeed, the Woodstock church was one of the last members of the Christian Connection when the congregation finally disbanded in 1949, nearly a century and a half after Smith's first sermon. In its first few years, the church experienced steady growth both numerically and spiritually. On April 20, 1808, they had the pleasure of ordaining Elias Cobb, one of their first eight members, as an elder, and they also benefited almost from the beginning from the preaching of Uriah Smith, Elias's brother.

²² I.C. Goff, article of unknown date in Herald of Gospel Liberty, quoted in Stephen Andrews, A Sketch of Elder Daniel Hix with the History of the First Christian Church in Dartmouth, Mass. For One Hundred Years, (New Bedford: Anthony, 1880), pp. 26-27.

In 1809, the Christians thought it desirable to express in writing their commitment to God and to each other as members of the Church:

In the 1806-09, a number of brethren who were formerly connected with the Baptist and Congregational Churches, together with a number of converts. . . have thought it their duty and privilege to form themselves into a church, taking Christ for their Master and Lord, and his rule for their guide and direction in all circumstances until death, to love one another with a pure heart fervently, and by the grace of God to shine as lights in the world.²³

So far we have traced the beginning of the Christians and their first growth and expansion. By 1808, just five years after Jones and Smith discovered each other's faith in Portsmouth, strong Christian churches existed in four New England states, and their influence had spread from Cape Cod to Canada. Yet, beyond brief statements of their principles, we have not considered in any detail the beliefs of the Christians, nor attempted at all to chronicle their doctrinal controversies. The next chapter will address this subject.

²³ Edward Williams, "A History Of The Christian Church, Woodstock, Vermont", 1950 unpublished monograph, p.3.

Chapter 3: Early Doctrinal Views

If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. Prov. 2:4,5

Virtually all denominations profess to find their religion commanded and exemplified in the pages of the Bible, but they have claimed a scriptural foundation for such a vast array of differing and contradictory dogmas that they bring the public to wonder whether the life of Jesus could be so enigmatical or the teachings of Paul so obscure as to leave man in such confusion regarding the divine will. Whether we assess the blame for our doubts on the comparative obscurity of revelation or the depravity of human understanding, it seems a thing not easily reconcilable with a loving God that he who called himself the light of the world should involve us in a perpetual conflict of darkness, and that the one who promised, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," should abandon us enchained by ignorance and error. A closer examination of religious diversity, however, reveals that many doctrinal differences arise not from varying interpretations of difficult scriptural passages but from loyalty to other sources of authority outside the Bible, such as the visions of a modern prophet, the pronouncements of an ecclesiastical synod, or the personal mystery of emotional experience. Even among Protestants, who have gloried in Stillingfleet's claim that "the Bible, and the Bible along" is their religion, such influences have often obscured the clearest Biblical commands. God has sent light into the world and given to men eyes adequate to perceive it and walk in its direction; but if men proudly shut their eyes and insist on feeling their miserable way through life, they should not complain when they stumble and fall. Following the Bible requires a reasonable intellectual competence, but it demands uncommon virtue, lest divine words be used only to sanctify human willfulness. When the New England Christians claimed to take the Bible as their rule of faith, they said no more than the meanest of their adversaries boasted of themselves. The test of such a claim is its actual application to religious practice and everyday life.

The most fundamental and significant departure of the Christians from common denominational teaching was their insistence that every individual capable of normal reasoning had both the right and the

inescapable duty personally to study, understand, and obey the Bible. They denied a place to any intermediary of creed or clergy between a Christian and his Lord. Perhaps the fullest statement of this cardinal principle is found in Elias Smith's defense of his faith included near the close of his autobiography: (Note: Smith's italicizing of words for emphasis.)

I do in the first place publicly declare, that the *Holy Scriptures* which contain a revelation of the will of God, are the only *sure, authentic, and infallible Rule* of the faith and practice of every Christian, by which *all opinions* are to be *fairly and impartially examined*; and in consequence of this, I do *protest* against setting up and allowing the decrees of any man, or body of men, as of equal *authority* and obligation with the word of God; whether they be *councils, synods, convocations, associations, missionary societies, or general assemblies*; whether *ancient or modern*, Romish, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, or Methodist, Popes, Fathers, or Doctors of Divinity.

I do farther assert and maintain, according to the doctrine of *Christ* and the *Apostles*, and the practice of *Christians* in the first century; that in all things essential to the faith and practice of a *Christian*, the Scriptures are plain, and easy to be understood, by all who will diligently and impartially read and study them; and that charging the *Scriptures* with obscurity and uncertainty, is contrary to the plain declaration of the Scriptures, and is an *abuse* of the *rule* given for Christians to walk by, and insult upon that *Holy Spirit* by which the authors of them were *guided*, and a wicked reproach thrown upon them by *ignorant, corrupt, and wicked hirelings*, to draw men into a *slavish dependence* on them; that by thus representing the Scriptures as a *dark book*, they have *hood winked* the followers of Christ, and others, that they might render them *implicit believers* on their arbitrary *decrees*, and make them without control, subservient to the views of their *ambition, avarice, pride, and luxury*.

I do farther assert, that every *Christian* is under an indispensable obligation to *search the Scriptures for himself*, and make the best use of it he can for his information in the *will of God*, and the nature of '*Pure Religion*'; that he hath an *unalienable right*, impartially to judge of the sense and meaning of it, and to follow the Scriptures wherever it leads him, even an equal right with the Bishops and Pastors of the churches; and in consequence of this, I farther *protest* against that unrighteous and ungodly pretence of making the writings of the fathers, the *decrees*

*of councils and synods, or the sense of the church, the rule and standard of judging of the sense of the Scriptures, as Popish Anti-Christian and dangerous to the church of God.*²⁴

The foregoing statement amounts to a declaration of war against the traditional denominations of New England. Although many of the Christians, led by Abner Jones, did not feel the bitterness evident in Smith's attacks on the clergy, they shared the views that underlay his attacks and make the Christians offensive to their opponents. No matter how harshly or sweetly they said it, Jones and his associates were calling for the destruction of denominationalism. When they asserted that Biblical truths were so plain that the common man could easily understand them, they implied, when they did not openly declare, that the reason the common man had not understood the simple teachings of Christianity was that he had been misled by the folly and pride of his ministers. Not only did they accuse the clergy of dishonorably misusing the trust placed in them by their church members, however, they also insisted that committing the faith into the hands of a professional elite was inherently wrong, even to ministers of the highest character. Similarly, the Christians generally opposed any intervention by the state into religious affairs, such as the financial support of churches through tax revenues, a practice still widespread in New England through the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The faith of the Christians was an individual faith, which church or state had no right to control.

Putting these principles into practice, the Christians rejected all denominational organizations as both unscriptural and inevitably tending to tyranny. During the first fifteen years of their movement, they avoided even general meetings that might give the appearance of a formal association between churches. Just as the churches of Christ in the first century were bound together by their faith and love and did not want or need any outward restraint to their fellowship, the New England Christians endeavored to keep the unity of the spirit by individual loyalty and obedience to the spirit. To quote the famous words of John Milton, which Barton Stone used to justify the Christian movement in Kentucky, the unhindered search for truth by free men

²⁴ Elias Smith, The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith (Portsmouth, N.H: Beck & Foster, 1816), p.402,403.

“makes up the best harmony in a church; not the forced and outward union of cold and neutral and inwardly divided minds.”²⁵

A serious problem connected with their rejection of denominational organization was how or whether to ordain ministers, which they called "elders", after the common practice among Baptists. Their attacks on the denominational clergy clearly threatened the very concept of ministers as privileged and authoritative class separate from ordinary Christians; yet, Abner Jones's care to secure ordination from the Freewill Baptists in 1802 demonstrates that, while denying both the pretensions of the clergy to be lords over God's heritage and the right of ecclesiastical authority to limit the work of the ministry to a chosen elite, he still felt that preaching was a special calling for which it was appropriate to have some formal ordination. Smith also explained that his anti-clericalism did not imply a complete rejection of an ordained ministry. When they attempted to define who should choose and ordain preachers, or what, if any, official rule preachers should play in the life of the church, however, they fell at once into difficulties which they never resolved. The significance and form of ordination differed widely from church to church. Often, the local congregation chose its own elder with little or no involvement by other preachers. Sometimes, a group of preachers would assume the right to ordain an elder separate from the wishes of any particular church. The ordination in Vermont of Jasper Hazen, one of the most prominent Christian preachers, followed this second pattern.

Hartford, 26 Dec., 1810; Now there was in the church of Christ at Hartford, Vt., certain teachers and preachers, and they ministered to the Lord and fasted, and they felt an impression of the Holy Ghost to set apart Jasper Hazen to the work of the ministry. These are therefore to certify that he was this day set apart publicly according to the New Testament, by fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands of us — Elias Cobb, Uriah Smith, James Spooner, and Frederick Plummer, Elders.²⁶

The filing of this statement with the Hartford town clerk suggests that one reason for formal ordination might have been to establish an individual's legal status as a minister, even if it meant little or no

²⁵ *Areopagitica*.

²⁶ Quoted by William Tucker, *The History of Hartford, Vermont*, p. 259.

change in his position within the church. Certainly, the Christians did not limit preaching, serving communion, or baptizing to those who had been ordained. Each congregation had its leader or leaders, whether officially recognized as elders or not, whose authority and effectiveness rested solely on the respect their character could command from their fellow Christians. Only a few congregations had a plurality of ordained elders, but more may have practically followed a group leadership. Almost no elders were professional preachers. They had no seminary training. A handful of well known preachers, such as Smith and Jones themselves, visited widely among the churches-and gave some leadership beyond the local level, but even they became increasingly tied to the work of their home congregations and had largely to provide their own financial support by engaging in business or the secular professions.

The authors and enforcers of creeds as a test of fellowship among Christians make two assumptions which Abner Jones and Elias Smith were quite unwilling to accept. Regarding themselves as wiser than their brothers, they assert the right to dominate other men's consciences; and, claiming to be more eloquent than the Holy Spirit, they seek to express the thoughts of God in language clearer and more effective than God's own word. The latter of these assumptions the Christians had little difficulty in despising; and, from the time that Jones first convinced Smith and his friends in New Hampshire to give up their creeds, they entirely avoided making any human document the touchstone of their faith. The former assumption, so seductive to human pride, has always proven a more formidable opponent to religious liberty, because it continually produces unwritten creeds that secretly but powerfully hold subject men's minds. Some of the most intolerant religious groups have never formally committed their bigotry into writing, but it has nonetheless crushed the spirit of Christian liberty among them. It was this danger that made Elias Smith warn his fellow Christians, "Though we have rejected all party names: yet my brethren there is a danger of retaining a party spirit; let us guard against this, by constantly following the Lamb, by owning all the Lord owns, and endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace."²⁷

²⁷ Circular letter to the Christian churches of New England, published in Herald Of Gospel Liberty, November 10, 1808.

The Christians made unusual efforts to preserve their liberty in the Lord. So fearful were they of allowing church tradition to become an authority that many congregations refused to keep records of past church decisions. At business meetings, a clerk would read the minutes of the previous meeting and then immediately burn them. This practice is reminiscent of the opposition among early churches of Christ in the South to the drawing up of membership lists, lest the numbering of God's people be a prelude to their subjugation. The New England Christians, while not hesitating to keep a record of their numbers, allowed every Christian the utmost freedom of private opinion. Although the churches required outward obedience to God in baptism to become a member and evidence of character in a holy life to remain one; they did not attempt to order the thoughts of their members. They gladly welcomed into their fellowship unitarians and trinitarians, Calvinists and Pelagians, the overly subtle and the childishly simple. They even permitted the preaching of divergent views. In a noble experiment that eventually failed with disastrous consequences, some Christian churches opened their pulpits to anyone of any denomination who bore the character of a good man and had a Biblical lesson to deliver.

Although not presuming to judge the thoughts and intents of the heart and allowing almost unrestrained doctrinal discussion, the early Christian churches did not permit laxity in regard to those commands of God which require outward obedience. A man may hold an erroneous view concerning the nature of angels or the origin of Cain's wife and no harm done; but if he believes in the virtue of adultery and puts his opinion into practice, the peace of the church, the honor of God, and the peril of his own soul demand that his fellow Christians not acquiesce in open sin. What the Bible clearly teaches must be plainly obeyed, if Christianity is to be more than empty words. Therefore, the Christians heavily emphasized the duties of common morality in their preaching and enforced their ethical standard by strict church discipline.

The two areas in which their desire for toleration and their need for discipline came into most severe conflict were the questions of baptism and communion, the most important ceremonies of Christianity. These were outward acts, clearly commanded and exemplified in the pages of the New Testament. Going to their Bibles, the Christians recognized

immersion as the original and only acceptable form of baptism. They did not find any justification for infant baptism. Although they did not believe that baptism was necessary to become a Christian, they regarded it as an essential duty of the beginning of every person's life in Christ. Elias Smith wrote, "I do not think that baptism saves people from their sins; I believe that it is to show that a person is saved from his sins through faith in Christ, previous to his being baptized."²⁸ But what of those who claimed the title of Christians, yet neglected or refused to show their forgiveness in baptism? At this early period, the Christians gave to baptism such importance that they refused to accept anyone as a member who had not been immersed.

The question of baptism inevitably brought forward the issue of communion. Concerning the act and design of communion itself, they knew little controversy, accepting without dissent the views current among Protestants in New England at that time. The difficulty arose over whether the Christians should share communion with members of denominations who had not been immersed, and therefore not demonstrated that they belonged to the Lord. The theoretical question of whether the unimmersed were saved could be left to the final judgement of God, but the practical problem of whether to invite or forbid their neighbors to come around the Lord's table was an emotional dilemma that divided the Christians among themselves. Elias Smith originally believed in closed communion and wrote a tract in 1803 entitled "A Reply to this Question: 'Why Cannot You Commune With Us, Seeing We Are Willing to Commune with You?'" Under the influence of Abner Jones, Smith moderated his views and began practicing open communion, at least to some extent. Where to draw the line remained unsettled. The church in Dothan, Vermont, a village near Hartford that has since disappeared, refused to admit the denominationalists as brethren and withdrew fellowship in 1811 from some members who had resumed attendance at a Congregational church. Not presuming either to encourage or discourage others to partake, some churches left it entirely to the individual conscience of visitors whether they should commune.

²⁸ A Sermon On New Testament Baptism, (Exeter, N.H.: Norris & Sawyer, 1807).

The most serious doctrinal difference in the eyes of the Christians themselves to arise among them in their early years of growth centered on the eternal destiny of the lost. Having already passed once through universalism while still a Baptist, Elias Smith shocked the Christians by his preaching on the afterlife. As Abner Jones later recalled, "Our trials and disasters have been many, and not among the smallest, is the fact that some of the first leaders in this cause, have made bad work: In 1805, Elder Elias Smith, according to his luminous imagination had great and new light, insomuch, that he (as he thought) saw the righteous, and wicked, sleeping all in their graves until the resurrection; and at the resurrection, saw the wicked raised, burned up—both soul and body."²⁹ Such opinions fell within the limits of the kind of theological speculation that the Christians had purposed to de-emphasize in their preaching and tolerate among their members, but Smith would not relegate his views to a minor and relatively private part of his teaching, but publicly proclaimed them with such vehemence and persistence as to antagonize his friends, unsettle the churches, and give an unnecessary occasion for scandal among the denominations. His conduct especially offended Jones, partly because Jones felt tempted to embrace any scheme which would extinguish the fires of hell from the doctrine of Christ, but had struggled to submit himself to the overwhelming weight of Biblical evidence that testified of eternal punishment for those who rejected the Lord. Having barely managed to overcome his own doubts and emotions on this awful subject, he had little calmness or patience to tolerate Smith's aberrations. Smith later ruefully acknowledged that "Elder Jones was some hurt respecting the end of the wicked";³⁰ and their relationship became increasingly strained. However, this controversy had more basic and ominous implications for the future, for it warned the Christians that the distinction they made between uniformity of action and liberty of thought and speech could not always be honored. Free expression, if unguided by wisdom and unrestrained by love, became an action too offensive and destructive for tolerance.

²⁹ "Sketch of the Denomination Who Claim To Be Styled Christians" in Christian Palladium, vol.3, 1834.

³⁰ Elias Smith, The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith (Portsmouth, N.H: Beck & Foster, 1816), p.358.

More perilous for the Christians' cause than their disagreement over the destiny of the wicked was their almost unanimous acceptance of certain speculations concerning the nature of Jesus and of God. As one of their leaders recalled in 1827, "At first we were all nominally Trinitarian, being educated in that doctrine. The doctrine, however, was soon canvassed, brought to the test of revelation, and universally rejected as unscriptural and anti-Christian, with all its concomitant doctrines."³¹ If they had rested from their intellectual labors when they had thus examined and refused the orthodox definition of the divine personality, they would have acted in perfect accord with their original resolve to declare to the world the clear and essential message of the Bible, unencumbered with superfluous theology, and to "strive not about words to no profit"; but many of the Christians proved unwilling to resist the temptation to devise their own descriptions of divinity and became vigorous combatants in the age-old dispute, so useless to morality and so destructive to religious peace, over the exact nature of the manhood and divinity of Christ, the relationship of Christ to his father, and the personality and origin of the Holy Spirit.

The Christians did not stray so far from their fundamental principles as to make a correct view on these questions a test of fellowship, nor did they reach any great degree of agreement among themselves as to what the correct view was. Elias Smith typically held the most extreme opinions, asserting "that Christ had no existence until he was born of the virgin Mary"³² and denying altogether the personality of the Holy Spirit. Other preachers advanced more modest theories, admitting the eternal divinity of Christ, yet denying his equality with the Father. Both extremists and moderates were branded by their denominational opponents as unitarians and engaged in a bitter controversy which the Christians had not the wisdom or the patience to let die away. Even their finest and most effective preachers, such as Frederick Plummer, allowed themselves to be diverted from preaching the gospel into pointless debates with the foolish and the violent. In *The Mystery Revealed*, Plummer's account of a farcical dispute in 1813 with a Methodist preacher named Samuel Lockey, this young preacher

³¹ Simon Clough, "An Account Of The Christian Denomination In The United States" in *Christian Herald*, vol. 10, p.66.

³² Jones, "Sketch of the Denomination Who Claim To Be Styled Christians" in *Christian Palladium*.

acknowledges the divinity of Christ, although not recognizing the Holy Spirit to be more than a divine influence, and pleads for Christians to accept the express statements of scriptures as the ground of their belief. As the later alliance in the West between Barton Stone, who held a similar position, and Alexander Campbell demonstrates, Plummer's views could have been practically reconciled with those of more orthodox brethren if he and his associates had been willing to lay aside their controversial opinions and build fellowship on justice, mercy, and truth. But they would not. They allowed their opponents to mark them as unitarians, and, with the passing of years, came to accept the stigma as a badge of honor. Having set out to be the champions of piety and love, they degraded themselves to serve as the advocates of a sect.

In their first decade, the Christians passed through many storms of controversy and persecution. Some they weathered strongly, and others they permitted to deflect their course and bring them into dangerous waters. Yet, more perilous to their cause than any wind of doctrine or wave of violence was a strong and deep current that silently threatened to bear them far away from the beacon of truth they sought.

No question can be more important for an attempt at religious reformation than the question of authority. Abner Jones recognized this truth even before he left the Baptists, and the religious movement which he came to lead was founded on the acceptance of the Bible as the standard of authority for Christians; but Jones also believed that God might speak to his people in modern times quite apart from the scriptures, by the direct influence of the Holy Spirit on their hearts and lives. In his own life, as in the case of learning not to trust to miraculous divine guidance in sermon preparation, Jones wanted to feel that the Holy Spirit was working in his everyday actions, but he had the wisdom to doubt his own emotions and to follow the rule of the Bible. Many of his fellow Christians had the same emotional longings, but not the wisdom to restrain them. Long centuries of human folly have abundantly demonstrated that when men persuade themselves that God speaks to them through mysterious emotions, they usually cherish the mystical relationship more than the written word of God, preferring the licentiousness of superstition to the discipline of faith. In the first years of their growth, in New England, the Christians only flirted with the goddess of emotionalism, but she was an increasingly seductive temptress, who could destroy the very basis for their plea.

Chapter 4: The Herald And Contact With Christians In The South

I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth. Isaiah 43:6

No later than 1805, Elias Smith had become heavily involved in two enterprises that have often fascinated ambitious Americans: journalism and politics. Already the author of several pamphlets, Smith began in that year the publication of *The Christian's Magazine, Reviewer, and Religious Intelligencer*, a quarterly priced at 12 ½ cents per copy. He also greatly accelerated his literary efforts outside the magazine. His works from this period include published sermons on *The Day of Judgement* and *The Doctrine of the Prince of Peace and his Servants, concerning the End of the Wicked*, and *A Discourse Delivered at Hopkinton*, in which he gave the first public description and defense of the Christians' plea to return to New Testament Christianity. He soon followed these works with an extended pamphlet entitled *The Clergyman's Looking—Glass*, a stinging attack on the denominational ministry that resembles Alexander Campbell's *The Third Epistle of Peter* both in its doctrine and its tone.

Smith's interest in politics first appears clearly in *The Whole World Governed by a Jew; or the Government of the Second Adam, as King and Priest*, a sermon preached March 4, 1805, to celebrate the beginning of Thomas Jefferson's second term as president. As strange as it may seem to a modern reader, New England religious divisions were closely associated with party politics. The Federalists were the party of the "ins," the rich, the establishment, the cities, and Congregationalism. The Republicans, the party which evolved into the later Democrats, found their adherents largely among the "outs," the poor, the restless, and those on the frontier, and included a large majority of Baptists and members of other smaller religious groups. Thomas Jefferson in particular excited admiration and opposition on religious as well as political ground. In the campaign of 1800, the *New England Palladium* voiced the fears of Congregationalists when it warned, "Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the

seal of death is that moment set on our holy religion...³³ To religious independents such as Elias Smith, however, Jefferson was the great champion of religious liberty, a second Cyrus, who had been prophesied and raised up by God to bring freedom to his people. The Virginia Statute of Religious Liberty, which Jefferson had authored, had broken the power of established religion in his home state in 1786, but its greater significance lay in the example it provided for national policy. To Jefferson went much of the credit that the Federal Bill of Rights began with the words, "congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion..." Elias Smith exultingly claimed that although some might call him "enthusiastic" for believing Thomas Jefferson to be one of the angels prophesied in Revelation, "future generations will see that this is true."³⁴ Smith thought that the established religions of his day had depended so much on the power of the state to force people to attend church and to pay taxes for their support, that the triumph of Jeffersonian Republicanism and its separation of church and state would mean the denominations' inevitable ruin. He boastingly warned his opponents,

Federalists... You are to be pitied, you have worked against yourselves. Your cause was bad, and could not prosper. Cease to oppose the kingly government of Christ, which is founded here on liberty, equality, unity, and peace, for you cannot overthrow it.

Clergy, your plan is so united with that which is called federalism, that it will go down with monarchy to perdition. Your popularity is failing daily, and soon God will make you contemptible and base before all the people. Your conduct in ten years past in writing and speaking against the government, and those in authority, will nearly overthrow your order in this country in ten years more, if it goes on as it has for a few years past.³⁵

Against this backdrop of Smith's passionate political involvement, we must place the unusual proposition made to him in 1808 by Isaac Wilbour, a congressman from Rhode Island. Wilbour, along with some unnamed associates, offered to finance the publication of a newspaper, with Smith as editor, to advance the cause of religious liberty. Since

³³ (Exeter: Norris, 1813).

³⁴ Quoted in The Whole World Governed By A Jew, etc., p.35

³⁵ The Whole World Governed By A Jew, etc., p.77

Wilbour did not share Smith's religious views, the congressman's motives may have had more to do with political ambition than pious zeal. Although nominally a Federalist, Wilbour came from a state that had the oldest and strongest tradition of religious freedom of any American unit of government. Exactly how he planned to employ Smith's formidable talents as a controversialist will never be known, because Smith, although pleased and flattered by the offer, had the good sense to decline an arrangement that would have obligated him to write only what his political employers approved.

Having rejected Wilbour's offer, Smith was still intrigued with the idea of publishing a regular newspaper to advocate his religious beliefs in general, and the cause of religious liberty in particular. Christians in large areas of New England, notably in Massachusetts and Connecticut, deeply resented the insult to their consciences caused by having to support Congregationalism with their tax dollars, a requirement that Jefferson termed "sinful and tyrannical." Smith proposed to become their editorial champion, but he carefully emphasized the religious nature of his plea, and avoided open political advocacy. In the first issue of the new publication, he went so far as to claim that it was the first purely religious newspaper in the history of the world.

Smith called his new paper the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*. Issues appeared every two weeks, beginning on September 1, 1808. Each issue had four pages, filled mainly with editorials by Smith, correspondence from readers, and items copied from other papers. Priced at one dollar per year, it initially managed to attract a respectable 274 subscribers, which grew to around 1500 in a few years. Nevertheless, the paper did not prove a profitable venture, keeping just one step ahead of bankruptcy until Smith finally sold it in 1818. No one could accuse Smith of giving up on the paper too easily, for he had several times sold what few private possessions of value he owned, including even his wife's silverware, to pay the printer's bill for the *Herald*. Originally published in Portsmouth, the paper followed its editor to Portland, Philadelphia, and Boston in vain attempts to find stable financial support. Ironically, after having such a precarious existence in its first decade, the paper eventually survived bankruptcy, moves, changes in format, name changes, and mergers to become the *Christian*, presently the official magazine of the United Church of

Christ. The newspaper thus outlived not only its first editor, but the religious movement which it had been intended to assist.

Under the editorship of Elias Smith, the *Herald* had a powerful influence on the progress of the Christians in New England. Smith used the paper both to continue his attacks on denominationalism and to explain what he believed to be the true doctrine of Christianity, but he was a much better publicist than a teacher, and gave a large amount of space in the paper to glowing reports of revivals and baptisms by the hundreds that were resulting from the Christians' efforts. Unlike Alexander Campbell's *Christian Baptist* and *Millennial Harbinger* in the Midwest, the *Herald* did not succeed in giving intellectual leadership to a religious movement, but it helped bring the Christians closer together emotionally and think of themselves increasingly as a distinct body of believers, separate from all denominations and opposed to them. When Christians in Vermont read of Daniel Hix's great success in Massachusetts, or those in Connecticut learned of the revival in the Saco valley in Maine, they identified themselves with the labors of their brethren, and they were encouraged to hope for similar progress in their locality.

In addition to strengthening the ties of fellowship among the Christians in New England, the publication of the *Herald* soon resulted in contact with similar religious groups in other parts of the country. Smith already knew of the existence of churches in Kentucky that had seceded from the Presbyterians and had assumed the name Christian. The most prominent preacher among these churches was Barton W. Stone, a great revivalist from Cane Ridge, Kentucky, who united in his personality a fine classical scholarship with a fervent love for the souls of men. Like Smith and Jones, horrified at the Calvinist picture of helpless men in the hands of a capricious and malevolent God, Stone resolved to remove this "dark mountain between heaven and earth" and to proclaim the gospel of God's offer of salvation to all men. He found a ready audience for his preaching in frontier Kentucky and Ohio, and eventually led thousands of Christians in support of the gospel cause. How Smith learned of Stone and the churches in the West is not known, although he may have read *An Apology for Renouncing the Jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky*, a defense of their action in leaving the Presbyterians published in Lexington in 1804. The first issue of the *Herald* carried a reprint of the "Last Will and Testament of

the Springfield Presbytery," the key statement of their beliefs which is appended to the *Apology*. In this famous document, they urged "that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven."

Through contact with the Stone movement, Smith may have heard of yet a third group of Christian churches who pleaded for a return to New Testament Christianity. These churches in North Carolina and Virginia came out of Methodism, originally as a protest against Francis Asbury's autocratic rule as the first bishop of the Methodist church in America. They shared Smith's preoccupation with religious liberty, and at first called themselves Republican Methodists as opposed to the Episcopal Methodists who followed Asbury; but their revolt against Methodism, once begun, went far beyond the question of denominational structure, and resulted in their rejecting denominationalism in favor of becoming simply Christians.

Whatever private reports or rumors of each other's existence may have circulated among the Christians in New England and those in the South, the first public exchange between the two groups occurred in the pages of the *Herald*. In the issue of November 10, 1808, Smith printed a letter dated October 24, from Robert Punshon, who preached for a small band of Christians in Philadelphia. The church in Philadelphia had originated the previous autumn through the efforts of Virginia Christians, and Punshon delightedly claimed fellowship with his newly discovered brethren to the North. He gave Smith the following account of the origin and progress of the Southern Christians:

In Virginia about 16 years ago it pleased the Lord to call out from the body of Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians, a people into gospel order, laying the foundation on Moses and the Prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone...The church has spread through Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and the Western part of the State of Pennsylvania, where there are thousands united in the same spirit worshipping the Lord."

As the quote shows, Punshon liberally admitted Stone and Western Christians into the fellowship of the Christians in the South. With the discovery of the New England group, the cause of simple nondenominational Christianity promised to become a truly nationwide movement.

After Punshon's letter, other Christians in the South began correspondence with the editor of the *Herald*, and Smith duly printed their letters, which familiarized his New England readers with the history and doctrine of the church in the South. In turn, some of the correspondents asked for more information concerning Smith and the churches in his region. The *Herald* of December 8, 1808 contained a letter from William Lanphier of Alexandria, Virginia, who wanted to know the "name, discipline, form of Church-government, doctrine, and extent" of the New England Christians. Smith delightedly supplied news of the cause in New England, and was enough satisfied with his correspondents' reports from the South that in the two January issues of the *Herald* he printed a lengthy "Plan of Union" by James O'Kelly, the first leader and still the most prominent preacher among the Southern Christians. In response, Smith offered "An Overture for Union" in the *Herald* of February 16. Smith wrote, "I really hope the time is near when something will be done to bring about an union among those who believe in the same Lord, and law."³⁶

Typically impetuous, Smith was hoping and planning for religious union with a church, none of whose members he had ever met, which he probably did not know existed until a few months before and concerning which he still knew very little; yet, even assuming that other Christian leaders shared his desire for a joining of forces, how to bring the two groups together posed serious practical problems. Consistent with their principles, neither group could have any authoritative organization to speak for the churches. The Southern Christians did hold an annual General Meeting, which served as an emotional revival for their preachers, provided a forum for doctrinal discussion, and gave opportunity for the ordination of ministers and the public acknowledgement of new churches in their fellowship. Since the New England churches did not at that time allow such formal meetings, Smith resolved to take the opportunity of the Southern Meeting as the best place to begin personal contact between the two movements. For this purpose, Smith sent Frederick Plummer, a brilliant young preacher from Massachusetts who was to play a prominent role in the later history of the Christian Connection. Although he carried a letter from Christians in New England to the Meeting, he was by no means an official representative of the churches in his region, and he could not

³⁶ *Herald Of Gospel Liberty*, November 10, 1808.

have hoped to accomplish much more than simply make the friendly acquaintance of the Christians in the South.

The Meeting took place on May 26, 1809, at Shiloh, in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. Officially, Plummer's mission went smoothly. The assembly cordially accepted the letter that he brought from New England, and they entrusted him with a formal reply that recognized the common ground which they shared. They wrote:

We feel thankful to God that on these points we may agree with you. O that the Mighty God of Israel may out his Holy Spirit upon us! We do love you and most ardently desire your prosperity and happiness.³⁷

Unofficially, Plummer got himself into some trouble. Joseph Thomas, one of the signers of the letter just quoted, bitterly recorded his complaint:

At candlelight I was set forth to preach. I did so, to the joy of my own soul, and thought to the comfort of others. But E. Plummer (from New England) immediately rose up in the congregation, and in his discourse observed, such preaching (alluding to mine) was not fit for God, men nor Devils." This, with some other impertinencies, disgusted the most of the preaching brethren, so that he was but coolly received. Though he came to open a communication between, and to unite the Christians in the East and South together, he did not succeed in his mission.³⁸

This account, though obviously slanted and full of the resentment of a boy (Thomas was then eighteen years old) who had been publicly humiliated, still shows that the first impressions the two movements gained from this meeting were far from uniformly happy. Only twenty-two himself, Plummer may be partially excused for his foolishness, but tactfulness never became one of the strong points in Elias Smith or the preachers he influenced.

³⁷ *Herald*, June 23, 1809.

³⁸ The Life Of Pilgrim Joseph Thomas, Containing An Accurate Account Of His Trials, Travels, and Gospel Labours (Winchester, Va.: Foote, 1817), p 44.

A more formidable barrier to union than a young preacher's rudeness, however, was the emerging disunion among the Southern Christians themselves. James O'Kelly either neglected to attend the 1809 meeting, or refused to sign the friendly letter to New England. In either case, O'Kelly nurtured a growing resentment against the tendency among the Christians in the South to incline toward the acceptance of immersion as the correct form of baptism, and to reject infant baptism as unscriptural. He argued that sprinkling or pouring were not only acceptable forms of baptism, but that they were the only valid forms, and that it must be administered to children. At the General Meeting of 1810 in Pine Stake, Virginia, he tore the churches apart by attempting to bind his beliefs on the whole movement. Although they revered him as a leader, a large majority of the churches refused to follow O'Kelly in this matter, some because they favored immersion or the baptism solely of believers, others because they felt the issue should be left to the judgement of the individual conscience. When the decision became apparent, their old leader withdrew from fellowship with those preferring immersion, never again attended any General Meeting or conference, and spent the remainder of his life in a voluntary but sad obscurity as a local preacher. The defection of O'Kelly was the single greatest catastrophe that befell the Southern Christians.

Delayed and frustrated by the controversy surrounding O'Kelly's actions, Elias Smith did not give up trying to effect a union with the churches in the South. Such a union would probably not have meant any organizational tie, for the New England Christians at least still opposed any meeting or conference that had the slightest official character, and their Southern counterparts had rejected O'Kelly in part on this very issue, preferring to keep all authority of church government within the local congregation. Instead, Smith sought mainly to increase the ties of fellowship and form an intellectual union of teaching and an emotional union of interest, effort, and encouragement. Because the two movements covered different geographical areas, the actual merger of congregations did not arise as a major issue.

No New England preacher attended the disastrous General Meeting of 1810, but Smith himself journeyed to Salem, Virginia, for the 1811 Meeting. At this time, Smith encouraged his would-be brethren to visit in New England on a regular basis, and Northern visits to North

Carolina and Virginia became longer and more frequent. Probably because of their advocacy of immersion, O'Kelly, absent from the Meeting but still a powerful disruptive influence in the church, opposed stronger ties with the Christians in the North. Smith later reported to the readers of the *Herald*:

The following from a brother in Virginia to his friend in Philadelphia, will give them some idea of the state of affairs there, since that meeting. It is stated that Mr. O'Kelly endeavored to prevent a union between the brethren in the North and South. The brother says, "The church near me, is in peace; Mr. O'Kelly has written them a letter, but they pay no attention to it. - Wherever the Christian name is professed, the churches prosper; but where Mr. O'Kelly prevails, they are cold as ice, and hard as stone."³⁹

The "friend in Philadelphia" to which this passage refers may have been the editor himself, for Smith had moved to that city in the preceding winter. His preoccupation with building a relationship with the Southern Christians undoubtedly grew partly from living in a city where he could enjoy personal fellowship with one of their congregations. On the other hand, he may have originally moved to Philadelphia in the hope that from such a central location he could better work for unity among the Christians, and also build a national readership for the *Herald*.

During these years, dissension among the churches in the South grew, and the lines of division became more distinct and harder for any peacemaker to cross. William Guirey, the second most influential Christian preacher in the South, had opposed O'Kelly on the baptism issues. Even though O'Kelly's proposals were defeated, Guirey also withdrew in 1810 from close fellowship with the main body of the Christians, and the churches which shared his views came to be known as the Christian Baptists. The remaining churches, that chose not to follow either leader, divided among themselves, mainly on a regional basis, as area conferences began to compete with the General Meeting.

³⁹ *Herald*, January 17, 1812.

These divisions plagued the Southern Christians for an entire generation, and rendered impracticable Smith's dream of a united church. Nevertheless, various groups did develop closer ties with the New England Christians, and certain New England preachers had an influence on events in the South. Naturally allied to the cause of those who favored baptism by immersion, Frederick Plummer joined with John Gray in a preaching tour of North Carolina in 1812, which, Gray wrote from Raleigh, "caused a general stir among the people; not only in this City, but in the vicinity."⁴⁰ Since many of their beliefs, including immersion, rejection of infant baptism, and denial of the Trinity, ran counter both to O'Kelly's influence and the general religious views of the denominations, one can easily believe that they caused a "stir," especially since Plummer's preaching style was anything but subtle. Although Elias Smith soon returned to live in New England when his plans for himself, the *Herald*, and the church did not prosper, Plummer moved to Philadelphia and spent most of the next forty years preaching in its vicinity. An interesting highlight of Plummer's later life was a debate on the trinity with William McCalla, a Presbyterian preacher better known for his earlier debate on baptism with Alexander Campbell.

By the 1820's, the tie between the Christians in the various parts of the country had become strong enough so that others began to consider them, if they did not always consider themselves, as one religious movement. At the same time, they began to be called the "Christian Connection," perhaps alluding to churches from different regions having "connected" in one fellowship. Yet, despite partial successes, their effort at unity must be finally adjudged a failure. The connection proved too loose to bind men's hearts. The "Christian Church, South" developed a sense of its own separate identity, and the Christians in the West never became even well acquainted with the churches in New England. Superficial communion never deepened to spiritual brotherhood.

Among the reasons for this failure, one is clearly that Smith and his associates made contact with the O'Kelly movement at a time of approaching internal crisis that demanded virtually all the attention and energies which the Southern leaders possessed. The New England

⁴⁰ *Herald*, June 23, 1809.

movement was then at the flood tide of success, and the zeal of its preachers naturally sought to overflow into new territory; but the churches in the South had seen their own tide of progress, so strong for the first decade of their existence, turn now against them, and threaten to sweep away what they had thought was founded on the rock. Smith saw fellowship with new brethren as a wonderful opportunity, while too many of the Southerners viewed the newcomers as a disturbing peril. In contrast with the attempts by Plummer and others to influence the doctrinal discussions in the South, it apparently never occurred to the Southern leaders to journey and preach in New England, because they were fighting for the very survival of the churches in their home area. When Smith decided that the Southerners were in error on some points, he wanted to teach them. When O'Kelly decided that the New Englanders were in error, he just wanted them to go away.

Also, the appearance of Elias Smith as the chief advocate of the New England churches did not help the case for unity. Brilliant but unstable, holding increasingly extreme doctrinal views, and harassed by financial pressures that soon forced him into bankruptcy and selling the *Herald*, Smith did not well represent the strengths and virtues of his fellow Christians. At his best, his sharp wit and bold heart made him a great preacher and formidable antagonist to foes; yet, the work of conciliation and creation of unity among strangers requires more prudence than brilliance, and more patience than courage. However, Smith was far from at his best during this period. Not long after ending his attempts to attain fellowship with the Christians in the South, he left the fellowship of Christians in the North to become a Universalist.

Finally, it seems extraordinary that the New England Christians did not make early attempts to form closer ties with Barton Stone and the churches in the West. Although separated from them by a greater distance and the Appalachian mountain range, they had numerous and increasing personal contacts with them, since many pioneers from New England followed the frontier and settled in the regions of the Midwest where Stone's influence had penetrated. Yet, Eastern Christians who united in Stone's fellowship seldom returned to New England, and not until rumor of the Western churches had been heard in the East for twenty years, and the progress of evangelism from the two groups met in Ohio and New York, did leaders of the New England movement journey to the West. Elias Smith, Abner Jones, Daniel Hix, Mark

Fernald—in short, the first and greatest preachers among the Christians—never met Barton Stone, who was eloquently pleading for the same goal they sought, a return to Christianity firmly and entirely based on the word of God. Had they reached out and discovered, instead of O'Kelly's tired bitterness, Stone's magnificent love, his clear intelligence, and calm sweetness of spirit, it might have made a difference in their history.

Chapter 5: The Movement At Flood Tide: Southern New England

One shall say, I am the Lord's; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel. Isaiah 44:5

During the years from 1808 to 1832, the Christian cause experienced phenomenal growth throughout New England, and its evangelists spread their message across the opening frontiers of New York, Ohio, and Ontario. At the beginning of this period, the Christians had to overcome their own poverty of resources, the contempt of their neighbors, and the violence of their opponents. By its conclusion, they faced the subtler and more perilous trials of wealth, respectability, and ease.

While Elias Smith was giving most of his time and energy to writing and editing the *Herald*, Abner Jones devoted himself to the less glorious, but necessary, task of preaching for the small churches in Eastern Massachusetts. Having helped to establish the churches in Boston and Nantasket, Jones moved in 1809 to Salem. Salem was then a busy seaport, and Jones made many converts among its restless citizens. The plea of the Christians usually found its most eager listeners along the western frontier, but Salem faced a different frontier: the sea. All along the coast, Christian churches sprang up in the seaports that handled the ever growing trade of the young United States.

Jones did not confine his labors to Salem, but worked also with other new congregations in nearby towns. In addition, Christians in many distant places naturally looked to Jones as a leader, and he accepted their invitations to visit them. Throughout his career, the churches valued his preaching, but they more highly esteemed his character; they enjoyed the encouragement of his presence as much as the instruction he gave them from the pulpit. Jones's influence helped the area stretching northward from Salem to Kittery, Maine, to remain a stronghold of the Christians.

In 1811, Jones began preaching in Assonet, a village not far from Dartmouth, Massachusetts, where Daniel Hix preached for his large and prosperous congregation. Just as in Salem, area churches were growing and united, and Jones had a strong local base from which to carry out his evangelistic efforts. His first stays in Salem and Assonet were perhaps the least troubled time in his life. Always a very sensitive man, he gained strength from the Christians around him; and the steady stream of converts that poured into the churches because of his preaching gave a constant reassurance that the Christian message could and would change men's lives. He felt such horror at the eternal punishment awaiting the lost that each soul "saved" came as a deep, personal relief. To Jones, the great revivals in which he participated proved the existence and love of God, because they demonstrated God's spirit moving in the hearts of men.

This was a dangerous attitude, which caused Jones severe problems later in life. By claiming outward success as proof of God's presence in his work, he undermined the foundations of faith for times of adversity, when converts were few. When his preaching did not "work", he despaired. Further, judging preaching by the false standard of how many people respond leads quickly to the temptation to change the gospel into a message to which more people will respond. The word of God sometimes finds little or no acceptance in a community; and only religions tailored for human pride can promise invariable success. Jones's preaching gradually lost its challenge to the world. He gave up the demanding intensity of a prophet for the emotionalism of a revivalist. Thirdly, to accept a large number of converts as proof that God approves of a particular church implies that other growing churches must also be pleasing to God. If the Christians made one thousand converts, but the Baptists made two thousand, it seemed that God had given the Baptists a double blessing of his spirit. Experience became the test of truth instead of the Bible. The unique doctrinal basis for God's people was lost. The more Jones valued and emphasized experiential religion, the more he damaged his original plea for Christianity based on the New Testament.

Jones moved in 1815 to Hopkinton, a town approximately thirty miles west of Boston. The Christians were not numerous in Hopkinton, nor did the surrounding towns have Christian churches at all. Jones hoped to establish and build up congregations, just as he had in Salem several

years before. He completely failed. In 1817, Elias Smith's announcement of his conversion to Universalism staggered the Christian cause in Massachusetts and the coastal areas of New Hampshire and Maine, where Smith had done most of his preaching. Although few Christians followed Smith out of the church, his defection marked the beginning of a decade of slow growth in Massachusetts. The church in Hopkinton did not prosper: and the meager financial support which it provided Jones soon added the pressure of poverty to his other discouragements. When an epidemic struck the town, he heeded the pleas of his neighbors and took up again the practice of medicine, thereby relieving his family's financial distress while helping to ease the physical distress of others. After six hard years, he moved back to Salem in 1821. What remained of the church in Hopkinton gave up the struggle and joined the Baptists.

During his stay in Hopkinton, Jones took his first stand on two issues that later became important among the Christians generally. He decided that drinking alcoholic beverages, even in moderation, was a sin. This may not seem a strange or daring position to modern Christians, but it provoked a great controversy in New England of the 1820's. Especially along the frontier, Americans loved their liquor, and alcoholism was a far greater problem in 1820 even than it is in 1980. Preachers joined in the social drinking of their congregations without a second thought, and, when Jones refused to drink at all, he amazed his friends and enraged his enemies. Also at this time, Jones joined the Masonic Order. The Masons had not yet aroused the fears of their fellow citizens, and still enjoyed the prestige of having numbered among their members most of America's founding fathers, including George Washington. Yet the order's social exclusiveness, its vaguely deistic religion, and above all its secrecy came to appear un-Christian and un-American to many people, and eventually produced a violent reaction that resulted in major political parties being formed whose chief goal was the destruction of the Masons. Because of this controversy, Jones later left the Masons, but he never believed them to be subversive to either Christianity or democracy.

When Jones returned to Salem, he found the church there in nearly as deplorable a condition as the one in Hopkinton. A large portion of the congregation enthusiastically believed that the Holy Spirit was working miraculously to guide them. They prized emotional display and had

little patience with rational discussion of the Bible. They naturally regarded those who did not share their enthusiasm as second-class Christians. Any caution or warning they dismissed as unspiritual. Jones wrote, "They professed to be governed by the Spirit, and a most perverse spirit it was."⁴¹ This spirit divided, embittered, and eventually destroyed the congregation.

Despite his own emotionalism and uncertain views on the work of the Holy Spirit, Jones retained enough common sense and humility not to trust wild enthusiasm; and he detested the self-righteousness with which the enthusiasts looked down on their calmer brethren. Unable to prevent the breakup of the church, he began patiently to pick up the pieces and build a new congregation. To support himself, he practiced medicine, taught school, and gave instruction in singing. All these expedients did not save him from poverty, partly because his generosity sometimes exceeded his prudence. Once he gave his last dollar to a beggar, and then worried how to provide food for his own family's supper. When a townsman gave him five dollars later that day, he accepted it as a providential reward for his liberality. Such unselfishness and faith, no matter how misguided, makes a strong impression; and Jones slowly but surely reformed the church until its numbers and prosperity reached an all-time high. By 1828, they had grown enough to build a new meeting house on Herbert Street. When Jones finally left Salem two years later, he could look with pleasure on a difficult job well done; but he yearned again for the excitement of revivals, and he moved west to New York State in search of greater evangelistic opportunities.

Next to Abner Jones, the second most important figure in the history of the Christians in Massachusetts was Daniel Hix, the former Baptist preacher whose conversion to the cause greatly strengthened the Christians' ranks. Honored and beloved in his lifetime, Hix has been almost completely forgotten in history, but his unique personality deserves a record.

He was born in about 1755 in Rehoboth, Massachusetts, a village in the southeastern portion of that state. His father had a few years before emigrated from England, from which he brought his religious faith as a

⁴¹ A.D. Jones, *Memoirs of Elder Abner Jones*, p.81.

Baptist. Having founded a Baptist church in Rehoboth, the elder Hix served for many years as its preacher, although he was never a professional minister. Limited by the village's tiny population, the congregation grew humbly and slowly; but it became the most influential religious group within the community. So greatly did they come to esteem their preacher that, when old age and its attendant illness finally rendered him incapable of fulfilling his office, they chose his oldest son, Jacob, to take his father's place.

Thus, Daniel grew up under the shadow of his father's reputation and position in local society. Like many preachers' sons, he felt pressured by, and rebelled against the assumption by other people that he shared his father's faith and would naturally follow in his father's footsteps. Jacob's decision to become a preacher did not help. For a brief time, Daniel indulged himself in adolescent riot, and took malicious pleasure in the embarrassment which his conduct caused his older brother; but this stage passed with his coming to maturity. His resentment against his father turned to loving admiration; and he settled down to respectability, then grew to a life of religious devotion, which soon flowered in religious service. Around 1780, he began preaching for a Baptist church in the nearby town of Dartmouth. He remained the minister of this congregation until a short time before his death nearly sixty years later.

For the first quarter of a century of his work in Dartmouth, Hix built up one of the largest and strongest Baptist churches in New England. By 1805, when he first met Abner Jones and Elias Smith, the membership of his congregation exceeded 400, an amazing total for a small town church in a state where Congregationalism was the official religion. As already described in chapter two, Hix accepted the plea to restore Christianity by the standard of the New Testament and left his denomination to become simply a Christian. For a man of his age and position, this decision required unusual courage, for it" meant not only bitter conflict with family and friends, but a repudiation of some of the principles by which he had lived all his life and which he had taught to others for so many years. He was the only prominent denominational preacher who ever dared to join with the New England Christians.

Hix's preaching brought hundreds of converts into the Christian ranks. Through his labors, churches were established throughout the area from

New Bedford north almost to Boston, and some of these congregations grew to have hundreds of members. Often working in concert with Smith or Jones, he regularly toured the region and preached to crowds that at times numbered in the thousands. The Christians had a fine sense of drama, and sometimes staged great processions in which they marched singing through the streets to church with Hix in the lead. Hix always led in whatever he did. His strength of character helped give the churches in his area the stability and peace which the Christians so sadly lacked elsewhere in Massachusetts and in the South.

He was a man of extraordinary courage, both physically and morally. Once, when he was visiting, the roof of a house suddenly caught fire. Quieting the panic of the other people present, he commanded them to bring buckets of water, scrambled up on top the house and coolly put out the flames with the water that was handed up to him, ignoring frightened pleas for him to jump down and let the house burn. He went about saving souls with the same fearless determination with which he saved that house. No criticism or threat ever moved him to change his course. Whether before the Baptists at his trial for heresy, or in confrontations with violent opponents of his preaching, or in disputes among the Christians, he followed perfectly Kipling's famous advice to "keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you." When the War of 1812 broke out, sixteen members of the Dartmouth church who opposed the war imprudently decided to blackmail Hix by threatening to leave the church unless he preached that Christians could not fight for their country. New Englanders generally hated the war so much that they seriously debated seceding from the United States, and perhaps the group of dissidents felt that Hix would not dare to refuse them on such an unpopular issue. He dared. No pacifist, and not pleased with the attempt to pressure him, he calmly told those who said they would walk out that they could go out the same door they came in. That was the end of the problem.

More than any other prominent Christian preacher, Hix held his mind clear from the blind emotionalism that plagues religion. Even while enjoying the enthusiastic revivals that characterized the Christian cause, he kept his feelings under the guidance of his principles. The following story of how he once briefly gave himself up to play the part expected of a revivalist illustrates both his wisdom and his humor:

I was feeling pretty well, and the people soon began to respond, "Amen!" So I thought I would see what Daniel Hix could do. I stopped and clapped my hands and shouted "Glory!" and such another shout you never heard. Mary got scared and went over into another pew with an old acquaintance. When I came down from the pulpit, they gathered round me, saying, "Elder Hix, you are full of the grace of God." "Oh," said I, "full of Daniel Hix." And if you think I ever got a chance to preach there again you are mistaken. That effort was Daniel Hix — poor stuff.⁴²

When nearing the end of his long life, he was asked to preach at the installation of his young successor in the pulpit of the Dartmouth church. He chose for his text, "Preach the word." As he told George Kelton, another young preacher, "Now, George, if you are going to preach, don't preach Kelton, - it will be poor stuff; don't do it." For Daniel Hix, the only thing ever worth preaching was the Word.

His loyalty to the Bible caused Hix to go beyond even Smith and Jones in rejection of Protestant theology. He despised Calvinism as a poison that destroyed the souls of men. In particular, he denied that faith without works can save men from their sins. Jones understood Biblical teaching on this point, but, in practice, allowed the testimony of emotional conversion to overshadow the need to obey God's commands. Hix's preaching, therefore, even more than Jones's, emphasized the practical duties of a holy life. With his own character as sterling proof, he insisted that being a Christian meant living a special kind of life. The Christian movement at its best resulted in the moral reformation of thousands of lives, because men such as Hix preached that Christianity brought not only forgiveness from the guilt of sin, but freedom from the practice of sin.

By 1823, when the *Christian Register and Almanac* listed thirteen Christian churches in Massachusetts, nine of those congregations owed their existence, at least in part, to the work of Daniel Hix. A comparison of the *Christian Register* with other sources demonstrates that many small groups of Christians were not included in the formal list of churches, either because they had no official organization or had

⁴² Stephen Andrews, *A Sketch of Elder Daniel Hix*, (New Bedford: Anthony, 1880), p.25

little contact with the main body of the movement. A higher percentage of these informal assemblies may have originated apart from any contact with Hix, because they were often located in areas other than the southeastern part of the state. Yet, Hix's influence on the course of the Christian movement in Massachusetts as a whole was unmistakably great. Although far less important a figure in history than Abner Jones, he made a larger direct impact on the growth of Massachusetts churches than any other man.

From Hix's work in the area around Dartmouth, the Christian cause naturally entered neighboring Rhode Island. Elias Smith also had contacts in Rhode Island, and his second wife was a native of the state. One of the first congregations to be established was in Cumberland. About the same time, Christian influence from Connecticut resulted in the organization of a church in Westerly, in the opposite corner of the state from Cumberland. From both directions, the Christian churches spread until they geographically covered the state, but they remained few in number and mostly small in size, although a congregation in Coventry reached a membership of 450 by 1842, and the little town of Portsmouth could boast two Christian churches in that same year.

The most prosperous and enduring Christian church in Rhode Island arose, as one might expect, in Providence. As early as 1815, Christians had regularly met for worship in Providence, but this first effort died out. By 1835, however, a new church had grown up sufficiently strong to build a meeting house at the corner of Pawtuxet and Fenner streets. Their building activities over the next few years clearly indicate increasing numbers and prosperity. In 1838, they enlarged their original building so it could seat 250 people. Three years later, they felt compelled to move to a new church building at the corner of Broad and Fenner streets. The new building had a seating capacity of 700, although the church numbered around 200 members. Not only had they grown, but they were expecting and planning for greater growth.

Christian churches spread rapidly through eastern Connecticut in the movement's first two decades. The 1823 *Christian Register* lists twelve congregations in the state, only one fewer than in Massachusetts. Most of these churches were in small towns in an area of east central Connecticut, centered around Windham. However, the early success did not lead, as in Massachusetts, to strong and lasting presence. One

can advance several reasons for this failure. First, and perhaps most importantly, no leading figure among the Christians invested his life in building up the Connecticut churches. Enduring strength elsewhere in New England largely sprang from the efforts of a few remarkable individuals. No men of the character of Daniel Hix, Abner Jones, Mark Fernald, and Elijah Shaw arose to lead the Christians in Connecticut. Partly as a result, no single congregation in the state attained the level of prosperity and stability to serve as a base for evangelistic efforts. In Massachusetts, the churches in Dartmouth and New Bedford provided constant leadership for decades. One such strong congregation gives more support to the long-term progress of a movement than a dozen smaller, weaker churches. Also, the Christians never gained a firm foothold in central and western Connecticut, where the great majority of the state's people live. Of the dozen congregations in 1823, all but one was located east of the Connecticut River. Elias Smith's defection to the Universalists and his long service as a Universalist minister in Hartford may have discouraged Christian attempts to establish churches in that part of the state. Whatever the full reasons, the Christian connection declined and virtually died in Connecticut at a time when it was still growing vigorously in the other New England states. The 1842 Christian Register counted only four churches with a total of 207 members.

Chapter 6: The Movement At Flood Tide: Northern New England

Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy. Isaiah 9:3

While establishing a significant number of churches in the southern New England states, the Christians enjoyed their greatest successes to the north, in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. The small towns of this region proved a fertile field for Christian preaching from 1810 onwards, just as they had provided the birthplace of the movement a decade earlier.

Early efforts in Vermont centered around Woodstock, the boyhood home of both Abner Jones and Elias Smith. Woodstock at this time contained more than 3000 souls. Although this made it the largest "city" in the state, it might better be described as a booming village. In September, 1810, four years after Smith started the church in Woodstock, Frederick Plummer moved into the area at the invitation of some Christians in the south part of town. He found several small groups of Christians meeting in the vicinity, with a total membership of around 100. In partnership with Uriah Smith, who continued to live and preach in Woodstock, Plummer began touring the area, preaching every day to whatever audience would sit still and listen. Only twenty-three years old, he gathered a small harvest of converts by his youthful energy and piety, but nature (or, as Plummer would have insisted, Divine providence) soon gave his preaching terrifying assistance.

An epidemic broke out that November. The town was overcome "by the prevalence of the spotted fever, which swept many inhabitants into the grave as with a broom of destruction."⁴³ The townspeople began looking to their eternal welfare. Plummer's bold preaching had not accomplished much good the previous year in the delicate business of attempting to unite with the Southern Christians, but now his was the perfect voice, when death and hell pressed close, to call men to

⁴³ Quoted from unidentified sources in "A History of the Christian Church, Woodstock, Vt.", p.4

repentance. Standing in Oil Mill Brook, while he waited for someone to come forward for baptism, he cried out, "Woe, woe to Woodstock!"⁴⁴

Over the next year and a half, the Christians baptized 367 people in Woodstock and surrounding towns. Baptisms sometimes occurred in the middle of the night, even in winter, just as Paul and Silas baptized the Philippian jailor at night in the Bible. Even some of the leaders of the Congregational church asked Plummer to baptize them, although most continued to attend their old church. Having thoroughly won the respect of the town's citizens, Plummer obtained the free use of the Court House for the Sunday worship services of the Christians, and two of the little groups of Christians in town merged into the church meeting at the Court House. This congregation soon reached a membership of 160. Outside Woodstock, several new congregations sprang up, notably in Hartford and Hartland, the two towns where Abner Jones had taught school fifteen years before. In a letter dated January 1, 1812, Uriah Smith happily informed the readers of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* that the Christians had "collected several Churches by the New Testament name—two in this town, and one or more in almost every town round about this." In regard to Smith's mention of "the New Testament name," it is interesting to note that the Woodstock congregation called itself a Church of Christ.

Plummer left Woodstock in the summer of 1812 to embark on another attempt to join forces with the Christians in North Carolina. The church suffered from a lack of leadership for the next three years, until Jasper Hazen, a young farmer from nearby Hartford, moved to town and began preaching regularly. Ordained in 1810, Hazen had preached for the tiny church in his home town for five years, but the move to Woodstock brought him far greater opportunities for evangelistic service.

Hazen, like most Christian preachers, was not a professional minister. In addition to farming, he taught school and authored or edited a varied assortment of books and magazines, ranging from religious literature to an elementary spelling book. He tried his hand at tanning. He served as the Register of Probate. During his long stay in Woodstock, he prospered both financially and socially, acquiring a modest fortune and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

a host of friends. In 1823-24, he represented the town in the legislature. The Christians thus had for their preacher a leading citizen of the community, and they enjoyed the mixed blessings of respectability. The church grew, no longer with the fiery revivals that had characterized Plummer's ministry, but with the calm, slow progress of Christians patiently winning their friends. Over the next quarter of a century, the church gained approximately 400 converts, and its membership reached the 400 mark in 1843. Over almost this entire period, it was the largest and strongest Christian church in northern New England.

The Woodstock church continued to meet in the Court House until November, 1825, when Episcopalians began to hold Sunday services there as well, and the Christians felt a need for their own building. Hazen purchased a lot on Pleasant Street, the main road through town, for the considerable sum of \$200 on August 1, 1826. He must have been in a hurry to have a new meeting house, because within two weeks they laid the cornerstone, and they completed the entire building by the end of the year. Abner Jones preached the dedicatory sermon on January 18, 1827.

The building was a very imposing brick structure that seated approximately 600 people. The belfry contained a Paul Revere bell, with which Hazen called his congregation to worship. The face of the steeple carried a clock, which marked time for the citizens of Woodstock for half a century until it finally broke in 1876. Curiously, the building did not include a baptistry. Instead, Hazen dug an outdoor baptistry in the back yard of his house on Elm Street, where he baptized many of his converts. Hazen paid for the building out of his own pocket, although he was partially reimbursed by families in the church who "bought" pews at prices ranging from \$25 to \$100. Nevertheless, the project must have been a staggering blow to his finances, for the building could not have cost less than several thousand dollars. Hazen retained title to the property for many years, but eventually his heirs gave it to the church. The building is still standing in 1980.

While the Christians were growing so successfully in Woodstock, they were also spreading throughout most of northern Vermont. Although the original church in Lyndon had soon died after Abner Jones moved away in 1802, the seeds of faith which Jones had sown remained in the minds of the local people, ready to burst forth into new life when Jones

and other Christian preachers again visited the area around 1808 to 1810. About this time, a church began meeting in Charleston, a village north of Lyndon and the home of Jonas Allen, a shadowy figure concerning whom we know nothing except that some of his contemporaries ranked him with Jones and Elias Smith as one of the three "founders" of the Christian Connection. From Charleston, Allen brought the Christians' ideas to Danville, a town west of Lyndon, in 1810. The fact that Jones had published a book, *The Vision Made Plain*, in Danville the previous year suggests Christian activity in town even before Allen formally organized a church. To the south of Lyndon, the Christians established a congregation the same year in the Goshen community in the town of Bradford, another location where Jones had started a church some years before, only to have it fail while he preached in Massachusetts. The Goshen church resulted partly from a preaching visit by Elias Smith. Also in 1810, the Calais Church of Christ began its long history as one of the strongest small town churches in the Christian Connection.

New congregations continued to spring up over the next two decades in Orange, Washington, Lamoille and Caledonia counties. Jones and especially Hazen still aided the growth of the churches by evangelistic tours, but the congregations depended mainly for leadership on their local ministers, including Isaac Pettingill, Abel Burk, John Capron, Benjamin Putnam, Edward Rollins, and Jehial Hendee. As elsewhere among the Christians, these men were not generally professional ministers, nor could the churches have supported them financially, for most congregations remained quite small in size, rarely reaching 100 members. Their small size resulted largely from the sparse population and rugged geography of that part of Vermont. Seldom did a church have a population base of more than a few hundred people from which to draw its membership. Consequently, the Christians, though numbering only 50 or 60, were often nevertheless the largest religious body in their community. By 1823, the same *Christian Register* which listed only thirteen Christian churches in Massachusetts contained the names of thirty-four congregations in Vermont, the great majority of them in the region just described. One researcher has found evidence that at least sixty-six Christian churches existed at one time or another in the state.

The early Christian churches in Vermont did not rush to construct church buildings, but commonly met in private homes for a decade or more before erecting a permanent meeting house. This complicates historical research into their beginnings, because later town historians rarely mention religious groups except those who owned buildings. The ownership of property at least leaves a definite record that a church existed at a particular time, but many smaller groups of Christians never did possess church buildings. In regard to those congregations that did build houses of worship, the ones in Peth, Goshen, and Calais hold a special interest, partly because they remain standing today, and partly because the history of these buildings provides insight into the history of the people who worshipped in them.

Christians began meeting in the vicinity of Randolph around 1815. Those in the village of Peth, a few miles outside of Randolph, erected a small meeting house in 1817, where they assembled for worship for two decades. Unfortunately, the population of Peth declined and in time virtually disappeared, drawn away by western migration and the rise of new cities in Vermont. In 1840, the church disbanded and gave its building to Christians in the Snowsville community, who moved it to their village in 1844-45. However, when a railroad came through Randolph and bypassed Snowsville, that village also vanished just as Peth had done twenty years earlier. The church declined along with the community and eventually died, and the building is now known as the East Braintree Congregational Church. Its steeple still leans back, a sign that carpenters failed to assemble it correctly when they moved the building from Peth 135 years ago.

The Goshen meeting house dates from the 1820's. Like the one in East Braintree, it is a small, white-frame structure, but its Greek Revival style has a touch of elegance. Preserved by the state and local historical societies for its architectural beauty and historical significance, it is today the only acknowledged physical memorial of the Christian Connection in Vermont amid wooded fields that bear little once surrounded the meeting house. It stands on a secluded hilltop amid wooded fields that bear little trace of the numerous farms which once surrounded the meeting house. As in Peth and Snowsville, the people of Goshen long ago all went West or went to Town.

The Calais Church of Christ did not choose to build its own place of worship, but instead joined with the various denominations in town in the construction of a “union” meeting house, which they all shared, being given the right to use the building a certain number of Sundays each year in proportion to their financial involvement in the project. At first, the Christians only worshipped in the building six Sundays per year, but their use later increased, as the Christians grew to become the strongest religious group in the community. The building was finished in November, 1825. Although it now contains a wood stove, the original congregations worshipped without benefit of any heat. Yet, even when the temperature dropped to twenty below zero, the people crowded into their new church building, apparently delighted to sit and freeze to the glory of God. The building is now known as the Old West Church and is well-preserved, but no crowds gather there for worship. Only a handful of people now live close by.

Despite their success in certain areas of Vermont, the Christians never made comparable progress in the southern and western portions of the state. Two of the earliest Vermont congregations were established in Springfield in 1811 with a total of 71 members. They struggled on for years, but did not grow numerically, nor did they spread their faith to surrounding towns. About 1830, the Springfield church finally died out completely, and it marked the southernmost progress of the Christians ever in Vermont. To the west, the Christians founded congregations in Georgia, Milton, Shelburne, Lincoln, and North Shrewsbury. None of these churches ever had a membership over one hundred. More important than the list of small towns that had Christian churches in them is the list of larger towns that did not: St. Albans, Burlington, Middlebury, Rutland, and Bennington. This illustrates the fact that, except for the churches in Woodstock and Randolph, the Christian Connection in Vermont was overwhelmingly a rural phenomenon. In 1824, when Zadok Thompson published his *Gazetteer of the State of Vermont*, he reported Christian churches as existing in only four of the nineteen then largest towns in the state.

During their years of growth, the Christians in Vermont published at least two religious periodicals. Abner Jones and Jasper Hazen collaborated to bring out in Woodstock the *Gospel Banner*, a semi-monthly first issued on August 4, 1827. This paper continued for only one year. The history of the other periodical, the *Christian Luminary*, is

both longer and far more complicated. Edward Rollins began the paper in Danville in January, 1831. He was a prominent leader among the Christian Brethren, a group of approximately twenty-five very small churches in upper New England that had a short life as a denomination in the 1820's and 1830's. Rollins believed that churches should have creeds, and he attempted to introduce what was called the Rollins Discipline among the Christians, without much success. Instead, the Christian Brethren eventually abolished their creeds and merged with the Christians in 1836. As part of the growing cooperation between the two groups, Rollins transferred the *Christian Luminary* in 1832 to the editorship of Jehial P. Hendee, a Christian preacher in Stow. Hendee, whose son George later became governor of Vermont, published the paper for about two years.

While the Christian Connection was building to its high tide in Vermont, Christian preachers were also streaming across neighboring New Hampshire. Not only did they enjoy a similar degree of success, but the pattern of their progress closely resembles the development of their sister congregations in Vermont.

From the beginning, the coastal region remained a stronghold of the Christians in New Hampshire. The Christians managed to establish congregations in virtually every town in the area: Durham, Portsmouth, Greenland, Stratham, Rye, Exeter, North Hampton, Hampton, Hampton Falls, and Kensington. Six churches in these towns reached memberships of over one hundred, including two congregations in Portsmouth. During most of its history, the *Herald* was published either in Portsmouth or Exeter, and the paper and its editors provided leadership to the local churches. This was not an unmixed blessing, for the erratic behavior and eventual defection of Elias Smith had a greater impact in these churches than anywhere else in New England. When Smith left their ranks, it helped cause more than a decade of turmoil in which the churches ceased to grow and struggled merely to stay alive. By around 1825, however, the Christians began again to make many converts to their cause, and the churches reached a peak of prosperity in the 1830's and early 1840's. In 1838 alone, the churches in Stratham, Rye, Hampton Falls, and Kensington all built new meeting houses. By 1842, churches in the coastal region had a total of more than a thousand members.

Just as the strong church in Woodstock served as a base for Christian evangelism in Vermont, the influence of the coastal churches spread the Christian message northwestward across New Hampshire. As mentioned in chapter two, a church was organized in Boscaawen, near Concord, in 1808, and Christian preaching in the area probably dates back to before Abner Jones and Elias Smith joined forces in 1803. The original churches which Jones founded in Piermont, Hanover, and Lebanon did not survive, but a later Christian church in Grafton, where Jones lived while studying medicine, may have included in its ranks members of an earlier group gathered by Jones's preaching. As in northern Vermont, the villages and small towns of this mountainous area proved especially receptive to the Christian's plea. Perhaps their call for unity made more compelling sense to people divided into tiny denominational churches in communities that could scarcely support one church, much less five or six. In any case, rural communities such as Groton, Danbury, and Sanbornton had solid Christian congregations for many years. The 233 members which the three churches just named had in 1842 made up a larger percentage of the general population than the Christians reached even in their coastal stronghold.

One of the preachers instrumental in the expansion of the Christians into upstate New Hampshire was young Elijah Shaw, who later became a prominent national leader in the Christian Connection, and his history provides an example of how they achieved their remarkable success in the area.

Shaw was born in Kensington on December 19, 1793. In the revival of 1810, he and his parents were baptized along with twenty-five other converts in town. Almost immediately, he began preaching. Though only seventeen, he went on long trips through the small towns in the central part of the state during which he encouraged the scattered Christians and preached to the handfuls of people who would listen. As he matured, Shaw soon grew from youthful exhorter to a dynamic evangelist. Instead of worrying about how to attract an audience, he had to preach in barns and the open fields because no house could hold the crowds that gathered to hear him. Not long after his ordination in March, 1814, he began preaching regularly in Sanbornton at the invitation of two deacons in the Baptist church. He baptized many converts, including the daughter of one of the deacons, and organized a Christian church in October. Five years later, this church appointed two

"ruling elders" to govern its affairs. Shaw married in 1818 and moved to New York State, but his work in rural New Hampshire lived on in the congregations he helped establish.

The Christian churches around Lake Winnepesaukee in eastern New Hampshire owed their existence largely to the efforts of Mark Fernald, perhaps the most colorful of all the Christian preachers. A native of Kittery, Maine, Fernald grew up in the established Congregational Church, but the hypocrisy and moral laxity of the Congregationalists in Kittery so disgusted him that he came to dislike organized religion of all kinds. In later life, he indignantly remembered singing in the choir at age eighteen, when many of his fellow "worshippers" were drunk around him. Soon afterwards, he went to sea and served as a sailor for several years. The violence and majesty of the sea made a powerful impression on his mind, and he felt inwardly an increasing attraction to Christianity. His life remained outwardly irreligious, but not spectacularly sinful. As an old man, he ruefully recalled that "card playing for amusement was another fearful evil which I was led into," along with drinking dancing.⁴⁵ When he came in contact with the Christians in 1807, the combination of their serious call to a holy life and their rejection of established religion won him permanently to their cause, and he was baptized on the ninth of December in the ocean at Kittery.

Like Elijah Shaw, Fernald began preaching almost immediately after his conversion, although he was not ordained until nearly two years later. He had almost no formal education, and the only educational text he ever owned was a spelling book; but he schooled himself to become a clear and compelling speaker. John Hayley, the aged town historian of Tuftonboro, still remembered many years after Fernald's death how as a child he loved the old preacher's sermons with their bold simplicity and many illustrations, which were often drawn from sailing days long before. To use Hayley's picturesque phrase, Fernald "never knocked off the corners of the truth."⁴⁶ He preached lovingly, but plainly and without compromise. He had unusual self-possession. When a crowd of opponents in Salem, Massachusetts, interrupted worship by attempting to drive a cow into the church building, he charged the door and routed

⁴⁵ Life Of Elder Mark Fernald, (Newburyport: Payne and Pike, 1852).

⁴⁶ History of Tuftonboro, (Concord: Rumford, 1923), p. 65.

both the cow and the crowd. When, at the conclusion of a sermon in Mill Village, some young toughs threw a stray cat into his arms, he calmly extricated himself from the terrified animal and went on with the invitation.

Fernald spent most of his life building up the Christian churches in eastern New Hampshire and western Maine. In more than forty years of preaching, he traveled 100,000 miles, delivered over 12,000 sermons, and baptized more than 6,000 people. Partly as a result, the Christians established a dozen congregations in the small towns around Lake Winnepesaukee, including particularly strong churches in Wolfeboro and Tuftonboro.

The Christians failed to penetrate extreme northern New Hampshire, and they established only one congregation in the southwestern portion of the state. This was at Gilsum, where Edward Rollins began preaching in 1818. Rollins' evangelistic labors founded a church, but his theory of "discipline" kept it in turmoil for most of its history. Whatever tie existed between Rollins and Jehial Hendee drew Hendee down to Gilsum in 1835, where he preached the next three years, but to no avail, for the church dissolved shortly thereafter. Although not as pronounced as in Vermont, the Christian movement in New Hampshire outside the coastal area had a strongly rural cast. Most of the large mill towns in which the state's industry centered in the nineteenth century never contained Christian churches. Despite these limitations, Fernald, Shaw, and their brethren managed to form more than sixty congregations in the state with a total membership that reached a peak of over 3,000 in the early 1840's.

The Christians also achieved great success in Maine, but they did not form as distinctive a religious movement there as in the rest of New England. Many of their preachers worked in such close alliance with the Freewill Baptists that one cannot tell concerning certain revivals or even churches whether they belong to the history of the Christian Connection. In many places, the Christians followed the pattern familiar from New Hampshire of working with denominational groups in an attempt to win them over to a nondenominational Christianity, then gradually separating themselves from them if denominational loyalty persisted. Elsewhere, separation never occurred or, if it did, happened so late in the day that the Christians meanwhile had forgotten

their nonsectarian plea and formed merely another denomination among denominations.

Christian activity in Maine naturally spread first north along the coast from Kittery. Elias Smith invested some of his early zeal in establishing churches in towns such as York, Berwick, and Wells. In 1810, Smith even moved to Portland, helped start a congregation in the town, and began publishing the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* there; but he departed in December of that same year to Philadelphia, partly because he desperately needed more financial support for the paper, and partly to pursue further his contacts with the Southern Christians. Despite the exodus of its first preacher, however, the Portland church grew to become the largest of all the Christian churches in the state. Beginning with only twelve members, it reached a membership of over 300 by 1827. Even north of Portland, the Christians very early made their presence felt. The first issue of the *Herald* contains an anonymous letter dated June 20, 1808, which reports 170 baptisms in the towns of Lincolnville, Hope, Cambden, and Thomaston, and exultingly continues,

Upwards of one hundred in each of these towns have professed to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ since last spring, and the work is now spreading marvelously....May God have mercy on such ministers as are found fighting against the work of God, when it does not come in their own way.

Although this particular revival did not result in the establishment of enduring congregations, other evangelistic efforts did have lasting success and dotted the state with Christian assemblies. As early as 1811, Christian preaching reached the northern frontier town of Canaan, where eventually four congregations arose as a result.

Unlike in the other New England states, the Christians managed to penetrate with their ideas every major population region of Maine at one time or another. They found the most fertile field for converts in the small towns and farming country between Rumford and Bangor, but isolated Christian churches sprang up all the way from Sanford, near New Hampshire, to Eastport and Monticello on the Canadian border. In 1842, there were at least 72 congregations in Maine, more than in any other New England state.

By the early 1840's, after forty years of outward prosperity, the New England Christians numbered more than 12,000, in approximately 200 congregations, and they were still increasing at a remarkable pace, with more than a thousand converts in a single year. The spectacle of apparent progress, however, could not wholly disguise the growing sense of uncertainty as to the direction the movement was going or should go. They had come a long way since Abner Jones's first plea to return to New Testament Christianity, but the plea itself had grown faint and indistinct in their minds; and "if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" The Christians were no longer quite sure who they were as a religious people, and they had almost completely forgotten who they had once wished to be.

Chapter 7: Doctrinal Developments And Problems

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion. Amos 6:1

Abner Jones and Elias Smith had called for a restoration of Christianity according to the clear teachings of the New Testament. They did not seek originally to found a denomination, but to call all men to live simply as Christians in the one church of Christ. The denominational world often despised and opposed them, but the fire of persecution only made their vision shine clearer. Yet, when opposition gave way to success, the years of prosperity which followed proved more destructive to their ideals than the years of struggle.

The first abandonment of their original goal occurred, however, not as the direct result of prosperity, but rather in response to a crisis which seemed to threaten the survival of the Christian cause. When Elias Smith first broke publicly with the Christians and embraced universalism in 1816, the defection of their leader caused panic in many congregations and grave concern among the Christians throughout New England. Seeing whole churches either follow Smith into Universalism or disintegrate in confusion and despair, many Christian preachers decided that they must take concerted action to save the movement from destruction. That same year, the Vermont Christians held a "denominational meeting" in Woodstock to discuss the crisis, and from this meeting developed a yearly general conference, to which most of the churches sent delegates. During the next few years, the Christians in other states formed their own conference and this naturally led to the formation of a national conference. Although the delegates at these meetings had no authority to bind legislation on the churches, they did occasionally take doctrinal positions and urge their brethren to accept the conference's decision. Also, the conferences ultimately gained practical control over the three leading religious newspapers among the Christians: the *Christian Herald*, the *Christian Palladium*, and the *Gospel Luminary*. The last two, although published in New York, had a considerable readership in New England. These papers came to speak with an official voice as denominational organs. The conferences also held effective control over most of the schools and colleges which the Christians established in later years. To sum up, in their reaction to the threat of disunion caused by Elias Smith, the Christians formed organizations which did preserve union, but at the

final cost of creating precisely what Smith and Abner Jones had originally sought to avoid: a new denomination. Beginning about 1825, the Christians began to refer unashamedly to themselves as a denomination among denominations, still pleading for unity among all the followers of Christ, but no longer insisting that unscriptural human organizations must be abolished to achieve that unity. Elijah Shaw wrote in 1842, “Lest should grow up into a sect, many, for a season, opposed all organizations, but... organizations are now becoming universal.”⁴⁷

In addition to the formation of denominational conferences, the Christians gradually changed their teaching concerning the organization of the local church. They had never achieved unanimity on this subject, but leadership in individual congregations had generally resided in the “elders,” who might or might not be preachers, but were overwhelmingly non-salaried citizens in the local community, rather than professionals hired from outside to come preach for the church. Some congregations, although not a majority, had more than one elder. As prosperity caused the Christians to develop a professional ministry; they increasingly looked to the preachers as the true leaders of the church, and elderships began to disappear. As late as 1846, Jasper Hazen still insisted in the *Christian Palladium* that every congregation should be governed by a plurality of elders, but his influence did not even preserve the eldership in the Woodstock church, where he had just completed thirty years as minister and one of the elders.

A symbol of the change in church leadership was the introduction of the term “reverend” as a title for Christian preachers. Early Christians in New England had indignantly rejected the term as being both vain and unscriptural. In 1813, Frederick Plummer refused to address his Methodist adversary in a debate as “Reverend,” not, as he explained to his opponent, out of disrespect to him, but out of proper respect for God. Elias Smith scornfully referred to “the- Reverend D.D.s” who regarded themselves as the guardians of other men’s consciences. By around 1840, the Christians began to acquire such “Reverend D.D.’s” among themselves. The change is sharply illustrated in the Woodstock church, where Elder Jasper Hazen was succeeded as preacher by his son-in-law, who styled himself Reverend Moses Kidder. The

⁴⁷ Sentiments of the Christians, (Exeter: Brown, 1842).

distinction between the two men endures today in the cemetery in which their bodies lie buried, where one stone proudly guards Kidder's reverend remains, and nearby another marks the resting place of "Jasper Hazen, Preacher of the Gospel."

One unusual development in the history of the Christians was the very early ordination of women. By around 1810, the practice of allowing women to "witness" during revivals concerning their own spiritual experience had expanded to include more general exhortations by women. This raised the issue of whether women should be allowed fully into the ministry and other leadership positions. On this point, two fundamental themes in the Christian movement clashed. On the one hand, a return to the New Testament as the perfect foundation for the church would make female preachers unthinkable, since the apostle Paul expressly forbade women "to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man." On the other hand, the Christians' zeal for open democracy in the church and their willingness to allow almost anyone to preach naturally extended itself toward female participation in the pulpit. The Christians chose to ignore Paul and ordain women. Not surprisingly, given the role of women in American society at large at that time, women ministers remained a small minority, and no woman became a major leader among the Christians as a whole. A few women attained good success as revivalists. David Millard, who later became one of the foremost Christian preachers and teachers, owed his conversion to the preaching of Nancy Cram in New York in 1814.

Along with problems of church organization, issues arose over the proper worship of the church. Just as they inevitably brought the temptation of forming a "respectable" clergy along denominational lines, success and prosperity led congregations, especially the larger churches in the cities, to desire "respectable" worship. In particular, instrumental music began to be heard in the churches instead of the a cappella singing which had first comprised the only music of the Christians. The change did not occur without a fight. The largest congregation in Maine, the Casco Street church in Portland, split down the middle in 1829, when a majority of the church introduced organ music into the worship. More conservative members left and formed the Temple Street church. The breach was never healed. In the minutes of their 1832 annual meeting, the preachers of the New Hampshire Christian Conference gave the following warning to their churches:

We would also let you know that it is our general opinion that the use of instruments of music in public worship are so far from being conducive of good that they are contrary to the spirit and genius of the Christian religion as revealed in the New Testament, and highly detrimental to the progress of holiness and spirituality in the church of God; we therefore recommend that scriptural liberty, divine spirituality, and primitive simplicity be conscientiously observed in all our churches.

Yet, departures from “primitive simplicity” continued to increase. As long as the first generation of leaders retained their influence in the churches, instrumental music found a place only in a few congregations, but new leaders were coming forward who rejected the “primitive” past. When Jasper Hazen left Woodstock, Moses Kidder soon filled the worship with the sounds of “the double bass, bass viol, flute, and clarinets.”⁴⁸ Mark Fernald, who detested instrumental music, could not persuade some of the churches in his home area not to use it, but they respected him enough to put up their violins when he visited to preach. Yet, even this limited personal consideration did not continue. When speaking once at an instrumental church, Fernald's eye disgustedly lighted on the organ, and he with heavy sarcasm announced to the crowd that they would “now sing and play to the glory of God.”

Another disturbing trend which continued among the Christians was the introduction of political controversy into the church. Just as Elias Smith had used his sermons to champion Thomas Jefferson along with Jesus Christ, all the most prominent Christian preachers at least dabbled in the muddy waters of politics, and some waded recklessly in, pulling their brethren after them. E.B. Rollins devoted much of his life to attacks on the Masons and Catholics in politics. Even so sane and fine a man as Daniel Hix helped publish a paper in Massachusetts that supported the beginnings of Know-Nothingism, the strange and disgraceful political movement that offered no policy to the American people except to fear and hate whoever differed from them in creed or color. Many Christians became involved in the temperance movement, and a few won election to state legislatures on the single issue of prohibition of alcoholic beverages. The most widespread and impassioned political involvement came, however, in the cause of the

⁴⁸ “A History of the Christian Church, Woodstock, Vt.”, p.12.

abolition of slavery. Mark Fernald and a great many others did not scruple to use the pulpit to proclaim the gospel of abolitionism along with the gospel of Christ. Such political issues were charged with emotion and caused inevitable tension within the church. Especially in regard to abolition, some thought Christians who disagreed with them were unfaithful to the Lord. Thus, the Christians found themselves in the unusual position of making political views a test of fellowship, at the same time as they tolerated almost any religious view. This built a wall between the New England Christians and their brethren in the South, and threatened to secularize their movement until it lost its distinctive religious identity.

Participation in the abolitionist cause brought the Christians into increasing contact with the Unitarians, a liberal denomination centered in Boston. Although largely holding unitarian views on the nature of God, the Christians had carefully distinguished themselves as evangelical unitarians, quite different from the liberal Unitarians. The foundation stone of Christian doctrine had been what is now called a "fundamentalist" view of the Bible as the all-sufficient, verbally inspired word of God. By the late 1830's, the theological liberalism of the Unitarians, who regarded the Bible as a precious but fallible document of human literature, had begun to challenge the Christians' faith. As early as 1834, Hende's *Christian Luminary* bore the ominous slogan on its front page, "Devoted to the cause of Liberal Christianity"; and, by 1845, at least some Christians had become comfortable enough with Unitarian doctrine to support a joint seminary at Meadville, Pennsylvania, where both professors and students were divided between the two denominations.

Perhaps the most serious problem facing the Christians by the 1830's was not a particular false doctrine, but rather an absence of doctrine at all. Although Smith and Jones had from the first valued morality more than theology, they also believed that the Bible contained certain essential principles, which were "plain, and easy to be understood." They felt that honest readers could find in the pages of the Bible a clear and certain standard of conduct; but, with the passage of years, the Christians grew increasingly reluctant to hold themselves or each other to the biblical standard. Jones's belief that toleration in matters of opinion could lead to unity in scriptural action gave way to vague appeals to every man to do "that which was right in his own eyes."

The Christians continued to grow in numbers, even while the meaning and purpose of their movement appeared steadily more uncertain. Eventually, growth became an end in itself. From Abner Jones on down, the Christians had accepted their remarkable success as proof of divine favor. They saw the flood of converts as only the beginning of a gathering of all believers in Christ into one united church. Whatever brought men together in the church must be right, and whatever separated them from each other must be wrong. It was a very American failing, which we still have with us today, to regard bigger as necessarily better.

This cult of church growth caused several disastrous consequences in the history of the Christians. First, it brought down the level of piety and commitment within the church at large. New “converts,” who believed nothing and continued to live as they pleased, might swell attendance at worship, but they added nothing to the real strength of the church. They tended to demoralize the more dedicated Christians and degrade the standing of the church within the community. E. B. Rollins chided his fellow ministers,

If their ambition be chiefly to swell their numbers, they certainly much mistake their calling. The multiplication of church members, unless they be such as God approves of, holy in heart and life, weakens instead of strengthens the church. It is but loading it with useless lumber, or building “with hay, wood, or stubble,” all of which will be burned up in the day of the Lord.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, many preachers did mistake their calling, and one of the worst effects of the mania for numerical growth was the prestige it gave some of the most unstable and unprincipled ministers among the Christians. When religious leaders are selected, not on account of their character and learning, but by their ability to draw a crowd, it is no wonder that soon the blind are leading the blind. As their first generation of great leaders grew old and died, the Christians began to listen to a class of preachers who were more showmen than saints, more publicity agents than biblical scholars. The Christians felt their loss, but did not know how to repair it.

⁴⁹ Christian Luminary, March, 1831.

The Christians' obsession with numerical growth also dangerously deflected them from other matters which required their most serious attention. Large congregations and exciting revivals gave such a glittering illusion of progress that many Christians simply ignored the gathering storm of problems which would shortly sweep away the work of decades. The building of their movement looked so imposing, they did not worry that it was built on sand. Part of the tragedy of the Christian Connection is not just that they failed in a crisis, but that they never even faced the true crisis of faith. The few voices among them who raised a warning were ignored or dismissed as negative and not properly enthusiastic.

Closely associated with their passion for outward success was the fundamental problem of emotionalism. In a self-sustaining, vicious circle, emotionalism both caused the distorted emphasis on numbers and resulted from that emphasis.

As mentioned earlier in this book, Abner Jones had wanted to believe that the Holy Spirit would give miraculous guidance in life. A few failures convinced him that he could not depend on such guidance, but he still thought that the Holy Spirit might choose to intervene on special occasions. Also, Jones believed that God was constantly working in the world through his divine providence. He saw in every important event a divine purpose. If he injured his foot while cutting firewood, God must want him to lie idle for a while and think on eternity. If sickness broke out near where he was preaching, God must want him to practice medicine. Whether such occurrences actually arose from God's providential care or not, Jones's faith in them was entirely emotional and quite beyond the judgement of reason. Only his belief in the Bible anchored him intellectually and put limits on his imagination.

Jones' emotional faith did not differ very much from the attitude of famous Christian leaders in other parts of the country. Barton Stone in Kentucky, for example, as a young man went farther down the road of emotionalism than Jones ever did. However, Stone allowed his understanding of the Bible steadily to enlighten his faith and control his emotions, while Jones permitted his emotions to cloud his understanding of the scriptures.

In no aspect of religious life did emotionalism cause greater difficulty for Jones and the New England Christians than in evangelism. It debased their motives for evangelism. Because they prized outward results as proof of God's grace, they sought new converts out of a need for personal reassurance, rather than from an unselfish love for souls. It debased their methods of evangelism. The emotional pleas of revivalism, always a part of Christian preaching, became almost the whole of their message, displacing the appeal to turn back to the New Testament. Preachers found it easier to frighten or excite people into the church than convince them. In 1842, Elijah Shaw boldly claimed, "Such revivals have ever been the life and soul of the Christian Connection. Their whole growth and prosperity have depended on them."⁵⁰ Another of their writers summed up this attitude in a single sentence, and thereby unknowingly provided an epitaph for his church. He wrote, "The spirit of the Christian Connection is the spirit of revivalism." Emotionalism finally debased the results of evangelism. Converts won by motional appeals often fell away when the emotions died out. This problem existed in all the revivalistic churches on the American frontier. One of the most depressing phenomena in American religious history is how whole areas of the country became "burned over" spiritual wastelands, where people had listened to a fiery revivalist, felt the flame of excitement blaze up in their hearts, then faced the cold realization that their experience lacked any substance or lasting meaning, and learned. to despise religion of any sort. Preachers who needed the constant excitement of revivals to keep their own faith up should not have been surprised when the churches they left behind withered into ashes.

By 1840, the Christians had had ample warning that the path which they were taking might lead to disaster. Although the total number of their churches and members kept climbing, even their outward success showed ominous signs of strain. While gaining a host of new members, they were losing many older ones. Approximately half of all congregations founded since the beginning of the movement had ceased to exist. More importantly, the Christians felt their loss of direction and the growing lack of any doctrinal standard. As far back as December, 1831, Mark Fernald confided in his diary his fear "that while we had

⁵⁰ Sentiments of the Christians. (Exeter: Brown, 1842).

enlarged our borders we had lost sight of some of the landmarks.” The fear would grow, until it became a terrible certainty.

Chapter 8: The Emergence Of Alexander Campbell

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Acts 6:10

Quite apart from the Christian Connection, other religious groups in America, and even in New England, were pursuing the goals of Christian unity and the restoration of the New Testament church in all its simplicity. Before we can begin the next chapter in the history of the Christians, we must first turn our attention to these efforts.

Robert Sandeman emigrated from Scotland to America in 1765. Under the influence of his father-in-law, John Glas, Sandeman had developed in Scotland an unusual religious view, which, like Abner Jones's, emphasized the New Testament as a practical standard of conduct, rather than as a subject for theological speculation. Having settled in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Sandeman began a church that put his ideas into practice. James Bailey quotes Webster as describing Sandeman's position in the following words:

He held that faith is only a simple assent to the divine testimony concerning Jesus Christ as set forth in the Scriptures. His followers hold to a weekly administration of the Lord's supper; to love feasts, which consist in dining at each other's houses in the intermission of public worship; to the kiss of charity on the admission of members; to mutual exhortation; to abstinence from things strangled, and from blood; to the washing of each other's feet; to a modified community of goods; to a plurality of elders, pastors, or bishops in each church.⁵¹

Although one may disagree with the inclusion of some of these practices as part of Christianity, the list clearly shows Sandeman's determination to follow the New Testament pattern as he understood it. Even though Sandeman soon moved to Danbury, Connecticut, the church which he founded in Portsmouth endured until 1820. Elias Smith could not help but have known of this church, but whether contact with them influenced the development of his own religious views remains a mystery.

⁵¹ History Of Danbury (New York: 1896), p.300.

In addition to the church in Portsmouth, Sandeman established congregations in Boston; Taunton, Massachusetts; and Newton, Connecticut. These churches proved relatively short-lived, but his work in his new hometown of Danbury had lasting significance. Arriving there in 1767, he quickly organized a congregation. Although encouraging correspondence with the local Congregational minister had helped originally persuade Sandeman to come to America, Danbury's establishment on closer inspection did not extend a cordial welcome to the religious revolutionary. In 1770, a judge ordered him out of town as an undesirable vagrant. When Sandeman refused to leave, he was brought into court and fined the appalling sum of L40, equal to well over a thousand dollars in 1980 purchasing power, and an absurd penalty for vagrancy. Sandeman pleaded that the law was not intended against harmless strangers but against persons of ungoverned and dishonest conversations."⁵² Perhaps he persuaded the judge, for the sentence was never executed; but Sandeman died the next year anyway. Half a century later, Alexander Campbell reminded the readers of the *Christian Baptist* how Sandeman and others had tried to restore the New Testament church, although he made it clear he did not think they succeeded. He paid Sandeman this tribute:

Sandeman was like a giant among dwarfs. He was like Sampson with the gates and posts of Gaza on his shoulders...Yet I now believe not one of them was exactly on the track of the apostles.⁵³

The Sandemanian church in Danbury long survived the death of its founder. After many years of growth and prosperity, a dispute arose in the church in 1817 over infant baptism, which the Sandemanians had always practiced. Since they could not find infant baptism in the New Testament, two families refused to baptize their children and left the church. Not knowing quite where to turn, they contacted Henry Errett, the preacher of a "Church of Christ" in New York City. Errett journeyed to Danbury, baptized the adults who felt that their baptism as infants had not been scripturally valid, and helped form them into an independent congregation. They were known as Reform Baptists, or Osbornites, after one of their leaders, until 1853, when they took the

⁵² Williston Walker, "The Sandemanians of New England", Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1901 (1902), vol. I, p.154.

⁵³ Christian Baptist, III (1826), p. 180

name "Church of Christ." During the first quarter century of its existence, this church remained very small, never numbering more than fifty members. The main body of the Sandemanians remained true to their old faith, and their church endured all the way into the twentieth century.

In 1823, a new influence began to be felt in New England religious circles. Alexander Campbell began the publication in Virginia of the *Christian Baptist*, which gained a large number of subscribers, including a few in New England. Campbell used the paper to launch a frontal assault on denominationalism and called for a restoration of "the ancient order of things" in the church. Article after article hammered at religious practices which he regarded as unscriptural, such as infant baptism and denominational organization. A brilliant man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and church history, Campbell scornfully attacked the ignorance and pretensions of the frontier clergymen. Never one to "suffer fools gladly," he battled against a host of foes from across the whole spectrum of religious opinion. The paper, along with its successor, the *Millennial Harbinger*, helped make Campbell one of the most controversial figures in America, revered by his associates, hated and feared by his opponents.

A copy of the *Christian Baptist* found its way into the hands of Francis Emmons, a college student from Vermont. Emmons grew up in the town of Georgia, where there was a strong Christian church; but he himself was a Baptist. In 1826, while attending Columbian College, he landed the unusual summer job of preaching for the Female Missionary Society of Richmond, Virginia. Disregarding his mother's advice to "be anything but a poor Baptist preacher," he set out on the circuit of poor, struggling Baptist churches in western Virginia to do his duty. During his visits, he began to hear of an arch-heretic named Alexander Campbell, who was disturbing the peace of the church. Securing his first copy of the *Christian Baptist*, he was outraged by Campbell's doctrine and decided to challenge him to debate, if the Baptist leaders in Virginia refused to do so. To prepare himself for the debate, he sent along with his challenge to Campbell an order for a complete set of Campbell's writings. By the time he received the books, summer had ended, and Emmons had to go back north to school at Brown University, where he had decided to finish his education.

At first, reading Campbell's works made Emmons miserable. They challenged the young man's whole view of Christianity, and their arguments proved impossible for him to answer. Yet, he fought against accepting them. After graduation from Brown in September of 1828, he took a position as minister of the First Baptist Church in Eastport, Maine. There, his mind was thrown into further turmoil by contact with William Ashley, the preacher of the Eastport Christian Church, to whom he showed the *Christian Baptist*. Ashley was so impressed that he decided to start putting some of Campbell's into practice. In place of the usual text-preaching, in which the minister took a single verse out of the Bible and developed his sermon from that verse alone, Ashley began lecturing on the New Testament in earnest, calling on the members of his church to study their Bibles as they had never studied them before. Emmons, pricked in his conscience by Ashley's willingness to act, tried to follow suit, but found himself miserably incapable of teaching the Bible as he realized it should be taught. At the end of 1829, he gave up in despair and moved to Killingworth, Connecticut, to teach school.

Ashley, however, did not give up. Continued study of Campbell's writings and the Bible convinced him that the controversial Virginian was teaching scriptural truth. In a letter to Campbell, he explained how his faith had changed.

When I first read some of the numbers of the *Christian Baptist*, I saw many things which I believed and admired — some that I disbelieved — and others, the truth of which I doubted.

As I had, for some years, been in quest of truth, I thought it would be nothing but reasonable that I should read the whole of your writings, before I made up my mind respecting the correctness or absurdity of your sentiments. I accordingly obtained a copy of your works, through the agency of brother Emmons and have given them an attentive perusal; and I can assure you in the sincerity of my heart, that my present views of the Christian religion are (in many respects) very different from what they were before I became acquainted with your writings; and I consider that my reading of them forms a new epoch in the history of my inquiries and efforts.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Millennial Harbinger, I (1830), pp. 63-64.

In the same letter, “wishing to see the ‘ancient order of things’ established in this place,” Ashley ordered complete sets of the *Christian Baptist* for a number of the members of his congregation. Distribution of Campbell's writings at Eastport had the desired effect, to bring some of the readers to share his views; but it also provoked a storm of controversy, which resulted in Ashley's dismissal from the pulpit of the Christian church. This did not end the call for change among the Christians, for a sizeable portion of the congregation remained convinced that weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, baptism for remission of sins, and genuine Bible study were necessary for a true restoration of the New Testament church. After nearly a decade of trying to persuade their fellow Christians, they formed a separate church that put these principles into action.

Although Ashley himself moved to New Brunswick, where he helped establish the restoration movement in Canada, he left behind in New England W.W. Eaton, a young convert who became a significant figure in the American restoration movement. Eaton began issuing the call for a return to the New Testament in 1833. Meanwhile, Benjamin Howard, a noted Christian Connection revivalist, had independently come in contact with Campbell's ideas and accepted the crucial doctrine of baptism for the remission of sins. When Howard's first convert, William Hunter, met Eaton in that same year, the two young men decided to join forces, and toured New England, spreading their new understanding of the scriptures among the Christians. To them goes the honor of having laid the foundations for churches in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts; and they were also mainly responsible for nurturing the seeds planted by Ashley at Eastport. Together, they published the first newspaper in New England that championed in its entirety the restoration plea. This was the *Christian Investigator*, first issued from Eastport in May, 1835. Eaton later distinguished himself as a professor at Bethany College.

The further career of Francis Emmons comprises one of the most frustrating chapters in restoration history. After his arrival in Connecticut in 1830, Emmons combined his work as a schoolteacher with preaching for a local Baptist church. When a few unguarded expressions revealed Emmon's “Campbellite” leanings, the Baptists fired him as their preacher, which did not injure him very much, since he had been preaching for free. However, they also raised a hue and cry

among the townspeople and persuaded parents from the various denominations to remove their children from school. Later, Emmons ruefully recalled that only four or five “Universalists or Infidels” trusted him to educate their children.

Forced by poverty to move elsewhere, Emmons visited Campbell at Bethany, West Virginia, in the summer of 1830. Probably because of Campbell's influence, he moved the following spring to the Midwest, where he preached for churches of Christ over the next twelve years. During this time, Campbell employed him at odd editorial jobs, including a second edition of Campbell's *Living Oracles* and as one of the secretaries for the debate between Campbell and Bishop Purcell. In 1842, he moved back to New England and practiced medicine in Boston. Astonishingly, he placed membership with the First Baptist Church, even though he not only still claimed to oppose denominationalism but continued to write regular articles for the *Millennial Harbinger*. He spent the rest of his life in the quiet respectability of useless scholarship, receiving honorary degrees, dabbling in politics, and denying by his life the principles he defended with his pen. Alas, Emmons was but the first in a long line of Christian intellectuals in New England who admired the New Testament church, but declined to work in building it up in their own community.

At the same time as Emmons, Ashley, and Howard were first discovering the plea for “the ancient order of things,” individuals in other areas of New England were also coming in contact with Campbell's writings. Worden Reynolds, a Baptist preacher in Manchester, Vermont, was converted in 1829. Having been one of the most successful Baptist revivalists in his state, he immediately turned his energies to the establishment of churches according to the New Testament pattern. The Baptists promptly disfellowshipped him, but he succeeded in organizing two small churches in Manchester and Pawlet. Reynolds' wife Emma was also excluded from Baptist fellowship, and her letter of protest to her old church contains perhaps the first clear and full written statement of restoration principles in New England. Dated February 4, 1830, the letter sets forth her convictions:

"That all sectarian religion is unscriptural, and at variance with the Christianity of the Bible. That the churches of Christ, in calling themselves by any other name, or assuming any other titles than those

applied to them in the scriptures, are carnal, and doing those things which Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (3d chapter,) reproveth and condemns. That the churches of Christ should be governed by the inspired writings, in the manner, form, and connexion in which they were delivered to the saints, exclusive of every other creed, rule, or confession whatever. That the bond of union among Christians is faith in Jesus Christ, and the ground of fellowship obedience to his commands. That the faith of Christians comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, and his belief of the testimony God has given of his Son. That there is no example, rule, or commandment given in the Bible authorizing anyone to tell his mental agitations, of the sorrows or joys he has experienced, in order for baptism; but that with repentance, and an honest and hearty confession of his belief in the Lord Jesus, he should be baptized for the remission of sins (through the blood of Jesus) and the reception of the Holy Spirit, as declared by Peter on the day of Pentecost. And that believers in Christ, so baptized, should first give themselves to God and to one another for his sake, and choose from among themselves men possessing such qualifications as are pointed out in the scriptures for overseers and servants of the church; and assemble on every first day of the week, if possible, for the social worship of God, and for their own edification by reading the scriptures, preaching, teaching, prayers, praises, exhortations, breaking of bread in commemoration of the Saviour, and contributing according to their ability and the necessities of the congregation."

Campbell admired this letter enough to print it in full in the *Millennial Harbinger*, along with the deacons' reply. Significantly for the future, the crucial problem in the deacons' eyes was not the purpose of baptism, but sister Reynolds' insistence that conversion did not require the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit.

The first missionary to arrive in New England to champion the cause of the primitive gospel was Nathan Porter, who was sent in 1833 by his church in Ashtabula, Ohio, to work in northern Connecticut. The choice of the area may reflect contacts made through the *Christian Baptist* and *Millennial Harbinger*, for Campbell had several subscribers in that region. Settling at Suffield, Porter began preaching there and in the neighboring towns. At first, he took his message to the denominational churches, but they quickly closed their doors to him. Frustrated, he must have wondered along with Worden Reynolds, "So long as they

will neither hear, nor read, how can they be corrected?”⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Porter made appointments to teach in private homes and reached the people as best he could. For a while, he enjoyed some success. By the end of April, 1834, he had baptized eight converts for the remission of sins, and gathered a church of about twenty members in Suffield. This church, however, did not endure; and Porter's mission ended in failure after only a couple of years.

The increasing number of subscribers from New England to the *Millennial Harbinger* and reports of churches having actually been organized there according to the New Testament pattern caused Alexander Campbell to consider how he might more actively assist “the restoration of the ancient order of things” in the region. Campbell knew well that, although the population and commerce of the United States were moving steadily and inexorably westward, America's intellectual center remained in New England, and that the ultimate success of his effort to build again the church on the old foundation of the apostles and prophets demanded an assault on the fortresses of orthodoxy in Boston and New Haven. He knew that those fortresses were troubled from within by the growing power of religious liberalism, which eventually destroyed the religious character of New England's great universities, such as Harvard. For a number of years, he had sent free copies of his paper to area seminaries in hopes of gaining a small foothold of interest, but without much success. Now seemed a good time to renew his efforts in a more personal and forceful manner. He decided to go himself.

Campbell set out in the summer of 1836 to visit New York and New England. As was his custom when making such evangelistic tours, he took with him several younger men, one of whom on this occasion was Tolbert Fanning, who later became one of the most important leaders within the churches of Christ in America. The first and less important part of the trip, a series of speaking engagements in upstate New York, went smoothly enough. While preaching at Auburn, Campbell sent Fanning on ahead into the unknown territory of Massachusetts to prepare a welcome for his chief. The hope was to gain an audience at Andover Theological Seminary. Meanwhile, Campbell and his other companions would follow up contacts in towns along their rout.

⁵⁵ *Millennial Harbinger*, IV (1833), p. 471.

Campbell's first stop in New England was his most productive one, even though he could scarcely have regarded it as anything but a relatively unimportant side trip, which he did not even mention in his account of the tour in the *Millennial Harbinger*. Through the influence of Worden Reynolds, Campbell won permission to speak to the Baptist church in the little village of Pawlet, Vermont. His stay lasted only two days, but it gave a great boost to Reynolds' efforts in the vicinity. Many of the Baptists were persuaded by Campbell's learning and eloquence to take a new look at their faith. The two small congregations which Reynolds had already established grew somewhat larger and stronger. Most importantly, Charles White, a physician from the nearby town of West Rupert, visited the services and was deeply impressed. He later recorded that three things struck home to him about Campbell's preaching: first, that Campbell knew the Bible more intimately and thoroughly than any other person he had ever met; second, Campbell's teaching on the Holy Spirit was a clear and satisfactory explanation of what denominational preachers had insisted was a mystery; and, last, that Campbell closed his sermons with a call for people to obey the gospel then and there. A devout Presbyterian, White could not bring himself to break immediately with his old religion, but he could not dismiss Campbell's insights into the Bible from his mind. Months of study convinced him that he must obey the clear commands of the New Testament in regard to baptism and many other subjects. After his conversion, he became the strongest pillar of a new congregation in his home town.

From Vermont, Campbell went on to Boston, where he arrived on August 3. He found that Fanning had been busy making contacts with the Christians within the city, and had moved on to Lynn, where there was a Christian Connection church that had come under the influence of Ashley and Hunter. During a two-week stay in eastern Massachusetts, Campbell made Boston his headquarters and visited towns within a radius of about twenty miles. The plan to make contacts within the academic community largely gave way to what seemed like the brighter opportunities presented by the open pulpits of the Christian Connection, then approaching the peak of its strength in numbers and apparent vitality.

Campbell lodged with Joshua V. Himes, the minister of a large Christian church and rapidly becoming a national leader within his

denomination, Himes had republished (without Campbell's knowledge) his guest's review of the *Book of Mormon* in 1832 and subscribed to the *Millennial Harbinger*. An indication of Himes' importance among the Christians is his selection to author the article on his denomination in Brown's *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, the same work which contains an article by Campbell on the "Disciples of Christ." Himes did not agree with Campbell's views on several critical issues; but he also differed with most Christian Connection leaders at other points, and Campbell may have regarded him as more likely to have an open mind to what he had to say. Campbell did not meet with any of the original leaders of the New England Christians. At this time, Elias Smith had once again gone off into Universalism; Daniel Hix had virtually retired from public affairs; and Abner Jones had returned to Assonet, Massachusetts, where the fatal illness of his wife distracted him, and his own ill health began severely to limit his activities.

Campbell was not very favorably impressed with what he did see of the Christians in New England. Several years before, he had come to know and love Barton Stone and to accept the western Christians as cherished allies in the cause of pure religion, but he did not know whether to regard the eastern Christians as friends or foes. He complained,

It was boasted by many preachers in New England and New York that the Bible was their only creed, and that by it alone they would be governed; but unless the production of great excitement, camp meetings, war against Trinitarians, and denunciations against Calvinism be walking by the Bible alone, I cannot see that these Eastern Christians are more under the banners of the Bible than any other sect in the land. There are now as many of the fashionable Christian vices to be met with in these communities as in Congregationalists, Methodists, Episcopalians, or any other Protestant societies.⁵⁶

He admired their zeal, but loathed their misguided emotionalism. He admitted their bright prospects for numerical growth, but he warned that the "Christian vices" of respectability, that had already introduced reverends and organs into the work and worship of the church, were turning the Christians into just another denomination, instead of the pure church of Christ which they had sought to restore. Still, he by no

⁵⁶ *Millennial Harbinger*, VII (1836), p.545

means gave up hope on them. Although recognizing that “much is wanting in many places to bring them nigh to the platform of apostolic usage and authority,” he believed that many Christians were honestly attempting to restore the New Testament Church, and only needed “to be taught the way of the Lord more perfectly.”⁵⁷ He was encouraged by the response of the churches in Lynn and Salem, which began having weekly communion and baptizing for the remission of sins. He also felt that he had secured the support of Philemon Russell, one of the Christians’ most influential young preachers and writers. All in all, it seemed like a promising beginning in the new and vital field of New England.

While in Boston, Campbell also preached to congregations of other religious movements. He enjoyed alike the hospitality of the Tremont Temple Baptist Church and William Ellery Channing's flock of Unitarians, and attracted capacity crowds to hear all his sermons. Campbell often preached to the Baptists wherever he went, but his association with Channing is quite surprising, since he had publicly attacked Unitarianism on many occasions. Perhaps the unitarian Christians obtained this introduction for him, or maybe Channing regarded Campbell as a fellow religious reformer, even if the two men had radically different views on which direction reform should take. Campbell spent one day of his visit inspecting a Christian Connection school at Beverly. Here, Campbell found something which he heartily and unreservedly approved. The students were given a basic education in the liberal arts, but they were also trained in practical labor and required to work in the operation of the school, with a heavy emphasis on the development of moral virtues necessary for success in everyday life. Campbell wrote,

“The objects of the institution are such as every friend of Christian education must approve. It is not intended to build up an aristocracy in religious society, or to form a learned ministry; but to promote the intellectual and moral culture of the youths of that community, and to fit them for useful stations as members of the great family of man.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Millennial Harbinger, VII (1836), p.546

⁵⁸ Millennial Harbinger, VII (1836), p.546

The school in Beverly set Campbell thinking about the possibility of establishing Christian schools in the midwest; but we do not know how it may have influenced young Tolbert Fanning, who many years later founded Franklin College, a very similar institution in Nashville.

Campbell's trip marked an epoch in the history of the restoration movement in New England. Its immediate results did not seem momentous, for no new congregations had been founded, the handful of churches which shared Campbell's views received only a few new converts, and no significant leader among the Christians changed his position on any of the crucial issues which Campbell raised. The churches in Salem and Lynn soon fired their preachers who had introduced weekly communion and baptism for the remission of sins, although strong minorities continued to believe in both practices. If Philemon Russell agreed with Campbell on any of the controversial questions, he kept it quiet. Nevertheless, Campbell had succeeded in fundamentally altering the situation. Even though he had not visited the fledgeling churches in Maine and Connecticut, his trip rallied his allies throughout New England and gave them the beginning of a sense of identity with each other. For the Christians, he brought crisis. The Virginian's visit forced them to respond to exactly the type of doctrinal issue which they had more and more tried to avoid during the previous years of outward growth. Campbell insisted that going by the Bible meant obeying biblical commands concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. To him, the Christians' acceptance or refusal of scriptural teaching on these points was a test of whether or not their claim to follow the Bible alone was a genuine commitment or mere talk.

Chapter 9: Crisis

The day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. Joel 3:14

The fundamental issue which Campbell raised for the eastern Christians was the question of authority for religious practices. Must Christians, to the limit of their knowledge and ability, render entire and exact obedience to the express commands of the New Testament in order for them truly to qualify as followers of Christ? Campbell insisted that they must, for Jesus had made obedience to his commands the test of our love for him. The Christians, whose first principle as a religious movement had once been to make the scriptures "the only sure, authentic, and infallible rule of the faith and practice of every Christian," had backed away from their original position, and now shunned any intellectual basis for their religion. Where Jones and Smith had pled for no creed but the Bible, many among the second generation of Christians wanted no creed at all, not even the word of God. They denied their own past. Joseph Badger, Campbell's most bitter opponent in the controversy, wrote in the *Christian Palladium*, "We never knew our brethren to boast of walking by the Bible alone. This we regard as an error, let who will proclaim it."⁵⁹ The division between Campbell and his associates on the one hand, and the main body of Christians in New England on the other, was not caused by a misunderstanding of baptism or communion but by entirely different views on the nature of faith and the essence of Christianity. Campbell thought of faith as primarily an intellectual understanding and acceptance of God's revelation in the Bible. Badger and Himes thought of faith as an emotional relationship with God, impossible to define and certainly not to be limited by the cold letter of the written word. To Campbell, Christianity was essentially a loving obedience of God's unchanging will. To many Christians, it was above all the immediate experience of God's spirit, working mysteriously but powerfully in every incident of life.

This broad and fundamental difference resulted in conflict between the two groups on many specific issues. One such question was whether the Lord's Supper should be taken every Sunday. Based on several passages in the New Testament and supported by the testimony of early

⁵⁹ *Christian Palladium*, V (1837), p.258

Christian writers outside the Bible, Campbell believed that the apostolic church had invariably practiced weekly communion. Given this authoritative example, he felt that modern Christians, living in a free country, had no excuse to neglect the proper observance of a ceremony central to the church's life. All Christian Connection churches served communion as a part of their worship services; but many did so only a few times a year, or when a minister happened to be present; and almost none of them placed the emphasis which Campbell did on strict observance of the Lord's Supper every week. As on so many other issues, many of them judged divine commands by human standards, and decided that weekly communion would be only a dry and legalistic formality. In their view, Christians could not reach the proper pitch of emotion to take the Lord's supper so often. It must remain a special occasion, or men would come to despise it. The two sides probably did not understand each other very well on this point. Each thought the other did not value communion highly enough. Campbell criticized the Christians for neglecting regular observance, and the Christians criticized Campbell for neglecting emotional preparation. The question was a highly practical one, and churches could not sidestep or compromise on it, because every week's service forced a decision.

Another controversy arose over the nature of teaching in the church. The Christians had generally followed the denominational practice of preaching on short passages of scripture, usually no more than a verse or two, without any detailed study of the Bible. Their sermons appealed to the heart, but they did not challenge the intellect. They exhorted, but they did not explain. They attempted the impossible task of making men good without first making them wise. We have already noticed how, when Ashley and Emmons began reading the *Christian Baptist*, they felt compelled to adopt an entirely different style of preaching. Biblical scholarship replaced emotional oratory, and they lectured their audiences instead of haranguing them. Many Christians did not like the change, preferring to be excited rather than to be instructed.

In their attitude toward church meetings other than the regular worship service, the Christians and Campbell and his associates differed even more widely. Most Christian Connection churches met regularly for times of prayer, exhortation, and witnessing. Campbell and those who came under his influence, although by no means despising public

prayer, felt that frequent Bible study was an essential part of church life. Wherever Campbell's writings made an impact, individual Christians began demanding that their congregations begin Bible classes and grew impatient with the shallow emotionalism of many of their preachers. Jehial Hendee bitterly complained,

Those that mere once humble followers of Christ, and willing to suffer the word of exhortation and engage in it themselves, now think that instead of conference and prayer meetings, it should be a kind of Bible class, to read scripture and converse on particular notions, (say, for instance, Mr. Campbell's theory.)⁶⁰

As their disagreement over the nature of preaching suggests, Campbell and his opponents among the Christians had radically different views of the ministry. Just as Campbell saw nothing mysterious about preaching, but believed that the preacher should simply present and explain Biblical teaching in a clear and logical manner, neither did he see anything mysterious about being a preacher, but thought that any Christian man, who had adequately prepared himself by study and holy living, could discharge this responsibility. He needed no "call" to preach other than the great commission. He needed no "inspired" guidance other than the inspired Bible. To many New England Christians, this seemed arrogant and almost blasphemous. They thought that no one should preach except those specially called and directed by the Holy Spirit. In his attacks on Campbell, Joseph Badger insisted that the Christians believed that the gospel was not contained in a book, but in human beings. The sword of the Spirit was important, but it required inspired men to wield it. Jehial Hendee worried that Campbell would take it out of the hand of the Spirit and put it into the hands of fallible men, (not called of God, but such as are conceited enough to consider themselves capable of preaching.)"⁶¹ This last statement indicates how perilously close their desire to experience the immediate influence of the Spirit had led them to an acknowledgement that there could be infallible men, called by God to give inspired teaching. They were approaching an utter repudiation of their original plea for a return to simple Christianity, devoid of ecclesiastical mystery and domination.

⁶⁰ Christian Luminary, IV, No. 2 (December, 1834).

⁶¹ Christian Luminary, IV, No. 2 (December, 1834).

Baptism provided the most notorious subject of controversy between Campbell and other religious leaders. Campbell valued baptism so highly that he called it "the gospel in water." Peter had told the crowd on Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Campbell could not see why the same invitation should not be offered to sinners today. Since the inspired apostle had made baptism one of the requirements for forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, modern preachers must present the same requirements.

Campbell's emphasis on baptism upset many Christians for a variety of reasons. First, they misunderstood him. His opponents often charged him with teaching the "Romish" doctrine of baptismal regeneration; the theory that the outward act of baptism, separate and apart from faith or repentance, makes someone a Christian. This was totally untrue. So far was Campbell from believing such a doctrine that he rejected infant baptism partly on the grounds that infants could not believe or repent, and were therefore not fit subjects for baptism. Water baptism played a part in spiritual rebirth, but only a part, worthless without the whole submission to God's direction. Campbell charged that his opponents were intentionally misrepresenting him on this point; and it seems hard to believe that anyone could read his works with the slightest attention and come to such a mistaken conclusion. Blind zeal wished to argue, not to understand.

Secondly, Campbell's insistence on baptism by immersion of adult believers threatened the Christians' efforts to unite with other religious groups. Abandoning their own original attempt to bring Christians together on a foundation of obedience to plain biblical teaching, they were moving rapidly toward a more modern and liberal ecumenicalism. They did not want the issue of baptism to stand in the way of such union. For them, Campbell was a voice out of the past, not nearly progressive enough for their dynamic faith.

Most fundamentally, many Christians rejected Campbell's teachings on baptism because they regarded the whole subject as insignificant in comparison with the "true religion" of emotional experience. No matter what Campbell said, no matter what the scriptures plainly seemed to teach, they knew they had been saved without water baptism, because their hearts told them so; and they believed their hearts spoke with the

voice of the Holy Spirit. Against such belief, no logical argument could prevail.

Direct contact between Campbell and the New England Christians had begun all the way back in 1825. In that year, Joseph Badger came west to visit the Christians in Kentucky, and especially Barton Stone. Passing through Cincinnati on the return journey, he accidentally happened to meet and hear Campbell, who was on a short preaching visit to the city. Badger did not know quite what to make of him. His obvious talents and commanding personality impressed him, but he felt (or claimed years later to have felt) a vague uneasiness at Campbell's preaching. Campbell had not yet taken his famous position on baptism, and the Disciples (as Campbell and his associates called themselves in that part of the country) were still relatively few and not in close fellowship with the Christians; but Badger apparently had clear enough sight to see that here was a man who could have a powerful impact on the restoration movement.

The following year, Barton Stone breached the subject of cooperation and eventual union between the Christians and Disciples in a letter to Campbell. Six years of discussions, isolated joint meetings, and increasingly important personal friendships between key figures in the two movements followed, until they eventually bore fruit in a wholehearted joining of forces in the Midwest in 1832. In towns where separate Christian and Disciple congregations existed, many merged; and Stone made John Rodgers, a leading preacher among the Disciples, co-editor of his religious magazine, the *Christian Messenger*.

Stone's prestige gave the merger its best chance of spreading to include the Christians in the East, who reverently regarded "Father Stone" as perhaps the greatest man alive. His open avowal of united fellowship with the Disciples caused general confusion among the eastern Christians and utter consternation among those who had already aligned themselves against Campbell and his doctrine. Arguments began over whether Campbell had converted Stone to his views, or Stone had converted Campbell. The same J. V. Himes who later entertained Campbell in Boston wrote a letter to Stone, requesting an explanation of how matters stood. Himes asked, Have the Christians given up the old ground, or, that on which they first came out in

doctrine, and practice, thirty years ago?⁶² Stone gave a ringing reply in the *Christian Messenger*: "No, they have not. The ground, on which we then stood, was the Bible alone as the only rule of our faith and practice. This ground we yet occupy." To the question of who converted whom, Stone answered, "They did not join us, nor did we join them; but we mutually agreed to meet on the Bible alone. . .Neither side gave up any sentiment, or opinion, nor were they requested to do it."⁶³ Both Stone and all other Christian preachers had been insisting for a generation that all followers of Christ should forsake their denominations and unite in simple Christian faith and love, with no rule to guide them except the New Testament. The union between Disciples and Christians proved the validity of this plea, and opposition to the union appeared to Stone as a perverse repudiation of the Christians' ideals at the very point when they were finally accomplishing this goal.

Stone's efforts to persuade his brethren to work together with the Disciples in peaceful harmony can be followed in the pages of the *Christian Messenger*, while the failure of those efforts appears in bitter articles in the *Christian Palladium*, edited through much of the period by Joseph Badger. At the very beginning of the controversy after Stone had given the right hand of fellowship to the Disciples and appointed John Rogers as co-editor of the *Messenger*, Rogers replied to a critical article on water baptism in the first issue of the *Palladium* by offering to trade space in the two periodicals for each side to present its views. This would have amounted to a written debate. Rogers believed that they could carry on such a discussion in a friendly manner that would show the church "how calmly, candidly, and kindly, Christians can conduct their controversies."⁶⁴ Badger refused; and his subsequent attacks on Campbell and the Disciples were seldom calm, candid, or kind.

Despite his total rejection of Campbell, however, Badger kept contact with Stone. Although he refused to print a letter written by Rogers to the *Palladium*, he regularly published letters from Stone, which gave Stone an opportunity to continue trying to heal the breach. Stone, on his part, maintained a friendly and positive attitude, while gently warning

⁶² *Christian Messenger*, IX (1835), p.42.

⁶³ *Christian Messenger*, IX (1835), p.42-43.

⁶⁴ *Christian Messenger*, VI (1832), p. 198

against Badger's excesses. He wrote in May, 1835, "I find you have unsheathed the sword in war against Campbellism. May God speed your efforts in cutting down and destroying every ism, not recognized in the scriptures. But would it not be well to be guarded, lest while you root up the tares, you root up the wheat also."⁶⁵ He pleaded with Badger and the readers of the *Palladium* not to allow the disagreements between the Disciples and themselves to frustrate the cause of Christian unity, but to join in a united search for the truth on all disputed matters. This is what he had done.

We ourselves agree not on every point with brother Campbell, and he in the same points, differs from us What then? Shall we not fraternize? Shall we not unite as Christians? Shall we quarrel about our difference of opinion like the world before us? Shall we love each other less? No. We are determined that diversity of opinion shall not be a bar to Christian fellowship. I stand on the old ground, the Bible, to acknowledge everyone to be my brother, sister, and mother, who does the will of my Father, who is in Heaven. To do otherwise is antisciptural and sectarian; from which may the Lord preserve us all.⁶⁶

Stone either did not recognize, or glossed over in hopes of an eventual solution, the fact that what divided Campbell and Badger was more than mere "diversity of opinion," but rather the vital practice of Christianity. The two sides held such divergent views on baptism, especially, that it inevitably resulted in widely different practices that could not be reconciled. Isolated from them in the Midwest, Stone probably did not understand the radical spiritual evolution which many of the Christians in the East had undergone.

Not all of even Badger's closest associates shared his extreme antipathy for the Disciples. David Millard, a regular writer for the *Palladium*, visited Stone in Georgetown, Kentucky, in 1834. He came away very impressed by the rapid growth and general condition of the churches in Kentucky. Stone and Rogers gratefully acknowledged Millard's friendly visit in the *Christian Messenger*:

⁶⁵ *Christian Messenger*, IX (1835), p.106

⁶⁶ *Christian Messenger*, IX (1835), p.109.

We are highly pleased with his visit, his person, his piety, and his public exhibitions. He had happily removed the unfavorable impressions, made on many minds, that the Christians in the East were fast approximating to Sectarianism, and had settled down on former opinions, without farther examination, and investigation of revealed truth. We should rejoice at the frequent visits of such brethren from the East, and that such brethren from the West could interchange the visits. This would be a happy means of cementing a union, important to the interests of religion.⁶⁷

This passage shows how weary Stone had become of the constant bickering back and forth between tactless Disciples and Christians of the Badger camp. Millard's visit was a refreshing encouragement, since it seemed to demonstrate that unity was possible between the two groups. However, Millard's willingness to fellowship the Disciples probably reflects his own conviction, not shared by men like Badger, that baptism was an essential part of Christianity. To the suggestion that "baptism is a non-essential, and not worth contending about," he replied passionately,

Do you honor your Savior no more than to say he came from heaven to earth to institute non-essentials—things of no use? What better evidence ought you to desire that baptism is essential than to know it is a command of the divine Redeemer? If that command is from heaven, is it not essential to your soul that you obey it, just as God's word teaches?⁶⁸

Such an attitude provided at least enough common ground with the Disciples to make rational discussion possible.

How many more moderates there were like David Millard among the New England Christians in the 1830's we can only guess; but they must have been numerous and prominent enough to have inspired the repeated attempts by the Eastern Christians to heal the breach with their brethren in the West, for efforts toward unity did not all originate from Stone's side.

⁶⁷ Christian Messenger, VIII (1834), p.158,159.

⁶⁸ Memoir of Rev. David Millard; with Selections from his Writings, ed.

David E. Millard (Dayton: Christian Publishing Assoc., 1874), pp. 448-449.

Campbell's trip to New England in 1836 marked a turning point. Just as it greatly increased Campbell's influence in the area and helped establish several churches modeled after "the ancient order of things," so it also provoked Badger and his allies to new extremes of abuse and opposition. Campbell unwisely included a personal attack on Badger in his report of the trip in the *Millennial Harbinger*, and Badger fired back with every verbal weapon he could command, suggesting Campbell might be insane. His anger reaches almost to hysteria in one of these attacks.

What an unkind, uncharitable, and unchristian spirit those dear Disciples of Mr. Campbell possess. We know of no Christian sect who have arisen in modern times, who have such an unreasonable degree of vanity, egotism, pride, malice, war, and persecution as is found among them. From Maine to Missouri, wherever they can be found, there may be witnessed contention and a careless infidel spirit; "by their fruits ye shall know them." Every man who dares dissent from their theory may expect every means will be tried to tarnish his honest fame.⁶⁹

Campbell had the good sense not to reply to such provocation, and apparently dismissed Badger and his wing of the Christians in the Northeast as a lost cause; but he must have been deeply mortified to have Bishop Purcell quote Badger's criticism against him in a debate in Cincinnati in 1837 on Roman Catholicism. Badger actually took pride in having provided ammunition for Purcell in the debate, and thus assumed the astonishing position, for a Christian preacher, of preferring Roman Catholicism to Campbell's plea for restoring New Testament Christianity.

The increasing bitterness of the controversy shocked and dismayed Stone. Viewing the situation with his characteristic gentleness and toleration, he could not understand why Campbell, Badger, and the rest of the combatants could not work out their differences according to the scriptures, or how they could use such violence of language against each other. He was growing old, beginning to be in ill health, and mortally weary of being caught in the middle between angry men. In 1840, he wrote to Joseph Marsh, who had succeeded Badger as editor of the *Palladium*,

⁶⁹ *Christian Palladium*, VI (1837), p. 25

I am grieved, Brother Marsh, at the course you and the Reformers (better known by you as Campbellites) have taken, one against the other. Blame equally attaches to both parties. Had you both cultivated more of forbearance, and charity, the wide gulph between you might have disappeared. Christian union is my polar star. Here I stand as unmoved as the Allegany mountains, nor can anything drive hence.⁷⁰

Stone had the rare quality of caring deeply about the course other men took, because he loved them and longed for their salvation, yet never allowing their actions to deflect him from what he knew was right. He remained true to his purpose, but he mourned the loss of so much good that might have been.

More and more of the Christians in the East turned their back on fellowship with Stone and Campbell as the decade of the 1840's began. This occurred partly because they chose to reject much of the doctrine which Stone and Campbell preached, but it also reflects a growing pre-occupation with other matters that will be discussed in the next chapter. As the breach widened, even Stone came under personal attack for his fellowship with the Disciples. At long last, he gave up his efforts to make peace. In reply to the attacks against him, he made one final defense of his actions and plea for unity, which closes with these words:

I bid you, bro. Long, and bro. Carr, and all my Eastern brethren, farewell. I die, and shall see you no more, till we meet at the judgement seat. I leave you with love, and hope to meet you all in the same spirit in a better world, where partyism will forever cease. It is better for us to err on the side of charity. Take from your old brother a last word of advice. Little children, love one another and see that you fall not out by the way.⁷¹

Stone lived only two years more after this letter, but that was long enough to witness the bitter catastrophe of the Christian Connection in the Northeast.

⁷⁰ Christian Palladium, VIII (1840), p. 286.

⁷¹ Christian Palladium, XII (1842), p. 211.

Chapter 10: The Trumpet That Did Not Sound

I saw a dream which made me afraid. Daniel 4:5

During the 1830's, a new force began to make itself felt in American religion. It originated from a most unlikely source, an obscure farmer in upstate New York named William Miller.

The first part of Miller's life follows much the same trail as we have traced in the history of Abner Jones and Elias Smith. Born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1782, Miller moved to the promised land of Vermont to seek his fortune in 1803, the same year in which Jones and Smith joined forces to ask men to become "Christians only." Like them, he had only a bare minimum of formal education, but his mind thirsted for knowledge, and he read insatiably. His intelligence won for him a measure of respect and trust from his neighbors, who elected him as a justice of the peace and deputy sheriff. After serving as a captain in the War of 1812, he moved west to Hampton, New York, and settled down to live an outwardly quiet and respectable life.

Inwardly, however, Miller was undergoing the kind of spiritual anguish which Jones and Smith had suffered before him. From a Baptist background, he felt the need for religious faith, but he found the Bible so confusing and apparently contradictory when he tried to read it, that he concluded it must be "a work of designing men, whose object was to enslave the mind of man."⁷² He did not rest on this unsatisfying conclusion, but resolved to study more intensively. In the midst of his study, he felt suddenly that God had opened his eyes, and the scriptures, "which were before dark and contradictory," became dazzlingly bright and clear.⁷³ He went from the extreme of condemning the Bible as hopelessly obscure, to the extreme of celebrating it as absolutely plain, containing no difficulties and no mysteries.

Among the matters which he decided were clearly revealed in scripture were the exact time and circumstances of the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. He computed that Christ was surely coming

⁷² J.N. Loughborough, History Of Wolfeborough (Wolfeborough: 1901), p. 318.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

some time between March, 1843 and March, 1844. Afraid of the ridicule of his neighbors, he prudently kept his calculations to himself for fifteen years; but his conscience tormented him for keeping secret such vital information. Finally, he later wrote, "I was compelled by the Spirit of God, the power of truth, and the love of souls, to take up my cross and proclaim these things to a dying and perishing world."⁷⁴

When Miller broke his silence in 1831, his views received quite a different reception than the one he had feared. People flocked to hear him and enthusiastically hailed his teaching. His neighbors did not scruple to believe that their friend had unlocked the mystery of the ages. In the following year, the Baptist church of which he was a member licensed him to preach, and a wider audience opened up for his teaching. He accepted invitations to preach in churches of different denominations farther and farther away from Hampton, as the circle of his influence widened. In 1836, he published his views in a book confidently entitled *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, about the Year 1843*. Miller became a well-known revivalist in the churches of the rural Northeast.

He found a particularly receptive audience in the Christian Connection churches of New England. They were numerous in precisely those rural areas where Miller's adventist ideas had their earliest and greatest impact. Their practice of allowing virtually anyone to speak from their pulpits gave him easy access to the congregations; their fondness for emotional appeals readily embraced the ultimate emotionalism of end-of-the-world preaching; and their tradition of not making the teaching of any opinion a test of fellowship made certain that those who opposed Miller would not be able to stop the progress of adventism in their congregations. Above all, his ability to excite the public and bring converts into the church through great revivals seemed to the Christians to prove that he was truly an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

Despite his success in rural areas, Miller might have remained a relatively obscure and unimportant figure on the fringes of American religious history, had he not in 1839 met and joined forces with J. V. Himes, a man ideally suited to take advantage of Miller's popularity. Himes had been very successful as the minister of the First Christian

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 31.

Church in Boston, and had recently started a second congregation in the city. He was widely known within the Christian Connection, and thus could open doors for Miller among his brethren. More importantly, he possessed an unlimited supply of audacity and an extraordinary genius for public relations. Whether or not he knew the Bible, he knew people and how to persuade them very well.

Given the opportunity presented by Miller, Himes proved himself one of the greatest publicity agents in American history. Miller converted him into an adventist, but he converted Miller into a celebrity. His chief tool was the printed page. He flooded the country with a deluge of papers, pamphlets, and books that warned that the end was near. Early in 1840, he began publication in Boston of the first paper to advocate adventist views, the *Signs of the Times*. Beginning without a single subscriber, Himes rapidly managed to make it into a widely circulated and influential paper. It soon spawned similar journals in New York, Philadelphia, Rochester, Cincinnati, and other cities. To go with this barrage of printed material, Himes brought Miller personally from the backwoods into the largest cities of the country. Buying a huge tent, they went from place to place holding meetings that drew thousands of people. It has been estimated that half a million people heard Miller preach in the years 1842 to 1844 alone.

All this had a disastrous effect on the Christian Connection in New England. Although Miller's views gained some acceptance among members of almost all denominations, they had a uniquely powerful impact among the Christians. Passionately convinced that the world was coming to an end in 1843, those who accepted Miller's teachings naturally focused their whole lives on the expected event. They regarded that portion of the church who did not share their fanaticism as composed, to use Miller's words, of "the worldly professor, the Pharisee, the bigot, the proud, haughty, and selfish."⁷⁵ Perhaps as many as half of all the New England Christians came to believe in the truth of Miller's prophecy of doom, and the other half felt a growing resentment and fear, as they wondered what would happen to their churches when 1843 came and Christ did not.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

One of the most important converts to Millerism among the Christians was Joseph Marsh, editor of the *Christian Palladium*, which he turned into an adventist publication. Joseph Badger, Campbell's old antagonist and the former editor of the *Palladium*, took the opposite side against Miller. The dilemma which Badger now faced exemplifies the problem confronting the Christian Connection preachers who rejected adventism and sought a way effectively to oppose it. He could not appeal authoritatively to the Bible to refute Millerism, because, in his dispute with Campbell, he had denounced walking "by-the Bible alone." He could not warn of the dangers of revivalism, because he had too often praised revivals as "the very heart of our churches." He could not caution his brethren that the outward success of Miller's preaching was no guarantee of its truth, because he had used the argument of outward success to guarantee the truth of his own preaching. Yet, he knew Millerism was unbiblical, full of an unhealthy emotionalism, and that its outward success proved nothing more than how easily men will believe a lie. He kept silent. Finally, in 1842, as the furor reared toward its climax, he broke his silence in an impassioned letter to Marsh, which, while correctly diagnosing the problems inherent in Millerism, unconsciously indicts himself and the Christian Connection.

A class of orators are got up who assume uncommon sanctity, have a set of arguments founded on mathematical calculations upon the prophecies, which common sinners are not capable of contradicting. Another class of arguments drawn from history, which common men have not the means at hand to contradict, are presented; then bringing all to bear on the one great point that God will burn up the world next year, is it strange that converts are multiplied? They serve God for fear he will burn them up if they do not. Take away this fear and they will hate him still. . . I do not see how we can say it matters not what motives we present, or what means we adopt, if we only get men to repent.⁷⁶

As the crisis over adventism developed, death deprived the Christian Connection of their two most beloved leaders. Daniel Hix's long life of service came to an honored end in May, 1838. Elijah Shaw preached his funeral in the Dartmouth church where Hix had preached for more

⁷⁶ E.G. Holland, Memoir of Rev. Joseph Badger (New York: Francis, 1854), p.387.

than half a century. His death left a void that cannot be measured. Never traveling, more than a few miles from his home, he spent his entire life patiently building up the Christian churches in southeastern Massachusetts. He helped make those churches one of the bulwarks of the Christian Connection. Far beyond the quiet villages where he personally ministered, however, his example reached out to enrich the churches wherever there were people who had come in contact with his remarkable personality. At his passing, the Christians felt a loss of stability and a separation from the great beginnings of their movement. Shaw selected as his funeral text the somber words of Psalms 12, "Help Lord, for the godly man ceaseth, for the faithful fail from among the children of men."

If the passing of Hix seemed to mark for many Christians the end of an era, the death of Abner Jones three years later broadened and deepened their sense of loss. Hindered by the lingering illness of his wife and then by his own ill health, Jones had taken a less and less active part in the life of the Christian Connection; but he still enjoyed unique prestige as the founder of the movement in New England. As he neared the scriptural standard of threescore years and ten, he felt the approach of death, and self-consciously prepared for it, as though he were an actor in a religious play. A few weeks before the end, he preached his last sermon, drawn from the text, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory."⁷⁷ When he could no longer preach, or even attend worship, and feeling the final exhaustion of his strength, he called the church to his bedside for a last observance of the Lord's supper. There he calmly commended his brethren to the care of God and expressed his own perfect willingness to leave this world for a better. A few days later, on May 29, 1841, he died. He was buried in Exeter, New Hampshire, where he had spent the last year of his life. Elijah Shaw preached his funeral sermon just as he had that of Daniel Hix, and surely it is given to few men to say farewell to two such friends.

Jones's character was flawed by his restless need for emotional reassurance; and his leadership failed either to guide those who followed him to a clear understanding of Christianity, or to establish firmly among the Christians the crucial goal of judging nothing in

⁷⁷ Psalm 73:24.

religion except by the standard of the Bible alone, or even to preserve the Christian Connection from the annihilation which awaited it. Yet, despite his faults and his failures, he was a man easily loved and rightfully honored. Out of spiritual darkness, he struggled for light. Without help or encouragement from friends or family, without any religious instruction worthy of the name, without even an elementary education, constantly beset by his own doubts and fears, enduring the ridicule and contempt of those whom the world called Christian ministers, he found the courage to embark on the great adventure of discovering and bringing to life the teachings of Jesus. For forty years, he continued in that endeavor. He may have strayed, but he did not give up, even when Elias Smith deserted the cause and all but destroyed it. That he failed is a tragedy. That he tried is a praise not ever to be taken away from the first and the greatest of the Christians of New England.

After Jones's death, the Christian Connection hurried toward disaster. Through the summers of 1841 and 1842, adventist revivals spread all across the northern United States. The contagion infected even the strongest of the Christian congregations. No matter what happened in the heavens or on earth, whether a meteor shower or a revolution in Turkey, the Millerites interpreted all events as additional proofs that their prophet was right and the end was near. They found many people gullible enough to believe them.

By the beginning of 1843, excitement grew into hysteria among some of the Millerites. Miller had refrained from giving an exact date for the second coming, but he assured his followers that it would be sometime between March 21, 1843, and the same date the following year. As the beginning of this period drew near, thousands of people confidently expected Jesus to come in that spring. March 21 arrived, and nothing happened.

Undaunted, Miller confirmed to the public in May that they were indeed living at the "end time," and he suggested that a likely date for Jesus to choose to appear would be sometime during the seventh Jewish month, which worked out to be October. Through the summer and early fall, Christian Connection congregations in which Miller's prophecy was taught enjoyed an intoxicating burst of popularity. Thundering revivals herded hundreds of terrified converts into the churches to avoid the wrath of the Lamb. When October came, the Christians

turned their eyes toward the heavens, some in hope, some in fear, some in doubt, some in ironic satire of their brethren's credulity. Again, nothing happened.

The Millerites reminded themselves that the prophetic year had still five months remaining to it, and they believed that Jesus would surely come by March 21, 1844. Once more, they waited for the great day with single-minded devotion. When the winter passed by and Christ did not appear, they rested their hopes on March 21 itself. Many gathered in their churches on the fateful day, in hope to be found ready to meet their Lord. Their meetings lasted all day and into the night, until, at the stroke of midnight, they had to face the realization that their hopes had proved false.

Miller would not accept defeat. He re-examined the prophecies and discovered that he had miscalculated: the prophetic year extended throughout 1844, and all signs pointed infallibly to October 22 as the exact date of Christ's coming. Not only did the mass of his followers believe him, but trust in Miller's prophecy hit a new high through a summer of tremendous excitement. Many believers who had saved a little money quit their jobs and lived on their savings, for why should they work or save money if the world was coming to an end in October? Some farmers in New Hampshire did not cultivate their land; and others, who had weakly consented to plant, found their faith grow strong enough by the end of the summer that they refused to harvest and allowed the crops to rot in the field. One family in Kensington, New Hampshire, bought special "ascension robes" to be properly dressed for the occasion. Another gave away their oven, on the grounds that raptured souls would not have to prepare food. Merchants sold out their goods and made no effort to restock their shelves, since store, stock, and customers were all destined soon to be burnt up in the conflagration of the world.

Tension between those Christians who followed Miller and those who opposed him increased to the breaking point. The non-Millerite Christians had patiently borne with the fanaticism of their brethren in the expectation that, when the inevitable day of disillusionment came, they could then try to rebuild the church. That day had come, but the adventists had incredibly refused to be disillusioned. The Christians lost respect for one another. One side viewed the other as hopelessly

worldly, and they in turn regarded their brethren as inexcusably foolish. Churches began to split, as some Millerites decided that they could not worship with people who did not share their faith. A group that left the Christian church in Wolfeborough, New Hampshire, gave the following reasons for their action:

First, we consider all the nominal churches Babylon, and are commanded to come out; secondly, we view ourselves as unequally yoked together with unbelievers, and that the time has arrived for these bonds to be broken; thirdly, we believe that on the tenth day of the seventh month, which is either the twenty-second or twenty-third of October, that this world will be on fire, and Babylon will be destroyed.⁷⁸

Most congregations remained united, at least on the surface, but it was becoming clear that Millerism was going to cause permanent damage to their fellowship.

The Millerites turned away from the world and looked to October 22 as the certain time of their hope's fulfillment. The day came. Once again, the true believers gathered in church buildings and meeting halls where they hoped their Lord would find them ready. Day passed into night. In mounting tension, they prayed their hearts out for Jesus to come. In some places, pranksters cruelly hoaxed the nervous people by blowing horns or raising a shout outside the churches, thus provoking a brief rapture of mistaken hallelujahs. As it neared midnight, the tension became unbearable. Finally, the clocks struck twelve, and to many Christians it was the most terrible sound that they had ever heard. Their faith had proved false.

The stunned Millerites, one by one, left the meeting places and stumbled homeward in silent despair or inconsolable sorrow. One leader in the movement wrote, "Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed that the loss of all earthly friends could have been no comparison. We wept and wept till the day

⁷⁸ Benjamin Parker, History of Wolfeborough (Woldeborough: 1901), p. 318.

dawned.⁷⁹ It was agony to have to face life again, to search for a new job or look on their uncultivated fields bearing silent testimony to their foolishness, to bear the ridicule of the world and the unwanted pity of their saner brethren in the church. An adventist in Vermont wrote:

And now, to turn again to the cares, perplexities, and dangers of life, in full view of jeering and reviling unbelievers who scoffed as never before, was a terrible trial of faith and patience. When Elder Himes visited Waterbury, Vermont, a short time after the passing of the time, and stated that the brethren should prepare for another cold winter, my feelings were almost uncontrollable. I left the place of meeting and wept like a child.⁸⁰

The Christians who had been caught up in the Millerite excitement reacted in different ways to the disappointment of their hopes. Some, led by J. V. Himes, refused even then to admit that they had been fundamentally wrong. Some slight error in calculation or misinterpretation of a prophetic symbol must have misled them as to the precise time, but Christ was surely coming soon, of that they were certain. They separated from the Christians and founded their own denomination to await the end. The name they chose, Advent Christians, sufficiently reveals the background of their members. The denomination still exists, though with only a few thousand members; but its historical significance lies in its role as one of the sources from which Seventh Day Adventism arose. Himes tried predicting the end of the world on his own in 1854, but he no longer had the magic to move the multitudes, and the world scarcely noticed his prophecy of doom.

More damaging to the Christian Connection than the stubbornness of men like Himes was the despair that overwhelmed many Christians. They had put their faith totally in the adventist hope, and now felt betrayed. Instead of blaming Miller or their own gullibility, they blamed Christ for not coming when they called. Many who walked away in bitterness from that last midnight vigil never entered a church building again for the rest of their lives. Having been deceived by a false religion, they gave up the search for a true one.

⁷⁹ Booton Herndon, The Seventh Day: The Story Of The Seventh-Day-Adventists (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 49.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

With the departure of the Advent Christians and the drifting away of the discouraged, the Christian Connection in New England lost approximately half its total membership in a single year. Many small congregations were wiped out, and larger ones were severely crippled. The church in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, which Daniel Hix had spent a lifetime building up, retained only seventy of its four hundred members by the summer of 1845. More important even than the staggering numerical losses, the Millerite disaster deprived the Christian Connection of whatever optimism and vitality it still possessed. It became the goal of Christian churches to survive instead of to evangelize. They entered on a long, slow, but continual decline. Forgetting their original principles, they came to resemble the denominational churches around them. Habit and old loyalties kept the churches barely alive, until one by one they closed their doors or merged with whatever strong denominational church was close by. Finally, in 1929, the remnant that was left joined with the Congregational Church, now known as the United Church of Christ, thus officially ending the history of the Christian Connection. Yet, though the funeral of their faith lasted for almost a century, the heart of the Christian Connection in New England died at midnight on October 22, 1844.

Epilogue

The loss of the Christian Connection from the Restoration Movement by no means ended efforts to restore New Testament Christianity in New England. Churches of Christ in other parts of the country helped Restoration ideas keep at least a foothold on New England soil.

The year after the Millerite debacle, churches in Virginia and the Midwest sent a mission team of five preachers to Boston to help the tiny church already meeting there become firmly established. Like most subsequent efforts, this trip met with only modest success. Over the next seventy-five years, more than fifty attempts were made to establish congregations in New England. Only about half of these churches endured for more than a few years, and the total number existing at one time never exceeded sixteen. Progress was very slow; and Disciple Literature contains many references to New England as a “hard field.” Nevertheless, the churches did grow, however slowly, and they had gained more than a thousand members by 1868, reaching a high of nearly three thousand around 1910.

Most congregations remained very small, but a handful achieved remarkable growth. The Church of Christ in Danbury, Connecticut, led the way throughout the nineteenth century, and attained a record membership of 800 in 1915, the largest congregation in the history of the region. It was served by nationally prominent ministers, including Isaac Errett, and had the distinction of being visited by Alexander Campbell in 1856. In northern New England, the strongest congregation was the one resulting from Campbell's 1836 visit in West Rupert, Vermont. This church reached a peak membership of over 300, and enjoyed one of its most successful revivals under the preaching of young James Garfield, later president of the United States. Despite repeated efforts and occasional short periods of prosperity, the church in Boston never became a stable support to the cause in New England. Leadership in Massachusetts fell to the Main Street congregation in Worcester, which was instrumental in establishing other churches throughout the state. A direct link can be traced between the Christian Connection and a number of the Disciple churches, including the one in Worcester, which was founded by a group out of the Advent Christians.

The Disciple efforts in New England were doomed, however, by events outside the region in the general development of the Restoration Movement. The majority of the church, especially in the North, grew more and more liberal in theology as the nineteenth century drew to a close. The widespread introduction of instrumental music into worship and the development of denominational organizations were signs that the Disciples were abandoning their distinctive plea for a return to New Testament Christianity. As they came increasingly to regard themselves as just one among many denominations of the Lord's people, the call to send missionaries to New England seemed first unnecessary and then ridiculous. They became anxious not to offend the denominations. As early as 1878, B. B. Tyler held a two-week meeting in New Hampshire and never offered an invitation, for fear he might scandalize the local clergy. With the prevalence of such attitudes, the Disciples inevitably declined. By 1978, they claimed fellowship with ten churches in New England with a total membership of less than a thousand. Even this probably overstates their actual strength.

The bleakest chapter in the history of the Disciples in New England is the role played by students who came to the divinity schools at Harvard and especially Yale. These bright young leaders in the church could have spread the gospel throughout New England. Instead, they either poisoned the churches with liberalism, or allowed them to die by neglect. Between 1872 and 1948, four hundred Disciple students attended Yale Divinity School. They never even established a congregation in New Haven where Yale is located. In 1907, Harry Minnick, the preacher in Worcester, wrote to the *Christian Standard*:

We need men, not to rewrite Moses, nor correct Christ, because we have a surplus of experts engaged in that business, but we need men who believe the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and who are not ashamed to proclaim it in truth and love.⁸¹

He dejectedly reported that he had solicited “a report from the brethren in New England who love the Lord, but do not love the way some of their brethren carry on the mission work. Only one responded . . .”

⁸¹ Christian Standard, (1907), p.706.

When the religious census of 1906 made the first statistical distinction between Churches of Christ and the more liberal Disciples, less than two hundred members were identified as belonging to seven tiny churches of Christ in New England. Six of the seven churches were in Maine, where the conservative influence of the churches in the Maritime provinces of Canada extended across the border. These congregations were plagued by the opposite extreme from liberalism, the belligerent radicalism of Daniel Sommers, who opposed Christian colleges, located preachers, and a great many other things. Nevertheless, during the 1920's and 1930's, despite its difficulties, the cause began to regain vitality and slowly to expand. By the early 1940's, small groups of Christians were known to be once again worshipping "according to the ancient order of things" in every state in the region.

The Second World War, the greatest armed conflict in history, ironically did more to spread the gospel of Christ than all the missionary schemes ever imagined. The exigencies of war moved millions of Americans far from their homes, and made friends and neighbors of those who would otherwise never have met. For the largely rural members of the churches of Christ in the South, this experience brought a new vision of the need and opportunity for world evangelism. As a result, missionary activity multiplied in every direction. The churches in New England have benefited from a steadily increasing commitment of men and money from the South. At the same time, the mobile nature of post-war American society has brought many Christians to move to the Northeast to accept employment or to go to school, without any conscious effort to be missionaries. These factors have helped cause the present relative prosperity of the New England churches, which numbered approximately seventy-five in 1980, and included several thousand members. In addition to these, thirteen small churches of Christ survived that used instrumental music in worship, but still professed the goal of restoring New Testament Christianity. Serious problems remain for the churches of Christ in New England. Their numerical growth, when compared with the past, has been wonderful. Compared to the eleven million people who live in New England, it seems almost insignificant. They must find ways to reach out to the masses in the area's cities. Despite the multiplication of congregations, they all are small and vulnerable to the loss of a few key members. Only a handful have elders, and the great majority receive at

least some financial aid from outside the region. Only time will tell whether or not the new mission points will develop the maturity needed to face the future. As with the church in all places and at all times, far more important than other problems is the question whether or not they will remain true to the principles of the New Testament. Every doctrinal dispute that has upset the church elsewhere in the country has had echoes among the New England churches. Such disputes will continue to test their faith. Above all, the great colleges of New England, which thinkers stretching back to Alexander Campbell have recognized as one of the most crucial targets for evangelism in America, also continue to be a likely source of doctrinal controversy and division.

In the issue of November 29, 1930, an editorial appeared in the *Christian Standard* on the merger of the Christian Connection with the Congregational Church. The editorial was entitled, "The People Who Lost Their Way"; and it read in part, "There is no more pathetic spectacle in American history than the history of the group of Christian people and churches known as the 'Christian Connection.'" It is all too easy for us to see their foolish mistakes; but do we see our own? The church can lose its way again. We are not immune to the temptations which deceived them. We too may surrender to emotionalism, or become so obsessed with numerical growth that we employ error to achieve it, or go astray on some point that never even posed a problem for the Christians. The church must be on watch.

More than a century ago, the ladies of the Calais, Vermont Church of Christ fashioned letters to hang on the wall behind the pulpit of their church building. They spelled out an ancient warning taken from Proverbs 22:28, "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy-fathers have built." Today, the landmark remains, but those things for which it stood, the faith and hope of the Christian Connection, have utterly perished. If our spiritual inheritance is to prove any more lasting, we must teach our children to do more than preserve our church buildings. Each generation must be confronted with the full challenge of following Christ, for each will certainly face the full power of sin. We must teach them to respect and follow the one landmark which can endure forever, the word of God.

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