

The Christian Churches

UCC Histories - Part 8

James O'Kelley wanted to restore a simpler church without hierarchy.

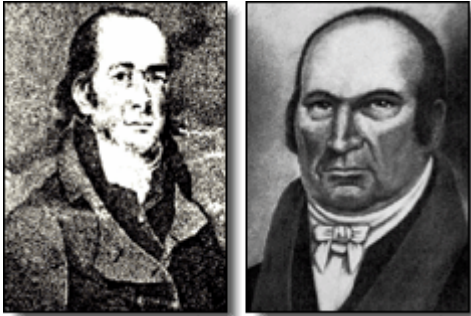
Of all the United Church of Christ traditions, the Christian Churches were most uniquely American in origin and character. In Virginia, Vermont and Kentucky, the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s motivated some of the members of different churches to return to the simplicity of early Christianity.

This was the origin of the first churches founded in the United States—in other words, churches that were not imported from Europe to North America. These new churches were determined to overcome the confessional and ethnic barriers that divided the Protestant community into competing traditions: Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican. So this was an early attempt to reunite the church, an "ecumenical" movement that preceded modern ecumenism by more than a century. They rejected denominational labels and simply called themselves "Christians."

The first Christian congregations were gathered in 1794 in Virginia by a veteran of the American Revolution—James O'Kelley. He was a Methodist but left the church, objecting to the power of bishops. Methodism, O'Kelley and his followers felt, was becoming too autocratic. They wanted frontier churches to be free to deal with problems that were different from those of older churches in the cities of the East. They declared that the Bible was their only guide and called for a simple faith free of the confessions and creeds European churches had inherited from their ancestors. They believed in freedom of conscience subject only to the authority of

Scripture.

Far to the North, in Vermont, a Baptist named Abner Jones and his followers were independently coming to the same position. They organized the First Free



Two Baptists, Elias Smith and Abner Jones, founded the second Christian church in New England.

Christian Church in Lyndon, Vermont. "Christian character" would be the only requirement for membership, and all were welcome to share in the Lord's Supper. Jones disagreed with his fellow Baptists that only those baptised by immersion could be invited to Communion. He was later joined by Baptist Elias Smith, who helped gather another Christian church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and began publishing, in 1808, the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*. Smith's paper became a means of drawing the separate Christian movements together.

Minimum of organization

With a minimum of organization, other churches of like mind were established and the movement became known as the "Christian Connection." The "Connection" had been organized in 1820 at the first United General Conference of Christians, during which six principles were unanimously affirmed:

- Christ, the only head of the Church.
- The Bible, sufficient rule of faith and practice.
- Christian character, the only measurement for membership.
- The right of private judgment, interpretation of scripture, and liberty of conscience.
- The name "Christian," worthy for Christ's followers.
- Unity of all Christ's followers in behalf of the world.

By 1845, a regional New England Convention was organized.

Stone and Campbell

A third group, under Barton W. Stone, withdrew in 1803 from the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky in opposition to Calvinist theology. They also called themselves "Christians" and shared the vision of the Christian Connection: a church beyond denominations that would acknowledge only the authority of Christ and liberty of conscience. Stone's followers spread from Kentucky into Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. A fourth Christian movement was founded a few decades later in Kentucky and West Virginia by Alexander Campbell, a Scottish Presbyterian immigrant. Some of Stone's followers united with Campbell's new movement in 1832 to form the community that later became known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The majority of Stone's followers did not join Campbell and instead reaffirmed their ties with the original Christian Connection founded by O'Kelley, Jones and Smith. More than a century later, these two divided streams of the Christian movement would join hands—but that development comes later in our story.

In 1844, the New England Convention adopted a strong resolution condemning slavery. This commitment to abolition—shared by New England Congregationalists and members of many other churches throughout the North and along the American frontier—precipitated a break with Christian congregations in the South, which formed a separate Southern Christian Association. The Northern and Southern Christians were reunited only in 1890. The Northern Christians organized the first Christian General Convention in 1850, and for the first time, Christians began to resemble a denomination.

Valued education

Christians valued education since their first leaders came from well-educated New England families that had exhibited a humanitarian spirit. In 1844, Christians helped to establish Meadville Seminary with the Unitarians. In 1850, Defiance College in Ohio was born and two years later the coeducational Antioch College, Horace Mann its president, was founded in Ohio. Elon College was founded in North Carolina in 1889, and a year later, the suspended fellowship between northern and southern churches was restored. Christian colleges were recognized as holding the key to an educated clergy and an enlightened church membership.

There was a leveling influence in the frontier church that promoted a democratic spirit. The Great Awakening on the frontier promoted an anti-creedal religion with freedom of conscience and a spirit of independent personal judgment. Quite different from the rough nature of frontier life itself, educated leadership brought refined sensibilities, compassion, and concern for humanitarian causes to the churches.

The Afro-Christian movement

James O'Kelley's denunciation of slavery in 1789 had attracted many blacks to join Christian churches in the South. They were further attracted by the revival style and the zeal for humanitarian reform. Neither race nor gender was a stumbling block to Christian fellowship in the South. Black churches were not organized before the Civil War and in 1852, Isaac Scott, a black man from North Carolina, was ordained by the Christian Church and sent to Liberia as the first overseas missionary from that denomination. The democratic social structure in the Christian Church proved more hospitable to women's sense of "calling" than had been true in Puritan New England churches. In 1839, the Virginia Christian Conference recognized an Ohio minister's wife, the former Rebecca L. Chaney, as her husband's official associate in preaching. The Christian Church exercised its independence under God when it became the first denomination to recognize the ordination of a woman. In 1867, at Ebenezer Church in Clark County, Ohio, Melissa Terrel was ordained to the Christian ministry.

Following the Civil War, black members of the Christian Church tended to cut themselves off from whites to form churches of their own. The black church became the only social structure totally supported by the black community. Elevated to a high status in a climate that denigrated black males, black ministers were close to a peer relationship with white community leaders. Black church ministers were not only pastors and preachers to their congregations, but were social workers and organizers for human rights as well. Black ministers and their churches were often targets of reaction, sometimes violent, during repeated periods of local political battle over issues such as freedom from oppression, the achievement of voting rights, opportunity for land ownership, equality of educational and vocational opportunity, the right to participate in the same amenities offered others in American communities.

Women in many black Christian churches became, to an even greater degree than in white churches, the backbone of church life; many became preachers. Black women so reared, upon joining integrated churches, found it

difficult to accept less crucial tasks where men dominated.

Becoming a denomination

The Reconstruction era after the Civil War was slow and painful. During the time of estrangement, Christian churches of both North and South had increasingly assumed characteristics of a denomination. During the first postwar decade, the Southern Convention adopted a manual for common worship as well as four defining "Principles" for Christians.

In 1866, a group of freed slaves established the North Carolina Colored Christian Conference. This group maintained close ties with white Christians and joined the General Convention of the Christian Church. In 1874, the Eastern Atlantic Colored Christian Conference was formed and, in 1873, the Virginia Colored Christian Conference. In 1892, an Afro-American Convention met for the first time representing five conferences with a total membership of 6,000.

The General Convention of 1874 adopted a Manifesto defining for the Christian Church movement a basis for union with other churches. The Manifesto stated: "We are ready to form a corporate union with any body of Christians upon the basis of those great doctrines which underlie the religion of Christ.... We are ready to submit all minor matters to ... the individual conscience." Although the various streams of the Christian were beginning to resemble denominations—with forms for worship and structures that united congregations together—the Christian Churches were still close to their original vision of unity for all the followers of Christ.

In 1890 the division of the Northern and Southern branches of the Christian Church was finally overcome and a new General Convention organized.

Source: <http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/christia.htm>
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