

The Search for Truth:
A History of the Restoration Movement
The Pursuit of Truth in the Framework of the Revolutionary War
November 19, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

In our first lesson, we illustrated the pursuit of Truth, the pursuit of Truth within the Roman Catholic church and within Protestant churches. In that lesson, I largely confined myself to European movements. Today, I want to present some efforts at the pursuit of Truth and NT Christianity on American soil, within the framework of the Revolutionary War and the war for freedom. We will go back and touch on some further efforts in Europe.

The Revolutionary War was a war for freedom. On the religious scene, at that moment in American history, there were maybe a dozen major religious groups in America. And all the religious groups were fiercely loyal to their respective denominational creeds. The Lutherans had their Augsburg Confession (1530); the Baptists had their Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742); the Presbyterians had their Westminster Confession (1648); the Reformed churches had their Heidelberg Catechism (1562). The Catholics, of course, had their catechism and 1700 years of church traditions.

As surely as there was rivalry between Americans and the British, between the Patriots and the Tories, there was also fierce rivalry between the Protestant churches and even, within different sects of the Protestant churches. The colonies, before the War, had their state churches, a reflection of the state-church concept imported from Europe. These state churches were supported by public tax money. NH, MA, and CT had the Congregational Church. GA, NC & SC, VA, MD had the Church of England.

Just like many today, people during that time period did not care so much about the religious division but they *despised* the squabbles that constantly occurred between the denominational groups. Additionally, life on the American frontier had bred a rugged individualism in the American people - even when it comes to religion. They did not like centralized government and many came to believe centralized government within the church was a bad idea as well.

Let's take a look...

RESTORATIONISM WITHIN METHODISM:

Following the Revolutionary War, many of the Church of England priests had fled to England and their churches were small and lacked appropriate oversight. The same with many Methodists, a sect within that denomination. James O'Kelly (1735-1826) - O'Kelly was born in Ireland (North & S-C *Encyclopedia*) although some think he was born in VA or NC. West (pg 7) says Mecklenburg County, VA. He at least had Irish roots. O'Kelly's wife converted to Methodism in the 1770s and O'Kelly did a few years later and he began preaching for them shortly afterward, about 1775.

John Wesley (1703-1791) worked at reforms within the Church of England (he was a priest) and, like Luther before him, did not intend to leave his church but his followers eventually formed their own denominational group. They were tagged "Methodists" by their critics because Wesley had a certain "method" of doing his acts of piety and benevolence.

Methodist preachers - at that point still within the confines of the Church of England, like James O'Kelly, could just do that - preach. They were not authorized to perform baptisms, weddings, or oversee the Lord's Supper.

Wishing to break with the mother church following the Revolutionary War, Methodist leaders met in Baltimore December 24, 1784. Sixty were present. O’Kelly was one and was appointed an elder over southern VA. A man named Francis Asbury (1745-1816) was appointed superintendent and their name was chosen as *Methodist Episcopal Church*. The “bishop” was Francis Asbury.

Eventually, O’Kelly would feel the constraints of having to do things the “Methodist” way, rather than the NT way. At a general conference in Baltimore November 1, 1792, there was a debate about freedom among the Methodist preachers. O’Kelly stood up with a NT in his hand and said, “Brethren, hearken unto me, put away all other books, and forms and let this be the only *criterion* and that will satisfy me.” One man responded, “The Scripture is by no means a sufficient form of government. The Lord has left that business for his ministers to do suitable to times and places.” O’Kelly’s position was soundly voted down.

O’Kelly’s followers were disturbed with the despotic and unscriptural form of government in the Methodist church and how Francis Asbury was utilizing his authority. So, O’Kelly’s followers met on December 25, 1793 in Powhatan County, VA to form a new religious identity: Republican Methodists, claiming 1,000 members and asserting that all the ministers had equal authority. Churches would have *congregational* government. They believed that the NT form of church government was a republican form of government, reflecting their new country.

So, these individuals wanted the NT to be the criterion of their church government. In a further meeting, the Republican Methodists met in 1794 and decided they would lay aside every manuscript except the Scriptures and take the Word of God alone as their guide. Within that discussion, a man named Rice Haggard stood, with NT in hand, and said, “Brethren, this is a sufficient rule of faith and practice and practice, and by it we are told that the disciples were called *Christians* and I move that henceforth and forever the followers of Christ be known as Christians simply.” They adopted that motion.

Rice Haggard had been ordained a preacher in the Methodist church in 1791 but joined O’Kelly’s movement when it arrived. We will see next week that Haggard will unite with Barton W. Stone once Haggard moves to KY. He will also call on Barton Stone’s followers to call themselves only Christians.

These “Christians” believed in an equality among preachers and people would have the freedom of private judgment relative to the Scriptures, as long as their view did not conflict with the NT. Any discussions made at their conventions, then, would only be advisory and would have no authority over the churches.

A biographer of James O’Kelly states that the O’Kelly movement siphoned off 10,000 members from the Methodist church (after North, 18). In 1801, O’Kelly presented five principles for their “Christian Church:”

1. The LJC is the only head of the Church.
2. The name Christian should be worn to the exclusion of all party and sectarian names
3. The Holy Bible was the only creed.
4. Christian piety was the only test of church fellowship and membership. O’Kelly never renounced infant baptism.
5. Right of private judgment and liberty of conscience was the privilege of everyone.

William Guirey. Guirey (1773-1840) was born around Philadelphia and became a Methodist in 1778. He went to Jamaica as a missionary in 1794 and found the native people did not like the formalism of the Anglican worship so he began changing things. The church officials did not like that and recalled Guirey. He came to believe the Methodists were wrong and he left them. He wrote:

“What was to be done? to stand alone was disagreeable - to unite on bad conditions was worse. Thus circumstanced, I perused the Scriptures, and from them gathered a system, which I conceived to be correct; after my mind was perfectly satisfied on the subject” (North, 19).

Guirey found himself in GA and came into contact with people who called themselves simply “Christian.” These were part of the O’Kelly movement. But, there was a serious disagreement over baptism. Guirey had studied the Scriptures and realized that baptism was by immersion. The O’Kelly movement was practicing sprinkling and pouring. Guirey became a fairly effective preacher, holding to immersion, while O’Kelly never could be persuaded of the error of his thinking.

There was a conference held between the two contending forces in VA in 1810. The subject was baptism. After the discussion among the 14 preachers present, 9 decided that the mode of baptism should not be made a test of fellowship. Three preachers repudiated immersion and two were neutral. In the heat of the discussion, O’Kelly challenged Guirey: “Who rules this body, you or I?” Guirey responded: “Neither of us brother; Christ rules here.” The two groups went their separate ways.

Guirey eventually called his group: the “Independent Christian Baptist Church.” Observe that in this controversy, O’Kelly, who left the Methodist church because they refused to let him preach according to his conscience, refused the same liberty to Guirey on the subject of baptism.

RESTORATIONISM WITHIN BAPTISTS:

Elias Smith (1769-1846) was born in 1769 in CT. His dad had been a Baptist until just a year prior to his death when a church was formed in Woodstock, VT which was “called by the ancient name recorded in Acts 11:26, Christians.” Smith’s mom was a “Newlight” Congregationalist and Smith was sprinkled into that denomination.

In 1779, when Smith was only ten years old, he was living in CT when he became concerned about his baptism. He studied the NT and decided that baptism was for believers, not young people, and that it was by immersion. So, he sought out a Baptist church which, of course, immersed adults. Smith did not consider himself a Baptist at that time, just a Christian. Within the Baptist denomination in those days, there were some stipulations:

1. You had to give a reason for your hope in Christ.
2. You had to be immersed.
3. You had to consent to their creed.
4. You had to be voted on by the other members.

Smith did that but with some hesitation. He wrote:

The articles of faith to which I then assented, contained what the Baptists call particular election; or that Christ died for the elect, and that such a number should be saved, etc. These *articles* I did not understand for they had never been read to me before; and being read but once, it was not possible for me to remember much of them. I assented to them, because the

minister and church thought they were true. Since that time, the minister and the members have rejected that abominable doctrine of partiality, and now stand in gospel liberty. (written in 1816; 47 years old).

He decided he would preach but not without first studying through a specific issue as thoroughly as possible. In 1801, he moved to Salisbury, NH with his doubts about Calvinism. He fell into controversy with his fellow Baptists and almost fell into universalism. It was in 1802, he writes, that he found the name which followers of Christ ought to wear; which was *Christians* (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. (West, 13).

His follower eventually decided they would simply call themselves a church of Christ. Smith began a paper called *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, began in 1808. It is apparently the first religious newspaper in the world (North, 27). Smith would move on to preach in NH and ME, Philadelphia, ME, and then Boston. In 1818, he changed the title of his paper to *Christian Herald*.

It was in 1808 that Guirey had an exchange of letters with Smith and determined that in the area of baptism, church government (episcopacy), and Calvinism, they were largely in agreement. Guirey's followers and Smith's followers had a meeting in VA to unite their forces together under three principles:

1. Christ is the only head of the church.
2. The NT is the only law for the church.
3. The name "Christian" is the only name for Christ's followers.

Smith opposed state-sponsored churches and their clergy, Calvinism, sprinkling, the and the Trinity. He believed the wicked would be annihilated.

Abner Jones (1769-1846). In June 1803, Elias Smith was met by a man named Abner Jones. Jones was from VT. Jones is credited with establishing the first "free Christian Church" in New England. He was born in MA in 1772. In the spring of 1793, he was baptized into the Baptist church. He began to preach and to study and to criticize Calvinism. He was also studying medicine to become a doctor, which he began in 1797.

While in the Baptist denomination, Jones found issue with three specific points:

1. He could find no Scriptural warrant for the name "Baptist Church."
2. He was bothered by parts of Calvinism.
3. He had doubts about Baptist church politics, specifically having associations.

It was in 1801 that he established his "free church" which rejected human names, calling themselves only "Christians." From 1802, Jones's work was combined with Smith's work.

RESTORATIONISM WITHIN PRESBYTERIANS:

The two men who are most well known among the Restoration reformers because they were the most influential, for various reasons, are from the Presbyterian Church: Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866).

Let's start with Barton W. Stone. Stone was born in MD in 1772, 30 miles south of modern day Washington, DC. Stone was baptized into the Church of England. After his father died, his mom moved to VA. During Stone's youth, he was impacted by the controversy

especially between area Methodists and Baptists. Stone vacillated between the groups until he finally got discouraged, quit praying, and decided to sow his wild oats.

In 1790, Stone made a fateful decision. We went to Guilford, NC to enroll in an academy run by a David Chadwell. While a student there, Stone's roommate invited him to a revival held by a James McGready. Stone agreed and under the influence of that revival, Stone decided to "seek religion." He prayed to God for mercy. But, Stone had a problem with Calvinism. For a year, Stone was depressed as he waited for a religious experience.

Stone would hear another preacher, this time of the Presbyterian denomination - William Hodge. Hodge preached on 1 John 4:8 and Stone came to realize that God was love and God wanted man to be saved. That's why Jesus came to earth. So, Stone converted to the Presbyterian faith. He decided he would not become a lawyer, but a preacher.

However, the Presbyterian church requires ordination and to be ordained, you had to pass a test. Stone had to study theology. Stone had studied the Bible but he had never studied books on theology. He became extremely confused. The Presbyterians, of course, hold to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Stone was examined on that Confession. He passed the test, although he had severe misgivings about much of their doctrine. This test allowed him to be licensed but it did not give him ordination. To be ordained, he had to be approved by the local presbytery. So, Stone was allowed to preach but he was not allowed to baptize, preside at the Lord's Table. When he sought ordination, he would have to take another test over theology.

Stone struggled with Calvinistic doctrine at the heart of Presbyterian theology. He moved to GA to teach at a Methodist academy. The principal of the academy was a man named Hope Hull who, in the Methodist controversy at the time, sided with James O'Kelly in the beginning but then switched sides to the Asbury position.

Also while teaching at the Academy, Stone came into contact with a Presbyterian preacher named John Springer. What was significant about this contact was that Springer had good relationships with people of many denominational groups, particularly the Methodists and Baptists. Springer influenced Stone to go back into preaching.

Stone returned to NC and received his license from a presbytery to preach. In 1796, Stone headed west, Knoxville, then Nashville. Here, he came into contact with Thomas Craighead. Craighead, who had been trained at Princeton, rejected the direct operation of the Holy Spirit in a sermon in 1806. In 1809, Craighead gave a sermon that critiqued every tenet of Calvin's TULIP. He was suspended by the presbytery.

Leaving Nashville, Stone went up in KY and on January 4, 1797, he was licensed to preach by the Transylvania Presbytery and given two churches to serve, one in Bourbon County (Paris) and one in Nicholas Country (Concord).

In our next study, we will pick up with Barton Stone and the great "Cane Ridge Revival" in Bourbon County, KY.