

The Search for Truth:
A History of the Restoration Movement
“A United Restoration Movement”
December 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

The effort to restore Christianity to its pure, pristine form was not original to the American scene nor was it unique to Protestantism. Paul told the Christians in Corinth: “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). Efforts were made within Catholicism at least as early as the Medieval era to restore purity and holiness to the priesthood and the Christian life.

But the effort to restore biblical Christianity within Catholicism did not pick up steam until the Bible was made widely available to the general population and Martin Luther had the courage to publicly confront the Catholic church. That led to the creation of Protestant denominations. But, many men within various Protestant churches continued to study the Bible and to challenge their peers to go back to the Bible for their pattern of Christianity. Some believed that pattern only applied to the moral lives of Christians; others believed it applied entirely to the Christian endeavor, including how the church ought to be organized and worship.

But the effort to restore biblical Christianity within Protestantism did not pick up steam until the effort found its way to the United States and its environment that encouraged individual thinking and the freedom to go one’s own direction, based on your own conscience and your response to God. So, we have studied efforts within the Methodists with James O’Kelly, the Baptists with Abner Jones - who would eventually join their forces together, and the Presbyterians where we have spent a few weeks, with the efforts of Barton W. Stone - who would join forces with the O’Kelly / Guirey movements - and Thomas & Alexander Campbell, as well as Walter Scott.

Now, we are in the middle of the 19th century, roughly 1830, and we pick up with the coalescing of the movement...

TOWARD UNION:

Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone first met in 1824 in Georgetown, KY. They became fast friends. There were Christians associated with the Stone effort in the Western Reserve of Ohio.

Their similarities included (North, 160):

- 1. They were committed to unity.**
- 2. They accepted the Scriptures alone.**
- 3. The object of faith was Jesus Christ.**
- 4. They rejected major points of Calvinism.**
- 5. Men were free to follow their own conscience in matters of opinion.**
- 6. Baptism was by immersion, for the forgiveness of sins.**
- 7. They were opposed to the use of unscriptural and denominational names and labels.**

In 1830, Campbell had written: “As it is, however, we chose the name *Christian*, with all its abuses, and have not for many years ever called the particular congregations to which we belong by another name than *the Church of Christ*” (North, 165). In practice, Campbell still preferred to call himself and his followers “Disciples of Christ” and during this period of time,

please understand that “Christian Church,” “Church of Christ,” and “Disciples of Christ” were all used interchangeably as they reacted against denominationalism dividing up believers into various camps.

In Georgetown, KY, there were two groups meeting, one of the Stone persuasion (with Stone preaching) and one of the Campbell persuasion, of whom numbered a John T. Johnson. Johnson would be elected to the U. S. House from Kentucky; his brother, Richard Johnson, was VP under President Martin Van Buren. Johnson encouraged the two to merge. That was the first effort, in 1829, to unite these two movements.

But a more official unity meeting was held in Lexington, KY in 1831 at the Hill Street Christian Church. Here, the followers of Barton Stone were represented by Stone and the Reformers of Campbell were represented by “Raccoon” John Smith.

Let me give you some background on “Raccoon” John Smith... Smith was born in TN but moved into KY when he was young. He never had more than six months of an education but he could read, which he did voraciously. His parents were Baptists but Smith struggled with some of the Baptists’ teaching, particularly that one must have a religious experience before he knows he is saved. He also disagreed that a preacher had to have a special call before he could preach. Still, he was baptized into the Baptist church in December of 1806 and ordained a Baptist preacher in 1808.

He was a farmer and after marrying, moved to Montgomery County, KY. It was here that he wrestled with the ideas of predestination and total depravity as they are taught in the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. So, he began leading a reform movement among the Baptists. Here is how he received his unwelcome nickname...

He was delivering a sermon at the Tate’s Creek Baptist Association at Crab Orchard, KY in 1815. When he stood up, his clothing was disheveled and people started to get up and leave. So, he called out, “Stay and hear what the great Augustine said!” And some sat back down. “Will you not stay?” He cried out, “and hear what the great Cato said?” More sat down.

“Come, friends, and hear what the great Thales thanked the gods for!” Finally, most of the folks sat back down. “And now, friends, I know you are ready to ask, ‘And pray, sir, who are you?’ What have you to say for yourself?” He said, “I am John Smith, from Stockton Valley. I have lived in Wayne. Down there, saltpeter caves abound, and raccoons make their homes. I stand before you today a man without an education.” So it was that John Smith came to be known as the preacher that was raised among the coons and the nickname “Raccoon” John Smith stuck.

In March of 1822, Smith was preaching among the Baptists, struggling with doubts about a supposed “call to preach” and other aspects of Calvinism when he abruptly stopped his sermon and said, “Brethren, something is wrong - I am in the dark - we are all in the dark; but how to lead you to the light, or to find the way myself, before God, I know not” (West, I:246).

Smith obtained a copy of Campbell’s magazine *The Christian Baptist* and subscribed to it. He read the magazine and studied his Bible. He came to realize that human creeds were wrong and he saw Calvinism as a great evil. By 1826, Smith was joining others who were calling for a restoration of biblical Christianity within the Baptists. But the North District Baptist Association charged him with violating his agreement to preach. Here were the charges:

1. He read from Campbell’s translation of the Bible rather than the KJV.

2. He said, "I immerse you," instead of saying "I baptize you."
3. He allowed people to break bread at communion for themselves.

The decision to expel Smith was delayed but it didn't matter. Smith was moving off on his own anyway and would find intellectual and spiritual agreement with Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell.

So, Smith found himself a part of the restoration efforts of Stone and Campbell. At this unity meeting in Lexington, in 1831, Smith pointed out that God had only one people on earth. He gave them only one book. He wanted them to be one family. The unity of God's people, His one family, based on that one book, would be both practicable and desirable. Smith said, **"Let us then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites or Stoneites, New Lights or Old Lights, or any other kind of lights, but let us all come to the Bible, and to the Bible alone, as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need"** (North, 173).

"Raccoon" John Smith lived and preached that very message for a very long time, eventually dying two years after Alexander Campbell (1868) in Missouri where he was preaching at the time.

Around this time, the numbers of believers in this "restoration movement" principle numbered anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000, focused largely in PA, OH, and KY.

A REAL CHALLENGE TO "UNITY" BASED ON "SCRIPTURE:"

I will introduce some men to you now before we look, next week, at the first real challenge to the unity among these reformers.

We begin with Dallas Burnet, or D. S. Burnet as he was most often called. Burnet was a leading voice behind the establishment of the missionary society that contributed heavily to the division of the restoration efforts during the middle of the 19th century. Burnet was born in Ohio in 1808. His father was mayor of Cincinnati in 1821 and Burnet was his father's clerk.

The Burnets had belonged to the Presbyterian Church and when D. S. was sixteen years old, he was teaching a Sunday school Bible class. But, he came to understand baptism was immersion and was so immersed in 1824 and became a member of the Baptist Church. Under the influence of Alexander Campbell's teachings, the Baptist church divided into the Ninth Street Baptist Church and the Christian Chapel Church. Burnet published or tried publishing a number of different periodicals in the 1830s and 1840s. He also tried to start a school for girls called the "Hygeia Female Atheneum."

But in 1845, Burnet called for the organization of the American Christian Bible Society, an idea that was never popular among the Christians. But, when Alexander Campbell, in 1849 called for a huge gathering of the Christians and reformers, to meet in Cincinnati, Burnet was there to call for the organization of a missionary society. Until his death, Burnet was heavily involved in promoting the missionary society. He died in 1867. Again, we'll come back to Burnet next week as we discuss the missionary society.

Let me introduce you to Benjamin Franklin, not the statesman, the restoration preacher. And, yes, he was named after his great-uncle, the famous inventor and statesman. Following the death of Alexander Campbell, Ben Franklin became the most influential man in the movement. Ben's dad was born in Providence, RI in 1783 and Ben was born February 1, 1812. The Franklin family moved to Henry County, IN in 1833 and lived next door to a Samuel Rogers. Rogers had been a Methodist but left that denomination for the restoration movement.

The whole Franklin family was baptized and Ben Franklin went to work studying the Bible and preparing himself to preach.

Franklin became an editor, a debater, and a very powerful preacher of the NT Gospel. Franklin started his editing and writing career with a paper called *Reformer* in 1845. But began a new monthly paper titled *American Christian Review* in 1856 which was a weekly in 1858. He would publish the *Review* until his death twenty years later. West (I:106) writes that the *Review* would be the most influential paper among the restorers for many years.

The S-C E (343) calls Franklin “the most influential preacher and editor among the Disciples of Christ following the death of Alexander Campbell.” Franklin support the founding of North Western Christian University, now known as Butler University. He was an early supporter of the missionary society and then turned against it. We’ll present that story next week. During the Mexican War (1846-47), Franklin was a pacifist. He held 25 formal debates during his lifetime.

North Western Christian University was founded in January of 1850 in order to be an alternative to Bethany College in western Virginia, but on the “free soil” of Indiana. The mastermind behind the university was an attorney and avid abolitionist named Ovid Butler. At his passing, the Board renamed the university in his honor. Before the Civil War, with the existence of North Western in Indianapolis, no city was as strong in the restoration movement as Indianapolis. When the churches of Christ split with the Disciples of Christ, the school went with the latter but eventually severed all ties with the Christian Church.

I have mentioned Campbell’s Bethany College but the first significant effort at higher education among the restorers was Bacon College, opened in 1836 in Georgetown, KY. It was named after Francis Bacon, one of the philosophers of the enlightenment. It relocated to Harrodsburg, KY three years later but came close to closing for financial reasons and then reopened as Kentucky University in 1859. During the Civil War, it was used as a hospital. After the war, Kentucky University merged with Transylvania University, which was the oldest institution of higher learning on this side of the Allegheny Mtns. A College of the Bible was set up in 1865 with a third college added, an Agricultural and Mechanical College. Eventually the three would split apart with the Agricultural and Mechanical college becoming the University of Kentucky. Kentucky University would revert back to its old name, Transylvania University while the College of the Bible would evolve into the Lexington Theological Seminary.

Let me introduce you to one more man, Tolbert Fanning. He was the most influential preacher in the South before the Civil War (West, I:108). Fanning was largely a cattleman. He was born in TN but raised in northern Alabama. Methodism was the largest denomination in his community but his mom was a Baptist. When Fanning was 17 years old, he heard the Gospel preached and he obeyed it. Fanning was 6’ 6” and usually weighed around 240 lbs.

One lady one time criticized Fanning’s preaching, saying, “Brother Fanning, you never can preach, and will always run your legs too far through your breeches. Do go home and go to plowing” (West, I:112).

Fanning will spend considerable time with Campbell. Marrying a woman named Charlotte, Fanning and Charlotte will start a Female Seminary Franklin, TN in 1837. In 1844, he will start Franklin College. He debated N. L. Rice the year before Campbell debated him. In the summer of 1855, Fanning and a man named William Lipscomb will start a magazine called the *Gospel Advocate* which is now the longest published magazine in the churches of Christ and the restoration efforts. Fanning will be an outspoken critic of the missionary society.

Next week: "A Crack Forms in the Restoration Movement"