**Unity Movements in Early 19th Century America**

James O’Kelly (1735-1826) was a Methodist preacher in North Carolina and Virginia. He and a few other ministers questioned the appointment of two “superintendents” of the Church, one of whom, Francis Asbury, referred to himself as a Bishop. O’Kelly thought these two men had too much power, as they appointed ministers in every congregation. O’Kelly felt each congregation should govern its own affairs. O’Kelly is quoted as saying, “I am for Bible government, Christian equality, and the Christian name.” In 1793, O’Kelly and a few other ministers broke away and began calling themselves Republican Methodists. In 1794, they went one step further and decided to call themselves Christians to the exclusion of all other names, and take the Bible alone as their creed.

Abner Jones (1772-1841) and Elias Smith (1769-1846) were Baptists from New England. Baptists were strongly Calvinistic, believing in predestination. Jones lived in Vermont and, along with others, denied Calvinism and took the name “Christian”. They started a Christian Church in Lyndon, VT in 1801. In 1803, Jones first met Smith. Smith had formed a Christian Church the previous year in Portsmouth, NH. The Smith-Jones movement struggled to establish unity within doctrinal diversity and soon splintered. Some with the O’Kelly Christians in the South, who eventually unite with the Barton Stone movement to form the Christian Connection.

Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) was raised in Virginia as a nominal Episcopalian. As a teenager he attended Baptist and Methodist churches, but did not experience the dramatic conversion that others did. So, he decided to focus on education and become a lawyer. He enrolled in a “log college” (a typical one-teacher frontier school) taught by David Caldwell, a Presbyterian Minister in NC. Under the influence of Caldwell and a revival preacher named James McGready, Stone had his conversion experience, became a Presbyterian, and felt called to preach.

Stone questioned two major doctrines: The Trinity and Predestination. He had been preaching in Cane Ridge, KY for two years, so he sought ordination from the Transylvania Presbytery there. The creed of the Presbyterians in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which includes the doctrine of the trinity. Stone was asked to adopt the creed in order to be ordained, so he said, “I do, as far as I see it consistent with the Word of God”. This satisfied the Presbytery and he was ordained in 1798.

In August 1801, Cane Ridge was the site of the largest and most famous tent revival meeting in American history. Attendance estimates are from 10,000 to 30,000. Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist members and preachers were there and repentance was the theme of each denomination’s preachers. There were many, many dramatic displays of Holy Spirit experiences on the part of attendees from all three denominations (see Holloway and Foster Renewing God’s People, pgs. 33-34). Stone believed in these experiences, but also knew that a person could be a mature, faithful Christian without ever having one, so to call him Pentecostal or charismatic would be inaccurate. The fact that the Spirit could come to people of all denominations at once convinced Stone and others of Christian unity. Differences between these groups must not be a matter of gospel. They thought that unity amongst Christians by the Holy Spirit should be the goal of every disciple of Christ. In Stone’s words, “Let Christian unity be our polar star.” The experiences also increased doubts about Calvinism as they saw so many diverse people freely respond to the gospel and receive the Spirit. They were now confident in a doctrine of real free will, one’s ability to *choose* God.

The Presbyterian leadership of Kentucky questioned Stone and five other ministers for their support of the revival, their open, unified stance toward other Christians, and their criticism of Calvinism. They broke away and formed their own organization, the Springfield Presbytery. Within a year they decided that the Presbytery itself worked against unity and disbanded it. In 1804, they wrote “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” (H&F, pgs. 35-36). It was signed by Stone and the other five ministers and was a clear call for restoration and unity. Christians should follow the Bible alone, each congregation should manage itself and choose its ministers, and those ministers should not be rule-making “reverends”. There should be no formal organization beyond the local congregation, and a spirit of cooperation and freedom should prevail between them. We should dispute less, and instead prayerfully look forward to the redemption Christ brings at His Second Coming.

Stone and his followers soon established congregations they called churches of Christ or Christian churches. The churches practiced believer immersion, but did not make it a test of fellowship (those only baptized as infants were still members and shared communion). By the 1820’s, the Stone movement had grown to over 12,000 members and had spread to other states. A great deal of this growth was due to entire Baptist congregations breaking away to be known a “Christians” only. Stone published a paper, *The Christian Messenger*, from 1826-1844, in which he focused on Christian tolerance and unity.

So, there were three movements toward “Christians only” unity. One from the Northeast by Baptists (Jones and Smith), one from the South by Methodists (O’Kelly and others), and one from the West by Presbyterians (Stone and others). They eventually unite in the Stone movement and in our next lesson we’ll see how they unite with Irish immigrants to grow even more through unity and the denial of denominational creeds.