



let it shine

Connected in Christ

Records of a “new church start” near Rochester, NY contain this initial journal entry:

At a meeting of the Brethren and sisters friendly to liberal Christianity convened at the schoolhouse in school district Number 7 Parma. Elder Joel Doubleday and Elder Wm. Blake of Clarkson were present. After each person present had expressed their feelings and Christian experience the following persons agreed to walk together in the bonds of Christian love and union taking the scriptures of truth for their only rule for faith and practice and we pray that God be with us. Parma, Aug. 23, 1834

Seven men and seven women signed it, becoming a new “Christian Church.” They were part of a frontier church movement that began in 1801 in Lyndon, Vermont when Abner Jones and his followers broke away from a Calvinist Baptist church to establish the First Free Christian Church, which soon spread into western New York State. The only requirement for membership would be Christian character and the communion table would be open to all. That is what it meant to be “friendly to liberal Christianity.”

In 1794, James O’Kelley, a Methodist pastor in North Carolina, left his church after disputing the appointment of Francis Asbury as bishop of the new Methodist church in the United States. A veteran of the Revolutionary War, O’Kelley objected to any autocratic form of church government. He believed that “any number of Christians united in love, having Christ for their head, and center of union, constitutes a church.” They adopted the name “Christian” as the only appropriate name for the church. O’Kelley was among the first Christian clergy to condemn slavery, writing an abolitionist tract in 1789.

In 1803, a third group of frontier Christians, led by Barton Stone, withdrew from the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky, objecting to strict Calvinist theology. His followers grew to more than 8,000, and the church spread into Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. Some joined with Alexander Campbell of Lexington, Kentucky, and eventually established the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1832.

Elias Smith, a “colorful and controversial” Baptist minister, joined Jones and started a Christian Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In 1808, Smith

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began publishing a newspaper, *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, which drew these three Christian movements together. In 1820, those groups established the “Christian Connection,” unanimously affirming six principles:

- 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.

The people of the “Christian Connection” based the unity of the church on Christian spirit and character, not doctrine, theology or even polity. Radically independent, the Christian Churches allowed women in their pulpits, and early on included African Americans among their numbers. In 1931, they joined the Congregational Churches to form the National Council of Congregational Christian Churches. Its legacy of ecumenism and passion for unity guides the UCC today, particularly in our relationship with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the other major denomination that emerged from the frontier Christian movement.

Elias Smith, a prolific hymn writer, caught the spirit of the “Christian Connection” well in the final verse of one of his poems:

Brother of ev’ry name to thee, Who do inquire if good there be,
In Christian conference, come and see, In Christ there is true liberty,
Enjoying Christian Union.

Reflections:

- How do the six Christian principles reflect the character of your congregation?
- Is true Christian unity possible in our day?

Resources:

- *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ, Volume 4: Consolidation and Expansion*, edited by Elizabeth Nordbeck and Lowell Zuck
- *Hidden Histories in the UCC*, edited by Barbara Brown Zikmund
- “A Short Course in the History of the United Church of Christ,” found at www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/conchr.html

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