

Chapter 3

ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN DENOMINATION IN NEW ENGLAND

Elizabeth C. Nordbeck

Elizabeth C. Nordbeck is Associate Professor of Church History at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

THE PIONEERS OF New England's Christian Connexion, asserted the Rev. Austin Craig before a ministerial gathering in 1850, certainly "did not purpose the formation of a new sect." Nevertheless, he admitted, "moral affinities presently consociated them," while misunderstanding and opposition from other religious groups gradually pushed them toward a more theologically and structurally defined position.(1)

Some Christians [*Hereafter this chapter will follow the Christian Connexion's own most common usage: the word Christian, upper case, will refer to the Connexion itself; "christian," lower case, will refer to the generic body of believers.*] had begun to call their movement a denomination as early as the mid-1820s. As a whole, however, the group adamantly rejected such labels, advocating instead a broad and fundamental christian inclusivity and eschewing all "party names." Austin Craig's address, delivered on the eve of a historic convention at Marion, Ohio, effectively united the three distinct regional movements that "carried the name of Christ only," and was thus especially notable for its attempt to summarize the several "principles" generally held among them. Resolutely biblical, privatistic, antidogmatic, and revivalistic, most of the Christians - especially in New England - had steadfastly resisted attempts to systematize or codify what they believed or how they ordered themselves. On both pragmatic and theological grounds they insisted on a believer's right to private judgment and on the concomitant necessity for tolerance and cooperation among believers whose private judgments might differ.

Even in 1850, after fully half a century of growth, the Christians were difficult to define precisely. By far the least well-known of the United Church of Christ's four constituent traditions - the denominational textbook devotes barely three of fifty-eight pages of history to its origins(2) - the story of the Christian Connexion is undeservedly "hidden." Indeed, at a time when matters of justice, spirituality, creeds and confessionalism, biblical faithfulness, and women's rights continue to be at the forefront of the United Church of Christ's common life, the Christian radical witness in these areas, along with a warm and heartfelt piety, provides a usable tradition.

Why has this movement of both vitality and innovation drifted into obscurity over time? At least two factors are responsible. In the first place the Christians were not one movement, but three. Springing up almost simultaneously among New England Baptists, Virginia Methodists, and Kentucky Presbyterians at the turn of the century, Christian "converts" were theologically and regionally diverse. Despite important common understandings that led to cooperation - notably their insistence on "taking the name of Christ alone" and on the New Testament as a sufficient "creed" - the three groups differed in leadership, in their primary concerns and emphases, and on the process and speed with which their organizational structures came into being. Origins of the New England group are further complicated by the separate conversions to Christian principles of cofounders Abner Jones of Vermont and Elias Smith of New Hampshire - two men whose

theologies and personal styles were distinct and not infrequently disharmonious. Moreover, regionally diverse publications, educational institutions, and record-keeping procedures have all contributed to a scattering of materials, making historical recovery difficult.

More important, though, the Christians' vehement anticreedalism, uncompromising New Testament faith, and revivalistic style made them something of an anomaly even at the height of their strength and influence. Convinced that trinitarianism was a "doctrine of man," nowhere to be found in the scriptures, many Christians happily named themselves "unitarians"; William Ellery Channing himself looked on them "with singular pleasure because they 'stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.'" The Christian churches, Channing wrote approvingly, "embrace a greater variety of opinions than can be found in any other. . . . Your denomination is practical proof that christians interpreting the scriptures for themselves may live in peace, and may join great fervor with great liberality of opinion."³ Unlike Channing and his Unitarian colleagues, however, virtually all the Christians energetically promoted a fervent, "experimental" piety that found its source and expression not in theological abstractions or the academy, but in freestyle worship and personal experience of the living God. The Christians were colleagues and frequent collaborators with groups like New England's Free Will Baptists. They gladly supported "seasons of refreshment" and revival in many denominations. Assailed from the religious left as too emotional and from the right as too unorthodox, Christians clung determinedly to a kind of "middle way" that attempted to hold head and heart, unity and diversity in tension.

The balancing act cost them dearly. Not only were their "principles" often and widely misunderstood, but also more than a few of their numbers eventually defected to groups as theologically different as the Unitarians and the Millerite Adventists. Even within the loyal Christian fold, diversity was held in tenuous check by a common commitment to christian unity and "civility" and a common mistrust of uniformity. The net result, wrote denominational historian Milo T. Morrill in 1912, was a movement that was frustratingly hard for an outsider to comprehend:

Readers will still press for categorical answers about Scriptural doctrines and theological dogmas. They will be answered perhaps that Scriptural doctrine should be carefully differentiated from theological doctrine; that Biblical language should be discriminated from philosophical formulae. . . . To elucidate the matter still further, suppose a minister of the Christians were asked to declare his views relative to the Trinity. He might answer in one of four ways. He might say, I know nothing about the Trinity; such a word does not appear in my Bible, but is a human invention. Or he might say, I neither affirm nor deny that upon which Scripture does not speak. Or he might say again, I believe in the Biblical Trinity but not in the theological. Or yet again, he might declare assent to the doctrine as commonly understood and might become a controversialist, handling metaphysical "essence" or "substance" or "three-in-one" speculative ideas incapable of conclusive proof, but capable of endless argument.⁴

With the exception of Morrill's history, no major work has been done on Christian origins in the past century. Nevertheless, in part because of their schismatic relationships with American Methodism and Presbyterianism, adequate material on both the Virginia and the Kentucky Christian movements is available. It is the New England group that remains virtually unchronicled. That movement - one that "kindled with new intelligence the countenances of the uneducated"⁵ in rural New England - also produced the first religious periodical in America.

NEW ENGLAND BEGINNINGS

In the wake of the American Revolution the religious contours of New England underwent rapid and radical change. The hold of Puritan Calvinism, embodied in the Congregational or “Standing Order” churches, was more relaxed in New England’s northern and western hill country. Even in these regions, however, Congregationalism was solidly established, subsidized by public taxation and supported by a network of Harvard- and Yale-trained pastors. During the Great Awakening, roughly from the late 1720s to the late 1740s, Congregational churches suffered numerical losses to Calvinistic (or “particular”) Baptists. However, the changes precipitated by revolution - political, economic, and social, as well as religious - broke the grip of the Standing Order and pushed the region toward pluralism. From the 1770s on, Shakers, Free Will Baptists, and Universalists, in addition to larger groups like Methodists and Baptists, energetically challenged Congregational hegemony. By 1815 Shakers, Free Will Baptists, and Universalists constituted one quarter of New England’s rural churches.(6)

Although there is no scholarly consensus on the origins of the late-eighteenth-century sectarian impulse in America, it is clear that the postrevolutionary ethos promoted new religious options that were experiential (or “enthusiastic”), anti authoritarian, innovative, and populist. Out of this ferment New England’s Christian Connexion emerged. The Connexion was a “sect” that disavowed sectarianism, advocating instead the emancipation of the common person from creeds, catechisms, “hireling ministers,” and denominations. Two men are credited with its founding.

Abner Jones, youngest of five children of strict Baptist parents, emigrated from Massachusetts with his family to Bridgewater, Vermont, in 1780. The next year, at the age of nine, Abner had his first religious experience, the result of a neighborhood hunting accident that touched off a local revival. “I was fully convinced that I must be born again or damned,” Abner recalled, and shortly thereafter he was converted. Despite this early episode, Abner’s adolescent years were ones of doubt, spiritual turmoil, and career experimentation. A decade after his conversion he “reconsecrated” himself to God and was baptized. Although at this time he began to entertain thoughts of preaching, Jones remained unclear about what he should preach and undertook the study of medicine instead. A close reading of scripture convinced him that his spiritual confusion was the result of embracing “many things without proper examination”; therefore he resolved to preach and practice nothing that could not be found in the Bible.

Before long Jones began to question not only the discipline and practice of his inherited faith, but also many familiar Calvinist doctrines. His mind was “brought out of a dark narrow prison, into the sunshine of a free gospel offered to everyone.” It now seemed clear that the gospel proclaimed few of the traditional doctrines that he had once accepted unquestioningly: the Trinity, Christ’s expiatory atonement, eternal punishment for sins, the doctrine of election. Jones discarded them all as spiritually binding and pernicious.

Around 1797 Jones and his new wife settled in Lyndon, Vermont, where he took up the practice of medicine and put his religious calling aside. But soon a “reformation” in an adjacent town moved him to a public confession of his backsliding ways; and in 1801 he preached his first sermon. Thereafter “doors opened . . . on every hand.” The same year Jones took a still more radical step: he and a dozen residents of Lyndon covenanted together to form a church, “rejecting all party and sectional names, and leaving each other free to cherish such speculative views of theology as the scriptures might plainly seem to them to teach.” This was the first Christian church

formally gathered in New England. In 1802, with three Free Will Baptist clergymen officiating, Abner Jones was ordained. During the next twelve months he began an active ministry, founding two more Christian churches at Hanover and Piermont, New Hampshire. Until his death in 1841 Jones exerted prodigious energy in support of the new movement, often preaching thirty to forty times a month in his travels across New England.(7)

A second founder, Elias Smith, was undoubtedly the most outspoken, theologically peripatetic, ideologically doctrinaire, and generally cantankerous of the Christians' early leaders. Smith was born three years before Abner Jones, in Lyme, Connecticut. Like Jones, he was the son of pious Calvinist parents - his father a Baptist and his mother a Congregationalist. Smith recalled a childhood filled with intense religious experiences. When Smith's family moved to Woodstock, Vermont, in 1782, he followed reluctantly, preferring less harsh and isolated circumstances. However, his schooling from a Baptist preacher and a conversion experience in the woods drew him "almost unconsciously" toward ministry. At twenty-one he joined the Baptist church; the next year he preached his first sermon; and thereafter he began a public ministry that eventually took him to Virginia.

Smith's view of ministry was iconoclastic from the start. He disliked the traditional black broadcloth of the clergy, was uncomfortable with the title "reverend," and objected to the use of notes in preaching. The doctrines of election and the Trinity were serious stumbling blocks for him. After his ordination in 1792 he got married and took a pastorate in Salisbury, New Hampshire. Yet he remained restless and uncomfortable in a settled position. His relationship with parishioners was as troubled as his theology. A brief lapse - the first of several during his lifetime - into the "heresy" of Universalism in 1801 was followed by a move to the comparatively sophisticated seacoast town of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. There, Smith crystallized his views on church and state. For the first time he ventured to say aloud that "the name CHRISTIAN was enough for the followers of Christ, without the addition of the word baptist, methodist, &c." In 1803 he and twenty-two others in Portsmouth covenanted "to bear the name of CHRISTIANS, leaving all unscriptural names behind." Inside of a year the new church had 150 members.

In June of 1803 Smith met Abner Jones, "the first free man I have ever seen." Before he came to Portsmouth, Smith wrote: "I considered myself alone in the world." Jones was instrumental in persuading Smith to abandon the last vestiges of his inherited Calvinism, as well as the "cumbersome" organizational structures of his church. Together both men began to preach - not without controversy-to receptive audiences in the Piscataqua area of New Hampshire and as far south as Boston. By 1804 Smith had become bold to denounce as "abominable in the sight of God" matters such as "calvinism, arminianism, freewillism, universalism, reverend, parsons, chaplains, doctors of divinity, clergy, bands, surplices, notes, creeds, covenants, platforms To this litany of unscriptural things he soon added the necessity of a college education for ministry, missionary societies, and church councils for ordination and discipline.(8)

Smith's and Jones' active itineracy earned the new movement converts and enemies. Strong at first in Massachusetts, Christian sentiments spread rapidly northward into the Maine and New Hampshire seacoast areas and more slowly into Vermont, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.(9) However, the publication of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* in 1808 brought the Christian Connexion into a decade of solid growth. The Herald, conceived and published by Elias Smith at Portsmouth and later Portland, Maine, was significant as "the first religious newspaper in the world" and as a vehicle for Smith's own strident republican sentiments. More important, however, it provided a forum for news and theological discussion among Christians across the country as

they began to define their movement and establish its boundaries. Through the mutual encouragement found in its pages, churches were planted in isolated areas of the north. By 1810 forty Christian churches had been gathered across New England, served by twenty preachers or “elders” who dutifully reported their gospel labors in the biweekly tabloid.

Growth of the movement in this early period was part of a larger “Second Great Awakening” that affected frontier and settled America after the turn of the century. In New England localized revivals swept like ripples over the rural landscape between 1800 and 1815, revitalizing old congregations and engendering new ones. To the Christians, these “quickenings” clearly represented “a glorious outpouring of the spirit of God in New England... perhaps beyond what has been known for many years, and a visible sign that their own cause was one whose time had come.(10) Every edition of the Herald brought new reports of “general reformations,” many of them following an almost predictable pattern of events. An 1812 revival in Westerly, Rhode Island, was typical:

At first but few attended; but after a few evenings the School-house was crowded in every part, and at last the windows were raised that people around the house might hear. In a short time they were obliged to meet in the Meeting-house, and frequently seven or eight hundred would attend an evening meeting. At some of the meetings a general sobbing has been heard through different parts of the Meeting-house; while an awful solemnity appeared through the whole. At certain times while the preachers and brethren were engaged in prayer, a great part of the assembly would be on their knees, and many like Peter’s hearers were saying in bitterness of soul, - “What shall we do?” ... When there is preaching, the people are very attentive to hear the word; after preaching, it is common for a very large number to speak one by one in exhortation some not more than 12 or 14 years old.(11)

Many other religious groups shared the revivalistic zeal of the Christians, but few shared their ecumenical interests. As early as 1812 they were involved in serious union discussions with the Free Will Baptists of Maine and New Hampshire. Periodically they promoted local interdenominational meetings at which “all party distinctions, of names and other things” were temporarily laid aside.(12) Correspondence between northern and southern Christians began as early as 1808 in the pages of the Herald. And in 1811 Elias Smith was in Virginia representing the New England fellowship at a meeting “in order to attend to the important question so often asked, - ‘Can the Christian Brethren in the South be united with the Christian Brethren in the North?’”(13)

The elimination of “party distinctions” and the fostering of an irenic spirit of cooperation among religious groups were elusive goals. Christians encountered bitter opposition throughout New England, fueled by their own fervent evangelizing and Elias Smith’s scathing attacks on “sectarian bondage” and “hireling” clergy “too lazy to work.” Where the Christians did promote unity among “the sects” it was often in an ironic reversal of their own intent. For example, when Frederick Plummer, one of New England’s earliest itinerant Christians, arrived in Chelsea, Vermont, in 1811, the “combined Sectarian parties” banded together to oppose him.(14) The next year, after calling a series of meetings to support orthodoxy, religious groups in Bristol, Rhode Island “declared themselves a Christian union of all denominations excepting the poor ‘Christians!’” who were formally requested to desist.(15)

Christian itinerants and settled pastors were often subjected to harassment. Elias Smith was hounded by opponents from the beginning of his ministry in Portsmouth: irate mobs broke win-

dows in the church, dumped vials of asafetida in the alley nearby, disrupted baptisms, and even attempted to haul the preacher bodily from his pulpit. Although few other Christian leaders suffered outright violence, many at one time or another endured verbal attacks and defamation of character. A letter from Frederick Plummer, for example, describes typical missionary trials during his labors in Woodstock, Vermont. The work of God has been great, he wrote to the Herald in 1812, but “the opposition has been great” as well: “Every false and base report, that bigotry, envy and malice could invent, have been circulated to injure my feelings and character.”

This widespread antagonism was not simply a response to the Christians’ revivalism, biblicism, and anticreedalism - all of which had earlier characterized the Great Awakening of the 1700s. Rather, it was what one modern commentator calls their relentless “zeal to dismantle mediating elites within the church”(16) that set Christians at odds with the Congregational Standing Order and with Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian leadership. “Venture to be as independent in things of religion,” Elias Smith declared repeatedly, “as [in] those [things] which respect the government in which you live.” Smith and his colleagues called for an ecclesiastical revolution that was fully as radical as America’s political one had been. They insisted on “gospel-liberty” that demolished traditional distinctions between laity and clergy, elevated individual conscience over the authority and decisions of groups or councils, and rejected the recondite theological abstractions of the academy in favor of a believer’s own interpretive insights.

WOMEN IN MINISTRY

The Christian ethos of equality and individualism offered grounds for innovations that in the early 1800s were uncommon, except among radical separatist and sectarian groups. Christians supported women’s public ministries long before revivalist Charles Finney brought the issue into general debate; and nearly a dozen “female laborers” were in their graves before Congregationalist Antoinette Brown was ordained.

Exactly when women began preaching among New England Christians is unclear. Historian Milo Morrill indicates that as early as 1812, “women preachers were working and highly esteemed in the movement at large, and that same year Christian women were “exhorting” at religious meetings in Vermont.(17) From the beginning the Christians’ egalitarian thrust and inclusive worship practices encouraged women inclined toward public profession. *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, October 1816, described a revival in Deerfield, New Hampshire. The writer noted what a difference there was between “an assembly of men improperly called *Divines*, who meet to make compendiums of *Divinity*” and a meeting of Christians, “where a large number of free brethren and sisters meet, to preach, sing, pray, exhort, and edify each other; where all serve by love, without one even pretending to have dominion over the faith of another.”(18) This egalitarianism was not limited to the spiritual arena. In a printed address on marriage that is remarkable for its time, an anonymous clergyman in 1814 advised altarbound couples to “yield ... to one another-*Be ye equally yoked*, is the command of God; but neither seek basely to throw undue weight on the other’s shoulders.”(19)

The first woman to preach actively among Christians in New England was probably Nancy Gove Cram, a native of Weare, New Hampshire. Converted early to the tenets of Benjamin Randel’s Free Will Baptists,(20) she was soon attracted to the Christian movement, embracing its ideas and regularly engaging in mutual work and fellowship among Christian elders. Whether or not she remained a Free Will Baptist is unclear; both groups claim her in their histories. Nancy Gove

Cram's preaching career was short - just four years, from 1812 until her death in 1816. But during that time she undertook a remarkable ministry, preaching "in barns, groves, and orchards" to huge crowds in Vermont and New York; establishing several churches; and by repute converting no fewer than seven ministers-to-be, including two other preaching women, Mary (Stevens) Curry and Abigail Roberts.(21) At her death, Elder Joseph Badger of Barnstead, New Hampshire, wrote to Elias Smith that Nancy Cram's "Faithful labours ... will be held in long remembrance. I have heard Saints," he added, "and even sinners, mention her name with weeping."(22)

Another Free Will Baptist - Clarissa H. Danforth of Vermont-was most influential in promoting early female leadership among Christians in New England. Like Nancy Gove Cram, Danforth was an itinerant, preaching with success in the Piscataqua area and later in Rhode Island between 1816 and 1822. The *Christian Herald* of September 1818 reported that Danforth "had made a serious impression, on the minds of multitudes" in towns along the New Hampshire seacoast, and apparently she itinerated there with good response for more than half a year.(23) Danforth was followed by other pioneer women: Hannah Hubbard, who labored and probably cooperated with her in New Hampshire; Sarah Thornton, who worked in Connecticut during the 1820s; Rachel (Hosmer) Thompson, who served as an evangelist in New Hampshire and Vermont during the same period; and Nancy Towle, a Free Will Baptist whose mission field among the Christians was Maine, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Hannah (Peavy) Cogswell (wife and sister of Christian elders) traveled extensively with her husband, Frederick, in New Hampshire and outside New England during the 1830s. The Cogswells were renowned as a revival-producing team: "Their names are generally signed together, and Elder Cogswell, in most of his letters, uses the pronoun 'we' while speaking of the meetings held."(24)

Among the Christians these preaching women were neither rejected, margined, tolerated as anomalies, nor relegated to circumscribed ministries among other women. They were considered equals and supported wholly in their ministries by both men and women of the Connexion, at least in the first three decades of the movement. Christian periodicals of the day are replete with material, both practical and exegetical, indicating unswerving support of female ministries. As early as 1817, for example, the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* noted that "the New Testament does not confine public speaking wholly to men, though they are generally mentioned." Both male and female might appropriately speak to an assembly, the writer added, provided neither is tedious or tiresome.(25) The next year, in the wake of a revival begun in Portsmouth and vicinity by Clarissa Danforth, commentator Elias Smith anticipated the arguments of others later in the century and spoke from the logic of simple efficacy: "When preachers, whether male or female, are followed with such signs as these, and cause the wicked to turn from the error of their ways, we hesitate not to pronounce them the servants of the most high God, who shew the way of life and salvation."(26) Women's preaching is frequently described in correspondence with adjectives like "free," "satisfying," "useful," "remarkably blessed," and "powerful"; and those few women in the field habitually spoke at public meetings right alongside the brethren.

Of course Christian apologists did engage in some interpretive contortions to support their unusual position. With reasoning that did not follow typical patterns of argumentation on the subject, an anonymous contributor to the *Christian Herald* in 1818 carefully showed that women had preached, traveled, and taught along with Paul in the early church. But what was to be done with those perennially troublesome passages from 1 Corinthians and 2 Timothy? The answer lay in a clever distinction. "But where is it that Paul considers it to be a shame for a woman to speak, teach, and usurp authority over the man? I answer, 'in the church,' -not in meetings of public

worship; and in no other way can Paul's declarations be reconciled."(27) By thus narrowing the meaning of "church" to encompass little more than the gathered body in its formal, organized sense, Christians could handily exclude women from the tasks of ordering and administrating and leave them free to accomplish the more important tasks of evangelizing, preaching, and teaching.

It is sometimes argued that it was precisely this fine distinction that kept preaching women - or "female labourers in the church," as they were usually designated - from formal ordination until a decade and a half after Congregationalist Antoinette Brown's ordination in 1853. Christians were willing to grant their females license to "prepare the soil" for the churches but not to hold structural power in them. Such an argument, however, misunderstands the Christians' own early and radical mistrust of church structure itself - a mistrust that was especially pervasive in New England, where the background of Christian converts from Baptist and Congregational origins was one of uncompromising independency. Christians considered themselves a movement or a "connexion" and not a church or denomination. Denying accusations of sectarianism, they created structures warily and gradually, and then only out of a growing need for permanence, order, and effective communication. Ordained Christian elders were notoriously casual about the sacraments, sometimes leaving it to the discretion of an individual convert whether he or she would choose to be baptized. Christian laypersons spoke publicly, interpreting the word and participating fully in decision making. It was scripture - the word preached with passion and taken to heart - that was the source of power and the center of faith. The exclusion of women from administrative positions in "the church," therefore, was a relatively minor, formal sort of limitation. In this way Christians were able to support women's public ministries and preaching and Paul's prohibitions concerning women in the churches. Ironically, their progressive stance did not lead them until much later to question the meaning of a gospel that declares spiritual equality and radical individual liberty but keeps some of its most powerful exponents from performing certain minimally important duties. Only with the opening of the frontier west of Pennsylvania, not in New England, did Christian women achieve full ministerial status. Unencumbered by old proprieties and recalcitrant social structures, women finally ministered with freedom and license that remained largely impossible in the old northeast until the turn of the century.

EXPANSION

Innovation, a freewheeling approach to structure and discipline, and apparent harmony in both worship and practice characterized much of the first two decades of the Christian Connexion in New England. Growth was rapid, if sporadic: in 1814 forty-nine men (forty-four of them ordained) presided over as many churches in the region; seven years later the number of preachers and churches had reached nearly eighty. In New York, under leadership that was drawn heavily from the ranks of New England-born converts, growth was remarkable: by 1820 fifty preachers, including three women, were itinerating or serving churches; fully one third of these were native New Englanders.(28) Close cooperation and communication existed between New England and New York well into the latter part of the century. Preachers routinely itinerated successfully throughout the entire territory.

From the beginning, however, the Connexion had problems. Elder Uriah Smith, during a swing through New Hampshire in 1813, reported with consternation that there were churches calling themselves "Churches of Christ" that had neither deacons nor records. "I think our travelling

elders are deficient in not doing these things in the first naming of a company the church of Christ," he wrote. He promised to appoint officers wherever he baptized five or more persons.(29) Two years later the *Herald* noted similar difficulties in an article entitled "Churches Out of Order." By 1816 the paper suggested that there was need to consider the subject of proper ordination procedures because of disciplinary problems and irregular practices in western New Hampshire and Vermont,(30)

Two "scandals" shook the young movement. In 1816 the volatile Elias Smith lapsed into Universalism, this time for an extended sojourn of seven years. Although he later recanted, many of Smith's colleagues never forgave him. With his defection the Christians lost not only their most brilliant and visible spokesperson, but also their credibility with a public already predisposed to criticism. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* was sold to Robert Foster, a layman from Portsmouth, who carried on publication in May 1818 under the new name Christian Herald. Although Foster continued the paper as an organ of "religious intelligence," he was no controversialist. Smith's grand purpose had been "to shew the liberty which belongs to men, as it respects their duty to God, and each other." But Foster's was significantly less ambitious: to promote "the cause of the Redeemer" and to "give an impartial statement of the spread of experimental religion."(31) The new Herald continued through a bewildering series of shifts in name and management until well into the twentieth century. It never again equaled the vision and power of the original publication.

Along with Elias Smith's heresy, controversy erupted in Connecticut over the alleged "sundry atrocious acts" of Elder Douglas Farnum, a charismatic and popular but eccentric itinerant from Vermont. Convicted of several charges-among them "naming obscene things in public" and "telling some if they wanted or would go to heaven with him to follow in creeping on the floor from room to room"-Farnum was formally disfellowshipped by a General Conference at Hampton, Connecticut, in 1819.(32) His guilt or innocence remained a subject of lively debate for years.

This departure of two influential leaders under questionable circumstances was embarrassing to the Christians. It gave credence to detractors' claims that the movement was both emotionally excessive and theologically unsound. To counter such opposition, and because of a growing need to safeguard young and isolated churches, by 1820 the Christians began to construct a rudimentary denomination out of their formerly loose fellowship.

In New England a tradition of congregational autonomy, shared by Baptists, Free Will Baptists, and Congregationalists, had long been coupled with systems of fraternal advisement and support among churches. As early as 1809 irregular local "elders' conferences" and "general meetings" were organized by Christians in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Similar meetings were held in every New England state by 1820. These gatherings initially brought laypersons and ministers together for devotions, discussion, and mutual support. It was not long before they took on a more formal cast, dealing with matters of discipline, admonishment, and order. In 1816 a "General Conference" was called at Windham, Connecticut, with representation from Pennsylvania, New York, and all New England states except Rhode Island. A similar gathering, held at Portsmouth in 1819, recommended "a union of the several churches throughout the connexion in the United States" and advised that a United States Conference of Christians be established. One year later, albeit with limited participation from outside the northeast, the conference was formalized at Windham. Expressing dismay at the "impositions and havoc" wrought by interlopers "whose characters have been stained with immoral conduct, entering in among us under the

name Christian,” the delegates adopted recommendations minimally to regularize ministerial standards, church membership and financial practices, and record keeping. Their ultimate values, however, were uncompromising: “Be assured,” they wrote to their absent colleagues, “that we do not mean to take away or abridge your liberties in the gospel.”(33) Statistics collected at the Windham meeting were printed in the first Christian Almanac and Register, which continued to be published irregularly into the 1850s. Although its data were sometimes only minimally accurate, the Register was an important symbol of the movement’s growing denominational consciousness and interregional solidarity.

MINISTRY AND THEOLOGY

The year 1820 marks a watershed for the Christian Connexion. After 1820 Christians confronted a dilemma as they attempted to articulate their principles and regulate their practices without wholly abandoning the “antisectionalism” that, paradoxically, united them. Two areas in particular—ministry and theology—felt the force of debate and change.

Massachusetts-born John Rand, a convert from Baptist beliefs, was the first person ordained among New England Christians. His consecration in 1806, presided over by elders Smith, Jones, and Joseph Boody, set a precedent. It was understood that individuals raised by recognition of their gifts could be ordained in the presence of three elders, a conveniently simple procedure in a movement that was rural and itinerant. The few elders and the demands of effective evangelism, coupled with the Christians’ deep antipathy toward “hireling” clergy, whom Elias Smith believed lived high off the public coffers and worked precious little for the Lord, prohibited anything like a settled ministry. By 1819 state support of clergy had all but ceased, the sharp tongue of Elias Smith was silent, and the needs of the young movement were rapidly changing. Christians began rethinking their earlier attitudes.

Furthermore, men like Douglas Farnum alerted leaders to the need for minimal standards of membership and office. Organizing regular local conferences was one “special remedy” specifically aimed at expunging “those who say, they are apostles, but are not.”(34) Other measures were taken: in Maine, for example, unordained persons wishing to preach were first to be recognized by their own churches and then approved by conference.(35) Increasingly, ordinations took place with a “respectable body of Christians” present, as well as the requisite three elders.

It was not discipline, however, but the plight of young churches—“planted and left by evangelizing preachers, which are now perishing through famine of the word”—that was most problematic.(36) During the 1820s and 1830s Christians further defined the nature of ministry. Evangelist and pastor were separate offices, the one for planting churches, the other to “take care of them after they are planted.” The latter office, wrote two ministers from the field in 1826, “has been sadly neglected by us as a people.”(37) By 1836 cofounder Abner Jones modified the equation of “settled pastorate” with “hireling.” A hireling, he wrote, is simply one who agrees to preach for a stipulated time and a set salary. Admitting that he himself had served under such stipulations for a year, he emphasized the need for mutual support and liberty, without potentially burdensome contracts that were unequal in their demands on pastor and people. Ministers should not be hirelings, but they should have a living. The way was cleared for Christians to assume, without guilt, the regular care of specific churches.(38)

Theologically, Christians experienced great change in the period after 1820. The “theologizing”

process was even more protracted and more complex than the process of rethinking ministry. From the beginning, Christians had shunned the heady intricacies of “speculative theology,” insisting on the sufficiency of the word itself and the combined power of the human heart and mind to grasp gospel truth. Elias Smith had articulated three foundational principles: no head over the church but Christ, no confession of faith but the New Testament, no name but Christian. The people veered little from these in more than half a century. Standards for church membership were based on action, not assent. Whereas proper Christian life was essential, uniformity of belief was neither anticipated nor desired, since “genuine religion can breathe freely only in an atmosphere of freedom.” To each individual believer, not just to an educated elite, the Bible offered up its full truth.

In one sense, little theological change occurred between 1820 and the final decades of the century. Christians remained wedded to the Bible as the center of their beliefs, adamantly rejecting anything that smacked of creedalism, including written summaries of their principles. They continued to insist on the precedence of piety over professional training. But the fact that theological issues—like the Trinity, a future state of rewards and punishments, and the Second Coming—were public issues represented an important step toward denominational consciousness. In the pages of the movement’s several periodicals, in pamphlets, at conferences, in publications of the Christian General Book Association, established in 1834 “that the connection may assume a character,” (39) Christians pursued theological debate with energy and sophistication worthy of the most effete Harvard-trained Congregationalists. Like the first-century churches they sought to emulate, Christians discovered the need for clearer self-definition, while defectors and detractors carried off members and spread misinformation about the fellowship with impunity.(40)

On October 2, 1850, delegates from eleven states and Canada met at Marion, Ohio, for the largest General Convention held to date. Historian Morrill reckons it a milestone meeting for the denomination, expressive of a “new thrill of organic life . . . a new spirit and conviction dominating the people’s thought.”(41) New Englanders and southern Christians built on the groundwork for unity established a decade earlier, when extensive correspondence and debate had issued finally in a formal union between Christian conferences of the two regions. The *Christian Palladium*(42) of December 1841 announced the consummation, expressing its wish that the union might “serve as a living and convincing example to the divided sects, that Christians can be one in spirit and work, though a difference of sentiment may exist among them.” (43) Not all Christians accepted these developments with equal joy, but the prevailing sentiment in New England was one of approval. In an environment where many religious groups had long vied for acceptance within a limited population, the inevitability of the Christians’ sectarianism continued to be discussed. “The Christians are, and must be, a sect,” one writer asserted. “It cannot and should not be avoided... . As a member of that connexion, I should prove recreant to honesty and consistency if I did not use the means and influence in my power to advance her denominational interest in preference to all others.”(44)

At midcentury, after fifty years of common life as a “connexion,” Christians began to recognize what their primitive forebears had discovered: in the living church, form and freedom, spirit and structure are not (and cannot be) mutually exclusive if a movement is to survive its founding generation. The gradual “institutionalization” of their Connexion, however, did not shake the Christians’ firm conviction that the true church is broad and open, its doors wide enough for the admission of all Christians “as Christians simply.” The center of the church is a person and not a proposition; therefore, no one formulation of the church can ever be absolutized as “true”; no

simple intellectual assent to creeds or confessions can make an “obedient christian” out of one whose life is not an imitation of Christ. As “Christian principles” gradually became “denominational beliefs,” they remained broad enough to invite other christians into mutual fellowship and cooperation, including the Congregational churches in 1931. A well-known New England pastor and educator, Elder Jasper Hazen, summarized the story well in a fitting verbal legacy for the United Church of Christ:

To be an able disputant, on minor points, a powerful master, or an elegant dancer, may fix the gaze and command the approbation of an admiring and wondering crowd; but neither do much good to the souls or bodies of men. Then let us leave the arena of the theological gladiator, and say to our brethren in Christ, and to the world, “Our great objects are the unity of Christians and the conversion of the world. We labor for both objects, because of their high importance; and for one of them again, that by its accomplishment we may secure the other.” “*That they may all be one—that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.*”(45)

Notes

1. Austin Craig, “Ourselves: Our Principles; Our Present Controversy; Our Immediate Duties” (Feltville, NJ, 1850). Craig, a prominent Christian pastor, biblical scholar, and educator in the mid-1800s, is today best known for the United Church of Christ conference center on Cape Cod that bears his name.
2. Louis H. Gunnemann, *The Shaping of the United Church of Christ: An Essay in the History of American Christianity* (New York: United Church Press, 1977), pp. 161-63.
3. “Doctor Channing’s Letter,” *The Christian Palladium*, February 14, 1837, pp. 305-11.
4. Milo True Morrill, *A History of the Christian Denomination in America, 1794-1911 AD.* (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association, 1912), pp. 184-85.
5. “Channing’s Letter,” p. 306.
6. Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). This is an excellent source and the only major study of its type.
7. All material on Jones is from A. D. Jones, *Memoir of Elder Abner Jones* (Boston: William Crosby & Co., 1842).
8. Elias Smith, *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Portsmouth, 1816); *The Christian’s Magazine*, June 1, 1805, pp. 11-12.
9. No church statistics exist before the publication of the Herald of Gospel Liberty (hereafter *HGL*). This assessment is based on the earliest published list of agents for the paper, representing 26 towns-eight each in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire and one each in Rhode Island and Vermont. *HGL*, September 15, 1808, p. 8.
10. *HGL*, August 17, 1810, p. 206.
11. *HGL*, December 11, 1812, pp. 447-48.
12. *HGL*, April 10, 1812, p. 380; August 17, 1810, p. 206.

13. *HGL*, October 25, 1811, p. 331.
14. *HGL*, December 20, 1811, pp. 4-9.
15. *HGL*, October 15, 1812, pp. 430-31.
16. Nathan O. Hatch, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," *Journal of American History*, December 1980, pp. 545-67.
17. *HGL*, October 30, 1812, p. 434.
18. *HGL*, October 1816, pp. 65-66.
19. *HGL*, April 29, 1814, p. 599.
20. The Free Will Baptists were perhaps the first group in New England to support women in traditionally male roles. As early as 1787 Abigail Amerzeen appears to have been in a position of authority at the church in New Castle, New Hampshire, and in 1791 Mary Savage of Woolwich, Maine, became the first in the denomination to "take the position of a gospel laborer." *The Centennial Record of Freewill Baptists, 1780-1880* (Dover, NH, 1881), pp. 45-47.
21. J. E. Burnett, *Early Women of the Christian Church Heroines All* (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association, nd.), pp. 9-13; the Rev. E. W. Humphreys, *Memoirs of Deceased Christian Ministers; or, Brief Sketches of the Lives and Labors of 975 Ministers, Who Died Between 1793 and 1880* (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association, 1880), pp. 96-97.
22. *HGL*, August 1817, p. 224.
23. *Christian Herald*, July 1818, p. 47; *ibid.*, September 1818, p. 70.
24. Humphreys, *op. cit.*, pp. 92, 267.
25. *HGL*, February 1817, pp. 132-33.
26. *Christian Herald*, September 1818, p. 70.
27. *Christian Herald*, November 1818, pp. 86-89.
28. *HGL*, March 4, 1814, p. 575; *Christian Herald*, April 13, 1821, pp. 157-58. Anne Rixford (sic), Sara Hedges (sic), and Abigail Roberts are listed as "Unordained Preachers in the East Conference" of New York in the latter periodical.
29. *HGL*, February 19, 1813, p. 467.
30. *HGL*, July 17, 1815, p. 61; *ibid.*, December 1816, pp. 73-77. See also *Christian Herald*, January 1819, p. 95.
31. *HGL*, September 1, 1808, p. 1; *Christian Herald*, May 1818, p. 1.
32. *Christian Herald*, March 1819; pp. 126-27.
33. *Christian Herald*, November 1819, pp. 72-73; December 8, 1820, pp. 79-88.
34. *Christian Herald*, August 1820, p. 12.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

36. *Christian Herald*, March 1820, p. 135.
37. *Gospel Luminary*, June 1826, pp. 125-32.
38. *Christian Palladium*, October 1, 1836, pp. 161-64.
39. Minutes of the Convention of 1834, reprinted in *The Christians' Annual 1899* (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association), p. 5.
40. If confusion existed over the antitrinitarianism of some Christians, especially in New York state, it was the Adventism of William Miller in the late 1830s and early 1840s that was most troublesome to New Englanders. Miller, a deist-turned-Baptist from Massachusetts, was convinced that the second advent was to take place on October 22, 1844; gathering thousands of followers throughout the northeast, he found the Christians, with their open pulpits and wide-ranging theologies, to be easy converts. Morrill estimates that "several thousand communicants" were eventually lost to the Millerites, with the most significant losses in Vermont. *History of the Christian Denomination*, pp. 175-76.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
42. The *Palladium*, published out of Union Mills, New York, was one of many religious journals sponsored by the Christians. For a complete account of the movement's voluminous output of print, see J. Pressley Barrett, ed., *The Centennial of Religious Journalism* (Dayton: Christian Publishing Association, 1908).
43. *Christian Palladium*, December 15, 1841, p. 251.
44. Quoted in Craig, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
45. *Christian Palladium*, August 2, 1843, p. 50.