

CHURCH HISTORY

"Now these things took place as examples for us..."

Lesson 18

The Frontier in 1800

Once you crossed the Appalachians, you were in the Frontier - Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett territory. If you crossed the Mississippi River you had left the United States. It was rugged land and rapidly filling with settlers.

The Restoration Movement in America

Our study of church history now narrows its scope to address the thread through which we trace our heritage. Our story picks up around the turn of the 19th century.

Religion in the US in 1800

The religious fervor apparent during the founding years of the colonies declined over time. It reached a low following the Revolutionary War. W.E. Garrison writes "there was probably

never a time when there was as large a percentage not only of religious indifference, but of active hostility to religion, as during the last two decades of the eighteenth century" (Religion Follows the Frontier; p. 53).

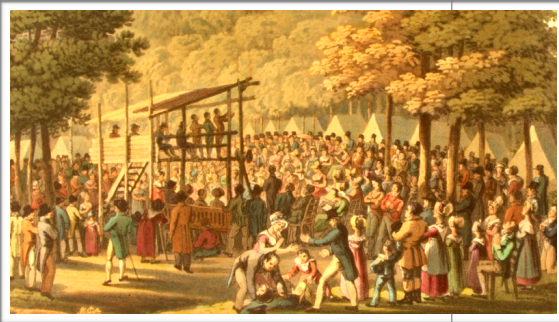
A brief period of religious revival in the mid 1700's faded. But in the late 1700's there was a religious outbreak all along the American frontier known as the Great Revival in the West. A lot of new religious bodies and sects came out of this period. Historians describe it as a natural breeding ground for bizarre cults and utopian societies such as the Mormons, the Shakers, the Rappites, the Adventists, and other similar groups.

But it was also a time when groups that met the needs of the individualistic, optimistic mindset of the frontier would arise. These included Methodists, Baptists, Cumberland Presbyterians, and Disciples of Christ. I am not suggesting the Restoration movement was produced because of its cultural



Cane Ridge Revival of 1801

The Revival was an enormous camp meeting held in eastern Kentucky near the old Cane Ridge log meeting house. Its Presbyterian pastor at the time was a young Barton W. Stone. The event is considered the climactic event of the Great Western Revival. Beginning on



August 6, 1801, the revival ran for 7-8 days when provisions ran out. The estimated attendance of 20,000+ would equal 10% of the population of entire state of Kentucky at the time.

and social settings. I do not believe that New Testament churches will only arise in certain cultures. But it is true the opportunity for it to thrive can be affected by certain factors like freedom of religion, absence of persecution, democratic principles, ready availability of the scriptures, and other things that provide fertile soil for the growth of primitive Christianity. The American frontier in 1800 was such a time.

In the first half of the 19th century growth was extraordinary among the more conservative evangelistic groups. In 1800 the largest denominations in order were: Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Reformed, Quaker, German Sectaries, and Methodists. But by 1850 the order was Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran. The Disciples of Christ, after only about 20 years, was sixth with 118,000 members, surpassing the diminishing Episcopalians with 90,000. (D. E. Harrell).

The great spiritual revival on the frontier is showcased in the Cane Ridge Revival of 1802 in eastern Kentucky. Modeled after the great revivals held by Presbyterian James McGready, thousands listened to Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist preachers out under the trees surrounding the little Cane Ridge meeting house. Half a dozen preachers might be speaking at once. The number attending was estimated between twenty and thirty thousand. Conversions were often of the convulsive kind with outwardly manifestations of jerking violently, dancing uncontrollably, falling down as if dead, bursting into laughter or singing. But not all present were so moved.

Others were called upon to re-examine their beliefs and commitment. Among them was Barton W. Stone who will play a major role in the Restoration Movement.

Despite the significant growth among many denominations, there was much division. When Thomas Campbell comes to America in 1807 he applies for a license from the Synod of North America of the Seceder Presbyterian Church, one of many minority wings of the Scottish church. He was well aware, and disgusted with, the divided state of his own church. He had been part of a unity movement in Scotland before coming to America. Such infighting was common and particularly distasteful to many of their members. This factionalism would also be a major factor in the Restoration movement.

What Is A Restoration Movement?

The Restoration Movement is a term used by religious historians to describe a primarily American movement that sought to unite all Christians on the Bible alone and, thereby, restore the church to its first century primitive form. (Primitive is not a negative term in this context. Historians use it to describe a desire to return to a simpler form of Christianity as found in the first

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Tombstone of William Rogers

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William Rogers, along with his father Nathaniel, were leaders in the church at Cane Ridge, KY. His tombstone says they moved to Cane Ridge and "united with the Church of Christ at Cane Ridge in 1807." The significance of this is the Cane Ridge congregation was designated by the term Church of Christ before either Thomas or Alexander Campbell were in America. The movement to restore New Testament Christianity and to use biblical names and designations was already well underway before they came on the scene.

century.) The movement appears in America in several different places at once. Its beginnings can be traced by studying its most significant preachers who first proclaimed the restoration principle in America.

We must remember that returning the church to its first century roots had also been the desire of the Reformers. But they sought it mostly in terms of restoring its purity - freeing it from covetousness, greed, lust for power, and immorality. They were not looking to do away with the existing church but only to "reform" it. In the beginning few Reformers wanted to break entirely with Rome. Their break came mainly because Rome forced it. Restorers want to form every aspect of the church on the basis of only what is found in scripture. As Thomas Campbell famously said, "Where the Bible speaks we speak. Where it is silent, we are silent. Luther's contemporary, Ulrich Zwingli, had stated the same principle over 250 years earlier. But they were applying it only to the fight against Roman Catholicism. Campbell is showing the principle should also be applied to Protestantism. The axe now lies at the root of both Catholic and Protestant churches. This is the principle and spirit of the Restoration Movement.

Although Thomas and Alexander Campbell are usually credited with beginning the movement in America, there were separate movements already underway before the Campbells arrive on the scene.

Virginia

As the Protestant movement grew in America, it became apparent to many that their church's doctrines were far removed from the church in the New Testament. In Virginia, Methodist minister James O'Kelly became dissatisfied with many of the Methodist Church's teachings. He pled for a return to the Bible as the only authority, and to the Bible form of church organization. In 1793 he, along with many preachers and several thousand members, severed ties with the Methodist Episcopal Church and called themselves Republican Methodists. They later dropped this name in favor of the Christian Church. Though still practicing many denominational doctrines it opened the eyes of many to the restoration principle. This group would later split and many of its members would join other restoration movements.

New England States

Seeds of the Reformation spirit can also be found in the work of Abner Jones and Elias Smith. In 1801 in Vermont, Baptist preacher Jones organized a "free" church which rejected any name but Christian and sought to unite on the Bible alone. Many such churches were soon established in New Hampshire and Vermont. He was joined by Elias Smith in 1802 who had rejected Calvinism and determined to go only by the name Christian.

However, Smith had earlier dabbled with Unitarian-Universalism and eventually drifted back into it. In time many of these congregations would drift into Universalism. But they evidence Restoration principles were being pursued independently and concurrently throughout the United States.

The arrival of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in America, along with the work of Barton W. Stone, will help lead to widespread knowledge of the Restoration ideal. Soon Restoration of New Testament Christianity is a plea throughout the states. The explosion of simple New Testament Christianity in America is beginning.