

# Who Are The Churches of Christ?

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The Churches of Christ in America result from an indigenous American movement seeking to restore the gospel and church of the New Testament. For this reason the term "Restoration Movement" has been employed as a self-designation, though this particular phraseology is not widely employed to identify these churches by outsiders. Three sizable constituencies now exist from the late eighteenth century beginnings: (1) The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), (2) The Independent Christian Churches (Christians Churches/Churches of Christ, and (3) The Churches of Christ.

The Churches of Christ are the conservative wing of the first major split in the movement and were identified as autonomous by the Federal Census Bureau in 1906. The Independent Christian Churches first moved toward a separate, more conservative conclave within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1927, and withdrew officially in the late 1960s.

Churches of Christ have approximately 3,500,000 members throughout the world. Approximately 1,300,000 are in the United States. The majority in the United States are located in the region running from Pittsburgh to El Paso with the north border extending from Pittsburgh through Indianapolis, St. Louis, Wichita and Albuquerque, and the southern through Atlanta, Montgomery, Baton Rouge, Houston, and San Antonio. The members in predominately African-American churches number above 170,000, and the members in Spanish speaking churches 10,000. The members of Churches of Christ in India number above 1,000,000 and those in Africa slightly less than 1,000,000.

The roots of the Restoration Movement extend backward to the period after the Revolutionary War in which several Americans with religious interests grew restless over autocratic structures, European control and theology, and denominational boundaries. These pressures revamped the mainline churches, but also resulted in independent constituencies springing up in various regions. Four such independent groups in (1) Virginia, (2) New England, (3) Kentucky and (4) Pennsylvania--West Virginia--Ohio, played a role in the crystallization of the restoration movement in the 1830's. The contributions of the constituencies in Virginia and New England were contributory rather than direct.

In Virginia in the 1780's, a group of Methodist ministers led by James O'Kelly (1757-1826) sought freedom from supervision so that Methodist circuit riders could determine their own itinerary. For a time it seemed they would succeed, but the outcome was that preaching assignments were placed in the hands of the Bishop. Those who favored self-determination broke away, founding the Republican Methodist Church. In 1794 they changed the name of the body to the Christian Church. Before the turn of the century preachers from this movement were traveling into the Carolinas and making their way through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and Tennessee. They also went west to the Ohio River and migrated into Ohio and Indiana.

In New England, especially in the newly developing regions of New Hampshire and Vermont, persons of Baptist heritage, chiefly Abner Jones (1772-1841) and Elias Smith (1769-1846), formed new churches. They went by the name Christian, or Christian Connexion. They championed defeat of tax support for establishment ministers (Congregational), and rejected aspects of Calvinistic or Puritan theology in regard to election and predestination. The Bible was heralded, especially the New Testament, as the only source of authority and faith. These New England leaders contended that

Christians should cut adrift from historical encrustations so as to create the New Testament church in its first century purity. Members commenced migrating into upper New York after 1810, where they became especially strong, then Ohio, Indiana and Michigan.

The two most important tributaries for the larger movement resulted from the work of Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and the two Campbells, Thomas (1763-1854) and Alexander (1788-1866) father and son.

At the turn of the century the second great awakening titillated the Kentucky and Ohio frontiers. Camp meetings sprang up throughout the region, the largest being the 1801 Cane Ridge, Kentucky, northeast of Lexington, extravaganza. Denominational barriers crumbled and the call to struggle followed by conversion, diluted traditional election theology. As the weeks extended into months, some of the preachers, especially among the Presbyterians, favored the ecumenical savor. They thereupon formed an independent presbytery in which Barton W. Stone was a participant. Not too long after, carrying these interests to their logical conclusions, they dissolved the Springfield Presbytery in order to "sink into union with the body of Christ at large." These leaders found many frontiersmen ready to embrace their sentiments and rapid growth ensued.

Barton W. Stone, a Presbyterian minister at Cane Ridge and Concord, Kentucky, extended the invitation for the great camp meeting at Cane Ridge. Stone was born in Maryland, and then lived in North Carolina before migrating to Kentucky. By 1810 he had emerged as the chief spokesman for those who had embraced the dissolving of the Springfield Presbytery. The five ministers of the Presbytery published "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" in 1804.

In 1807 Thomas Campbell, born in North Ireland of Scottish descent, arrived in Pennsylvania, settling in Washington County. Long a Presbyterian minister, he exerted considerable energy in the land of his nativity in a struggle to unify dissident Presbyterian groups. His efforts at similar rapprochement in Pennsylvania resulted in litigation to oust him from the Presbytery. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, he resigned and with others of like-mind, formed the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania. The foundational documents of this group which Campbell authored was "The Declaration and Address" 1809.

In 1809, his gifted son Alexander arrived with the rest of Thomas' family after a stint at the

University of Glasgow. Out of the Campbells' efforts, churches were formed in the region around Pittsburgh. After 1816, the Campbells joined with Baptist ministers of the Redstone and a decade later the Mahoning Associations, winning several Ohio and Kentucky Baptist churches to their outlooks. The Campbells envisioned a mass exodus of believers from sectarian Protestantism so as to become one body—one New Testament church.

Early in the 1830's the churches from the Stone and Campbell groups commenced merging in Kentucky. The amalgamation expanded to churches in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Tennessee, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. Several churches from the New England Jones-Smith, and Virginia O'Kelly movement in these mid-west regions also became a part of the Stone-Campbell merger. After the Civil War the Christian Connexion churches that did not merge established headquarters in Dayton, Ohio. In 1931 they merged with the Congregational Church, then with the Evangelical and Reformed Church, to form in 1957 the United Church of Christ.

By 1850 Alexander Campbell, because of his journal editing, book publishing, debating, lecturing, and founding of Bethany College, in West Virginia, became the best known leader of the movement. His outlooks left a permanent stamp on all his descendants regardless of location on the theological spectrum. His views definitely influenced the Churches of Christ even though the perspectives of David Lipscomb (1831-1917) of Nashville, Tennessee, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, modified certain views. Thomas and Alexander Campbell were highly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment that emphasized reason as opposed to enthusiasm.

They also highlighted exterior constructs in regard to the church, as opposed to inner feeling. They modified their reform views, that is, the heritage of John Calvin (1509-1564), accordingly, though remaining far more Reform than they themselves recognized.

The churches of the 1832 merger, usually going by the name Christian Churches, multiplied rapidly, becoming the fastest growing indigenous American church, by 1900 reaching a million members. After the Civil War differences going back to the beginning created ruptures in the movement. The first had to do with state and national mission societies. Wide spread support especially existed for the state missionary societies.

Regional differences and embitterments over the Civil war and reconstruction led to estrangements. The liberal leaders in the movement gained the upper hand in the mission societies with the result that the conservatives in former Confederate states withdrew and became increasingly critical of the societies. In the early 1870's Tolbert Fanning (1810-1874) and David Lipscomb (1831-1917) of Nashville, Tennessee, leaders of the opposition, published *The Gospel Advocate*, Fanning beginning in 1855. The journal ceased publication for a time during the war, but Lipscomb reissued it in 1866.

At a somewhat later date Austin McGary (1846-1928) promoted the opposition in Texas, founding *The Firm Foundation* in 1884. A dispute over instrumental music likewise defined the resulting separation. By 1895 several of the conservative churches rallied around these two journals.

The major expansion in the Churches of Christ took place in the 1920's and 1930's. Growth plateaued in all regions of the United States in the early 1970's, but grew exponentially in Africa and India. The states with the largest number of members are: Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, Oklahoma, California and Arkansas. Of these states, Tennessee has the largest number of members per capita. Major universities are Harding, Abilene Christian, Pepperdine, Lipscomb, Freed-Hardeman, Oklahoma Christian, Faulkner, Lubbock Christian, Ohio Valley, Rochester, York and Florida.

The Churches of Christ have no organizational structure larger than local congregations and no official journals or ways of declaring consensus positions. The churches and preachers are highly entrepreneurial. Consensus views often emerge through the influence of Christian universities and religious journals. Editors feature consensus positions, and often highlight articles that oppose deviations from commonly accepted points of view.

Significant attributes of the Churches of Christ are: an affirmation of the centrality of Scripture; commitment to church life, the responsibility of all members for the church, church planting and evangelism; a genuine struggle with Biblical precedents; personal commitment to the Lord, a devotional life; focus upon Biblical ethics and morality; concern for the needy; a strong brotherhood networking,

and acquaintance with other members nationally and internationally. Certain groupings within Churches of Christ have drawn lines over para-church institutions, Bible classes, multiply communion cups, one preacher churches, and a few other distinctions, but these together comprise less than 10 percent of the total. In 1993 a group of churches identifying themselves as the International Church of Christ separated from the mainstream Churches of Christ though after 2003 new rapprochements occurred.

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### **Bibliography**

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