

## Unity by Design – Historical Roots

### September 15, 2019

Some of you may not know this about me, but both myself and my wife, Connie, grew up in this church. In fact our parents were founding members of Knollwood Christian Church back in 1964. I tell you that as a background to my early childhood. I distinctly remember several conversations I had with my friends, early on, during which we were discussing **what we were religiously**. And I had friends who were Baptists, and Methodists and Catholics – but when they asked me what I was, I would reply that I was “Christian”. And they would somewhat laugh and respond, that **we’re all “Christians” but what type of Christian are you**, they’d ask? And I didn’t quite know how to respond to that curious question. And when I went home and asked my folks that same question they affirmed to me that we were just “Christians”. That didn’t seem like an adequate answer to my friends’ question and deep down I was kind of hoping that I could just throw out a label, (like Catholic or Baptist) to satisfy them. I wanted a label to make my answer acceptable and understandable.

It wasn’t really until I went to Bible College and took a class on church history that I understood why we called ourselves simply “Christians”, without any additional labels. And since then I’m proud of the fact that I don’t have an additional “label” to identify who I am.

And this morning I want to share with you a brief historical background to explain where the Christian Churches, Churches of Christ, or the Disciples of Christ come from.

Over the 2,000 years, since Christ established the church, there have been lots of attempts to reform the church to be more accurate to what someone understood the Bible to teach.

#### Efforts to **Reform** the Church:

- In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, **Martin Luther** and others tried to reform the Catholic Church. Which resulted in what’s known as the Reformation and ultimately the Lutheran Church.
- Also, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century came **John Calvin** who taught many doctrines which have become known as Calvinism (such as the absolute sovereignty of God, the total depravity of man, predestination and original sin. From this teaching came such churches as the **Presbyterian Church** (founded by **John Knox** in Scotland.)
- **Puritans** arose in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as an attempt to reform the Church of England from many of its practices that they thought were not Biblical and too closely aligned with the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the early U.S. colonies were established by the Puritans.
- The **Baptists** came along as an attempt to reform the Puritans. And two of their distinctives is that they taught **baptism should only be of believers** (not children) and that **baptism should only be done by immersion**.
- **Methodists** arose in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley. It arose a revival movement within the Church of England to stress the individual responsibility of each Christian to live a faithful disciplined Christian life. They rejected the predestination and total depravity of man, taught within the church of England. But they weren’t trying to establish a new denomination, but merely to reform the existing church. After Wesley’s death it broke off and became its own denomination.

So, when people began to leave England and come to America, it didn’t take long for individuals within these various separate groups to be led by God to get back to the basics of the Bible and strive for unity among Christians.

## Efforts to **Restore** the Church

- **Methodists** – in 1793 two Methodist preachers in Virginia, (James O’Kelly and Rice Haggard), decided to discard denominational creeds and go strictly with the Bible’s teachings and call themselves only “Christians”.
- **Baptists** – in 1800 two Baptist preachers in **New England**, (**Abner Jones and Elias Smith**), questioned some of the core teachings of Calvinism and began to use only the Bible for their teaching and doctrine and began using the name ‘Christian’ to refer to themselves, instead of ‘Baptist’. Also, in Kentucky a similar movement was begun by a Baptist preacher by the name of Raccoon John Smith.
- **Presbyterian:** In the early 1800’s a Presbyterian minister, **Barton W. Stone**, in **Kentucky**, was quietly beginning to question many of the teachings of Calvinism. Such as that man doesn’t have the free will to come into a relationship with God unless God chooses them and draws them to himself. So, in the early years of the country you had men and women desperately calling out to God to choose them for salvation – otherwise, without God’s choosing you, you’d be lost and cut off from God for all of eternity. Many churches had mourning benches” where people would kneel and call out to God. However, during August 6 to August 13, 1801, Barton Stone participated in a huge outdoor revival service, an estimated between 10,000 to 20,000, where people were choosing to come to the Lord and their rather strange behavior after their decision clearly indicated that their conversion was real. Some people would pass out, for lengthy periods of time and then wake up and immediately begin praising and worshipping God, others were barking like dogs and many other strange occurrences. Upon witnessing these strange reactions, Stone became convinced that an individual could come to the Lord on his own accord, repent of their sins and be saved. Shortly after that he resigned from the Presbyterian church and began leading others to simply study and follow the Bible and call themselves only ‘Christians’.
- Back in Ireland, **Thomas and Alexander Campbell** (father and son) were both Presbyterian ministers. The Presbyterian sect they were a part of was called the **Old Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church**. Each of those names in front of the word Presbyterian represented another division. In the late 1700’s Thomas came over to America, partly for health reasons and to get a preaching job in a church and then to send back for his family to join him. Separate from each other, they both developed a disdain for the many divisions within all of the churches and a hungering for unity around the basic teachings of the Bible. When Alexander and his mother came to America the father and son shared their new found beliefs and convictions and realized that they were on the same page.

In their study of the Scriptures they concluded that participation in communion ought to be open to anyone who is a committed follower of Jesus Christ and not just because you’re a part of a specific branch of a specific denomination. So, in their churches they began to offer what’s commonly referred to as ‘open communion’. When that happened, they were kicked out of the Presbyterian Church.

About the same time, Alexander Campbell’s first child was born and traditionally she would be baptized as an infant to deal with the stain left from original sin. However, in his study of the Bible, Campbell came to the conclusion that baptism, in the Bible, was only done with people who were believers – and infants can’t be a believer. So, he found a Baptist minister and asked him to baptize him. For 17 years, (from 1813-1830), the Campbells aligned themselves with the Baptist faith. However, they increasingly felt a deep conviction that they should not be aligned with any denomination, because they inherently create disunity among the larger Christian church and so, they left the Baptists and began to call all Christians, from every belief and background to join them in calling themselves simply ‘Christians’ (not Baptist or Presbyterian or Methodists etc) and agree to unite under that simple umbrella of ‘Christians’ under core beliefs of the Bible and then have the freedom to disagree over everything else that isn’t considered a core teaching.

In 1832 the Campbell movement merged with the Barton W. Stone movement and simply became known as the Restoration Movement. Unlike many previous efforts, they weren't trying to reform an existing denomination, but they were rather trying to restore what they believed was the core teachings of the Bible and strive for the unity of all believers that Jesus prayed for in the Upper Room. We don't have to have labels as Christians but simply go by what the early church was called.

**Acts 11:26 (NIV)** *The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch*

In one of his many writings, Alexander Campbell wrote this observation about the church: *"In what moral desolation is the kingdom of Jesus Christ! Was there at any time, or is there now, in all the earth, a kingdom more convulsed by internal broils and dissensions than that which is commonly called the church of Jesus Christ?"*

As we read last week, out of John 17, Jesus, in the Upper Room prayed to the Father that He would preserve the unity of all believers as a powerful witness to the world. And yet, in our disunity, we severely hamper our witness.

In Acts 4:32 we get a snapshot into the early church and here's how it's described: *"All the believers were **one** in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."*

Did that early church agree 100% on everything? I doubt it. But they were unified in their focus on Jesus and in living a Christ honoring life. And their unity showed up in life transforming ways in how they lived their lives in community with one another. They seemed to have the attitude that my love for the Lord and then for others binds us together and now I have a privilege and a divine responsibility to show that love in sacrificial acts of love. So, if there was a need within their midst, they would go sell a possession they had and give the money to help meet that need. And that community began to sit up and take notice of how well Christians took care of one another. They'd never seen anything like this before. And if we truly practiced this today, the world would sit up and take notice as well.

Reflecting back on my childhood experience now, I'm proud to simply say, *"I'm simply a Christian"* If you've noticed, the last several years there's been lots of churches that are dropping their denominational tags and rebranding themselves as simply a *"Christian Church"*. And I think that's a great thing. However, how much greater would it be if all Christians could unite together in their efforts in cities and countries. There is tremendous power and strength when individuals unite in their efforts.

I love the illustration I found. *"Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together they can stop traffic, close schools and shut down entire cities."* And last year we certainly the truth of that here in Minnesota.

The Christian Church, of which we're a part of, started small but today it comprises over 2 million people world wide in over 7,000 congregations.

One of the slogans that is often used within the Christian Church is *"We are not the only Christians, but we are Christians only."* Sadly, we haven't always done a very good job conveying this or living it. Many individuals I've known from Christian Churches believe and convey that if you're not part of this church movement then you're not saved. And I absolutely don't believe that. I fully expect to see Christians in heaven from all sorts of denominations. I also fully expect that there are individuals who claim to be members of the Christian Churches who I will not see in heaven, because it's not church membership that gets you into heaven, it's your commitment to Jesus Christ. And, as I talked about last Sunday, it's our individual alignment each with Jesus Christ that unites us to one another and not our attempts at unity. Many years ago, before most of you were even a part of this church, I had a handful of people deeply upset with me because I mentioned Promise Keepers from the pulpit as well as Billy Graham, primarily because they didn't agree with some of the doctrines that are taught there.. They eventually left Knollwood and aligned themselves with another church. That's the type of narrow thinking that divides Christians rather than unites them. I certainly don't see in Scripture or in the life of Jesus where lines of division were drawn based on differences in doctrine. Jesus embraced people from all sorts of

walks of life and beliefs in God and loved on them. And in that they were affirmed and loved and drawn deeper into a relationship with God.

Next week I want to begin to take a closer look at some of the key doctrines and slogans that Campbell and Stone felt we should be able to unite on as well as how divergent many of the beliefs of Campbell and Stone were. They were amazingly quite a bit apart on many beliefs and yet continued to live in unity with each other over core beliefs.

I want to close by reading an excerpt from an article that's part of packet I typically hand out to new members or people curious about what Knollwood Christian Church believes and is a part of. It's a special edition of the Christian Standard magazine from several years ago. The portion of the article I'm going to be reading from was written by **Ralph Kinney Bennett** who is retired after serving for many years as the senior editor of the Reader's Digest. His article is entitled, "**Why I Belong to the Christian Church.**"

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They were Old Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church

What prompted Alexander to reconsider infant baptism?

The disciples were first called \_\_\_\_\_ at Antioch (Acts 11:26)

**Christian Church slogan –**

*“We are not the only Christians, but we are Christians \_\_\_\_\_.”*

What’s the basis for our unity as Christians?

How do we achieve unity as Christians?

How have you seen Church disunity? What was it’s effect?

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How are you contributing toward Church unity?

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