Prayer
Scripture: Jeremiah 6:16
Hymn: 306 "When We Walk With the Lord"

The years of the 1790's and the first two decades of the 1800's were a
time when the hearts of patriotic Americans were filled with great
exhileration. The Patriots had dreamed of a free and independent United
States and the dream had come true. The birth of the new nation was
followed by the Second Great Awakening in Religion. The religious revival
kindled dreams of making the new republic the model Protestant country.
There was a growing and spreading confidence that men could dream dreams
and dreams could come true. Emerson described it as a time when every
thinking man that you met had the dream of a better world in his pocket.
A multitude of societies sprang up whose very existence came from a dream
of correcting some existing evil that the earth might be a fairer place.
Missionary societies were formed to carry the gospel of salvation to the
heathen in darkness. Bible Societies were formed to make the Word of God
available to all. Tract and Christian literature societies sprang up to
bring Christian nurture to all who hungered for a spiritual life. Sunday
School Societies were formed to instruct children in the way of the Lord.
A multitude of humanitarian societies came into existence to bring help to
the handicapped—the deaf, the dumb, the blind, the mentally ill. There
were societies to make hospital care available to the physically ill.
There were a host of reforming societies: societies to reform the prisons,
societies attacking the exploitation of children in factories, societies
fighting for women's rights, societies attacking sweat-shop labor
conditions. There were societies fighting drunkenness, profanity, gambling,
and vulgarity in literature and entertainment. A number of societies were
formed whose goal was the establishment of some utopian community.
Societies were formed to end slavery.

In this time of so many worthy and laudable dreams, a dream that was
dear to many hearts was the dream of answering the Savior's prayer for
unity among his followers. One form that the dream took was the dream of
restoring unity by going back to the New Testament. It was a dream that
appeared in different parts of the country and in several different
denominations. One of the first places where the dream appeared was among
the Methodists.

JAMES O'KELLY AND THE METHODISTS

When John Wesley made provisions for his American societies to become
an independent church—the Methodist Episcopal Church—the form of church
government that he provided was "episcopal." Some of his American
followers felt that this form of government was not in harmony with the
democratic government of the new country. They also questioned whether it
was in harmony with the teachings of Scripture. One of the most vocal of
these critics of the episcopal system was one of the Methodist lay
preachers named James O'Kelly.
From the beginnings of the Methodist movement both in England and in America the members of the Methodist societies had been dependent upon the clergy of the Church of England for the sacraments. Methodists found little welcome in the Church of England. With the coming of the American Revolution many of the Anglican clergy returned to England. Wesley tried in vain to persuade the Church of England to bestow ordination on some of his Methodist preachers so that they could administer the sacraments in America. During the war a strong movement arose among the Methodist lay preachers to ordain each other so that they might administer baptism and the Lord's Supper and so that they might perform marriage ceremonies and conduct funerals. Francis Asbury, whom Wesley had sent to America in 1771 and whom he had appointed in 1772 to be his assistant to superintend the American work, opposed the movement among the preachers and for a time was able to arrest it. The movement reached a climax in 1779 when a group of the preachers from Virginia and North Carolina met in Fluvanna, Virginia, and decided to ordain one another. Asbury and the preachers of Maryland and Delaware strongly opposed the move as disloyal to Wesley. Asbury was finally able to persuade the preachers to abstain from ordination and to continue loyal to Wesley and to accept Asbury as Wesley's General Assistant and their leader.

One of the leaders among the lay preachers who wanted to separate from the Church of England and to ordain their own clergy was James O'Kelly. He had experienced conversion and had become a Methodist lay preacher in 1775. In 1779 at the time of the Methodist meeting on May 18, 1779 at Brokenback Chapel, in Fluvanna County in Virginia, O'Kelly was traveling the New Hope circuit in Southern Virginia and North Carolina. O'Kelly had gained the reputation of being a hard working circuit rider who arose at 4 a.m. so that he might spend two hours in prayer, meditation, and the study of his Bible before beginning the day's work. He was a man of considerable natural talent and had developed into an outstanding preacher. He was powerful in exhortation. O'Kelly loved John Wesley and trusted him as an interpreter of Scripture. He liked Wesley's saying, "We will be downright Christians." During the next five years O'Kelly often found himself at odds with Asbury.

In 1784 John Wesley, assisted by two priests of the Church of England who had joined the Methodist movement, Dr. Thomas Coke and James Creighton, ordained Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as deacons, and the next day ordained them elders. Two days later, Wesley, assisted by Creighton and Whatcoat, ordained Coke as superintendent of the Methodist Societies in America. Wesley sent Coke, Vasey, and Whatcoat to America with instructions to ordain Francis Asbury to serve with Coke as joint superintendents over the American Methodists. Vasey and Whatcoat were to serve as elders, administering the sacraments. At the Baltimore Conference, December 24, 1784, Asbury refused to accept Wesley's commission until he had been unanimously elected by the almost sixty Methodist preachers at the conference. Once they had chosen him, on successive days he was ordained deacon, elder and superintendent. A week after the conference O'Kelly and twelve others were ordained elders by Coke. Soon after the conference Coke and Asbury began calling themselves "bishops." Wesley strongly objected to this title when he learned of it but the American Methodists made it official in 1787. When Coke left America to visit Methodist mission stations around the world, Asbury became "the Bishop" of American Methodists.
Francis Asbury, as bishop, ruled his American Methodists with an iron hand. He appointed the presiding elders over the circuits. He appointed the preachers to their circuits and churches. Asbury himself set the example in hard work. He travelled unceasingly on horseback in all kinds of weather. He did not spare himself. He rivalled John Wesley in his work habits. The Methodists grew rapidly in numbers. O'Kelly and a few of the preachers considered Asbury tyrannical in his relations with the preachers.

In 1790 O'Kelly wrote Asbury complaining that he was misusing his episcopal powers. In Southern Virginia a number of the preachers and their churches followed O'Kelly in turning against Asbury. Asbury did not change his ways.

At the meeting of the General Conference in Baltimore in 1792 James O'Kelly introduced a resolution that challenged the degree of Asbury's episcopal authority:

After the bishop appoints the preachers at the conference to their several circuits, if anyone thinks himself injured by the appointment, he shall have the liberty to appeal to the conference and to state his objections; and if the conference approves his objections, the bishop shall appoint him to another circuit.

The resolution produced great debate. Asbury withdrew from the Conference, leaving Coke to preside. The resolution was split into two parts. First the Conference took up the question of the right of the bishop to appoint the preacher to his circuit. The Conference quickly and with little dissent approved the right of the bishop to appoint the preachers to their circuits. The second part of the resolution—the right of appeal on the part of the preachers—provoked fierce debate that lasted for three days. When the vote was finally taken it was against O'Kelly's resolution and in favor of the unlimited power of Asbury as bishop.

James O'Kelly and his followers withdrew from the Conference. Among those who withdrew were Rice Haggard, John Allen, John Robertson and William McKendree. They felt that the episcopal system was out of keeping with the democratic spirit of the new nation and that it was contrary to the practice of the early church as pictured in Scripture.

Shortly after the end of the Conference in November 14, 1792, O'Kelly and his followers met at Reese Chapel in Charlotte County, Virginia. They sent a petition to Asbury and the Methodists calling for unity and for amendments that would make the church more democratic. The Methodists turned down the amendments.

O'Kelly and his followers held another meeting at Piney Grove in Chesterfield County, Virginia, on August 2, 1793. They petitioned Asbury to meet with them in a Conference to examine by the Scriptures what the government of the Methodist Episcopal Church should be. Asbury refused to meet with them.
When O'Kelly and his followers met at Manakintown in Powhaton County, Virginia, on December 25, 1793, they decided to officially sever all relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church. They adopted the name, "Republican Methodists." They would build a glorious church with a scriptural republican form of government. No slavery was to be tolerated among the members. The republican Methodist Church had about one thousand members scattered in a number of congregations, and about thirty preachers.

Eight months later, the Republican Methodists met at Old Lebanon in Surry County, Virginia (just across the James River from Williamsburg) on August 4, 1794. A committee of seven had been appointed to draw up a plan of government. The plan called for each congregation to choose its own elders to rule the congregation and to call and dismiss the preachers.

Rice Haggard, one of the preachers, stood up and held up his Bible and asked, "Where in the Bible do you read about Republican Methodists?"

Holding up the Bible he said:

Brethren, this is a sufficient rule of faith and practice. By it we are told that the disciples were called Christians, and I move that henceforth and forever the followers of Christ be known as Christians simply.

Brother Hafferty, a preacher from North Carolina, stood up and moved that they take the Bible itself as their only creed. They decided to lay aside every manuscript and to go by the Bible alone. They drew up what became known as the "Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church:"

1. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Church.
2. The name Christian to the exclusion of all party and sectarian names.
3. The Holy Bible, of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament our only creed, and a sufficient rule of faith and membership.
4. Christian character, or vital piety, the only test of church fellowship and membership.
5. The right of private judgement, and the liberty of conscience, the privilege and duty of all.

In spite of considerable persecution the movement grew. By the time that this Christian Church began hearing of a similar movement in New England that had come out of the Baptist Church, the Christian Church led by James O'Kelly was said to have had almost 20,000 members.

ABNER JONES, ELIAS SMITH AND THE BAPTIST CHURCH

Early in the nineteenth century in New England two young men withdrew from Baptist churches to form churches pledged to wear no name but the name of Christ and to accept no book of doctrine but the Bible. O'Kelly had reacted to the form of government of the Methodists. These young men reacted against the doctrines of Calvinism. The two young men were Abner Jones and Elias Smith.
Abner Jones was born at Royalton, Massachusetts on April 28, 1772. When he was eight years old his parents moved to Bridgewater in the backwoods of Vermont. Abner Jones received very meager schooling. During his youth he was rather irreligious. In spite of his poor schooling, for a time he taught school in Granville, New York. In the spring of 1793 he experienced conversion and was baptized into the Baptist Church by Elder Elisha Ranson. He became a member of the Regular Baptist Church in Hartland, Vermont. Jones decided that he wanted to be a preacher. He began to study and to preach. As he became more aware of the conflicting religious doctrines being preached in New England he became concerned over what to preach. He determined to study his Bible more to find out what to preach. His studies led him to raise questions concerning Calvinism that was dominant in New England. Calvinism was preached by the Baptists, the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. It was being questioned by the rising Universalism and Unitarianism. Jones began having doubts about original sin, about predestination and election, about limited atonement, and the doctrine of the inability of man to do anything for his own salvation. When Jones began expressing doubts about the doctrines of Calvinism he began receiving the cold shoulder treatment from the Baptists. The opposition from the Baptist preachers made him more determined than ever to study his Bible. He determined that he would preach what the Bible taught.

To support himself Jones turned to the practice of medicine. The Thompsonian system of medicine boasted that it could train one for the practice of medicine in the short period of only a few weeks. Jones practiced medicine and preached as he had an opportunity. Practicing medicine gave him freedom to escape from Calvinism.

Jones' studies convinced him that all the formal systems of theology were wrong. It became clear to him that Christians should be guided by Scripture alone. The sectarian names that divided Christians were sinful. Followers of Christ should be Christians only. He came to the conclusion that Christian character should be the only test of fellowship.

About 1798 Jones began practicing medicine in Lyndon, Vermont. He married Demaris Prior. He could not get preaching out of his system. He decided to give up his medical practice and concentrate on his preaching. He made some converts and in the fall of 1801 he organized a "free" church in Lyndon, Vermont—a church free to follow the Bible. It had twenty-five members. It has been called the first Christian Church in New England. This little church rejected all human names. The members insisted on being Christians only.

In 1802 Abner Jones established churches in Bradford, Vermont and in Hanover, New Hampshire, that were determined to follow the Bible alone and whose members would not accept any name but the name Christian.

In 1802 Abner Jones sought and received ordination at the hands of three Freewill Baptist preachers. They invited him to join the Freewill Baptist Church. Jones declared that he could not accept the rules of the Freewill Baptists and that he would wear no name except the name Christian.
In 1803 Abner Jones established another of his free churches in Piermont, New Hampshire. He heard that a Baptist preacher named Elias Smith had established a church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire that had renounced human creeds and human names to follow the Bible and to wear only the name Christian.

Elias Smith was born at Lyme, Connecticut, in the County of New London. His father, Stephen Smith was a Baptist. His mother, Irene Ransom Smith, was a Newlight Congregationalist. His mother had him sprinkled as a child. He received enough schooling to read and write a little. He began reading the Bible.

In May, 1779, Elias Smith heard a Baptist preacher, William Grow, who was holding a meeting in Woodstock, Connecticut. Elias Smith became deeply concerned over the form of baptism. The Baptist preacher convinced him that immersion was the only proper method. Smith asked Grow to baptize him. He was baptized in the Queechy River. He became a member of the Woodstock Baptist Church.

In the spring of 1780 when Smith was eleven years of age the family moved to Hebron, thirty miles away. Here Smith received a little more school--his last schooling.

In the summer of 1789 Smith began thinking of becoming a preacher. He began to study the Bible with great earnestness. In November, 1789 he went to Elder William Grow and asked him for books that would help him learn to preach. Grow gave him a book of sermons and a Cruden's concordance. Smith began working to become a Baptist preacher.

In the fall of 1801 Elias Smith moved to Salisbury, New Hampshire. He had begun to have doubts about the Calvinistic doctrine of the Baptists. He began meeting Universalism and this increased his doubts. He resolved to take his concordance, to take everything the Bible had to say on a subject, and to preach what the Bible taught. He soon found that this pleased neither Baptists nor Universalists.

By the spring of 1802 Smith had decided that he could accept neither the teachings of the Baptists nor the Universalists. More seriously than ever he searched the Bible to find the truth. He discovered in Acts 11:26 that the followers of Christ ought to wear the name Christian. He was convinced that this was the right name to the exclusion of all the popular names in the world. In the month of May, 1802, in the home of a man named Laurence, in Epping, New Hampshire, he took Acts 11:26 for his text and softly told the people assembled that the name Christian was enough for the followers of Christ without the addition of the word, Baptist, Methodist, or any other. He declared that the catechisms were the inventions of men.

Smith's preaching aroused growing opposition. He became convinced that the clergy were wedded to their own systems which were contrary to the New Testament. He continued to preach that people should follow the teachings of the Bible.
In October, 1802, some of Smith's friends moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. They rented a hall called "Jefferson Hall" over a market and began holding Sunday morning services. Smith and his family moved to Portsmouth in December, 1802. The hall burned on December 26. The little group moved to the school house. There were only five in the group. They began discussing how they could form themselves into a church. They determined that they would follow the New Testament and that they would wear the name Christian without the addition of any sectarian name. By March, 1803 their number had increased to ten. When their number reached twenty they decided to consider themselves a Church of Christ. Christ would be their only Lord and Lawgiver. They would wear the name Christian without the addition of any unscriptural name. In March, 1803 they began meeting in the court house. The first Sunday in April, 1803, they held their first communion service. They had twenty-two members.

In June, 1803, Abner Jones from Vermont came to visit Elias Smith. Jones had heard of the work of Elias Smith and the Portsmouth church. Smith declared that Jones was the first man he had met who was free to follow the Bible wherever it led. He was free to follow the Bible unhindered by the creeds of men.

In 1804 Elias Smith and the Portsmouth church had grown until the membership numbered one hundred-fifty. They purchased a lot and built a building.

In 1804 Jones moved to Boston and started a church there. A little later he started one in Salem.

In 1806 Abner Jones and Elias Smith and their followers held a conference to attempt to draw up articles of agreement. They referred to it as a "Christian Conference." Very quickly they agreed that their articles were useless and they abandoned them. They determined to take the New Testament as the "Only and all-sufficient rule for Christians." They would recognize no head of the church but Christ. They would wear no name but the name Christian. The only test of fellowship would be an upright walk and meek deportment. They would accept as brethren all who gave evidence that they were children of God. They kept the believers' baptism by immersion that they had learned from the Baptists but did not make it an exclusive test of fellowship.

Both Jones and Smith preached and worked diligently to spread their message. They were able to win converts among both the Regular and the Freewill Baptists. By 1807 they had fourteen congregations and twelve preachers in their fellowship.

In 1805 Elias Smith began publishing a small religious paper. In 1808 he began calling it "The Herald of Gospel Liberty." Smith maintained that it was not only the first religious paper in the United States but also the first religious paper to be published in the history of the church throughout the world. The subscription price was a dollar a year.

Somehow a copy of Smith's paper fell into the hands of some Christians in the South. On May 27, 1809 some Christian ministers in Virginia sent greetings to the Christian brethren in New England. They rejoiced that the
New England Christians had accepted Christ as the only head of the church and the New Testament as the only rule of faith and practice, and the name Christian as the only name for the followers of Christ. The New England Christians returned the greetings. Correspondence between the two groups continued. In 1811 Elias Smith attended a conference of Christian preachers in the South and the southern Christians gave him the right hand of fellowship.

No formal union between the New England Christians and the Christians in the South was accomplished. Both groups went their own way with only minimal contacts and fellowship. Smith continued his editorship. Jones diligently continued his evangelistic work. While Jones continued his preaching he taught himself Latin, Greek, and Hebrew that he might better understand the Bible.

The New England Christians won a number of preachers from both Regular and Freewill Baptists. With great zeal the preachers successfully planted churches in many parts of New England, in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. They followed the westward expansion with their message. They also established churches in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia in Eastern Canada.

In this same period Barton W. Stone led a group out of the Presbyterian Church following the dream of taking Christ as the only head of the church, the Bible as the only guide, and Christian as the only name for followers of the Lord. A little later Thomas and Alexander Campbell led another group with similar dreams out of the Presbyterian Church into the Baptist Church and then out of the Baptist Church to be disciples of Christ with no creed but the Bible and a dream of unity by returning to the New Testament.