CHRISTIAN HISTORY

THE AMERICAN RESTORATION MOVEMENT IN THE 1800s

September 9, 2026

SUMMARY

The Second Great Awakening in the United States, combined with a centuries-old desire among some in the British Isles to return to the beliefs and practices of the New Testament church—and that combined with the new American spirit of freedom, individual power, expanding frontiers, and progress—provided fertile ground for the development of the American Restoration Movement. This movement combined two groups of Christians who sought Christian unity through a return to New Testament Christianity. Their union produced the Christian Churches/Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ. Unfortunately, differing views on important matters plus the horrors and cruelty of the American Civil War led to divisions in this unity movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Key Dates:

1801 — the Cane Ridge Revival

1804 — "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" is published

1809 — Thomas Campbell published "The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington"

1832 — the churches aligned with Barton W. Stone and those aligned with Alexander Campbell unite, beginning the Disciples of Christ/Christian Churches/Churches of Christ

1860-1865 — the U.S. Civil War

1) BACKGROUNDS OF THE AMERICAN RESTORATION MOVEMENT

The Churches of Christ today did not emerge out of a vacuum but came from somewhere. These churches exhibit certain characteristics that were shaped by their past. Identifying these traits can help churches live wisely and faithfully into the future. Douglas A. Foster, The Story of Churches of Christ, page 3

• IN ENGLAND — For hundreds of years in England, flying under the radar, there had been groups of Christians who called themselves "Church of Christ," baptized by immersion for the forgiveness of sins, and worshiped without musical instruments. They influenced the thought of believers in the British Isles so that there existed something of an impulse toward a return to the beliefs and practices of the earliest churches as described in the New Testament.

• Robert Haldane (1764-1842) and James Haldane (1768-1851) followed the teachings of John Glas, who had lived in the 1700s and had left the Scottish Presbyterian Church in order to pursue a purer, New Testament form of Christianity. The Haldanes practiced baptism by immersion, emphasized reading and teaching of Scripture during worship, and made no distinction between clergy and laity. Alexander Campbell, son of Thomas Campbell, attended their seminary in Glasgow, Scotland, and learned their ideas there. Walter Scott—who, like the Campbells, became a leader in the early American Restoration Movement—was baptized by a follower of the Haldanes.

• VALUES THAT LED INTO THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT

- break from established church tradition
- a return to the practices of the early church
- the importance of reason for each person's ability to understand Scripture (an outgrowth of the Enlightenment)
- the importance of having a personal faith in Jesus (an outgrowth of humanism)
- the value of both the individual to understand and obey Scripture and of the unity and community of believers

• THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING, beginning in 1787 and continuing into the 1800s, and the accompanying growth of revivals in the United States helped Christian ideas spread widely, especially along the frontiers of the young and growing nation.

2) THE CANE RIDGE REVIVAL AND BARTON W. STONE

• THE CANE RIDGE REVIVAL, held at Cane Ridge near Paris, Kentucky, was organized by local Presbyterian minister Barton W. Stone (1772-1844), age 28, from Maryland. It was held August 6-12, 1801. Historian Paul Conkin once called the Cane Ridge Revival "America's Pentecost". Partly for spiritual renewal and partly for entertainment and socialization on the American frontier, an estimated ten to thirty thousand people attended. The event had an anti-Calvinist emphasis on the idea that Jesus died for all people, not only the "elect". Many came away from this revival more devoted to Christ or newly committed to Christ. Many people, including Stone himself, went home afterward and freed their slaves.

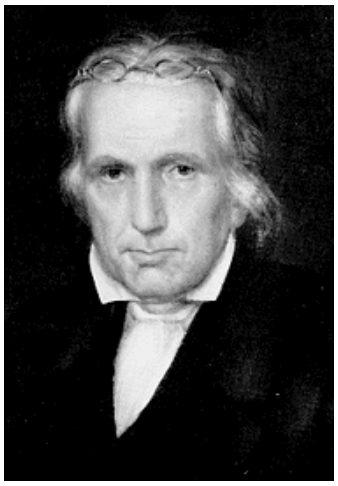
In 1832, Stone wrote about the revival: *The doctrine preached by all was simple, and nearly the same free and full salvation to every creature was proclaimed. All urged faith in the gospel, and obedience to it, as the way of life.*

All appeared deeply impressed with the ruined state of sinners, and were anxious for their salvation. The spirit of partyism, and party distinctions, were apparently forgotten. . . The spirit of love, peace, and union, were revived. You might have seen the various sects engaged in the same spirit, praying, praising, and communing together, and the preachers in the lead. Happy days!

Dr. John Mark Hicks, retired Professor of Theology at David Lipscomb University, recently said Cane Ridge "still matters to our fellowship for several reasons. The event formed our original sense of unity that transcends partyism [sectarian denominationalism], provides an alternative vision of the Holy Spirit's work than what came to dominate Churches of Christ in the 20th century and reminds us of the constant need for evangelistic revival and renewal among disciples of Jesus."

Quotes from Bobby Ross, Jr., "225 Years Ago, a Revival Gave Birth to a Movement," The Christian Chronicle, August 12, 2026

• Stone ran into disapproval from Presbyterian Church leaders because he believed people could come to faith by hearing the gospel and without waiting for a miracle. He and four other Presbyterian ministers were charged with heresy. In response, in 1803, they declared themselves free of the control of church authorities and able to interpret the scriptures for themselves. On June 28, 1804, they released "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery", in which they declared their aim to be not Presbyterian, but merely Christian: "We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large…" In other words, they refused to be Presbyterians any more; from that point on they would be simply Christians. Stone's movement thus became a unity movement hoping to break down denominational barriers.

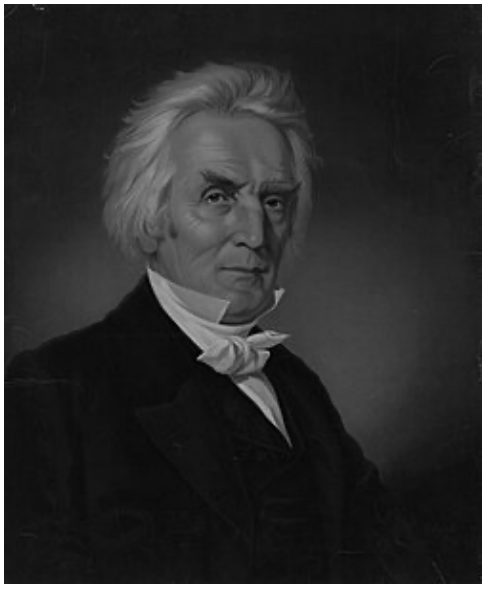


3) THOMAS CAMPBELL (1763-1854) was a Scotch-Irish, anti-Burgher Presbyterian minister from Ireland. For health reasons, he moved to the U.S. in 1807. He came alone, with the expectation that his family would follow later. While ministering to his congregation, he offered communion to believers from other denominations. He viewed them as Christians, but his superiors in the Presbyterian Church required him to stop. Thomas broke away from the Presbytery (the body of elders overseeing the region's

churches) and began to preach a faith based not on church creeds, but on the Bible alone, calling believers to unite around biblical teaching and practice. In 1809, he published "The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington," which promoted ideas such as:

- Division is sinful. All Christians should promote unity.
- Most divisions take place over matters of opinion, not essential, core beliefs.
- Christian unity must be based on Christ alone and supported by the teachings of Scripture.
- The call to unite the church is both reasonable and seasonable (it makes sense and the time is right).
- We know Christian unity is possible because Jesus prayed for it (John 17).

The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures… Thomas Campbell in the Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington



4) ALEXANDER CAMPBELL (1788-1866), also from Ireland, and his family followed his father to the U.S. in 1809. Entirely on his own, while getting his education in Scotland, Alexander, too, had come to believe the church needed to move back to the faith and practices of the New Testament church. Once in the U.S., he gained a following of believers who longed to do just that. Initially most of those who aligned with him were Baptists, but by 1830 they had come to be known as Disciples of Christ and their churches had separated from the Baptist churches. Differences between Alexander and the Baptists focused on, among other issues, the role of baptism in salvation, the means of a person's election, and the Baptist requirement that one have a personal experience of the Holy Spirit prior to salvation. Alexander was a powerful intellectual and called believers to return to the Bible for Christian life and practice. His influence spread through preaching (often in debates) and through his publication of two journals, *The Christian Baptist* (1823-1830) and *The Millennial Harbinger* (1830-1870). He was one of the best-known religious figures in the U.S. in the period leading up to the Civil War.

5) WALTER SCOTT (1796-1861), from Scotland, moved to New York and later met Alexander Campbell. The two worked together for many years. Scott is best-known for developing the Five-Finger Exercise that summarized the plan of salvation: Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Remission of Sins, and the Gift of the Holy Spirit (which he combined with eternal life). *(In the twentieth century, that Five-Finger Plan of Salvation was commonly changed to Hear, Believe, Repent, Be Baptized, and Be Faithful.)*

5) UNIFICATION — In 1832 the Disciples influenced by Alexander Campbell and the Christians influenced by Barton W. Stone united their efforts. They came to be known by a few names: Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, and Church of Christ.

> *[T]he defining characteristic of Churches of Christ throughout their history, until late in the twentieth century, was the notion of the restoration of primitive Christianity—the attempt to recover in the modern age the Christian faith as it was believed and practiced in the first century. This vision flourished especially in the heady, utopian climate of the early nineteenth century when Churches of Christ first began. Many Americans of that period, deeply impressed with the glories of the new nation and of the land it occupied, imagined that a golden age was near, perhaps even the final triumph of the kingdom of God. In that context, a number of religious movements dedicated themselves to recovering primitive Christianity in all its purity and perfection.* Richard T. Hughes, Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America, pages 1-2

- Stone and Campbell disagreed on some important matters, but in the quest for Christian unity they agreed to fellowship together anyway. "Eventually, some of the underlying differences combined with other factors including 'innovations' like instrumental music and missionary societies, regional rivalries and the civil war, economic differences, theological issues (unity/restoration), and the deaths of the original leaders to produce a divided movement and two new groups: Churches of Christ and Christian Churches/Disciples of Christ." The latter group went through a division in 1926 that produced the Independent/Conservative Christian Churches. *Luke Dockery and Jared Pack, Origin Story: Churches of Christ and the Restoration Movement, page 67*
- In roughly 1804-1844, Barton W. Stone was most influential in southern Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and northern Alabama. Most of Alexander Campbell's influence was further north.
- Alexander Campbell was a rationalist, focusing on reason and logic in the interpretation and application of Scripture. Stone, by contrast, was a pietist, emphasizing the work of God in the heart and life of the believer.
- Alexander Campbell was a premillennialist. He believed that as primitive Christianity was restored, Christian unity would flourish and eventually bring about the return of Christ and the start of his thousand-year reign on earth.
- DISTINCTLY AMERICAN TRAITS OF STONE & CAMPBELL
  - Concern over the religious pluralism of the American frontier prompted them to pursue Christian unity.
  - It was an American trend at the time to work toward Christian unity by returning to primitive Christianity.
  - The American impulse toward democracy (with its impetus toward the power of the individual) drove them to break away from the authority of creeds, high church officials, and regional/national/international church authorities.
- WHO WAS RIGHT?
  - Stone: The key to Christian unity is a return to the kind of holiness we see in the New Testament.
  - Campbell: The key to Christian unity is doing things in the church today as they were done in the New Testament.

6) GROWTH — The Stone-Campbell Movement grew to an estimated 200,000 people by 1860 (the start of the Civil War). In 1881, James A. Garfield, a member of the movement, was elected U.S. president.

- W. T. Moore wrote in 1909, reflecting practices in the 1800s, that "the Disciples of Christ do not have bishops, they have editors." The leaders of the Restoration Movement at large, beyond the congregational level (where elders led), were editors of publications within the Restoration Movement. They shaped ideas and at the same time reflected the ideas of their readers.

7) DIVISION — Over the next century, despite a deep desire for Christian unity, the American Restoration Movement gradually broke into three parts: the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), the independent Christian Churches, and the Churches of Christ.

- FACTORS IN THE DIVISION BETWEEN DISCIPLES OF CHRIST AND CHURCHES OF CHRIST

  1) *Restoration vs. Christian Unity* — Those who emphasized restoration tended to move into the Churches of Christ, where strict adherence to the pattern perceived in the New Testament church was expected. Those who emphasized Christian unity tended to move into the Disciples of Christ, where there was more tolerance of a wider range of doctrines and practices.

  2) *The Civil War* — After the war, Churches of Christ were generally found in the upper South. Disciples of Christ were found primarily in Kentucky and the Midwest.

  3) *Perspective on Culture* — After the war, Disciples, following Campbell more, tended to value progress and American civilization. Churches of Christ tended to reflect Stone's emphasis on the kingdom of God as distinct from the prevailing culture, and ultimately triumphant over it.

[U]nity and restoration were the twin motivations that lived at the heart of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and an inherent tension exists between them. If you are someone who prioritizes restoration, then practices like instrumental music in worship or the creation of missionary societies are problematic, because they are not found in the Bible. Taken to an extreme, emphasizing restoration can lead to division from people who adopt practices not found in the early church. On the other hand, if you are someone who prioritizes unity, then it is more important to stay connected to others, even if some of their beliefs or practices aren't clearly taught in Scripture. Dockery and Pack, 66

DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES (adapted from Foster, pages 21-22)

Question	*Position A*	*Position B*
How does the Bible serve as the ultimate authority for Christian belief and practice?	It is a book of information we must learn and put into practice. It is a guidebook, a prescriptive pattern (for baptism, communion, proper forms of worship, church leadership, etc.)	It is the message of God by which his Spirit begins to work within us to produce love, peace, unity, etc.
What should we do with the silence of Scripture?	Silence is prohibition. Whatever is not authorized in Scripture is unacceptable to God. (Thus, instrumental music in worship is unacceptable.)	Silence is permission. Whatever is not prohibited in Scripture is acceptable to God. (Thus, instrumental music in worship is acceptable.)
How do we come to unity in the church?	We must agree on nearly all beliefs and practices.*	We must agree on Christ, but our unity is based on our shared faith in him, not on agreement on nearly all doctrines and practices.

* This view became the norm in the Restoration Movement especially with and following the cruelty and alienation of the Civil War. People on both sides of the issues condemned the other side harshly.

8) STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST

• STRENGTHS:

- continuing quest for unity
- dedication to Scripture (including taking Scripture as our only creed to be used for testing whether others are Christians)
- emphasis on worshiping together as a community of God's people
- emphasis on believer's baptism and the weekly sharing of communion
- active in evangelism
- congregational autonomy, including godly local leadership by elders — non-centralized organization allows cooperation among congregations but keeps each congregation independent
- emphasis on education (lots of Christian schools and colleges)

• WEAKNESSES/DANGERS:

- *a new, unspoken creed* — Pursuit of unity through restoration of early church practices led to definition of how things should be in the church, and beliefs and traditions gradually became fixed. Then anyone who deviated from someone else's "correct beliefs and practices" could be seen as being in error and therefore unfaithful to God. "Many on both sides forgot that true Christianity shapes one into the image of Christ. Instead, they insisted on their intellectual understandings. Rather than being mastered by God's Spirit and reflecting love, joy, peace, and patience, many reflected strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, divisions, and envy (Galatians 5:16-26)." *Foster, page 31*
- *ritualization* — In the early twentieth century, Churches of Christ began listing five required "acts of worship": sharing the Lord's Supper each week, singing (without instruments), prayer, fellowship or giving, and preaching/teaching God's word. Any deviation from these forms of worship was, for some, seen as making the church's worship unacceptable to God. "The danger of this understanding was that worship could become an obligation rather than a time of joy—less about glorifying God and building each other up and more about checking off the five acts. Today many Churches of Christ are reexamining the richness of worship and reclaiming some of the early impulses of worship as profoundly spiritually transformative." *Foster, page 31*
- *culture-based forms of leadership* — Corporate business models in both business and government became more common around the end of the 1800s. Elderships, too, have sometimes become corporate-style boards of directors who make decisions for the church and demand its obedience to them, instead of serving as shepherds for the church. "Elders were often seen as officers with power to make decisions, handle finances, and require obedience from the congregation. The corporate model served well where leaders were godly servants lovingly guiding the body. Yet this view tended to make elders into 'boards of directors,' their primary function being decision making. Today many Churches of Christ are reshaping their model of elders into one of leading and caring for a community of believers rather than corporate decision-making." *Foster, page 32*