

Abner Jones: Christian Only

Bradley S. Cobb

Abner Jones: Christian Only

Is dedicated to all of the Christians this world over who have determined to be Christians the way the Bible describes.

Abner Jones: Christian Only is copyright 2013, Bradley Cobb. All rights reserved. To order more copies (cheap!), contact Bradley Cobb at Bradley@GravelHillchurchofChrist.com or by writing to Bradley Cobb; 827 Steed; McCloud, OK 74851

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
His Early Life: From Childhood To “Conversion”	4
His Early Life: Years Of Rebellion	7
What To Preach: Baptist Doctrine?	11
What To Preach: The Fight Against Calvinism	12
The Christian Connexion: Enter Elias Smith	15
The Christian Connexion: The Union Of Forces	17
The Christian Connexion: The Herald Of Gospel Liberty	19
His Final Years: The Connexion’s Decline	21
His Final Years: Ups And Downs	22
His Final Years: Abner Jones’ Dream Dies.	23
Conclusion	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28

Introduction

When one hears of the Restoration Movement, certain names always seem to spring up: Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, “Raccoon” John Smith, James O’Kelly¹, and perhaps one or two others. This alone gives the impression that just a few men in a somewhat concentrated location began the movement to go back to the Bible for all matters of faith and practice. This is not the case, although these individual movements did come together, having the same goal in mind.² In New England, a man by the name of Abner Jones launched a movement to go back to the Bible and follow only what it says. His is a seemingly ignored story, receiving only a passing remark in many Restoration Movement history accounts. What follows here is his story.

His Early Life: From Childhood to “Conversion”

The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776. Four years earlier, in Royalton, Massachusetts, Mr. and Mrs. Asa Jones³ had their fifth child, a son. This husband and wife were both raised as “Calvinist Baptist[s],”⁴ and proceeded to bring up their own children, including newborn Abner Jones, in the same way. Asa Jones was a preacher for the Baptists, and his “prayers and admonitions” weighed heavily on young Abner’s mind, even

¹ Mattox, F.W. *The Eternal Kingdom* (Gospel Light Publishing, DeLight, AR 1961) Pgs 311-340

² Ibid, 341.

³ www.pioneerpreachers.com

⁴ Jones, Abner. *Memoirs of the Life and Experience, Travels and Preaching of Abner Jones*. (Norris and Sawyer, 1807) Pg 4.

as a young child.⁵ Abner himself later confessed that this time was spent with “much concern” about his eternal well-being.⁶

At age eight, amidst the War for Independence, Mr. Jones moved the family to Bridgewater, Vermont.⁷ At this point, the area was basically wilderness,⁸ and the family built their home out of trees that they cut from the area. Being the first family to move into that area, their nearest neighbor was at least two miles away.⁹

Throughout his youth, Abner was tormented by depression. He felt a constant struggle for inner happiness which could not be found. He sought for it in religion, desperately looking for peace. In his Memoirs, Jones says the following: “But to return to the situation of my mind...I know not a better similitude than the wilderness in which I then dwelt...dreary and melancholy.”¹⁰

One summer, a series of events happened in Woodstock, Vermont which turned many people’s minds towards religion. Indians plundered some nearby towns, worms destroyed most crops of all the farmers in the area, and a hunting accident involving the decapitation of a man caused the people—including Abner Jones—to think about their eternal life. These events caused him to reflect, but he felt “ashamed to let any one know

⁵ *ibid*, 5.

⁶ *ibid*, 5.

⁷ *The New England Christians* (see bibliography)

⁸ Burnett, J.F. *Rev. Abner Jones: The Man Who Believed and Served.* (unknown publisher, 1921) Pg 6

⁹ Jones: *Memoirs*, Pg 5.

¹⁰ *ibid*, 7

that [he] felt concerned about [his] soul.”¹¹ Because of this, he kept his thoughts secret.

This young child felt the need of religion, and was “fully convinced that [he] must be born again or be damned.”¹² At age ten, the need he felt was even stronger. He heard of a meeting wherein many people were converted, but this did not satisfy him, because of the depression he felt. He said that even at this time, “all was darkness and gloominess.”¹³ He still fought against religion, thinking that even though he needed it, it would not satisfy his mind.

It was about this time that he went to a meeting where a Baptist preacher named Snow was speaking. On his way there, he prayed for God to have mercy upon him. He desperately desired that he would receive some relief from his terrible condition that night. When he arrived, all appeared to be gloomy, and he resigned himself to knowing that this day would be no different than the rest. About this event, Jones relates:

I do not remember that the thought ever passed my mind that religion yielded any joy or peace; all the advantage I thought of, was that it would save the soul from eternal misery; and on that account I felt desirous to obtain it; feeling fully satisfied of my lost undone situation...(though I can not say that I saw myself

¹¹ *ibid*, 10.

¹² *ibid*, 11.

¹³ *ibid*, 12.

hanging immediately over hell as some have discovered themselves).¹⁴

At that meeting, however, Abner suddenly felt alive inside. He observed the preacher speaking of something not melancholy, but joyful. Asa Jones arose and spoke some more words which seemed to his son as something he had never before heard from his father. At the time, Abner thought the difference was not with his own perception, but with the speakers who spoke of joy and gloriousness. Inside, Abner finally felt peace.¹⁵

This inner joy was short-lived. The happiness crept away, and he did not understand why. Many days passed when the thought of Luke 15:24 entered into his mind: “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found.” According to Jones, this is the first time that a Scripture went to his heart. He took this to mean that he had been dead in sin, but was at this point alive in Christ. He said “from that moment, a hope sprang up in my soul for eternal life.”¹⁶ Many times afterwards, though, he did doubt that this was truly the moment of his salvation.¹⁷

His Early Life: Years of Rebellion

After the events previously described, Abner determined to keep his “conversion” to himself for the rest of his life. This did not last very long because he revealed to his mother and one of her friends that he had a secret. This knowledge led to the women harping at him until finally one of them guessed the secret.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 12-13.

¹⁵ *ibid* 13-14.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 15.

¹⁷ *ibid*.

When he finally acknowledged it, he felt once again free from the depression that seemed to plague his early life. It was only later in life that he was able to see that the events of happiness coincided with his *belief* (as mentioned earlier), and here with his *confession* of Jesus before others.¹⁸

His joy remained for a short period of time, after which he realized that the Lord had commanded for all who believe to be baptized. Instead of obeying the command which he knew was from Christ, he shrunk back from it. This cast him into a deep depression, a “darkness that might be felt.”¹⁹ This depression lasted for several months, and during that time his only happiness came from knowing that he would eventually die and be freed from this earth.²⁰

He knew he needed to be baptized, but continually fought against it because he felt he was too miserable of a person. It was due to this refusal that he says of himself “I wandered in darkness.”²¹ He went to other meetings trying to regain the hope and joy which he had earlier felt, but to no avail. One night, the realization sprang upon him that his “soul was eternally undone.”²² He understood his completely lost condition at that time and knew God would be justified if He were to send Abner to hell at that moment. He spoke to his mother the next morning and told her “I am going right to hell.”²³ Being a Calvinist, his

¹⁸ *ibid*, 17-19.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 19.

²⁰ *ibid*.

²¹ *ibid*.

²² *ibid*, 23.

²³ *ibid*, 24.

mother tried to convince him that he might be among those predestined, but he fell into a depression deeper than he had ever previously experienced.²⁴

From this point onward, though there were moments of light, he began to stop caring about God, and he hardened his heart towards religion. When his father died in 1786, Abner's heart was hardened even further. His oldest brother came to Vermont shortly thereafter. This brother was a worldly person, dedicating his life to the pursuit of merriment and arguing against religion. He was "in favor of universalism"²⁵ which is the doctrine that everyone will be saved, regardless of how they live.²⁶

For the next six years, Abner did everything he could to embrace universalism in an effort to ease his conscience. As a result of embracing this doctrine, he "led a rather immoral life during his teen years."²⁷ He set about to banish every thought of religion from his mind. He determined that if anyone should ask of him why he had changed, he would give no answer at all. This refusal to answer shows that he understood the things in which he involved himself were wrong. He was now determined to follow after "vanity and folly."²⁸ Though he felt empty inside, his pride kept him in his sin. In order to quench thoughts of his need to follow God, he carried on even more in the vanity. There were times where he thought he should return to following

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid*, 25.

²⁶ Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary

²⁷ *New England Christians.*

²⁸ Jones: *Memoirs*, Pg 27.

God, but the thought of what his friends would say made him abandon the thought.²⁹

His attempts at becoming rich all ended with sickness or injury. He tried being an apprentice, but a severe sickness incapacitated him and he had to return home. In January of 1791 while cutting wood, he accidentally chopped into his foot. It was at age eighteen that he exerted himself to the extent that he burst himself, apparently a reference to an extremely bad hernia. The surgeons were unable to adequately fix his problem, so from that point onward he was unable to do any physical labor.³⁰ He made one last go of business, but that ended with a terrible fever that lasted for weeks.³¹ Abner viewed all of these injuries and illnesses as God punishing him for not being baptized. Yet still he ignored God's command.³²

He went back to Bridgewater, where a reformation of sorts had taken place. There were many new "converts" in the city, and finally he was convinced to go to meeting. Before the meeting was over, Abner Jones realized his completely "awful situation."³³ This event, more than any other to that point, made him realize that he needed to turn to the Lord. He reflected on his past with shame, knowing he had ignored what he knew to be right. Even

²⁹ *ibid*, 28.

³⁰ *ibid*, 33.

³¹ *ibid*, 38.

³² *ibid*, 29-33.

³³ *ibid*, 42-43

so, he did not do what he knew he must and remained in that situation for months.³⁴

What to Preach: Baptist Doctrine?

Slowly, he began to get involved and pray and to preach at some meetings, but as of yet was not baptized, which was not a surprise considering that it is not deemed necessary for salvation in the faith in which he was raised. The urge to be baptized, though, weighed heavily on him. He finally followed through with this in 1793 at age 20 by Elisha Ransom, a preacher from the Baptist Church.³⁵ Six days later, Abner Jones became reacquainted with Elias Smith, a friendship which would later lead to great strides towards restoring the New Testament church.³⁶

After a few months, Abner was regularly preaching things he had been taught, all the while looking into the Scripture and wondering how some of the Baptist doctrines could be right. He searched for evidence to prove Calvinism was in the Bible, but “discovered that they [the Baptist preachers] preached complete contradictions on the subject.”³⁷ He was very confused about these things, and he took to seeking the inspired word’s message on the matters. He discovered, as did many others in the Restoration Movement, that many of the doctrines he had been embracing were not to be found in Scripture.

³⁴ *ibid*, 43-44.

³⁵ *New England Christians*.

³⁶ Mattox, *Eternal Kingdom*, Pg 313.

³⁷ Jones, *Memoirs*, pg 59

The first problem he noted was the name “Baptist.” He correctly discovered that there is no group of “Baptists” in the Bible. From that point onward, he determined to be called nothing but a Christian.³⁸ After that, he looked into how Baptists founded congregations. He looked at the articles of faith, the church covenants, their constitutions, and their leadership counsels and found that they were all, as he calls them, “anti-Christian” and “as popish and unscriptural as infant sprinkling.”³⁹ They were traditions of men, and not from God. When these things were presented before the minister of the Baptist congregation, Abner was told that those things to which he objected were necessary, though the man could not recall the Scriptures that commanded them, “because they were not in the Bible.”⁴⁰ Other Baptists acted as though he was insane and that he “had denied the Bible.”⁴¹

What to Preach: The Fight Against Calvinism

From that point, Abner Jones fought vigorously within his mind against the ideas of Calvinism,⁴² especially that of predestination;⁴³ but he did not make his views public for almost five years for fear that he would be viewed as a castaway.⁴⁴ He

³⁸ *New England Christians.*

³⁹ Jones, *Memoirs*, Pg 61.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 63.

⁴¹ *ibid*.

⁴² Gielow, Frederick, Jr. *Popular Outline of Church History* (Standard Publishing, 1926) Pg 184.

⁴³ Olbricht, Tom. “Christian Connexion and Unitarian Relations 1800-1844” *Restoration Review* Vol. 9, No. 3 (1966).

⁴⁴ *ibid*, 66

assumed that he was the only one in the world who finally understood the simple truth contained in the Bible, not realizing that many other people in the United States were coming to that very same conclusion at around that same time.⁴⁵ During those five years, he felt lonelier and lonelier as he struggled against the knowledge which was in him. It is during this time that he became a medical doctor, practicing what was called "frontier medicine."⁴⁶

When he finally gave up fighting and turned back to the Lord in 1800, many asked "what has befallen Dr. Jones?" or said "he is a little deluded, he will soon get over it."⁴⁷ After this return to following what he had found in God's word, he proceeded to preach to whomever would listen. A man by the name of Peck invited him to come speak in his house to all the neighbors he could round up. He was shortly thereafter invited to many more houses in the area to preach. Many more requests of him were made in subsequent meetings. Because of filling these meeting requests, his medical practice suffered. His wife was worried about what would befall them and their family with the lack of funds coming in. He reminded her that, before they were married, he had told her that he knew he would eventually have to preach. He had told her that if that was not acceptable, not to marry him.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Womack, Morris. *Thirteen Lessons on Restoration History*. (College Press, Joplin, MO, 1988) Pgs 52-55.

⁴⁶ *New England Christians*.

⁴⁷ Jones, *Memoirs*, Pg 75.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 99-100

It was in 1801, in Lyndon, Vermont, that Abner Jones began a congregation of “Christians only.” Disagreeing with the Baptists, they called their congregation a “Christian Church.”⁴⁹ Some historians argue for different years, some stating this took place in September of 1800⁵⁰, while still others present a date of September of 1802.⁵¹ His son states that it was September of 1801.⁵² This simple congregation of just over a dozen members set about to go back to New Testament Christianity.⁵³

In February, 1802, a surprising event occurred. Three men among many to whom he preached pulled Abner Jones aside and stated “we understand that you have a family, and we believe the Lord has called you to preach. And we conclude it is our duty to take your family and take care of them, in order that you might be liberated to preach.”⁵⁴ After a time, he took them up on their offer and felt free to preach without concern for his family’s well-being.

One of the places where he went to preach was Hanover. The people of Hanover, New Hampshire responded well to the message of free-will that Mr. Jones preached. The only doctrine they had heard, perhaps in their entire lives, was that of Calvinism. They had taken that false doctrine to heart and

⁴⁹ North, James. *Union In Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Standard Publishing, 1994) Pg 26.

⁵⁰ Haley, J.J. *Makers and Molders of the Reformation Movement* (Christian Board of Education, St. Louis, 1914) Pg 43.

⁵¹ Jennings, Walter Wilson. *Origin and Early History of the Disciples of Christ* (Standard Publishing, 1919). Pg 64.

⁵² Jones, A.D. *Memoirs of Elder Abner Jones* (Crosby, Boston 1842)

⁵³ Haley, *Makers and Molders*, pg 43.

understood it to mean that nothing they did mattered: if God wanted them to be saved, they would be, if God wanted them lost, there was nothing they could do to change His mind.⁵⁵

His preaching against the tenants of Calvinism led him into great favor with the Free-Will Baptists. They ordained him a minister in 1802.⁵⁶ This was done, not because he agreed with them (for he still taught that the name “Baptist” was not scriptural), but because it gave him more clout and freedom to go about with places to preach. During this time, the Free-Will Baptists accepted him readily, even though he “refused to submit to their rules and regulations.”⁵⁷ He insisted that he was a “Christian only” and that the congregations he established were not Baptist, but Christian churches. Within the next few years, Jones established congregations in Bradford, Vermont and Piermont, New Hampshire.⁵⁸

The Christian Connexion: Enter Elias Smith

In the years leading up to 1803, Elias Smith had basically come to some of the same conclusions as had Abner Jones.⁵⁹ Like Jones, Elias Smith had turned to Universalism at one point, trying to find

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 103

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 106-107.

⁵⁶ *New England Christians*

⁵⁷ *ibid*.

⁵⁸ Vogel, Dan. *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Signature Books, Salt Lake City, UT, 1988), online text at <http://www.signaturebookslibrary.org/seekers/chapter1.htm>

⁵⁹ Gardner, James. *The Christians of New England* (Hester Publications, Henderson, TN 2008) Pgs 19-20

a way to soothe the sins of his childhood.⁶⁰ In 1801, Elias Smith (already a preacher) was convinced by his brother and was a Universalist for a period of 15 days before seeing he was embracing error.⁶¹ Both Jones and Smith had determined that Calvinism was wrong and that there was no authority for the name “Baptist.”

During this time, Smith had also begun a congregation of five people. They acquired a meeting hall, but it burned to the ground in December of 1802. They were determined to carry on and to only “follow the New Testament order and wear the name, Christian.”⁶² By the time he met Abner Jones again, the number of members had grown to ten. The small number was due in part to the fierce opposition to an independent “church of Christ...Christians without the addition of any unscriptural name.”⁶³

Jones admitted to being influenced by Smith, yet it seems that when they met again in 1803, it was Abner Jones who did the influencing.⁶⁴ Elias Smith suffered from instability, not truly able to decide which path to follow. This is seen in that many times throughout his later life he flirted with Universalism. He thought that if Calvinism was false, “then universalism—its polar

⁶⁰ North, *Union In Truth*, pg 25.

⁶¹ *New England Christians*

⁶² West, Earle. *The Search For The Ancient Order: Volume I* (Gospel Light Publishing, DeLight, AR. 1950) Pg 14.

⁶³ Smith, Elias. *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Beck and Foster, Portsmouth, N.H., 1816). Pg 320-321

⁶⁴ North. *Union in Truth*, Pg 26.

opposite—must be true. Smith accepted and repudiated Universalism five times.”⁶⁵ He had felt that he was the only one who had come to the conclusions against Calvinism. Smith says this about their meeting: “In June, 1803, about the time of this difficulty [fighting against Calvinism], Elder Abner Jones, from Vermont, came to visit me, and was the first free man I had ever seen.”⁶⁶

Elias had some interesting religious experiences before, including the time when his mother tried to force him to be “baptized” by sprinkling. He took off running from the building in protest, only to be dragged back by his uncle. Thus he was forced into the Congregationalist Church that his mother attended. Within a few years, he reflected on that practice and went to the Scriptures for answers. He saw the New Testament truth that baptism was only for believers and was by immersion.⁶⁷ This was one of the main emphases that he brought with him when he and Abner Jones met once more.

The Christian Connexion: The Union of Forces

Because of their similar beliefs and conclusions, Abner Jones and Elias Smith declared themselves in fellowship with each other. Thus the two small movements of just a few congregations, joined together and strengthened each other. Because they viewed themselves as Christians only, there was no need for a formal document to unify the forces. It was less than a year after this unofficial union that the congregation where Elias Smith preached

⁶⁵ *New England Christians*

⁶⁶ Smith, Elias. *The Life of Elias Smith*. Pg 321

⁶⁷ Gardner. *Christians of New England*. Pg20.

reached 150 members.⁶⁸ In 1804, leaving Elias in the congregation at Portsmouth, Abner Jones started congregations in the city of Boston and places surrounding it.⁶⁹ The movement towards restoring the Lord's church was moving forward.

In 1805, the congregations had a meeting "to draw up church articles."⁷⁰ This was done because of the familiarity with church articles and creeds in all the denominations which surrounded them. Just as it was difficult to initially leave the ideas of their Baptist upbringing, it was hard to leave other things of which they were familiar and comfortable. However, this "Christian Conference...agreed that their articles were useless and so they abandoned them, taking only the New Testament" as the guide for all Christians.⁷¹

The brethren in New England were a connected group of Christians, and as such began to be recognized by the collective term "the Christian Connexion."⁷² This was not a term making them a denominational group, but merely a term to emphasize the fellowship between the different congregations. By 1807, there were 14 such known congregations in that area and twelve preachers working with them.⁷³

In the southern states, as well as other places, more people had come to the same conclusions as had Jones and Smith. One such

⁶⁸ West. *Ancient Order I.* Pg 14.

⁶⁹ North. *Union in Truth.* pg 26.

⁷⁰ West. *Ancient Order I,* Pg 14

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² Olbricht. *Christian Connexion.*

⁷³ North. *Union in Truth.* Pg 26

person was James O’Kelly, who led a group who left the Methodist Church, calling themselves “Republican Methodists.” At their beginning, in 1794, they claimed to have 1,000 members.⁷⁴ They had guiding principles for their movement, much of which mirrored what Jones and Smith were advocating. Soon afterwards, they decided to go by the name “Christian Churches.”⁷⁵

Within the O’Kelly-led movement, there was dissention about the role of baptism. William Guirey was an influential leader in the Republican Methodists who believed in the necessity of baptism by immersion. He was very pleased to learn that others were going by “Christian” alone and that they also had come to the same conclusion as he had on baptism. By 1809, this group united with the Christian Connexion.⁷⁶ It is strange to note, however, that shortly thereafter, James O’Kelly tried to break up the newly-made union between the two forces because of his belief on baptism. It seems that he was holding on to his Methodist upbringing about faith-only being a “most wholesome doctrine and full of grace.”⁷⁷

The Christian Connexion: The Herald of Gospel Liberty

With Abner Jones spending his time preaching, Elias Smith became the leading voice in the newly-united movement.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, Pg 16.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, pgs 18-19,

⁷⁶ *ibid*, pg 27.

⁷⁷ Caldwell, G.C. “Baptism: the Core of Controversy in the Restoration Movement” *Florida College Lectures*, 1976, pg 242.

Though he had less than a year of formal education, Elias Smith was an able writer and speaker. He started a publication near the end of 1808 called *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* which he claimed to be the first religious periodical to ever be published.⁷⁸ It initially had 274 subscribers.⁷⁹

That these Christians had become aware of some other restoration movements around the still-growing country is obvious from this periodical. On the back page of the first issue, Elias Smith printed—in full—“The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.”⁸⁰ The Springfield Presbytery was a small group of Presbyterians who realized many of the errors of Calvinism and of man-made religions. Unfortunately, in protesting one man-made religious body, they created another. They did see their error, and this document, written in 1804⁸¹, was the official dissolution of their group, as well as a call to only follow the Bible.⁸²

The Herald of Gospel Liberty was as unstable, however, as Elias Smith himself was. The publication was moved numerous times in the decade of its existence. At one point there were over 1,000 subscribers to the paper. In the final issue of this periodical, Elias Smith announced “that he had gone into

⁷⁸ Phillips, Dabney. *Restoration Principles and Personalities*. (Youth In Action, University, AL, 1975) Pg 18.

⁷⁹ Womack. *Thirteen Lessons*. Pg 54.

⁸⁰ North. *Union in Truth*. Pg 63.

⁸¹ Womack. *Thirteen Lessons*. Pg 62.

⁸² Davis, A.M. *The Restoration Movement in the Nineteenth Century*. (Standard Publishing, 1913) Pgs 149-150.

universalism.”⁸³ There is some well-founded speculation that Alexander Campbell was familiar with that paper. Campbell was at the very least, acquainted with who Elias Smith was, as well as his doctrinal position. James North relays this:

The Stone Movement had been called “Christians.” But Alexander Campbell did not like that term. Because the Smith-Jones Movement also used the same term; and because the Smith-Jones Movement was tinged with a good deal of Unitarianism, Campbell was convinced the term was tainted.⁸⁴

Smith did start another publication called the *Christian Herald*, which lasted a bit longer than his previous paper. With the changes in stances, Smith’s influence waned and the publication was bought out by a publishing company.

His Final Years: The Connexion’s Decline

While Elias Smith was busy being the visible leader of the Christian Connexion, Abner Jones was busy doing the work of a preacher. He moved to Salem, Massachusetts in 1809 where he traveled to numerous congregations in the area. He saw many converts, which helped to strengthen his faith. He believed that the people converting was proof that God approved of his preaching and was blessing it.⁸⁵ This mind-set led to problems down the road.

⁸³ West. *Ancient Order I.* Pg 15.

⁸⁴ North. *Union in Truth*, Pg 164.

⁸⁵ Gardner. *Christians of New England.* Pgs 75-77.

In 1815, He moved to Hopkinton, Mass. There he met with virtually no success, and the depression and doubt that plagued him as a younger man re-surfaced with a vengeance. Elias Smith's return trip to Universalism "staggered the Christian cause in...the coastal areas."⁸⁶ The departure of this very vocal leader proved quite the hurdle to overcome.

While in Hopkinton, Abner Jones stirred up quite a controversy in preaching on the evils of drinking alcohol, even in moderation. While there, he also joined the Masons. When public opinion began to sway against the Masons as a social group, Jones quit, although "he never believed them to be subversive to either Christianity or democracy."⁸⁷

The congregation in Hopkinton did not grow, and in fact became so weak that Jones was unable to support himself any longer. When an epidemic came through the town, he resumed his practice as a doctor. He moved back to Salem after six years of unproductive work in Hopkinton. What was left of the congregation in Hopkinton faded from what faithfulness they had attained and merged with the Baptist Church.⁸⁸

His Final Years: Ups and Downs

Upon his return, he found the congregation in Salem in the throws of emotionalism. The majority of the congregation wanted nothing to do with a logical approach to the Bible, but claimed to be "moved by the Spirit." The congregation was

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

destroyed and Jones was left “to pick up the pieces” and rebuild a new congregation. After seven years, the new congregation was large and strong. During this time, Jones “practiced medicine, taught school, and gave instruction in singing.”⁸⁹ In 1830, this restorationist moved to New York in search of other fertile hearts.

His need for emotional reassurance weakened him in his stances on the truths of the Bible. He slowly drifted towards accepting emotional experiences as evidence of Christianity, contrary to his statements prior in which he described the emotionalists ones who “professed to be governed by the Spirit, and a most perverse spirit it was.”⁹⁰ In this, he stated that rash emotionalism was not from God, yet he was unwilling to stick with his convictions.

The movement started by Abner Jones, and for a time aided by Elias Smith, to go back to the Bible only had touched many people. But without solid leadership, it began to die out. The original congregation established by Abner Jones in Lyndon, Vermont had shut its doors and melted in with the denominations.⁹¹ Many of the other congregations also faded from existence. However, in the 1830’s, there were signs of hope by more growth in certain areas.

His Final Years: Abner Jones’ Dream Dies.

The original call was to leave denominationalism and go back solely to “the New Testament for their only rule of faith and

⁸⁹ *ibid.* Pg 78.

⁹⁰ Jones, A.D. *Memoirs of Elder Abner Jones.* Pg 81.

⁹¹ Gardner. *Christians of New England.* Pg 91.

practice.”⁹² For a time, Abner Jones and company were well on their way to accomplishing it. However, because of various events and decisions, the group which came to be known as the Christian Connexion drifted off into denominationalism itself.

In order to deal with the effect of Elias’ Smith’s departure into Universalism, they convened a general council. This became a yearly event in which almost every congregation in the Connexion sent a delegation.⁹³ This yearly convention established a governing body similar to the councils which mark the Catholic Church of the first Millennia AD.⁹⁴ Smith did try to return, yet traveled back and forth with Universalism to the point where “his own brethren disciplined him because they refused to trust someone who was ‘blown about by every wind of doctrine’.”⁹⁵ By 1825, the conference of the Christian Connexion referred to themselves as “a denomination among denominations.”⁹⁶

Another aspect where they left the pattern of the New Testament was in the organization of the local church. Many pleaded for a plurality of elders, although most of the congregations in the Connexion only had one elder, that being the preacher (this following the lead of the Baptists who referred to the preacher as an elder).⁹⁷ They also took to following the lead of other denominations in calling the preacher “reverend,” a word used in

⁹² Brumback, Robert H. *History of the Church Through the Ages*. (Mission Messenger, St. Louis. 1957). Pg 290.

⁹³ *ibid.* Pg 104.

⁹⁴ Mattox. *Eternal Kingdom*.

⁹⁵ *New England Christians*

⁹⁶ Gardner. *Christians of New England*. Pg 104

⁹⁷ *ibid.* Pg 105.

the Scriptures only in reference to God. Also, as early as the 1810's, some of the congregations were promoting women to positions of preaching.⁹⁸ This was not widespread, but it was tolerated in many locations.

Perhaps the final blow to the dream of "Christians only" in New England was a man by the name of William Miller. This man claimed to have figured out the time for the return of Jesus Christ and pinpointed the date at "some time between March 1843 and March 1844."⁹⁹ Because of his emotional speaking style and the direction in which the Christian Connexion was heading, Miller found ready listeners in those Christians. By 1839, nearly half of the Connexion had been taken in by his lies, and the other half was ostracized as faithless.¹⁰⁰

Elias Smith was no longer a leader in the movement, but had completely left. Abner Jones' own son was referred to as a "Unitarian minister."¹⁰¹ Daniel Hix, the preacher at one of the strongest congregations in the Connexion, had died in 1838.¹⁰² The ones who had taken the abuse for trying to follow the New Testament pattern had gotten older and there arose a new generation that knew not what they had gone through, and were thus unprepared to combat this false teaching.

So caught up were the Christians (as well as others) in this prophetic end, that many farmers did not plant crops that year.

⁹⁸ *ibid.* Pg 106.

⁹⁹ *ibid.* Pg 146.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Olbricht. *Connexion and Unitarian.*

¹⁰² Gardner. *Christians of New England.* Pg 150.

The ones that did refused to harvest, for that would show a lack of faith. Many store owners simply sold out of merchandise and refused to re-stock. On the day in which the return was supposed to occur, the “faithful” who believed the sayings of Miller all gathered in church buildings. They prayed their hearts out for Jesus to return.¹⁰³ When the bells rang at midnight, it was like a funeral. Jesus did not return according to the false prophet’s timetable. People’s faith had died. They blamed Christ for not coming again. “Being misled by a false religion, they gave up searching for the true one.”¹⁰⁴ Those who bought into the lie could not bear to face those who were wise enough to know better. Those who did not fall for the emotionalism of the Miller fiasco decided they could not put their faith in those so easily led astray. The bridge between the two collapsed. As James Gardner put it: “the heart of the Christian Connection in New England died at midnight, October 22, 1844.”¹⁰⁵

Thankfully, Abner Jones did not live to see that day. He died before he could see the collapse of his dream of a unified church of Christ. He died in 1841, in Exeter, New Hampshire. The Christian Connexion had become a perversion of what it was meant to be. In the years that followed, the Christian Connexion broke apart, and today various denominational groups claim the Connexion as part of their history. Among these are the 7th Day Adventists, the United Church of Christ,¹⁰⁶ as well as perhaps

¹⁰³ *ibid.* Pgs 151-156.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.* Pg 156.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* Pg 157.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.* Pg 151-157.

Mormonism.¹⁰⁷ Some "Jehovah's Witness" even claim Abner Jones was one of them.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Abner Jones had the right idea, initially. He strove to become a Christian only, following nothing but what he could find in the pages of the New Testament. All who seek to be true Christians should emulate the principle for which he and other restorationists stood. In the end of his autobiography, Abner Jones gave a pleading warning to all of his readers to stop and look at their spiritual condition. The words which he gave were those of a hymn he wrote:

STOP, poor sinner, stop and think
Before you farther go—
Will you sport upon the brink
Of everlasting woe?
Hell beneath is gaping wide!
Vengeance waits the dread command,
Soon to stop your sport and pride,
And sink with you the damn'd.
O be entreated now STOP,
For unless you WARNING TAKE,
Ere you are aware you'll DROP,
Into the BURNING LAKE.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Vogel. *Seekers and Mormonism*.

¹⁰⁸ Watters, Randal. "Abner Jones - A Real Jehovah's Witness."

<http://www.freeminds.org/organization/pre-russell/abner-jones-a-real-jehovah-s-witness.html>

¹⁰⁹ Jones, Abner *Memoirs*. Pg 107.

Bibliography

- Burnett, J.F. *Rev. Abner Jones: The Man Who Believed and Served.* (unknown publisher, 1921) Electronic edition at: [http://www.gravelhillchurchofchrist.com/ebooks/Burnett, J.F. - Abner Jones.pdf](http://www.gravelhillchurchofchrist.com/ebooks/Burnett,J.F.-AbnerJones.pdf)
- Brumback, Robert H. *History of the Church Through the Ages.* (Mission Messenger, St. Louis. 1957)
- Caldwell, G.C. "Baptism: the Core of Controversy in the Restoration Movement" *Florida College Lectures,* 1976.
- Davis, A.M. *The Restoration Movement in the Nineteenth Century.* (Standard Publishing, 1913)
- Gardner, James. *The Christians of New England* (Hester Publications, Henderson, TN 2009)
- Gielow, Frederick, Jr. *Popular Outline of Church History* (Standard Publishing, 1926)
- Haley, J.J. *Makers and Molders of the Reformation Movement* (Christian Board of Education, St. Louis, 1914)
- Jennings, Walter Wilson. *Origin and Early History of the Disciples of Christ* (Standard Publishing, 1919)
- Jones, Abner. *Memoirs of the Life and Experience, Travels and Preaching of Abner Jones.* (Norris and Sawyer, 1807) Electronic edition [www.GravelHillchurchofChrist.com/eBooks/Jones, Abner – Memoirs.pdf](http://www.GravelHillchurchofChrist.com/eBooks/Jones,Abner-Memoirs.pdf)
- Jones, A.D. *Memoirs of Elder Abner Jones* (Crosby, Boston 1842)
- Mattox, F.W. *The Eternal Kingdom* (Gospel Light Publishing, DeLight, AR 1961)

- *The New England Christians*,
www.ChristianChronicler.com/new_england_Christians.html
- North, James. *Union In Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Standard Publishing, 1994)
- Olbricht, Tom. "Christian Connexion and Unitarian Relations 1800-1844" *Restoration Review* Vol. 9, No. 3
- Phillips, Dabney. *Restoration Principles and Personalities*. (Youth In Action, University, AL, 1975)
- www.PioneerPreachers.com
- Smith, Elias. *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith* (Beck and Foster, Portsmouth, N.H., 1816)
- Vogel, Dan. *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Signature Books, Salt Lake City, UT, 1988), online text at <http://www.signaturebookslibrary.org/seekers/chapter1.htm>
- Watters, Randal. "Abner Jones - A Real Jehovah's Witness." <http://www.freeminds.org/organization/pre-russell/abner-jones-a-real-jehovah-s-witness.html>
- West, Earle. *The Search For The Ancient Order: Volume I* (Gospel Light Publishing, DeLight, AR. 1950)
- Womack, Morris. *Thirteen Lessons on Restoration History*. (College Press, Joplin, MO, 1988)