

An
ACCOUNT
of the
Christian Denomination
In The
UNITED STATES

*IN A LETTER TO THE CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE
GENERAL BAPTIST ASSEMBLY OF ENGLAND.*

BY SIMON CLOUGH,
*CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE U.S. GENERAL CHRIS-
TIAN CONFERENCE, AND MINISTER OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN
SOCIETY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK*

1827
(Edited 2016 by Bradley S. Cobb)

Part of the
Jimmie Beller Memorial eLibrary
www.TheCobbSix.com

AN
ACCOUNT
OF THE
CHRISTIAN DENOMINATION
IN THE
UNITED STATES.

IN A LETTER TO THE CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE
GENERAL BAPTIST ASSEMBLY OF ENGLAND.

BY SIMON CLOUGH,
CORRESPONDING SECRETARY OF THE U. S. GENERAL CHRISTIAN CON-
FERENCE, AND MINISTER OF THE FIRST CHRISTIAN SOCIETY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

BOSTON,
PRINTED BY ISAAC R. BUTTS AND CO.
1827.

New York, January 30, 1827

Mr. Smallfield,

The United States General Christian Conference, which was holden at Windham, Connecticut, on the first of September last, were sorry to learn that the contemplated correspondence between the Christian denomination in the United States of America, and the General Baptists of England, had been wholly neglected on the part of our Corresponding Committee, and that letter from yourself as the Corresponding Secretary of your brethren had miscarried. The Conference are desirous that the contemplated correspondence should be carried into effect, and as an evidence of the sincerity of their profession appointed the Rev. Mr. Jones of Salem, Massachusetts, the Rev. Mr. Badger of Mendon, New York, and myself, a Corresponding Committee to accomplish the desirable object. The Committee have met and appointed me their Corresponding Secretary, with instructions to write to you before the sitting of your General Assembly in April next;—in whose name I now make the following communication.

The Christian denomination having been the last that has risen in the world, which has come to any note or respectability, is probably the least known both at home and abroad of all the religious sects at the present day. Consequently the generality of writers who have condescended to notice us have usually given an erroneous and confused account of our character, faith, and numbers. The obscurity of the Christian denomination of which I speak, has originated from a number of causes, the principal of which, however, are the manner of our rise, and the means by which we have spread ourselves and our views of divine truth. We have had no Luther, no Calvin, no Fox, no Wesley, who has headed a party of Christians and been recognized as a master among us, and whose fame has been celebrated as a founder of a new sect. Neither have we had any Council, Synod, General Assembly, or Conference to frame articles of faith separate from the scriptures to impose upon the consciences of our brethren, and bind the disciples of Christ, who has said call no man master on earth.

The rise and progress of the Christian denomination have been attended with many peculiar characteristics. As I have already intimated, no individual is recognized as the founder of a new sect, as has formerly been the case among other denominations of Christians. Many individuals in different parts of the United States, about the same time, became dissatisfied with that sectarian spirit, which seems to be the ruling and governing principle of most of the Christian sects of the present day,

and likewise with the principles upon which they acted as religious bodies. It appeared to us that all the various sects had greatly departed from the simplicity that is in Christ, and from that spirit of love, and unions, which our blessed Lord had so earnestly and frequently inculcated upon all his disciples in every age, and which constitute the very essence of Christianity; that they moreover by introducing force instead of choice, as a principle of action in religious bodies, had violated the rights of conscience, invaded the prerogatives of the King of Heaven, and divided and scattered the flock of Christ. We farther saw that in carrying on and maintaining this sectarian and theological warfare between different parties of Christians, many unhallowed weapons were employed, many false and erroneous statements made to excite the prejudice against each other, much time and money wasted that might be better employed, and many unchristian tempers cherished and nourished; that in many instances professors of different parties, instead of uniting their efforts to reform the wicked and diffuse the blessings of the gospel through the destitute parts of our country, were contending about the mint, anise, and cumin of religion, and wasting all their strength to no purpose.

Under these circumstances, many individuals, becoming dissatisfied with the movements of sectarian bodies, withdrew from different sectarian denominations, and formed themselves into independent churches on the principles of Christian liberty. In New England we first separated from the Calvinistic Baptists. As soon as it was understood that a separation had actually taken place, and a new denomination been instituted upon liberal principles, a number of large churches of the Calvinistic Baptists declared themselves independant of the Baptist Association, and united with the new party. Many new churches were constituted in a very short time. The doors of the meetinghouses of the Free-will and Six-principle Baptists were all thrown open to the ministers of the new sect, and at first it was expected they would all be amalgamated into one body. This, however, has not fully taken place as yet, although a friendly intercourse is still cultivated among us. The principles upon which the new churches were constituted were the following: The Scriptures of truth were to be the only rule of faith and practice, and each individual to be left at liberty to search the divine records, and exercise and enjoy the inalienable right of private judgment, both as it relates to doctrine and practice; and no individual member to be subject to the loss of church fellowship, so long as he lived a life of piety and devotion, on account of his sincere and conscious belief. No one was to be subject to discipline

and church censure but for immoral conduct. The name Christian should be taken to the exclusion of all sectarian names, as the most proper appellation to designate the body and its members. The only test of admission to the membership of a church should be a personal profession of the Christian religion, accompanied with an evidence of sincerity and piety and a determination to walk according to the divine rule. Each church to be considered an independent body, possessed of supreme authority to regulate and govern its internal affairs.

The topics on which we dwelt most in our preacher, were the excellency and sufficiency of the Scriptures as a rule of faith and practice. We contrasted the Scriptures with human creeds and formularies of faith, giving the Bible the preference, which we claimed as our only and all-sufficient rule. We insisted upon the rights of private judgement, which no man had power to alienate, and denied that any man or body of men whatever had any right to impose his or their sentiments upon another. We insisted upon the absolute necessity of personal religion, of holiness of heart and purity of life; and that sinful and wicked men must become holy and pure by a change of heart and conduct before they could be regarded as the proper subjects of the kingdom of heaven. We portrayed the evil effects of sectarianism, its bad moral influence upon society, and its shilling and withering effects upon vital religion. We asserted that we had seen and felt these things, and from a conviction of its evil tendencies, had renounced it; that we had dropped every name but that of Christian, and extended our love, charity, and Christian fellowship *to all who lived godly in Christ Jesus*. It was our constant theme,

*"Let names and sects, and parties fall,
And Jesus Christ be all in all!"*

We maintained that our churches were established upon those broad and liberal principles inculcated in the New Testament; that they were open to the reception of all sincere and devoted Christians; that we laid more stress upon the virtue of the character than upon a speculative belief in this or that doctrine; and herein lay the most important distinction between the Christian denomination and other sects; for they preferred a correct belief in speculative points to evangelical piety and morality. We asserted the principles upon which we acted were peculiarly favorable to the formation of a deep and thorough piety as they threw open the heart to expansive benevolence and inculcated Christian charity, and that these were the only principles upon which all Christians could be cemented together in union and brotherly love. We furthermore proved that the uniformity of sentiment, so much contended for by the different

sects as the only ground of union among Christians, existed merely in profession; that no such uniformity had ever existed in the church of Rome, for she had always been fermented by divisions and discordant sentiments; and that no uniformity of sentiment, strictly speaking, existed in the discordant sects around us. We also maintained from the nature and constitution of man, the diversity of their capacities, the habits of thinking and different modes of education, that a diversity of sentiment would be entertained by different Christians on the subject of religion, as well as on all other subjects, and, consequently, the only way of preserving union among Christians is by keeping *the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. We accordingly inculcated in our own societies, charity, forbearance, and brotherly love.

These topics with their connexions and dependencies, were dwelt upon with interest and zeal in our public discourses: and as we preached altogether extempore, the effect produced was similar to that of the preaching of the celebrated Whitfield, Wesley, and their associates at the commencement of Methodism. These principles we disseminated, not so much by our writings as by our personal labors. And as all ministers travelled more or less, and many devoted the whole of their time to travelling and preaching *the word of the kingdom*, there was a rapid diffusion of our sentiments through the country, and an astonishing increase of our numbers. The Lord has been with us and multiplied us, and spread us over the face of the new world.

About the same time we commenced our operations in New England, others enlisted the same cause in the Southern and Western States, at that time wholly unknown to each other. In the Southern States, the separated principally from the Methodists, and in the Western from the Presbyterians. These bodies, however, shortly became acquainted with each other, and have long since been considered as forming one extensive denomination of Christians, and have cooperated together in promoting the general cause of truth and piety.

From the rapid increase of our numbers and extend of the body, it was soon found necessary, in order to maintain a friendly intercourse, to cultivate mutual friendship, and to bring into active operation the mutual energies of the whole body in support and promotion of the general cause, to form associations of churches and ministers, called by us *Conferences*. These conferences, however, have no prerogative over the independency of the churches. The plan which has been adopted in forming Conferences is the following: that the ministers and churches which are represented by delegation form themselves into one Confer-

ence, or more, as may be convenient in each State. Hence the origin of what we call State Conferences, and all these were to form one by delegation, denominated the United States General Christian Conference. This Conference is to meet as often as shall be deemed expedient. It has always met every year since its formation, save in one instance. No delegate, however, as yet has met with us from the Western States. It is expected they will be represented at the sitting of the next Conference. We have an account, through the medium of our periodical works, of the following number of conferences which have been formed in the different States. One in the State of Maine; one in New Hampshire; one in Vermont; one in Massachusetts; one in Rhode Island and Connecticut; two in New York and New Jersey; one in Pennsylvania; one in Virginia; one in North Carolina; three in Kentucky; one in Tennessee; one in Alabama; four in Ohio; one in Indiana; one in Illinois; one in Missouri; and one other which has recently been formed in one of the Western States.

It would be difficult to determine correctly the extent of our numbers. In looking over the minutes of the several Conferences, I perceive they give an aggregate of about five hundred ministers. The number of churches belonging to several of the Conferences is not given; but the whole number is generally estimated to be from seven hundred to a thousand. The most probable estimate gives fifty thousand communicants, and about two hundred thousand, including the congregations who wait upon our ministry, who have embraced the principles and doctrine inculcated in the Christian denomination. It will be seen that this estimate of our probable number is much larger than that given by Mr. Potter in his letter. It has been ascertained that our body is much more extensive than it was supposed to be at the time he wrote. Besides, our increase since then has been very considerable.

We have now established among us three periodical works, published monthly, in a pamphlet form, similar to the *Christian Reformer*. The oldest is the *Christian Herald*, (formerly *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*) published by R. Foster, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This work was first published by Elias Smith in the form of a newspaper, and is said to be the first religious newspaper published in the world. The second is the *Gospel Luminary*, conducted by the Rev. Mr. Millard of West Bloomfield, in the state of New York, for the two conferences in that state. The third is the *Christian Messenger*, a work recently commenced under the direction of the Rev. Barton W. Stone, Georgetown, Kentucky. The Rev. Mr. Potter's paper was discontinued at the close of

the first year.

We have no public seminary or theological school under our direction. Those ministers who have received a classical education in the denomination have educated privately, or at some of the public colleges under the direction of the different sectarian denominations. Many of our ministers have only a common English education, and some others have educated themselves. We make no boast of a learned ministry. We say with the eminent Robinson, *'Let him who understands the gospel teach it!'*

As it respects doctrine, it is granted, when the Christian denomination first began to organize societies, there was a great diversity of sentiments and opinions among us; for some were educated Baptists, some Methodists, and others Presbyterians, each party bringing along with them the prejudices of education. In New England, as we separated from the Calvinistic Baptists, a few of the first churches were established upon the principles of close communion; but this was soon abandoned as unscriptural. In the Western states, as they separated from the Presbyterians, they were at first Pedobaptists, but in a few years they all became Baptists and were baptized. At first we were all nominally Trinitarians, having been educated in that doctrine. The doctrine, however, was soon canvassed, brought to the test of revelation, and universally rejected as unscriptural and anti-Christian, with all its concomitant doctrines.

From these few remarks it will be readily seen that we were united at first only in the great principles of Christian liberty, taking the Scriptures of truth as our only rule of faith and practice, with a firm determination to go where this *lamp to our feet and light to our path* should lead us. Having shaken off the trammels of human formularies, and freed ourselves of the frowns of a disaffected hierarchy, we were now prepared to read the Scriptures with a mind free from bias and prejudice. We accordingly searched the divine record with serious and prayerful attention. It was made a topic of conversation in our private circles. Many points were discussed in our periodicals, and in various ways, such an interest was excited among us to know what was, and what was not taught in the NT, that we read it over again and again till we made ourselves completely masters of the letter, and were able by this means to show that many things, held quite sacred by the different sects around us, both as it related to doctrine and practice, were unauthorized by Scripture. For instance, when a Trinitarian attacked us, and began to talk about three persons in the Godhead, he was immediately requested to show the chapter and verse where the doctrine of three persons in one

God was taught; and when he evaded our request by asserting the holy and ever blessed trinity was a profound mystery, he was requested to show in what part of the Bible the trinity was called a mystery. And as he could not do this, he was then told the doctrine of the trinity was not a mystery, but a riddle, a contradiction, an absurdity, a doctrine nowhere taught in the Bible. In this way our most unlearned ministers were able to put down and confound at once their most learned opponents.

By searching the divine record and explaining it in a connected sense, we very shortly arrived at about the same conclusions as it respects the true doctrine of the gospel; so that at present there is quote a uniformity of sentiment among us. We understand the true doctrine of the gospel to be included in the following short summary:

1. That there is one living and true God, the Father almighty, who is unoriginated, independent, and eternal, the creator and supporter of all worlds; and that this God is one spiritual intelligence, one infinite mind, ever the same, never varying.

2. That this God is the moral governor of the world, the absolute source of all the blessings of nature, providence, and grace, in whose infinite wisdom, goodness, mercy, benevolence, and love has originated all the moral dispensations to man.

3. That all men in every age, country, and grade of society, sin and come short of the glory of God; and consequently fall under the curse of the law.

4. That Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the promised Messiah, and Savior of the world; the Mediator between God and men, by whom God has revealed his will to mankind, and by whose death and resurrection the new covenant has been confirmed and ratified, by whose instrumentality God is still carrying on his benevolent purposes towards the human family, who also is appointed of God to raise the dead and judge the world at the last day.

5. That the Holy Spirit is the power and energy of God; that holy influence of God by whose agency in the use of means the wicked are regenerated, converted, and recovered to a virtuous and holy life; sanctified and made meet for the inheritance of the of the saints in light; and that by the same Spirit, the saints in the use of means are comforted, strengthened, and led in the path of duty.

6. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

7. The free forgiveness of sins on the ground of the rich unpurchased mercy of God, which has been revealed in Christ and confirmed by his death, so that this mercy and forgiveness comes to use through the la-

bors, sufferings, and blood of our blessed Lord.

8. The necessity of repentance towards God.

9. Faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.

10. The absolute necessity of holiness of heart and rectitude of life, to enjoy the favor and approbation of God.

11. The doctrine of a future state of immortality.

12. The doctrine of a righteous retribution, when God will render to every man according to the deeds done in the body.

All these great and important truths we fully believe are taught in the NT, and we all agree that they include the first principles of Christianity. In some smaller points there is a difference of opinion among us. Some believe in the personal preexistence of our Lord, and others reject that doctrine. All believe in the doctrine of his miraculous conception. Some believe the suffering of the finally impenitent will terminate in their utter destruction; the great majority consider the Scriptures leave them in a suffering condition; none profess the doctrine of final restitution to holiness and happiness.¹ We find no such doctrine revealed in the Scriptures, and as we take revelation to be the rule of our faith, on this ground it is wholly indefensible. We consider the doctrine resting wholly upon inferences and deductions, which are no proof, no revelation. In this country nearly all the Universalists have renounced this doctrine. They now deny the doctrine of a future retribution altogether, and maintain that all who die impenitent will be raised from the dead morally holy and pure, and consequently must be happy. This is the inference they draw from the benevolence of the Deity. It requires, however, but little discernment to see that this doctrine strips Christianity of its chief motives to a holy and virtuous life.

It will be seen by this short statement of our faith, that we are strictly Unitarian in our sentiments. We, however, choose to be known by the name of *Christians* to the exclusion of all other names not found in the Scriptures, this being the most significant appellation of the followers of Christ, and agreeably to our views, given by divine appointment. It will be proper here to state that our mode of preaching and applying these doctrines is very different from that body of Christians usually denominated *Unitarians*. We are Evangelical Unitarians in preaching and applying the Unitarian doctrine; and are frequently denominated the *Evangelical Unitarians*, to distinguish us from the Unitarians in this country and England. It is this mode of preaching and applying the

¹ A.K.A, universalism.—Editor.

Unitarian doctrine which has crowned our labors with such a rich harvest; it is this which has given us access to the common people who constitute the greatest part of our churches and congregations; it is this through the medium of which we hope to prove a blessing to the world; and it is this which constitutes us the pride and glory of Unitarianism.

Like all other new denominations, we have had to encounter much powerful opposition, endure many hard struggles, and bear the burden of the heat of the day. In the midst of a complication of reproaches from older and more popular sects, our labors have been abundant, and our exertions unwearied. We have fought the good fight of faith, and hope to lay hold on eternal life. Many of our preachers have been young men, who in the morning have renounced all for Christ's sake, who have gone forth in strength and ardor of youth, preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to a perishing world, and having food and raiment, have been content therewith. *The wilderness has budded and blossomed as the rose, the desert has rejoiced, and the solitary places been glad for them.* The power and glory of God has been revealed, and the light of a pure, spiritual, and rational Christianity is stripping off the meretricious ornaments with which she had been clad in the dark ages, and rising in all her beauty, glory, and excellency. Many of her mistaken sons are coming forth to the light, beholding new charms and graces in the mother of us all.

The prospects of the Christian denomination are more encouraging than at any former period. During the last year we have been favored with many precious revivals of religion, and many new churches have been planted. Report brings cheering intelligence from the Western States. In those parts the success of a free gospel has exceeded our most sanguine expectations. It is stated by Mr. _____, who has been traveling under the direction of the American Unitarian Association in the Western States, to collect information respecting the moral and religious state of that part of our country, that the Christian denomination are the most pious, intelligent, and increasing body of people in the Western States. The same account is given by the Rev. Mr. Badger who has recently visited those parts under the direction of the Western Conference in the state. We regard ourselves as feeble instruments in the hands of Him who ruleth over all, in the accomplishment of these mighty acts which God has wrought by us. To Him be all the glory and praise forever and ever.

In closing this account of the rise, progress, character, numbers, faith, and prospects of the Christian denomination, I will once more

observe that I am authorized to state the Conference exceedingly regrets that this correspondence has been delayed to this later period—some of the circumstances of delay, however, have been beyond their control. It is hoped in future we shall be able to continue the correspondence regularly. You will be so good as to answer this communication soon after the sitting of your General Assembly in April next, so that your communication may be in time to be laid before the United States General Christian Conference to be holden the first day of September next.

With every sentiment of gratitude and esteem,

I subscribe myself your brother and friend,

Simon Clough.