

Christian Connexion or Connection

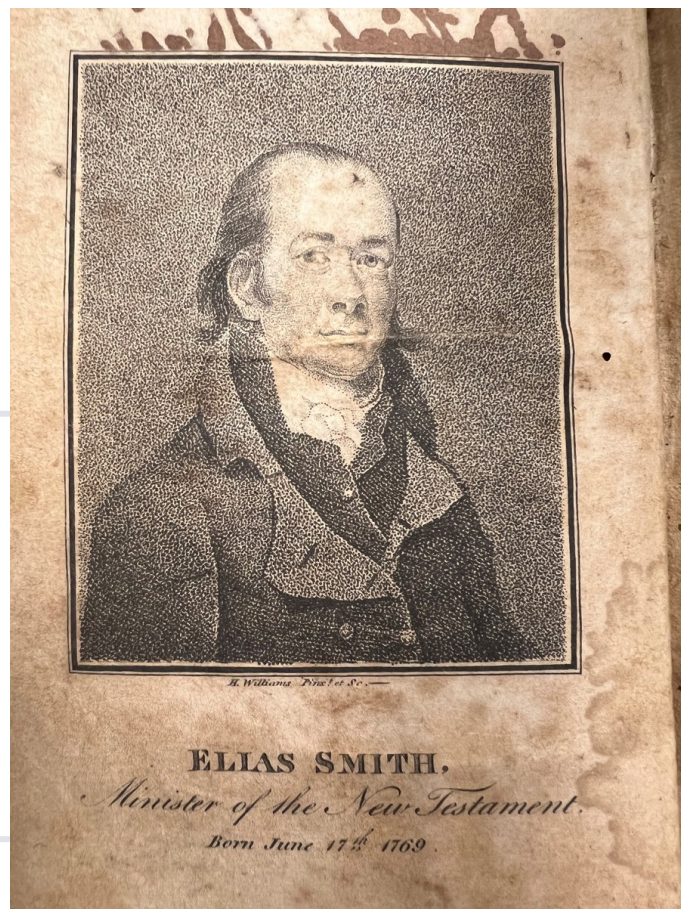
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A restorationist or primitivist movement that emerged independently in several sections of North America about 1800. It is considered as the first truly indigenous American religious movement. The focus was a quest for apostolic purity. Restorationism

believed that the Reformation begun in the sixteenth century would not be completed until the last vestiges of tradition were gone and replaced by a radical position of *sola scriptura* for all church beliefs and practices. The Restorationist movement coincided with the Second Great Awakening that peaked in the 1820s and 1830s.

The Christian Connexion was one of the branches of the broader Restorationist movement. The group in New England led by Elias Smith (1769-1846) and Abner Jones (1772-1841) was especially influential on early Adventism. They referred to themselves as “Christians” or the “Christian Connection” (or “Connexion”). Another important branch was known as the Stone-Campbell Movement that was led by Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and Thomas (1763-1854) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866). All began their ministries in Presbyterian churches. In 1801 Stone hosted the Cane Ridge camp meeting that espoused restorationist ideals. “In an attempt to make individual religious life more personal, active, and practical,” wrote Gerald Wheeler, “the Christian Connexion preached ‘gospel liberty,’ which meant that all believers must base their faith on what they themselves discovered to be the teachings of the Bible, and that their understanding would keep growing.”



Elias Smith for Christian Connexion.

From Michael W. Campbell's private collection.

The most distinctive feature of Restorationism was fusing major aspects of existing Protestantism into its own unique synthesis. It blended Arminian theology (individual free will) from Methodism and adult baptism as well as congregational polity (they were fiercely anti-organizational and rejected any kind of church government beyond the local church) from the Baptists. In New England, drawing from the Presbyterian thought, they discouraged excessive emotional expressions and instead emphasized reasoning from the scriptures. They were suspicious about creeds and relied instead upon the Bible alone. Similarly, they rejected appeals to new divine revelation (as opposed to the Mormons). They also espoused a pacifist outlook, rejecting military service. Along with a contemporary British movement, known today as Christian Brethren, the Christian Connexion hoped to manifest Christian unity and overcome denominationalism. There does not appear to have been any direct connections between the two movements, however. Claiming to be non-denominational, they believed they had a correct understanding of the New Testament and insisted that others must agree with them in order to affiliate. In 1838, while Joshua V. Himes was a minister for the Christian Connexion, he described the purpose of the movement:

Their leading purposes, at first, appear to have been, not so much to establish any peculiar and distinctive doctrines, as to assert, for individuals and churches, more liberty and independence in relation to matters of faith and practice, to shake off the authority of human creeds and the shackles of prescribed modes and forms, to make the Bible their only guide, claiming the right for every man the right to be his own expositor of it, to judge, for himself, what are its doctrines and requirements, and in practice, to follow more strictly the simplicity of the apostles and primitive Christians.²

This democratic appeal to religion quickly took root within American Christianity. "The Bible-based Protestant Christianity that flourished so remarkably in the free atmosphere of the new United States never witnessed agreement on how the Scriptures should be put to use," wrote Mark A. Noll. "The success of the Restorationist movement led by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone highlighted strategies that rejected historical traditions of biblical interpretation."³

The Christian Connexion was especially adept at harnessing the power of print. They developed numerous religious periodicals, including *The Christian's Magazine, Reviewer, and Religious Intelligencer* (1805-1808), followed by the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (1808-1817). An important aspect that united this movement was their hymnody. Elias Smith first published *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of Christians*, that went through numerous editions in the early nineteenth-century.⁴ They tended to be egalitarian in their call to a return to New Testament Christianity and encouraged women to preach.

Several Millerite ministers, including Joshua V. Himes (1805-1895), Joseph Bates (1792-1872), and James White (1821-1881), all began their ministerial careers as ministers in the Christian Connexion movement. Himes wrote that every member had the right to be his or her own expositor of Scripture and that "diversity of sentiment is not a bar to church fellowship."⁵ "The Christian Connexion way of thinking," wrote George Knight, "became

extremely important in early Seventh-day Adventism because two of its three founders had belonged to the Connexion—James White and Joseph Bates.⁶ Ellen White's family, while they were Millerites, attended the Casco Street Christian (Connexion) Church for a time while living in Portland, Maine. Ellen White's understanding of the great controversy theme comes out of a Restorationist framework, and it is probable, that her understanding of conditionalism and annihilationism came from the Christian Connexion influence.⁷ Finally, as Gerald Wheeler has noted, a significant legacy of the Christian Connexion for Seventh-day Adventism is the fundamental conviction that truth is progressive.⁸

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