

CHAPTER SIX: DENOMINATIONAL REALIGNMENT IN THE SECOND GREAT AWAKENING

In the new environment of independence and revival, denominational alignments changed. A new denominational family, the “Christians,” came into being, and New England Congregationalism experienced a schism between trinitarians and unitarians.

PART A: NO NAME BUT CHRISTIAN

In four different places, with four different sets of leaders, a new movement arose at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. Independent of each other, and coming from different backgrounds, these four groups came to similar conclusions. Two of the groups, and part of the third, became the Christian denomination that is now part of the United Church of Christ. The fourth group, and the remainder of the third group, became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

How could four groups, independent of each other, at about the same time come to similar beliefs? The answer must lie in similar circumstances. The four movements arose from a common ethos, which had been created by the American Revolution. This ethos included:

- *denominationalism as a new fact of life.* Disestablishment placed all churches on an equal footing, competing for the loyalty of the people. This competition, and their harsh words toward each other, contradicted Jesus’ commandment, “love one another,” and his prayer, “that they all might be one.” Two factors stood out as the causes of division in the body of Christ: creeds and hierarchy (bishops and presbyteries). Therefore the abolition of both appeared to be the first step in creating Christian unity.
- *an egalitarian spirit.* After the Revolution, any pretense of privilege was taboo. Bishops and pastors were not to “lord it over” the people but to serve. Anyone could read the Bible and understand it. The Holy Spirit could empower anyone to preach. Academic degrees and ordination were unimportant.
- *revivalism.* The one over-riding question of the revival was, “Are you saved?” Other issues, such as the mode of baptism, or even the

Trinity, sank into the background. Much diversity could be tolerated among Christians if the one essential unity – faith in one Lord – was affirmed.

The leaders of these four movements were:

1. James O’Kelly, who left the Methodist Church with his followers in North Carolina and Virginia.
2. Abner Jones, in New England, who came out of the Baptist Church.
3. Barton Stone, in Kentucky and the Ohio Valley, who left the Presbyterian Church.
4. Alexander Campbell, in western Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley who left a small dissenting Presbyterian denomination.

The Christian movement that joined the United Church of Christ was composed of the followers of O’Kelly and Jones, and some of the followers of Stone.

James O’Kelly

James O’Kelly (ca. 1735-1826), probably born in Ireland, had emigrated to Virginia by 1760. James followed his wife and sons to a Methodist class meeting, was converted, and by 1775 had become a licensed preacher.

O’Kelly attended the “Christmas Conference” at Baltimore in 1784, at which time the Methodist movement reorganized itself into a denomination. The leader of the Methodist Church, Francis Asbury, called himself a bishop and exercised control of the church, appointing pastors to their charges. Dissatisfied with hierarchical organization, O’Kelly agitated through Virginia and North Carolina against having bishops.

At the General Conference of the Methodist Church in 1792, O’Kelly proposed a “right of appeal” so that ministers dissatisfied with their appointment from the bishop could appeal to the Conference meeting. The proposal was defeated, and the following morning O’Kelly and thirty others left. For a year O’Kelly and his followers petitioned for reconsideration and reconciliation, but to no avail. O’Kelly and his followers then organized the Republican Methodist Church on 25 December 1793, at Manakintown, Virginia.

When the Republican Methodists met again in 1794, in Surry County, Virginia, preacher Rice Haggard (1769-1819), standing with an open New Testament in his hand, said,

Brethren, this is a sufficient rule of faith and practice, and 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.

The motion passed without dissent. Another minister moved, “to take the Bible itself as their only creed,” and this also carried. These two motions defined the Christian denomination.

Abner Jones

The family of Abner Jones (1772-1841) moved to the northern frontier of Vermont when Abner was a boy. His family was Calvinistic Baptist. Abner experienced conversion several times, but could not accept his church’s doctrine of predestination. After working several years as a teacher and physician, Jones finally accepted his calling to preach. Jones founded the First Free Christian Church in 1801 in Lyndon, Vermont. In November, 1802, three Free-Will Baptist ministers ordained Jones, the ministers understanding that Jones was not joining their denomination.

Abner Jones traveled widely across New England and upstate New York, preaching and founding churches. Jones soon began to work with Elias Smith (1769-1846). Ordained into the Baptist ministry in Lee, New Hampshire, in 1792, Smith later questioned his church’s doctrine. He resigned his position as minister in 1801 and embraced Universalism.¹ Fifteen days later he renounced Universalism and returned to the Baptist Church. Smith moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, returned to the ministry, and joined Jones’ Christian movement. Elias Smith preached widely, but his principle ministry was religious journalism. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, which he began in 1808, advocated for religious liberty and created a connecting link for the many scattered Christians.

Barton Stone

Barton Stone, the host pastor of the 1801 Cane Ridge revival, had been ordained in the Presbyterian Church in 1798. Ordination was a difficult step for Stone to take because he had some reservations about some parts of the *Westminster Confession*, which he was required to affirm at ordination. He gave assent to the *Confession*, “as far as I see it consistent with the Word of God.” That was good enough for his Kentucky presbytery.

The revival continued after Cane Ridge. Besides people falling, some had “the jerks,” “solemn” laughter, and other physical manifestations. “Mingled

¹Universalism is a belief that *all* persons are saved and will go to heaven; there is no Hell.

exercises,” in which everyone prayed audibly at the same time, were common. The revivalists preached a doctrine of free-will. To the revivalists, conversion depended more on the power of preaching, and less on the inner working of the Spirit, than was customary in Calvinism. Some Presbyterian elders and ministers criticized Stone and the other revivalists for these doctrinal deviations.

For two years, from 1801 through 1803, presbytery meetings in Kentucky and southern Ohio were filled with charges of heresy, acrimonious debate over revival methods, and procedural maneuvering. Both sides appealed to the Synod of Kentucky to resolve the dispute in 1803. Believing they were not being treated fairly, Stone and four other pastors came together for prayer during a recess of the Synod meeting, and resolved to withdraw from the Synod. On 16 September 1803 the five ministers organized themselves as the Springfield Presbytery.² The revivalists reached out to the synod for reconciliation, but to no avail. Removed from their Presbyterian Churches, the pastors of the new presbytery gathered their followers into new congregations. In one year they organized fifteen congregations in Ohio and Kentucky.

The Springfield Presbytery longed for Christian harmony, and did not wish to become a religious faction. Rice Haggard, from the O’Kelly group, visited them, and they published his tract, *The Sacred Import of the Christian Name* (LTH 4:2). The presbytery decided to dissolve, empowering their congregations to govern themselves, with the Bible their only creed, seeking fellowship with all Christians. On 28 June 1804, the members of Springfield Presbytery signed *The Last Will and Testament of Springfield Presbytery* (LTH 4:5) and became Christians simply.

Creating Christian Community

These three similar movements soon made contact and began to cooperate, although they were reluctant to create a permanent organization. Rice Haggard had provided a link between the O’Kelly and Stone groups. Christian evangelists and settlers from the South and from New England moved to the Ohio Valley and joined forces with those Christians. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, published by the New Englanders, carried news of all the Christian groups, and was read by Christians throughout the country.

The Christian groups soon expanded through the work of traveling evangelists. From New England the Christian movement spread to New York, New Jersey, northern Pennsylvania, and Canada. From Virginia and North

²named for Springfield, Ohio.

Carolina Christians soon expanded southward into Georgia and Alabama, and northward to south-central Pennsylvania. The Ohio Valley group evangelized into Indiana, Tennessee and Illinois. Many Baptist congregations and a few Baptist Associations joined the Christian movement. These were “open communion Baptists,” in the Ohio Valley called “Separate Baptists.” They practiced believer’s baptism by immersion, but received into communion persons not so baptized.

The Christians were a revival church. They often met in groves or barns, in school houses or homes, for several years before building a chapel. Their worship was simple, consisting of vigorous a capella singing, the reading of scripture, extempore prayer, and practical Biblical preaching unaided by notes. They often held three services on Sunday, as well as mid-week prayer meetings. Anyone who felt called could exhort, and women were numbered among their early preachers. The early Christians opposed a “hireling ministry” – that is, settled pastors with a stipulated salary. Elders and evangelists were ordained by several other elders. One of these evangelists recalled, “it was as natural for preachers to be traveling as it was for birds to be flying.”

The early Christians resisted formal organization. However, elders often met together, and conferences of elders and lay people were held to discuss issues in the developing movement.

In 1816 Elias Smith, editor of the *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, lapsed into Universalism again. After much discussion throughout the movement, Christians held a general delegated meeting in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in September, 1817, to discuss the Smith situation and the need for some kind of standards.

The New Bedford meeting developed a few guidelines for church order:

- baptism to be administered only by a church’s consent;
- baptized persons to seek a church relationship;
- church approval needed to ordain an elder (minister);
- elders to be church members;
- churches and ministers to be subject to discipline.

These actions marked the transition from a movement to an institution. Local conferences of churches organized throughout the denomination at this time.

In 1820 delegates from the three Christian groups met together at Windham, Connecticut, and organized the United States General Christian Conference. They had no ongoing organization between their annual meetings. Local Conferences and the General Conference had no authority over local churches and pastors. General Conference often passed resolutions on many subjects, but in the view of one historian of the movement, these resolutions “fell

harmless.”

Christian Controversies

This new movement, thoroughly pietistic, committed to unity in Christ, and liberally rejecting the conventional standards of other denominations, soon felt the stress of theological controversy (*LTH* 4:6). Elias Smith’s intermittent Universalism was only one of several issues.

When Barton Stone left the Presbyterian Church, he renewed his quest for theological truth. Rejecting all creeds, and using only the Bible, he developed a theology that was rational, and consistent with revival practices. First, he rejected *predestination* in favor of free-will.

Second, Stone addressed the issue of *atonement*. Most Protestants preached a “substitutionary atonement” theory. The theory was: (1) We have all sinned; (2) God requires that we be punished for our sin by death; (3) Christ died in our place. Stone could not reconcile this theory with the loving God he knew and preached. In 1805 Stone published *Atonement: The Substance of Two Letters Written to a Friend*. Stone argued that the purpose of the Cross was not to change God’s attitude to us, but to change our attitude to God, to make us holy, and thus to reconcile us to God.

Third, Stone addressed the issue of the *trinity*, in 1814, in *An Address to the Christian Churches in Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio: On Several Important Doctrines of Religion*. Stone was determined to use only the New Testament in developing his theology. The language of the creeds of the church – including the word “trinity” – he set aside as a confusing and inconsistent human invention. Stone spoke of three “distinctions” rather than three “persons” in the Godhead, and affirmed the unity of God and the divinity of Christ, but in fresh language.

Barton Stone’s views won wide acceptance in the Christian movement in the west and the northeast. O’Kelly and many others clung firmly to the substitutionary atonement theory, and found other ways of expressing the trinity. However, these doctrinal differences did not inhibit their Christian fellowship.

The result of Stone’s theological work was to enlarge the boundaries of belief acceptable in the new Christian movement. It also caused other Protestants to distance themselves from the new movement. The doctrine of the trinity, developed in the first four centuries of Christianity, was affirmed by all other Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox. This new Christian movement would not use the word “trinity” because it was not in the Bible. As a result, this new

Christian movement, committed to the principle of Christian unity, found itself isolated from most of the rest of Christianity. Yet Stone and his followers believed everything they found in the Bible about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The mode of Baptism became an issue of dispute. The founders of the movement in New England had been Baptists, and continued the practice of believer's baptism by immersion. In the Ohio Valley, Stone was (re)baptized in 1807, and believer's baptism by immersion became the common practice. However, the churches accepted into their fellowship persons sprinkled as children, and even Friends who had not received water baptism, without requiring immersion. In the South, O'Kelly believed strongly in infant baptism by sprinkling. William Guirey became the leader of the Southern Christians who advocated believer's baptism by immersion. In 1810 the Christian Church in the South split. O'Kelly and the sprinklers organized the Old North Carolina Conference; Guirey and the dunkers organized the Virginia Conference. The two groups reunited in 1854.

William Miller (1782-1849), a Baptist layman from northern New York, after two years of Bible study calculated that Christ would return and the current age end in 1843 or 1844. Joshua V. Himes (1805-1895), the Christian minister in Boston, was converted to Miller's movement in 1839, and became Miller's promoter and publicist. "Millerism" was not a new denomination, but a movement that drew supporters from most denominations. Miller was permitted to speak from many Christian pulpits, and his movement received strong support from most of the Christians in northern New England. The last predicted date for Christ's return, 22 October 1844, came and went. Following this "Great Disappointment" many Millerites fell away from religion altogether. Others found new ways to interpret events and founded Adventist churches. The Christian Church in northern New England never recovered from the Great Disappointment and much of the Christian movement there flowed into the Advent Christian Church.

All of these controversies helped to define this new Christian movement as a distinct denomination, in spite of its nondenominational intentions. The Christians were at the same time the most conservative and the most liberal of the groups that formed the United Church of Christ. They were conservative in their resistance to any change that could not be justified by Scripture. They were liberal in their tolerance of diversity of doctrine, which they described as the freedom of conscience of the individual in interpreting the Scriptures.

Christians and Disciples

In addition to the movements begun by O’Kelly, Smith and Stone, a fourth similar movement began, led by Thomas and Alexander Campbell.

Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), Scotch-Irish minister in a dissident Presbyterian group, came to America in 1807. He soon became pastor of a congregation of the Associate Synod of North America. Censured by his denomination for allowing persons not of that denomination to receive communion, he withdrew, and in 1809 published *Declaration and Address* (LTH 4:18) and organized the Christian Association of Washington.³ That same year his son, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) arrived in America, and soon took over leadership of the Association.

The Campbells led a “Restoration” movement. Rejecting the accumulated human creeds and traditions of the centuries, they worked to restore the church to the New Testament model. This rejection of human traditions, they believed, was the way to achieve Christian unity. They soon adopted believer’s baptism by immersion and weekly communion. This restoration movement in 1813 consisted of one congregation, which in that year affiliated with the Baptists.

Campbell’s restoration movement spread down the Ohio Valley as a faction within the Baptist church. However there were tensions. Baptist churches at that time subscribed to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith, but the restorationists rejected all creeds.

In 1830 a Baptist association in Eastern Ohio that was dominated by restorationists voted to cut its ties with the Baptists by dissolving the Association. Other congregations withdrew from their Associations, and the restorationists became a distinct movement of independent congregations, calling themselves Disciples of Christ.

Disciples and Christians soon discovered each other in Kentucky and Ohio, and found they had much in common. Their common quest for Christian unity drove them to question why any distinction between the two groups should exist. For two years Campbell and Stone discussed the prospects for union and the issues that appeared to divide them, through editorials in the religious newspapers they published. Barton Stone entered into dialogue with Disciples pastor John “Raccoon” Smith, which led to a series of public meetings in Lexington and Georgetown, Kentucky, well attended by Christians and Disciples

³named for Washington County, Pennsylvania.

in the region. In a public meeting Raccoon Smith declared, "God has but one people on earth. . . . Let us all come to the Bible, and to the Bible alone, as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need." Barton Stone replied, "I am willing to give him now and here my hand." The two communities celebrated their unity in Christ with communion on Sunday, 1 January 1832, at Hill Street Christian Church in Lexington.

It is difficult to speak of two groups of autonomous congregations as uniting. There were no votes of representative bodies, and no written agreement to sign. Two groups of Christians simply recognized each other as kin and chose to walk together. Disciple Raccoon Smith and Christian John Rogers were appointed to visit the churches, and to encourage them to walk together, like the churches of Lexington. Christian Barton Stone and Disciple John T. Johnson promoted the union through the printed word.

Any union involves give and take. Stone adopted the Disciple custom of weekly communion with no difficulty. With regard to theological speculation on the trinity and other subjects, Stone pledged to only use the language of the Bible in the pulpit. He wrote,

Let us cease to speculate on the doctrine of Christ, and learn his simplicity. Let us confine ourselves to the language of the Bible as much as possible. Speculations are unprofitable and injurious to growth of vital piety, and stand in the way of Christian union.

Stone acquiesced to the Disciple practice of only offering communion to persons who had received baptism by immersion.⁴ However Stone insisted on use of the Christian name. Most of the Christians of the Ohio Valley chose to join Barton Stone in this walk together with the Disciples. However some dissented.

David Purviance (1766-1847) and Matthew Gardner led the opposition to this union. Purviance had been ruling elder at Cane Ridge, and was the only person ordained by the Springfield Presbytery during its brief existence. He served on the state legislature in Kentucky. After moving to Ohio in 1807 he was both pastor and legislator there. Purviance and other continuing Christians were unwilling to surrender their open communion or their tolerance of broader theological diversity (see *LTH* 4:20). A minority of the Ohio Valley Christians continued in the fellowship of the United States General Christian Conference.

⁴Actually Stone's statements on this subject are contradictory. He insisted that he personally continued to offer communion to all, while he defended the exclusive Disciple position.

PART B: THE UNITARIAN SCHISM

In the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries the Congregational churches of New England were moving doctrinally in two opposite directions. On the one hand, New Light pastors trained new pastors in the doctrines of Edwards. These Edwardsians provided the interior of New England with evangelical leadership that embraced the *Westminster Catechism* and promoted revivals. On the other hand, pastors in the affluent and cosmopolitan maritime cities preached a gentler philosophy. They believed that people were essentially good and capable of doing the right thing. They elevated Reason over Revelation, which had to be explained in accord with Reason. Skepticism toward the supernatural led some to disregard the divinity of Christ, which led to a disregard of the doctrines of atonement and trinity. They ridiculed revivals and emotional religion. For them, Religion was Morality, and was always reasonable.

As the divide deepened, occasional conflicts occurred over the calling of a pastor or the adoption of a creed. Conflict often occurred between church and parish – the taxpayers of the parish often desiring a less demanding faith than the communicant members of the church.

Jedidiah Morse and the Contest at Harvard

Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) was eager to provide the spark and fan the flames of conflict in defense of the trinitarian faith. Born in Woodstock, Connecticut, to a devout Congregational family, Morse attended Yale College, where he was converted in a revival in 1781, and graduated in 1783. Morse then remained in New Haven, where he studied theology and taught in a girls' school. He then was ordained in 1786, served as pastor of a Congregational Church in Midway, Georgia, for a year, then assisted in a Presbyterian Church in New York City. Called to the Congregational Church in Charlestown, Massachusetts,⁵ in 1789, he served there until 1819.

Jedidiah Morse had a highly combative personality, “the sort of man who could never stand in friendly opposition to anyone,”⁶ and he tended to see conspiracies in the designs of those he opposed. His zeal and vision shaped the beginning of the organized opposition to the Unitarians. But his contentiousness ended up alienating even his friends, and other more temperate personalities

⁵Charlestown is now part of the city of Boston, but was then a separate Town.

⁶Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), 61.

assumed leadership of the movement he began.

Once settled in the Boston area, Morse supported revivals and opposed every trend away from orthodox⁷ theology. When vacancies occurred in the positions of professor of divinity at Harvard College in 1803 and president of the college in 1804, Morse urged the appointment of orthodox candidates. After many delays and much debate, Henry Ware (1764-1845), whom Morse considered a unitarian, was elected professor of divinity in 1805.

The Trinitarian Strategy

Morse immediately took action to organize evangelical Christians. He first worked to unify the New Light and Old Calvinist factions of Congregationalism against the common enemy. Then he led that coalition in a fourfold strategy:

1. Establish a periodical to shape the opinion of the supporters of the orthodox faith.
2. Create a new educational institution to prepare a new army of clergy with orthodox doctrine and evangelical piety.
3. Unify the Congregationalists of Massachusetts in a statewide organization to defend orthodoxy.
4. Start new trinitarian churches in Boston, to contest with the older non-trinitarian churches for the loyalty of the masses of the growing metropolis.

A religious journal – In June, 1805, one month after Henry Ware's installation at Harvard, Morse began a monthly publication, the *Panoplist*. Taking its name from *Ephesians* 6:11, "put on the whole armor (panoplia) of God," the *Panoplist* gave a call to arms to the faithful to spiritual combat against the enemies of the faith. In three months it achieved a circulation of 2,000, more than any other religious periodical in America at the time. With articles on doctrine, practical piety, biography, and events in church life, Morse and his associates informed the trinitarians.

A school to train ministers –After a couple of years of coalition building, fundraising, and promotion in the *Panoplist*, Andover Theological Seminary opened on 28 September 1808. This was a new kind of educational institution (*LTH* 3:13). Previously candidates for ministry completed college, then studied with a pastor or college professor before ordination. Andover offered college graduates a three year program with a growing faculty.

⁷The terms "orthodox" "evangelical" and "trinitarian" were all names for the anti-Unitarian party.

Connectionalism – A General Association of Massachusetts had been organized in 1803, consisting of representatives of the voluntary district clergy associations. However, for several years only three to five of the twenty-four associations attended – all in the west. Promoted by the *Panoplist*, the General Association slowly grew to ten associations in 1810 and more thereafter. The General Association had no authority over churches or clergy. By affirming the doctrine of the *Westminster Catechism*, it presented itself as a defender of the historic faith.

Some Congregationalists feared any church organization to be a threat to local autonomy. Nathanael Emmons (1745-1840), New Light pastor who had educated eighty-seven other pastors, had declared, “Associationism leads to Consociationism,⁸ Consociationism leads to Presbyterianism, Presbyterianism leads to Episcopacy, Episcopacy leads to Roman Catholicism, and Roman Catholicism is an ultimate fact.” The Mendon Association, to which Emmons belonged, was the last to join the General Association, after Emmons’ death in 1841.

Many of the *Panoplist* leaders did want consociations, and had no problem being Presbyterian when outside New England. They encouraged the General Association in 1814 to study the proposal of 1705 for consociations (rejected in Massachusetts, but adopted in Connecticut as the *Saybrook Platform*—see Chapter 4, Part B: Saybrook), and promoted it in the *Panoplist*. After two years of study the plan was dropped. The Congregationalists of Massachusetts were not prepared to go that far.

New churches in Boston – Of nine Congregational churches in Boston, only Old South Church was clearly trinitarian. The *Panoplist* leaders organized new congregations in Boston, preaching the evangelical faith, and attracting the many immigrants to the city from the more orthodox rural areas. The first new congregation, Park Street Church,⁹ was organized 27 February 1809. By 1842 twelve more trinitarian congregations had been organized in Boston.

The War of Ideas

Jedidiah Morse’s son, Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872),¹⁰ an art student in

⁸Associations were regular meetings of clergy in an area; consociations were regular meetings of clergy and lay delegates from churches in an area.

⁹now affiliated with the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference (CCCC).

¹⁰he would later invent the telegraph and Morse Code.

England in 1815, noticed a book in a bookstore, *Life of Theophilus Lindsey*, by Thomas Belsham. The book included letters to British Unitarians from Boston area clergy, in which they claimed that most of the city's clergy held unitarian views. They further acknowledged the clergy were unwilling to fully disclose these beliefs to their parishioners. Samuel sent a copy of the book to his father, who promptly published the relevant sections, titled *American Unitarianism*, in April, 1815. The *Panoplist* reprinted much of the material in a review, and highlighted the pattern of deception that showed contempt for the people.

One of Boston's clergy who felt offended, William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), wrote a tract criticizing the publication and review. Samuel Worcester (1770-1821), one of the *Panoplist* group and pastor of Tabernacle Church, Salem, replied with another tract. By December 1815 Channing and Worcester had each published three tracts. The trinitarians considered these tracts to be the definitive statements of the controversy. The Unitarians were forced to acknowledge their true views. Worcester clearly articulated the orthodox doctrines of the trinity, atonement, and the divinity of Christ. He argued that these doctrines were central to the Christian faith, and that the failure of preachers to proclaim them was sufficient cause for the orthodox to separate and to organize new churches.

Channing made the clearest defense of the Unitarian position in an 1819 ordination sermon, *Unitarian Christianity*. This resulted in numerous other tracts and rebuttals.¹¹ This war of words was conducted in a better spirit than most such wars. Both sides refrained from name calling, ridicule, and the distortion of the other's positions. The trinitarians believed they were preserving their "catholicity" in the sense of their doctrinal unity with Christians in all times and places. The campaign was ultimately an act of piety – of devotion to their Lord Jesus Christ.

The Battle in the Courts

The decade of 1810-1820 saw a series of battles in local parishes, fought out in church councils and the courts of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. These cases set precedents that determined events in scores of other churches in the succeeding decades. Prominent Senators, cabinet members and state officials presented the cases of the contending parties in church councils; the cases were widely reported and discussed.

¹¹Moses Stuart, *Letter to the Rev. Wm. E. Channing*; Leonard Woods, *Letters to Unitarians*; Henry Ware, *Letter to the Reverend Dr. Woods*.

The *Cambridge Platform* had provided that a church with problems could call on representatives from neighboring churches to come to a meeting – called an Ecclesiastical Council – to hear the case and give advice. If the two parties could agree on the issue and whom to invite, a mutual council was called. If they could not agree, either or each party could call their own *ex parte* council. By the nineteenth century these councils had ceased to have a geographical base, each party inviting those clergy and churches that would favor its cause. Also, by the nineteenth century, state law had recognized the right of the parish to call a council.

Conflict in Sandwich led to *Burr v. Sandwich* (1812), in which the state Supreme Court ruled that the Parish could determine which was the real First Church and entitled to the support of the Parish, without regard to the actions of the church. In *Baker v. Fales* (1820), dealing with conflict in Dedham, the court ruled that the Parish was the legal trustee of all assets and property of the church, and these assets belonged to whatever group the Parish declared to be the church (See *LTH* 3:14).

The battle in the courts of church and state was conducted with more animosity, pettiness, and cruelty than the battle of the tracts. The system of mutual and *ex parte* councils had proven ineffective, causing the *Panoplist* group to call more desperately for a system of standing geographic consociations. In battles between Parish and Church, the parish was usually anti-trinitarian and the church, orthodox. The courts – dominated by Unitarians – took a legal position that gave all the power to the Parish. As a result, trinitarians were repeatedly driven from their meetinghouses and forced to start afresh, free of the Town's financial support. Each case increased the antagonism and deepened the divide between the two parties.

Division of the Churches

Slowly but steadily, the plague of schism spread from Town to Town across eastern New England. Over one-third of the Congregational churches of Massachusetts divided. By 1840 the General Association of Massachusetts counted 126 “exiled churches” – orthodox churches having to start over from scratch, without any share of the property, furnishings or invested funds of their former parishes. Many of the most affluent and influential persons had been left behind, but in the cases of the exiled churches alone, 75% of the membership came out. New England Congregationalism was “born again” in the Unitarian schism, with a new beginning founded on faith in Christ rather than on tradition and memory. Thousands of trinitarian Congregationalists had to find new ways to fund their churches, and a new way to function independent of the Town

government.

The Unitarian schism was social and political as well as theological. The affluent, highly educated, urban Unitarian leadership often appeared condescending toward the less affluent trinitarians with more emotional religion. Trinitarians criticized the Unitarian monopoly of the leading offices of the state government.

The trinitarians won the “religious war” by portraying themselves as the true inheritors of New England’s ancient religion, and by portraying their opponents as innovators. Trinitarian institutions produced another movement that gave more energy, cohesion, and strength to their cause than all the other institutions: the missionary movement.