

**“A Patriot of God:” Minister James O’Kelly**  
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James O’Kelly was a man who truly believed and embodied the principles forged by America’s quest for Independence. He experienced a powerful conversion to Christ as the first shots of Lexington echoed across the country. O’Kelly’s fiery sermons attracted Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers, who sought to rid themselves of unjust rulers. Catching the sprit of the Revolution, O’Kelly sought the same for the Methodist Church. He stepped forward to lead his own rebellion against a controlling church leadership that reflected the old order and favored a church that gave freedom to those spreading the word of God to the masses.

In 1792, O’Kelly’s campaign resulted in a major split in the Methodist Church. Together with other ministers he formed a sect known as Republican Methodists, who claimed the Bible as their rule, decried episcopacy, and believed in the equality of all people, lay and ministerial, and black and white. The minister moved to Chatham County, North Carolina and established a series of churches and attracted a loyal following that would reshape the religious world of Tidewater Virginia and Piedmont North Carolina. Ultimately O’Kelly was justified when many of his complaints against the Methodist Church were finally adopted.

James O’Kelly was born in 1735 but nothing is known of his youth and early manhood. In 1759, he married Elizabeth Meeks, who bore him two children, John and William. This lower gentry family lived in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, from the early 1770s. He was not far from forty years of age at the time of his conversion, and he immediately united with the Wesleyan Societies. His conversion on the eve of war in 1775 was definitely announced, and strongly emphasized in the most forceful way, so much so that he consigned his fiddle to the flame, and forever turned his back upon worldliness.

As the war for American Independence raged, O’Kelly began his own fight for the salvation of earthly souls. By 1778 he was a minister riding the New Hope Circuit in North Carolina. He rose quickly in the Methodist ranks (many ministers took ten years or more), and by 1780 he was district elder over circuits in Tidewater Virginia and in eastern and central North Carolina. With return of peace to America, the Methodist Church officially broke its ties to England. A new American Church struggled to build itself anew but there were many who wanted to hold on to the English tradition and shunned any changes.

But James O’Kelly was not one of these. Consumed with the principles of liberty and motivated by a desire to shape a new American church, the minister began a long, controversial campaign create a new church, one woven with same yarn as the patriot banner of 1776.

Just as the Methodist church declares its independence at the "Christmas Conference" at Baltimore in 1784, O’Kelly burst onto the scene and first announced his position. O’Kelly sat in this body, and subsequently, by strongly opposing certain of its measures, he did much to discredit councils. Over

the next five years, O'Kelly begins to call for a new set of laws by which the church ran itself. By the Methodist Conference in Virginia at the Brokenback Chapel on May 18, 1789, the church leadership recognized the obvious desire many Southern ministers had for ending the Episcopal system altogether. The church's chief leader, Francis Asbury, fought this on the ground that it represented a thorough break with Episcopalianism (Anglicanism) and Wesley did not want such separation. Southern churches spoke most clearly. Most Virginian and North Carolinian preachers simply felt Asbury a tyrant. O'Kelly was the southern churches' acknowledged leader.

Through his experience riding the circuit into North Carolina, O'Kelly became familiar with North Carolina, eventually moving here in 1787. He joined cousins and former neighbors in a small community named Moringsville. Two years later he published a unique tract entitled, An Essay on Negro Slavery. From 1782 till 1792 O'Kelly was stationed almost constantly in Virginia, and presided over a large district of the best circuits

It was called for November 1, 1792, and O'Kelly introduced a resolution to modify the bishops' power of appointment to the extent of allowing to any preacher who should feel dissatisfied with the place assigned him an appeal to the conference. He wanted to put the government of the church on the same basis as that upon which the civil fabric rested; that is, on a democratic, instead of an autocratic basis. He was striving to adhere to the original plan of John Wesley, the Methodist's founder, while Bishop Asbury was trying to depart from it: for the Methodists of England as we have shown, have never had bishops.

"There is another subject, still, that deserves a serious thought, which very thought creates sensation in my breast. That is to say, we have purchased this liberty government by representation at no less price than the blood and lives of thousands; some of whom died in the hospitals, others on the road--and numbers fell in the field of battle with the English! What suffering of body and mind they passed through before the awful hour--who can describe? There is one thing of importance they have done for us, they have freed us from despotic negatives, and British tyranny; and have left us, sealed with their own blood, the valuable legacy of civil and religious liberty, a liberty guarded and preserved by representation; and this is the government the General Conference is pleased to charge us with being enemies to. Groundless charge; cruel slander--the very offspring of your spurlous episcopacy."

The second letter is addressed to Col. Hollowell Williams, of Currituck County, North Carolina, a member of the North Carolina Convention of 1776, which framed the (Constitution of North Carolina, a leading Methodist. It is as follows:

**Liberty is worth contending for at the point of the sword in divers ways--monarchy, tyranny tumbling both in church and kingdom--while our preachers are erecting a throne for gentlemen bishops in a**

**future day, when, fixed with an independent fortune, they may sit and lord it over God's heritage. I speak in the fear of God and feel for the dear people.**

Before the last link was broken that bound him to Methodism, Bishop Asbury sent messengers to him telling him that he was his "right eye, right hand, and right foot." O'Kelly and Asbury disagreed over the right to place itinerants. Receiving no support from his fellow ministers, he left the Methodists in 1792 and formed the Republican Methodists in 1794. (The Republican Methodists, claimed the Bible as their rule, decried episcopacy, and believed in the equality of all people, lay and ministerial.)

A large majority rejected this and O'Kelly withdrew. Several of O'Kelly's adherents also left the conference, and he subsequently organized a "Republican Methodist Church," James O'Kelly was accused of trying to mislead the people.

O'Kelly's teachings were widely adopted in southside Virginia and North Carolina, the region in which the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ still has a large presence. Although Methodists decried O'Kelly's constant harangues against Asbury, they eventually adopted aspects of O'Kelly's democratic style of church government, including the right of the itinerant to appeal his appointment. O'Kelly also used the pulpit to explain his views regarding church government and encourage the unity of emerging Christian denominations. Hoping to unite all Christians through music, he compiled Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Use of Christians (1816), which contained many of Isaac Watts' hymns.

"The greatest asset a nation, or a church, can have is not found in fertile soil, and large endowments; not in great rivers, and eloquent preachers; not in mines of coal and iron, of silver and precious metals; not in the largeness of college buildings, and the architecture of temples; not in the transportation of great cargoes of merchandise across the seas; not in the organizations of forces according to the latest scheme for expert work, but in giving to the world such heroic spirits as the man, who for conscience' sake dares to stand alone. The greatest asset that any nation, or church, can have, is a robust, self-respecting, intelligent, law-abiding, high-minded citizenship, and a membership of consecrated men and women, whose lives are given to the unselfish service of one another."

He departed this life, in the triumphs of faith, on the evening of the 16th of October last, after a painful and lingering illness, which he bore with Christian fortitude and a perfect resignation to the will of Heaven. He was, I learn from a gentleman who has been in habits of intimacy with him for many years, in the 92nd year of his age, and had been a minister of the Gospel upwards of fifty. His conduct, from the time he embraced the religion of the cross, has ever been the most exemplary--those who knew him best are unanimous in saying that he "walked worthy of the high vocation wherewith he was called."