

OBLATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Barton W. Stone's Legacy: A Spirituality Driven by God's Grace

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Tradition and Contemporary Spirituality

by

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Introduction

When a Christian movement recognizes two different founders, interesting questions emerge regarding legacy. Are each of the founders equally important? What unique aspects of the movement's characteristics should be attributed to each pioneer? Legacy serves as memory or a compass for group identity. But when there are two men that stand in the role of forefather, which identity takes precedent or should they be conflated? Later division within the movement only further complicates matters. The individual groups not only struggle to define their identities in relation to their founding figures, but they strive to define themselves in dialectic with the other factions that share in their history. In other words, the group's identity can be drawn directly from one or both of the founders but also becomes defined by how it is different from the other groups that claim the same heritage.

Such is the narrative of the American Restoration Movement. Through very different circumstances, Barton W. Stone (1772-1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) each developed Christian followings in the early decades of the American Republic. Stone and his followers referred to themselves as "Christians" while many from outside called them "Stoneites." Campbell and his followers referred to themselves as "Disciples of Christ" and outsiders called them "Campbellites."¹ Their movements merged over a handshake in 1832. Stone and Campbell couldn't agree on terminology for the united movement and continued to use various terms such as "Christians," "Disciples," and "Disciples of Christ." Their movement is now referred to as the Restoration Movement or the Stone-Campbell Movement. Several

¹ Lester McAllister and Dr. William Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1975): 27-28.

contemporary Christian groups have emerged from this heritage including the “Churches of Christ,” the unaffiliated “Christian Church/Church of Christ,” the “Christian Church/Disciples of Christ,” the “International Churches of Christ,” and the “International Christian Churches.”

Legacy for the Restoration Movement during its united period (1832 to 1906) favored Alexander Campbell. Stone’s influence was discounted, neglected, or minimized for a variety of reasons. As stated by G. Richard Phillips,

Someone has written that history is written by the victors. It is so with Stone's story. He died some twenty-odd years before Campbell, and a decade before his death he effectively left the "field of battle," following his children in moving from Kentucky to Illinois. Stone retired from the settled world only two years after the "merger" with the Campbellian forces, which was in many ways not so much a merger as a "hostile take-over."

Campbell habitually overshadowed Stone’s contributions. According to Phillips, forcibly so. Anthony Dunnavant states, “It seems to be the case that Barton W. Stone was not normally recognized as a “founder” of the nineteenth century reformation until nearly the middle of the twentieth Century.”² He explains that Stone and his followers were part of a “preparatory background of the Campbellite reformation or a tributary that eventually flowed into it.” At least, that is how historians told the story of the movement’s origins before the middle of the twentieth century.³

² Anthony L. Dunnavant, “From Precursor of the Movement to Icon of Christian Unity: Barton W. Stone in the Memory of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),” in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnavant, (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992): 9.

³ See Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: Embracing a View of the Origin, Progress and Principles of the Religious Reformation Which He Advocated* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1871)., William Thomas Moore, *A Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ: Being an Account of a Century's Effort to Restore Primitive Christianity in Its Faith, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909)., James Harvey Garrison, *The Story of a Century: A Brief Historical Sketch and Exposition of the Religious Movement Inaugurated By Thomas and Alexander Campbell. 1809-1909* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Company, 1909).

With today's one exception being the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, Campbell remains the prevalent voice for the Stone-Campbell tradition. Stone-Campbell historian Leonard Allen states, "One could say that the memory and legacy of Stone has been almost entirely lost among the Churches of Christ in the twentieth century—even though his name remains known by many and his memory revered by some."⁴

Campbell has overshadowed Stone for many reasons in Stone-Campbell history, but one of the most salient lies in the baptism/ecumenism dialectic. Baptism and unity were defining original principles for both Stone and Campbell. Both taught adult baptism for the remission of sins. Both "urged Christians to throw off divisive creeds and ecclesial structures and return to simple New Testament Christianity, thereby effecting the visible unity of Christ's church."⁵ And yet, when a decision must be made regarding membership to the church, which would prevail? Would the potential member be permitted to join the church in a spirit of ecumenism if they disagreed with the need for adult baptism?

Four of the five emerging sects from the Stone-Campbell Movement require baptism for the remission of sins as a prerequisite to membership and brotherhood.⁶ In other words, a person is only considered a fellow Christian if they have been baptized as an adult for the remission of sins. For these churches, Campbell's voice is loudest. In Campbell's periodical, *The Millennial*

⁴ C. Leonard Allen, "The Stone That the Builders Rejected": Barton W. Stone in the Memory of Churches of Christ," in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant, (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992): 44.

⁵ Douglas A. Foster, Paul Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 755.

⁶ The doctrinal position for the Churches of Christ, the unaffiliated Christian Church/Church of Christ, the International Churches of Christ, and the International Christian Churches requires baptism for the remission of sins as a prerequisite for membership. Only the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ allow membership for those who disagree with this doctrine.

Harbinger, Campbell stated in reply to Stone in 1830, “by what authority, command or precept, does [Stone] commune at the Lord’s table with unbaptized persons? It is not enough to say there is no command against it. Is there no command for it?”⁷ Stone agreed with the biblical teaching of baptism for the remission of sins but was unwilling to make it a matter of fellowship, valuing ecumenism over judgment. He writes in 1831:

We believe, and acknowledge, that baptism is ordained by the King a means for the remission of sins to penitent believers; but we cannot say, that immersion is the *sine qua non*, without maintaining the awful consequence above [being sent to hell for disobedience to the one command of being immersed], and without contradicting our own experience. We therefore teach the doctrine, believe, repent, and be immersed for the remission of sins; and we endeavor to convince our hearers of its truth; but we exercise patience and forbearance toward such pious persons, as cannot be convinced.⁸

When conversion doctrine is elevated to be the determining factor whether someone is considered a Christian brother or sister, the remaining aspects of their contributions can be underappreciated. Even though Stone was himself baptized for the remission of sins and taught it as the proper method of conversion, he was unwilling to draw fellowship lines over it. Campbell did draw lines. For the churches that follow his theological position, Campbell’s legacy as a founder is stronger than Stone’s, thereby landing on one side of the baptism/ecumenism dialectic.

The Restoration Movement continues to hold to the core tenet of its founding days, the idea of “restoring the ancient faith.” The modern difficulty lies in the question of what should be restored and how can success be measured? On the one hand, if restoring the *theology* of the New Testament takes precedent, how should the church handle the fact that educated believers disagree on exactly where doctrinal lines land? If someone disagrees with the church’s

⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Millennial Harbinger,” 1, (1830): 474-475.

⁸ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 5, (1831): 181.

soteriology, are they not considered a fellow believer, a fellow Christian? If, on the other hand, restoring the *spirituality* of the New Testament takes precedent, how can boundaries of fellowship and brotherhood be defined? Certainly, theology and spirituality are not mutually exclusive and must be viewed in a necessary symbiotic relationship. As this paper cannot possibly explore all of the implications of this question, spirituality tends to be anemic or neglected in many corners of the Stone-Campbell tradition.

It is this author's contention that Barton W. Stone's underappreciated legacy in the Stone-Campbell tradition lies not in his theology but rather in his grace-infused spirituality. Restoring an appreciation for Stone's spirituality can help to balance the scales of a theologically-weighted culture. As stated by Richard L. Harrison, "Stone understood Christian unity would never come as a result of the restoration of 'New Testament doctrines,' but of New Testament life as it is seen in the love of Christ."⁹ He further states, "It was the character of one's life, the way one lived as a Christian that was paramount to Stone, not doctrine or structure."¹⁰ For Stone to be properly respected for the legacy that he left requires the use of a proper lens in which to view him. For example, if a human being's value was entirely determined by their I.Q., many artists, athletes, and social workers would be significantly unappreciated. Many of the articles and books written within the Stone-Campbell tradition focus on the theology or even the philosophy of its founders. One notable exception is Stone-Campbell historian Newell Williams. In one article and in his biography of Stone, Williams defined and utilized "spirituality" to draw attention to

⁹ Richard L. Jr. Harrison, "Is Barton Our Cornerstone?," in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant, (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992): 67.

¹⁰ Harrison, "Is Barton Our Cornerstone?": 67.

Stone's life.¹¹ Williams acknowledged the lack of other similar assessments, "there have been few studies that focus on Stone's spirituality, other than his autobiography."¹²

Williams worked to restore vital aspects of Stone's spirituality and drew attention to its implications within the tradition. After briefly addressing William's treatment of Stone, the remainder of this paper will utilize Bernard McGinn's three approaches to the academic discipline of studying spirituality in hopes to build upon Williams work and draw attention to Stone's profound example of a spiritual life lived in radical response to the grace of God that he experienced.

Newell Williams' Contribution to Recovering Stone's Spirituality

In his biography of Barton W. Stone's life, Newell Williams briefly surveys the major texts that preceded his work on Stone.¹³ Williams points out that very little has been written on Stone's spirituality. He then provides his working definition by stating, "I define spirituality as one's fundamental orientation to God."¹⁴ Williams goes on to explain:

The thesis of this biography is that no influence was greater in the development of Stone's theology and religious and social practice than his Presbyterian spirituality. That spirituality worshiped a God of love and grace revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, maintained a chastened view of human nature, and identified the knowledge, enjoyment, and service of God as the purpose of life.

¹¹ See D. Newell Williams, "Historical Reflections on Stone-Campbell Spirituality: The 200th Anniversary of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address," *Call to Unity* 10, (2009). and D. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000).

¹² Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*: 6.

¹³ Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*.

¹⁴ Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*: 4.

Williams argues that Stone's spirituality originated from his training as a Presbyterian minister. Williams' primary argument emerges from the view of God that Stone developed as a young man while studying with Presbyterians and listening to preachers like James McGready. According to Williams, the Baptists and Methodists "put great stock in assurances of having been forgiven and converted" which they received through personal dreams and visions.¹⁵ The Presbyterians "stressed that the only reliable assurance of having been forgiven and converted was the experience or feeling of a new heart or will toward God that made one willing to go to Christ for forgiveness and release from the power of sin."¹⁶ In other words, Williams argues that the Presbyterians provided Stone a higher view of God, which ultimately oriented him in such a way that shaped his spirituality.

Stone did have a high view of God, in particular his view of the love of God. Williams properly places the origins of Stone's view of God in his Presbyterian training, although limiting Stone's spirituality to these roots confines the complete view of the man he became. For example, one significant development in Stone's view of God came in reaction against Presbyterian doctrines, particularly those of conversion, election, and predestination. Stone moved beyond the Calvinistic perspective. This will be explored below.

Williams does point out, "Spirituality, though distinguished from theology and practice, is never separate from theology and practice and never occurs outside of a particular context. One perceives spirituality through the study of theology and practice in their context."¹⁷ As the academic definition of spirituality has continued to strive for definition and categorization, many

¹⁵ Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*: 24.

¹⁶ Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*: 24.

¹⁷ Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*: 4.

scholars have chimed in as to how to frame any particular Christian spirituality. For example, Philip Sheldrake provides five categories or “ways” that spiritualities typically manifest; the ‘way of discipline,’ the ‘contemplative-mystical way,’ the ‘way of practical action,’ the ‘way of beauty,’ and the ‘prophetic way.’¹⁸ While these “ways” are helpful to distinguish the spirituality of the desert fathers from that of Julian of Norwich’s contemplation, different categories are needed to articulate the differences, for example, between one variation of active-practical spirituality from another. Most variations of Christian experience on the nineteenth-century American frontier would fall into Sheldrake’s category, ‘way of practical action.’

Bernard McGinn suggests three broad approaches to the study of spirituality; the theological, the anthropological, and the historical-contextual.¹⁹ In other words, a particular spirituality can be described by; first, exploring the theological components that orient the participant to the Divine, second, by analyzing the existential practices and experiences that define the spirituality, and third, by considering the historical context in which the spirituality is practiced. Each of these approaches illuminates the unique spirituality of Barton W. Stone, a man whose understanding of God’s grace shaped an ecumenical spirituality that was mature beyond his times.

A Theological Approach to Stone’s Spirituality

In describing theology’s influence on spirituality Phillip Sheldrake explains, “Every version of Christian spirituality can be judged in reference to belief in a Trinitarian God who is

¹⁸ Yet to be released. Philip Sheldrake, “The Spiritual Way: Classic Traditions and Contemporary Practice,” (2019).

¹⁹ Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* 1, (1993): 15-16.

engaged with the human condition and to a belief in incarnation and all that this implies.” In other words, how does the important trialectic of nature, sin, and grace in relation to the Divine shape the lived Christian experience? Sheldrake summarizes, “In general, the theology of grace implied in a given spirituality needs to be examined.”²⁰ In many ways, the theology of grace for Stone materialized as the central struggle that defined his spiritual journey and shaped the other aspects of his spirituality.

Stone’s parents raised him Anglican. He aspired to become a barrister. Stone states, “Having determined on my future course, I bade farewell to my mother, brothers, companions and neighbors, and directed my way to a noted Academy in Guilford, North Carolina under the direction of Doc. David Caldwell.”²¹ Stone arrived at the school during a time of great religious fervor influenced by a popular Presbyterian minister named James McGready. Put off by the conversion of many of his fellow students and believing that religion would impede his academic progress, Stone attempted to steer clear of religion and eventually attempted to leave the school to attend Hampden-Sidney in Virginia but was prevented departure due to a storm. Afterwards, Stone resigned to stay at his academy and after being invited by his roommate, succumbed to an invitation to hear McGready preach.

McGready was a “New Light Presbyterian,” those Presbyterians who promoted the ideals from the eighteenth-century Great Awakening.²² He taught that human beings lost their ability to

²⁰ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London: Darton Longman & Todd Ltd, 1998): 91.

²¹ Barton W. Stone and John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone* (Cincinnati: Published for the author by J.A. & U.P. James, 1847): 6-9.

²² Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 17-23.

know and enjoy God as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin, but God had chosen to save a portion of humanity, those he called “the elect.” Newell Williams describes:

McGready argued that a view of the excellence or glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus caused sinners to fall in love with God and thus to grieve over the evil of sin and not merely its penalty. As a result of such love, and the genuine sorrow for sin produced by such love, the sinner was “willing” to “come to Christ” both for pardon from the penalty of sin and for release from the power of sin. This change of the will—a change of heart—was conversion.²³

McGready also taught that God allowed one specific time in a sinner’s life in which they might be saved, a day which the New Light Presbyterians called the “day of grace.” When this time in a person’s life passed, they would no longer have opportunity for salvation. McGready warned that this would be ‘sinning away one’s day of grace.’

Stone returned to his room after the sermon. He self-reflects in his autobiography:

Are you willing to make this sacrifice to religion? No, no, was the answer of my heart. Then the certain alternative is, you must be damned. Are you willing to be damned—to be banished from God—from heaven—from all good—and suffer the pains of eternal fire? No, no, responded my heart—I cannot endure the thought.

According to the convention of the day for the New Light Presbyterians, potential converts anticipated long and painful struggles to prepare themselves to “get religion.” In Stone’s words, “For one year I was tossed on the waves of uncertainty—laboring, praying, and striving to obtain saving faith—sometimes desponding, and almost despairing of ever getting it.”²⁴

It was a different preacher with a different message that eventually reached Stone, William Hodge. One of Stone’s later biographers, Alonzo Willard Fortune explains, “In 1791 he heard William Hodges preach on ‘The Love of God.’ Light broke into his soul. The message was

²³ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 20.

²⁴ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 9.

for him. He was told that God loves all people and is anxious to save all who will come to him. With that assurance, he claimed acceptance with God.”²⁵ Stone described that night in his own words by stating, “I loved him—I adored him—I praised him aloud in the silent night,—in the echoing grove around...I now saw that a poor sinner was as much authorized to believe in Jesus at first, as at last—that *now* was the accepted time, the day of salvation.”²⁶ Stone was moved to conversion by the love and grace of God, not the fear of hell or insecurity of not being one of the elect. His “heart was warmed” by the character of a God who gifted sinners with forgiveness. He also stated, “My mind was absorbed in the doctrine—to me it appeared new.”²⁷ Stone’s conversion and view of a gracious God that loved *all* sinners was the beginning of his theological shift away from Calvinism. Newell Williams explains, “Stone’s major difficulty with New Light Presbyterian theology was reconciling the gospel of God’s love for sinners disclosed in Jesus Christ with the doctrine of election as taught in the Westminster Confession.”²⁸ Fortune comments, “His conversion experience, the conviction that God loves all men, and is anxious to save those who turned to him, made him feel that he should tell others who were groping in the dark, as he had been doing.”²⁹

After his conversion, Stone lived his life in devotion to God’s love. He felt a strong call to preach. Stone pursued ordination with the Orange Presbytery aligning with his Presbyterian

²⁵ Alonzo Willard Fortune, “Barton W. Stone and His Contribution to Christianity,” in *Voices From Cane Ridge*, ed. Rhode Thompson, (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954): 141.

²⁶ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 11.

²⁷ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 11.

²⁸ D. Newell Williams, “Barton W. Stone’s Revivalist Theology,” in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant, (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992): 78.

²⁹ Fortune, “Barton W. Stone and His Contribution to Christianity,”: 141.

formation, even though aspects of the Westminster Confession did not reconcile with his common-sense rationalism. After some itinerant preaching, two congregations in Cane Ridge and Concord, Kentucky requested that he settle down as their preacher. Stone served as a Presbyterian minister on the American frontier beginning at the close of 1796.³⁰

Stone wrestled with his doctrinal convictions during these years. Referring to the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, Stone states, “Clashing, controversial opinions were urged by the different sects with much zeal and bad feeling.”³¹ When he would hear preachers addressing the doctrine of total depravity, calling for sinners to repent, he would think, “my zeal in a moment would be chilled at the contradiction. How can they believe? How can they repent?” He continued, “Wearied with the works and doctrines of men, and distrustful of their influence, I made the Bible my constant companion. I honestly, earnestly, and prayerfully sought for the truth, determined to buy it at the sacrifice of everything else.”

Stone-Campbell scholars tend to ignore the next part of Stone’s autobiography, possibly unsure about how to place Stone’s mystical experience:

On a certain evening, when engaged in secret prayer and reading my Bible, my mind became unusually filled with comfort and peace. I never recollect of having before experienced such an ardent love and tenderness for all mankind, and such a longing desire for their salvation. My mind was chained to this subject, and for some days and nights I was almost continually praying for the ruined world. During this time I expressed my feelings to a pious person, and rashly remarked, so great is my love for sinners, that had I power I would save them all. The person appeared to be horror stricken and remarked, do you love them more than God does? Why then does he not save them? Surely, he has almighty power. I blushed, was confounded and silent, and quickly retired to the silent woods for meditation and prayer.

³⁰ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 25.

³¹ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 30-31.

Stone could not accept that God only loved part of his creation, predetermining to send others to hell. This mystical experience fortified new convictions. Stone's high view of God's love, that Newell Williams correctly attributes to the influence of his New Light Presbyterian training, moved beyond the Calvinist doctrine of election. God's grace, for Stone, was not limited to the elect. God loved the whole world, all of his creation. He proclaimed, "I became convinced that God did love the whole world, that the reason why he did not save all, was because of their unbelief; and that the reason why they believed not, was not because God did not exert his physical, almighty power in them to make them believe, but because they neglected and received not his testimony, given in the Word concerning his Son."³² Stone's theological shift was radical. Rejecting the doctrine of election, Stone claimed God's grace was for all. This theological understanding of grace would awaken Stone to an egalitarian spirituality that manifested racially and religiously over the next forty years of his life and opened his mind to manifestations of the Spirit that were about to reveal themselves in the Great Revival in the West (1797-1805).

Over the next few years, tent meetings, also called 'sacramental meetings' because of their culmination in a celebration of the Lord's Supper, were a popular mode of spiritually reaching men and women on the frontier. Word began spreading about the stirring religious excitement created by the events. Stone recalls attending one such meeting in early Spring 1801,

The scene to me was new, and passing strange. It baffled description. Many, very many fell down, as men slain in battle, and continued for hours together in an apparently breathless and motionless state—sometimes for a few moments reviving, and exhibiting symptoms of life by a deep groan, or piercing shriek, or by a prayer for mercy most fervently uttered. After lying thus for hours, they obtained deliverance. . . . With astonishment did I hear men, women and children declaring the wonderful works of God, and the glorious mysteries of the gospel.³³

³² Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 33.

³³ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 34.

Stone returned to Cane Ridge determined to host a tent meeting that fall.

The Cane Ridge revival took place the first week of August 1801. Stone described its beginning by saying, “The roads were literally crowded with wagons, carriages, horsemen, and footmen, moving to the solemn camp. The sight was affecting. It was judged, by military men on the ground, that there were between twenty and thirty thousand collected.” Preaching took place at various parts of the camp by Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists. Stone explained, “Many things transpired there, which were so much like miracles, that if they were not, they had the same effects as miracles on infidels and unbelievers; for many of them by these were convinced that Jesus was the Christ, and bowed in submission to him.”³⁴

Stone was not only affected by the appearance of the miraculous but also by the radical conversions. Newell Williams points out, “Stone observed that under the influence of preaching at meetings of the revival, many persons were converted—from start to finish—within a matter of hours.”³⁵ Stone’s convictions were again challenged. From his viewpoint, conversion had always been a slow and laborious process. Now, sinners transformed in front of him. It had become increasingly clear to Stone that he had moved to a more graced theological conviction. Howard Short says, “After the big meeting, life in this meetinghouse was never the same. It was obvious to synod officials that what transpired here was not in line with the accepted doctrines of the church. Stone and others were asked to explain their beliefs and they could not do so satisfactorily.”³⁶ Stone and his colleagues found themselves in a difficult position. Williams

³⁴ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 38.

³⁵ Williams, “Barton W. Stone’s Revivalist Theology,”: 80.

³⁶ Howard E. Short, “Romance and Reality of Cane Ridge,” in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant, (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992): 136.

notes, “Stone’s doctrine of faith differed from that of his opponents in the Synod. This difference can be accounted for by the impact of rationalism on Stone and by the insight that he claims to have gained from his observation of the rapid conversions characteristic of the Great Revival.”³⁷ Barton W. Stone would spend the next few years wrestling with how to relate to the Presbyterian synod because he no longer believed the Westminster Confession to be biblical.

A Historical-Contextual Approach to Stone’s Spirituality

Barton W. Stone’s upbringing during the American Revolutionary War profoundly shaped his ideas of freedom, democracy and independence. Historian Nathan O. Hatch describes Stone and his colleagues as a loose network of religious radicals on the frontier, “They demanded, in light of the American and French revolutions, a new dispensation free from the trammels of history, a new kind of church based on democratic principles and a new form of biblical authority calling for common people to interpret the New Testament for themselves.”³⁸ Stone consistently demonstrated spiritual independence. He certainly learned from surrounding teachers and preachers as is evident in his writings, but wrestled with the doctrines and consequences for himself, which led him to departing views.

Sydney E. Ahlstrom says, “When it was over, Cane Ridge was referred to as the greatest outpouring of the Spirit since Pentecost. It marks a watershed in America church history, and the little log meetinghouse around which multitudes thronged and writhed has become a shrine for

³⁷ Williams, “Barton W. Stone’s Revivalist Theology,”: 73.

³⁸ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 68-69.

all who invoke ‘the frontier spirit’ in American Christianity.”³⁹ This frontier spirit had now put Stone and his contemporaries at odds with their synod. After a series of meetings and emotional exchanges, Stone and four other ministers separated from the synod and formed their own Presbytery in September 1803. They called it the Springfield Presbytery.⁴⁰ In January 1804 they published their defense in *The Apology of Springfield Presbytery* rejecting the jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky.⁴¹

Within the Apology, the five men gave three reasons for declaring themselves no longer under the jurisdiction of the Kentucky synod: first, a misrepresentation that the synod projected on one of the five ministers; second, “We claim the privilege of interpreting the Scripture by itself;” and the third being of particular interest here. It reads:

We remain inviolably attached to the doctrines of grace, which, through God, have been mighty in every revival of true religion since the reformation. These doctrines, however, we believe are in a measure darkened by some expressions in the Confession of Faith, which are used as the means of strengthening sinners in their unbelief and subjecting many of the pious to a spirit of bondage. When we attempt to obviate these difficulties, we are charged with departing from our standards—viewed as disturbers of the peace of the church, and threatened to be called to account.⁴²

Stone believed that what they were teaching reflected God’s grace more accurately than the synod’s standard position. In their opinion, Calvin’s doctrine of total depravity and election shackled people to a dysfunctional view of God’s love and grace. Stone and the others broke from the Kentucky Synod in a spirit of freedom: freedom to decide for themselves what the

³⁹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004): 433.

⁴⁰ The five ministers that formed the Springfield Presbytery were Barton W. Stone, Robert Marshall, John Thompson, John Dunlavy, and Richard McNemar.

⁴¹ “The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement”: 696-698.

⁴² Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 170.

scriptures taught, freedom to preach the love of God to all sinners, and freedom from the oversight of a denomination that hindered those liberties.

The publication of *The Apology of the Springfield Presbytery* was received so well that within a few months fifteen other congregations had united with this new organization.⁴³ The new presbytery's leaders became concerned. They were not interested in becoming another denomination. Six months later, in June 1804, the group drafted and signed a document entitled, *The Last Will and Testament*, dissolving the new presbytery. They also rebuffed any name or nomenclature that created division and therefore would go by no other name than "Christians."

Stone-Campbell historians Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes claim, "If any one theme was foundational for the Stone movement it was the ideal of freedom."⁴⁴ This deeply entrenched American ideal permeated the Stone movement for decades. They held that each individual had the right to their own convictions, even if they were different from the group as a whole. This ideal drove the ecumenism that the Stone movement would become known for. Collectively they refused any name beside "Christians" as to avoid creating another sect of Christianity.

One of the most volatile issues prevalent in nineteenth-century America was whether Christians should own slaves. Stone also became an early advocate for the emancipation of slaves in America, a position that put him at odds with some within the Stone-Campbell fellowship. Barton W. Stone minced no words on the matter, "I have long viewed Slavery as the darkest cloud that hangs over America. It will burst in ruinous desolation upon us, unless averted

⁴³ "The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement": 967.

⁴⁴ C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1988): 104.

by a timely repentance.”⁴⁵ Stone’s conviction derived both from scripture and from his American context, “We cannot hold this simple and incontestable truth with impunity, that we drink the cup of freedom to our own condemnation, unless we are willing to confess, and repair our wrongs—unless we are resolve to *act* in obedience to the law of liberty which we have proclaimed, and by which we must be judged.”⁴⁶

Allen and Hughes comment about Stone’s movement, “With so strong a commitment to freedom, they avoided developing ecclesiastical traditions of any kind, even those predicated on primitive Christianity. Even believer’s baptism, acknowledged by practically all Stoneites as apostolic, was simply left to the discretion of the individual.”⁴⁷ Stone’s treatment of the doctrine of baptism for the remission of sins remained one of the longstanding disagreements in his relationship with Campbell, as articulated above in the introduction of this paper. Stone drew all of his authority from scripture and concluded that baptism for remission of sins *was* the apostolic doctrine, but Stone respected the freedom of each individual to decide for themselves. If someone believed differently, Stone respected their convictions, as long as the Bible was their standard and Jesus their Lord.

The Last Will and Testament, dissolving the newly founded Springfield Presbytery, was simple and succinct. Its primary purpose was stated in its beginning, “We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.”⁴⁸ Stone saw sectarianism or

⁴⁵ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 9.4, (1835): 82.

⁴⁶ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger”: 83.

⁴⁷ Allen and Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ*: 104.

⁴⁸ Stone and Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*: 51.

“partyism” as evil. It was the driving reason for the quick dissolution of the presbytery. He explained later in his periodical, *The Christian Messenger*, “And is this demon of partyism, fostered by the professed followers of the Lamb of God? What more foreign from the Spirit of God? Is such a religion a blessing to the world?—a religion that destroys the natural ties of friendship—that produces and stirs up passions—and says stand off I am holier than thou?”⁴⁹ Stone respected the freedom of the individual such that he believed that parties, sects, or denominations bound those liberties. Stone-Campbell historian Paul Blowers comments, “Cane Ridge represented the hope of a generation of Christian leaders (Stone, the Campbells, et al.) who really and truly believed that their churches could transcend (perhaps had already transcended) the fray of theological conflicts that had marked much of church history and generated not a few open wars of religion.”⁵⁰

Stone lived in Kentucky from 1796 until 1834 at which time he relocated to Jacksonville, Illinois. Williams claims that although Stone offered no formal explanation for his move, the longtime readers of his periodical, *The Christian Messenger*, knew it was because of his opposition to slavery. Kentucky was a “slave state” and Illinois a “free state.” Stone found anyone that claimed to be a Christian and owned a slave deplorable. In the October 1835 edition of *The Christian Messenger*, he replied to a letter from Will S. Gooch saying, “talk no more of being washed from your sins by immersion, when we see you living in sin; and many of you living on the gains of oppressing the poor African.”⁵¹ As appears consistent with Barton W.

⁴⁹ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 2.6, (1828): 131.

⁵⁰ Paul Blowers, “Neither Calvinists Nor Arminians, But Simply Christians: The Stone-Campbell Movement as a Theological Resistance Movement,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 35.3, (2000): 145.

⁵¹ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 9.10, (1835): 223.

Stone, doctrine was important, but the spirituality of a person, the way they lived their life as oriented to the Divine, was the true test of their Christian spirit. Stone's perspective being deeply influenced by the newly formed American republic fostered a genuine respect for the individual's right to decide for themselves what they believed the scriptures to teach, even if they doctrinally disagreed.

An Anthropological Approach to Stone's Spirituality

Barton W. Stone's theological convictions regarding the generous love of God and his historical context of freedom and independence birthed a grace-infused spirituality exhibited tangibly in his expressions of faith. Stone's real legacy for the Stone-Campbell Movement was left in his passion to live and call others to a live a Christianity that reflected the grace of God, a faith defined by love of God and love of neighbor. Even Stone's biblical hermeneutic expressed his primary concerns, as addressed by Newell Williams, "Note if you will his principles of interpretation: that scripture interprets scripture and that no interpretation of scripture can be authoritative if it stands in conflict with the Biblical revelation of God's love for all."⁵²

In 1859, James M. Mathes, a long-time friend of Stone's, published a collection of Stone's writings. In a brief introduction he stated:

Elder B.W. Stone was a great and good man, always meek and gentle as a child, yet valiant and mighty for the truth. Owing to the circumstances that surrounded him when he commenced his career of reformation, he was greatly misunderstood, and misrepresented by his former brethren and others, and even down to the present day, these stale slanders of FATHER STONE are circulated and believed by many! Yet in the

⁵² D. Newell Williams, "Historical Reflections on Stone-Campbell Spirituality: The 200th Anniversary of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address": 7.

midst of all his trials, he was calm and unmoved, and pursued the even tenor of his way, always manifesting the true Christian spirit, his enemies themselves being the Judges.⁵³

The plurality of denominationalism resulted in an environment of conflict over doctrine in Stone's time as it does today. Stone prioritized the individual and their discipleship, attempting to steer clear of idiosyncrasies particular to creeds and traditions. He did not avoid doctrine. He addressed theological matters frequently in *The Christian Messenger*. Stone rather elevated the call to love God as the priority. Leonard Allen points out, "Throughout his career Stone issued the call to radical discipleship and separation from the fashions, preferments, and allies of the world."⁵⁴ Stone had deeply wrestled with the doctrines of the Trinity, atonement, soteriology, and others. Sometimes he landed in an orthodox position and other times more heterodox, which is part of the reason Mathes addressed the persecution Stone faced. Regardless of his personal theological views, he believed that Christian charity should be extended, and ecumenism should prevail.

Before the merger in 1832 between Stone's and Campbell's movements, each strove to restore an apostolic doctrine, faith and life. Each attempted to unite Christians, just as Christians, leaving behind the divisive titles and teachings from denominationalism. But Stone would privilege the Christian's lifestyle over the form and function of the New Testament structures. According to Allen and Hughes, "The Stone movement was restorationist, to be sure, but it focused more in its early years on holy and righteous living than on the forms and structures of the primitive church. Restoration for Stone and his colleagues meant first of all restoring the

⁵³ James M. Mathes, *Works of Elder B. W. Stone to Which is Added a Few Discourses and Sermons (Original and Selected)* (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Publishing, 1953): v.

⁵⁴ Allen, "The Stone That the Builders Rejected": Barton W. Stone in the Memory of Churches of Christ," 51.

lifestyle of the first Christian communities.”⁵⁵ Of course, the inevitable question of church fellowship and membership would arise. Who could be considered a member of the church? Who was allowed to commune at the Lord’s Supper? Howard Short shares, “We have to be thankful for Barton Warren Stone and Cane Ridge. They never claimed to be the only Christians. They never excluded anyone from worship; they never ‘fenced’ the communion table.”⁵⁶ For Stone, he possessed, and he taught strong biblical convictions. When someone disagreed, it did not become a matter of fellowship.

This sentiment of grace so permeated Stone’s spirituality that he publicly warned Christians of the dangers of doctrinal fervor overshadowing Christian virtue, “Had we taught the truth in the meekness of wisdom, a hundredfold more would have received it; but by teaching for this doctrine our uncharitable opinions of theirs has driven them off. By zeal not tempered with meekness, knowledge, and charity, the mischief has been done; and if persisted in the mischief will be increased.”⁵⁷ In other words, Stone was concerned that hardline doctrinal teaching regarding baptism for remission of sins was being taught in a way that drove people from God. He believed that a lack of love and patience with those seeking spiritual direction was lacking. He mourned the absence of charity shown. He continued, “Experience is a scriptural test of true religion. ‘Hereby we know that we love God, because we love the brethren, and hereby we know that we love the brethren, because we love God and keep his commandments.’”⁵⁸ Love was Stone’s litmus test not uniform dogma.

⁵⁵ Allen and Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ*: 103.

⁵⁶ Short, “Romance and Reality of Cane Ridge,”: 140.

⁵⁷ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger”: 223.

⁵⁸ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger”: 223.

This passion for unity and desire to treat other followers of Jesus with grace put Stone at odds with many people and defined a contradistinction with Alexander Campbell. Richard L. Harrison states, “Barton Stone lived an acceptance of diversity, he lived a valuing of other viewpoints that clearly moved further than the Campbells, or at least further than Alexander Campbell wanted to go within the church.”⁵⁹ The spirit of ecumenism was profoundly important to Stone. After dissolving the Springfield Presbytery in 1804 with *The Last Will and Testament*, Stone and his colleagues busied themselves in the evangelistic trenches across the western frontier. Twenty-eight years passed before the Stone and Campbell movements would merge. Leonard Allen pointed out, “By 1832 there were as many as 380 Stoneite churches in Tennessee and northern Alabama, most of them established by men who were largely unaware of Campbell’s work.”⁶⁰

The Christian Messenger was an important platform to teach and share ideas, but it also served to answer letters, publicly addressing questions and accusations. Mathes claims the periodical was read across the middle and western states.⁶¹ It apparently made an indelible imprint on the minds of many. Stone not only worked to express acceptance and grace with those who thought differently, he actively worked to build unity through his writings. Stone became known for his motto, “Let the unity of Christians be our polar star.”⁶² He boldly preached against partyism:

⁵⁹ Harrison, “Is Barton Our Cornerstone?,”: 64.

⁶⁰ Allen, ““The Stone That the Builders Rejected”: Barton W. Stone in the Memory of Churches of Christ,”: 45.

⁶¹ Mathes, *Works of Elder B. W. Stone to Which is Added a Few Discourses and Sermons (Original and Selected)*: vi.

⁶² Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 6.9, (1832): 266.

By controversy and contention for these contrary opinions, the witnessing spirit is grieved, and often lost with many. Then a party spirit prevails in their breasts—pride aspires to honor and pre-eminence—everything must submit to their opinion, or be anathematized and rejected. This is the baleful spirit of sectarianism, which has ruined the Christian world. This spirit is as foreign from Christianity, as hell is from heaven. All possessing this spirit are sectarians, by whatever name they be called.⁶³

This persistent and passionate plea permeates the fourteen years of Stone’s periodical writings. He was consistent and determined to hold unity in its rightful place.

It is unfortunate that Campbell’s legacy played a more prominent role in the development in the Stone-Campbell Movement for the first century after its inception. Both men represented important but different aspects of ‘restoring the ancient faith.’ The merger did not take place because the two groups agreed on everything. They came together because of Stone’s desire for unity. According to A.W. Fortune, “[Stone’s] passion for unity made him tolerant of those with whom he did not agree. It made him not only anxious, but willing, to cooperate with all who love God and were trying to do His will.”⁶⁴ That sentiment could even be said of how he treated Campbell. In 1954, William Garrett West published a book based on his Yale doctoral dissertation. He argues that the Stone-Campbell Movement would not exist as it does without Stone’s ecumenical passion:

[Stone] differed sharply from Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), who believed that Christian unity should be established on a particular biblical pattern of entrance requirements into the Church, a set of biblical doctrines and biblical church polity. Campbell, with his viewpoint, probably never would have been able to bring his followers together with those of Stone. It was Stone’s spirit and active practical interest in unity which generated the drive necessary to cement the union of the two groups.⁶⁵

⁶³ Barton W. Stone, “The Christian Messenger,” 6.1, (1832): 20.

⁶⁴ Fortune, “Barton W. Stone and His Contribution to Christianity,”: 147.

⁶⁵ William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Unity* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1954): 110-111.

If West's assessment is fair and accurate, the Stone-Campbell Movement was birthed because of Stone's grace-infused spirituality, even though Campbell would become its figurehead.

Conclusion

Legacy provides important guiding principles, reminders, and recalibration for movements. Having two founders creates potential complications but it also affords the opportunity for more balance and diversity if strengths and characteristics from each can be appreciated. Although not explored in this paper, Alexander Campbell synthesized and solidified the Restoration Movement for years after Barton W. Stone passed. Campbell's legacy shaped the theology and structures in most corners of the movement up until this day.

In 1931, distinguished professor Elmer Ellsworth Snoddy delivered an address to the Texas Christian Church Conversion. In that address he attempted to help restore Stone's influence as a rightful founder of the Stone-Campbell heritage. He argued that Stone's movement rightfully be respected because of its many precedents over Campbell. Stone's ministry began more than a decade before Campbell's.⁶⁶ He was immersed in American experiences and idealism.⁶⁷ He prioritized unity. Stone lived sacrificially on the frontier and labored face to face with men and women in need of salvation. But Snoddy's most significant argument was his final one, "Lastly, this pioneer of the disciples movement discovered the people. Like Jesus, he saw the multitudes and when he saw them he was "moved with compassion for them, because they

⁶⁶ Stone began his ministry in 1796. The Campbells began their ministry in 1809.

⁶⁷ Campbell was born in Ireland and went to university in Scotland.

were distressed and scattered, as sheep not having a shepherd." (American Standard version.) It is strange that the church should lose sight of people. That is what had happened in that day."⁶⁸

Campbell left a critical legacy, but the Stone-Campbell Movement has two forefathers. Barton W. Stone's grace-infused spirituality should rightly be recognized, prioritizing Christian charity and the unity that Jesus prayed about in John 17:20–21 (NIV), "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you."

⁶⁸ E. E. Snoddy, "Barton W. Stone: Ambassador of the Love of God," in *Voices From Cane Ridge*, ed. Rhode Thompson, (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954): 253.

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