

Lecture: Barton Stone: Pathway to the ideal of Religious Freedom
Date: June 25, 2016
Place: Cane Ridge, Kentucky
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With this gathering we honor the 212th year since the signing of the *Last Will and Testament* on June 24, 1804; and the 215th year since the famed Cane Ridge Revival August 6-11, 1801; and the 200th anniversary of the founding of Central Christian Church in Lexington. To commemorate the several occasions, it was suggested that I speak about some key influences upon the thought and ministry of Barton Warren Stone, and the resulting impress of those influences upon the early development of the Christians and Disciples Reformation Movement.

Third in time among the so called “Christian” movements---following James O’Kelly and Elias Smith---but more important and more complex than the earlier two, came the “Christian” movement born of *southern revivalism* and *western Presbyterians*. Barton Warren Stone is honored as one of the four founders of that movement. Being called a founding father is a recent promotion for Stone. A shift in Disciples historiography near the middle of the twentieth century lifted Stone from relative obscurity to status as a founder. Nineteenth century historians characterized Stone as merely a harbinger, a tributary movement to the Campbell mainstream, a “John the Baptist” for the more celebrated ministry of Alexander Campbell. Then in 1932---centennial year of the joining of Christians & Disciples and the time of building the Cane Ridge memorial---came the writings of Charles Ware, Alonzo Fortune and Elmer Snoddy, writings that sought to lift up the role of the South, particularly the state of Kentucky, recognizing the contributions and significance of that region to the Reformation Movement. At the same time writings appeared from others who sought elements in the Disciples past compatible with 20th century theology, especially ecumenism. These writings reinterpreted Stone in the context of unity, elevating Stone and the Christians to a position alongside the Campbells and the Disciples---and eventually leading to co-titling the movement with Stone’s name in front of Campbell---The Stone-Campbell Movement. Historian Tony Dunnivant said this new historical recognition transformed Stone from “precursor to Icon.” Some recent scholars contend the driving force in Stone’s ministry was freedom and liberty, independence from all structures---that it was a higher priority than unity in Stone’s thought. Others argue just as strongly

that unity was the primary thrust of his ministry. Barton Stone's ministry was a significant benchmark on the long journey of both of those ideals [freedom & unity], ideals whose origins were centuries old, ideas that journeyed from the hearts and minds of generations in a former age, ideas that were carried by close knit communities of faith, by ministers of extraordinary talent across continents and oceans, ideas that ultimately found their way into the DNA of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

In these two lectures, I will speak briefly of those two significant ideals, unceasingly nurtured by Barton Stone and eventually intertwined by him, leaving their imprint, weight and affect upon the Stone-Campbell Movement: the ideal of *Religious Freedom* as drawn from the *Scottish Reformed Presbyterian Church*, and the ideal of *Spiritual Unity* as drawn from *New Light Presbyterianism and the Second Great Awakening (1795-1835)*. This first lecture will trace the genealogical pathway of the ideal of religious freedom coursing its way from a point of gestation in the mind & heart of John Knox, into the life of the Scottish Reformed Presbyterian Church, an ideal that would cross the Atlantic, take root in Colonial Pennsylvania, then migrate to North Carolina finding a center of nurture in the famed Caldwell Academy before reaching the mind and heart of Barton Stone.

Slightly more than a year ago the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the 1514 birth of John Knox, seminal 16th century Scottish Reformer, a towering and colorful figure in church history. It has been written that "Martin Luther was the hammer of the Reformation, John Calvin the pen, and John Knox the trumpet." A man of his times, Knox was ministering in a context of change, a Reformation that swept through Europe. He is described as strident, compelling, difficult, complex, determined, brash, original, courageous, able, a man of passion and resolve---traits that produced a mixed legacy. Some claim Knox was one of the great spiritual warriors of the Reformation, "The Thundering Scot" who became leader of the Scottish Religious Reformation, father of a progressive branch of Protestantism known as Presbyterianism, who is called by some the "Greatest Scotsman" and the "pivotal figure in that nation's history." Others see him in a different light, a religious lunatic, a bigot, perpetually angry who preached a joyless version of Protestantism, and one who secular Scotland found it acceptable to put a parking lot over his grave at Saint Giles. He, like his spiritual descendant, Barton Stone, is something of an enigma.

Knox was a fervent international Christian, deeply involved with the community of reformed churches in England, France, Germany, Ireland, and Switzerland as well as Scotland. He often clashed with church authorities. Knox was a preacher of spiritual intensity, viewing the sermon as primary in his reformed order of worship. He was regarded as having a gifted and brilliant mind, a person given to diligent and disciplined study of the Bible and its commentaries. And his preaching has been described as filled with fiery energy---“His words went *in* to men; like those modern missiles which burst within the wounds which they have made, so his words *exploded within the hearts* of those who received them and set them on fire with convictions...”

Knox was the primary author of the *First Book of Discipline* for his newly revolutionized church, in which he recorded his views of what the reformed polity & guidelines should be. Among the basic principles were: Commitment to Freedom, an ethos of Catholicity, simplicity of original Christianity, the Centrality of the Bible, Evangelism and a learned Ministry.

(A few select samples from *First Book of Discipline*)

- Congregational Governance: right to elect its own learned minister
- Democratic Ministry of elected elders and deacons (an elder led polity)
- Two major Sacraments---“Baptism and the holy supper of the Lord”
- God’s word understood through plain reading and interpretation
- A schoolmaster in every parish; Parish based school system; University or College in every notable town; “Bring up children in learning.”
- Centrality of the Bible to the life of faith

“In the books of the New Testament and Old Testament are contained and expressed all things necessary for instruction of the kirk, and to make the man of God perfect.” [First Book of Discipline.]

“The Word of God is the beginning of life spiritual...the lantern to our feet...without its brightness we walk in darkness...It is the foundation of faith...it is the instrument God uses to preserve and keep the very life of the soul.”

[Works of John Knox, Vol. 4, p. 133]

The trinity of religion, education and politics were joined under Presbyterianism, and Scotland quickly became Europe’s first modern literate society---birthing the

Scottish Enlightenment. Scottish Presbyterianism would provide much of the motive and model for the future ministry of Barton Warren Stone.

Within less than 150 years the essence of John Knox's Scottish Presbyterianism had crossed the Channel into Ulster, Northern Ireland, and soon continued across the Atlantic to America. My own ancestors, were among those early migrants who carried Scottish Presbyterianism into Ulster and subsequently into the backcountry of colonial Pennsylvania. John Knox died in 1572. Some 60 years later, King Charles I, monarch of England, Scotland and Ireland, attempted to impose Anglican religious policies upon Scotland. Thousands protested by signing a national covenant establishing Presbyterianism as the National Church of Scotland. Some actually signed it with their own blood. They were known as Covenanters. The Cummins were among the Covenanters---spiritual heirs of John Knox; and they were among the thousands who left Scotland in the mid-1600s sailing to Northern Ireland, settling on land in County Down where my 10th generation great grandfather, Charles Cummins was born in 1694. Fifteen years later, the Thomas Campbell family migrated from Scotland to County Down---the grandfather of his namesake, Disciples founder Thomas Campbell, who subsequently fathered Alexander Campbell. There is no record that the ancestral Campbell and Cummins families ever met or even heard of each other, but, as a happenstance of history, they were in the same county of Northern Ireland at the same time for nearly 20 years, and were likely there due to the similar religious motives.

At age 34 Charles Cummins, his wife Rebecca and their seven children, all devout Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, were part of a massive migration from Ulster Ireland to America in 1728, entering through the port of Philadelphia on the Delaware river. The Cummins, along with other Ulster Presbyterian friends, settled on land later designated as Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, near Middle Spring Creek. As soon as a sufficient number of Ulster pioneers gathered in a new area, they proceeded to organize a Presbyterian church---to perpetuate the reformed doctrine and polity their forbearers had protectively carried from Scotland a century before. They typically built their church buildings about 10 miles apart, near streams and springs. In 1738, the Cummins joined with their neighbors in constructing a building for their little congregation---Middle Spring Presbyterian Church---35 ft. square, built of logs, dirt floor, slab benches, and unheated. The members, stacked their muskets by the door during Sunday worship, for

protection in the event of an attack by a marauding band of Delaware, Seneca or Shawnee.

They selected Thomas Craighead as their first minister! He pastored several years in Ulster, then migrated from Ulster to Pennsylvania, becoming an itinerant, Presbyterian minister helping found several small frontier congregations--- including Middle Spring in 1730. Folk described him as a genial man, a person of humility and industry who gave impassioned sermons and who died during Sunday morning worship in 1739 while preparing to give the benediction. His youngest son, Alexander Craighead, also became a Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania. A New Light Presbyterian, Alexander was a zealous promoter of revivals and a friend of George Whitefield (most famous, influential religious figure of the 18th century, a founder of Methodism, founder of the First Great Awakening, a founder with Franklin of the predecessor college of the Univ. of Pa.) Craighead regularly published pamphlets supporting the First Great awakening, supporting revivals and supporting the American Revolution, causing some to regard him as controversial, cantankerous, and a maverick; a few accused him of sedition and treason. His publisher was Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Synod suspended Alexander Craighead, whereupon he published another pamphlet, "Reason for receding from the Judicatory of the Church,"--- a familiar sound.

He left Pennsylvania, pastoring briefly in Virginia, then continued southward to Mecklenburg County, North Carolina where he ministered until his death in 1766. Alexander fathered six daughters and two sons. In North Carolina, his daughter, Rachel, married a young man who had been the Craighead's neighbor back in Pennsylvania---David Caldwell! Alexander's son, Thomas Craighead, a graduate of Princeton, ultimately accepted a pastorate in Nashville, Tennessee. By conviction and temperament, Thomas disliked revivals, evangelicalism and new light Presbyterianism. The Synod appointed him to a special commission to correct the revivalist disorders in the Cumberland Presbytery of Tennessee; and he ultimately sat in judgment on the so-called "five wild men" of the Cumberland (McGready, McGee, Hodge, Rankin and McAdoo), all associates and friends of David Caldwell and Barton Stone; all five held connections to Cane Ridge, and all were known as "Caldwell's Boys."

Back in Pennsylvania, near the time of the elder Thomas Craighead's death in 1739, members of the Middle Spring Presbyterian Church selected John Blair as their second minister, who would remain 19 years. During that time he mentioned the Charles Cummins family only three times in his Session Book. John Blair along with his brother Samuel received their ministerial education at a little Log College, founded by William Tennant in 1735, and located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Tennant was the evangelical leader of Pennsylvania, a New Light Presbyterian, friend of experiential, spiritual religion and revivals, also a friend of George Whitefield who spoke at the Log College. John Blair had only recently been licensed when he came to Middle Spring, later receiving ordination from the New Light Presbytery of Newcastle in 1742. A learned man, Blair would later be appointed Professor of Divinity and Moral Philosophy at Princeton in 1767, where his brother Samuel was a trustee. John Blair soon became president of Princeton, and was succeeded by John Witherspoon. By 1750 there were 54 Presbyterian ministers in America---29 from Ulster, 3 from Scotland, only 9 native born---a ratio that would soon be reversed.

This interconnected, close-knit fellowship of Presbyterians, both laity & ministers, commenced a southward migration during the mid-1750s,--- prompted by the outbreak of the French & Indian War. Charles Cummins and his family packed their Conestoga wagon, joined with a group of Scotch-Irish from Nottingham Presbyterian church near Lancaster, and traveled 435 miles south through the Shenandoah Valley into North Carolina settling on land that later became Guilford County. The historian, Carl Bridenbaugh, suggested that North Carolina, populated as it was by so many Pennsylvanians, should have been called "Greater Pennsylvania." In Presbyterian custom, soon after their arrival Charles Cummins along with his wife Rebecca and their sons John, Francis and Thomas predictably joined in founding a church---Buffalo Presbyterian Church in 1756 near Greensboro. Like Middle Spring, it was a "New Light" congregation. The names of all three Cummins sons appear in Samuel Rankin 's *History of Buffalo Presbyterian Church*. The founding generation of Presbyterian ministers in North Carolina who served these new immigrants, were nearly all Scotch Irish with roots in Pennsylvania and who had attended New Light Presbyterian academies.

In 1765, the Buffalo congregation selected as their pastor a newly ordained minister, 40 years old, native of Lancaster, Co. Pa., a 1761 graduate of Princeton where he had studied under the widely respected president, Samuel Davies, formerly the acknowledged evangelical leader of Virginia. This new

minister's name was David Caldwell! Five years after beginning his ministry at Buffalo Presbyterian, members of the congregation, including Charles Cummins and his sons, helped Caldwell build a two-story log structure that served as his home and as a school. This was in good keeping with Presbyterian practice as suggested in John Knox's *First Book of Discipline*. Scotch-Irish historian, Wayland Dunaway, noted in his description of Scotch-Irish settlements on the Pennsylvania and North Carolina frontiers:

The schoolhouse and the Kirk were together wherever the Scotch-Irish frontier moved. The extraordinary zeal of this group for education is revealed in its emphasis on a learned ministry, in its founding of schools and colleges, and in its printing of books.

The school was known as Caldwell's Academy, sometimes as Guilford Academy. Twenty years after the little log college was built, a teenage boy, age 17, wandered out of Virginia to enroll at the school---February 1, 1790--one among its annual enrollment of some 50 to 60 students. His name was Barton Warren Stone. Stone recorded in his autobiography, that "With ardor, I commenced with full purpose to acquire an education." By the time Stone enrolled, Charles and Rebecca Cummins had died---she eight years before in 1782, and Charles in 1784, six years before Stone arrived. And it is not likely that their three sons---John, Thomas and Francis---knew or met young Stone, nor even mingled with the Academy students---but two generations of that Cummins family knew David Caldwell; they were among those who called him to the ministry at Buffalo Presbyterian Church, supported him with their offerings, may have known Caldwell during his youth in Pennsylvania, and who helped him build a little log college that would leave a major imprint on the life of young Barton Warren Stone---and through Stone, upon the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Here, in a stronghold of New Light Presbyterianism, hospitable to revivalism, Stone pursued a classical course of studies in Latin, Greek, mathematics, and natural philosophy taught by New Light David Caldwell from a syllabus of lectures prepared by New Light Dr. John Witherspoon, president at Princeton. Stone completed the course of study at the Guilford Academy in 1793, abandoned his intention to study law, deciding instead to become a Presbyterian minister. David Caldwell was the caring and experienced friend and mentor who

guided Stone through his Guilford years and through the angst of a major change of career from law to ministry. It was here that Stone first developed a resistance to creeds, where he was drawn to the freedom to search the scriptures for himself, where he found in practice the congregational right to select its own minister, where he absorbed Knox's ideal of freedom as it related to congregational governance, and as it related to the personal liberty of searching the scriptures for truth, interpreting it without creedal or ecclesial orthodoxy. Religious freedom clearly emerged in Stone's thought as a high priority. "Freedom" became the subject of the opening essay of the first issue of his *Christian Messenger*, in which Stone offered affirmation of what he came to consider an inalienable right of individuals to search for truth in the scriptures.

*If the present generation remain under the influence of
[the principle of ecclesial infallibility], the consequences
must be that the spirit of free inquiry will die---our liberty
lie prostrated at the feet of ecclesiastical demagogues...*

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and in the *Last Will and Testament*, which opens with a statement of dissolution and sinking into union with the Body of Christ, three of the first four of nine reasons for this action are based upon "freedom."

*We will that our power of making laws for the government
Of the church, and executing them by delegated authority,
Forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible...*

*We will that the church of Christ resume her native right of
internal government...*

*We will that each particular church, as a body...choose her
own preacher, and support him by free will offering...*

Stone, like John Knox, cared deeply about religious freedom. Some say it was at the heart of Stone's thought and ministry, that it was a higher priority than unity or restoration, although he espoused them all. Within the association of congregations later formed by Barton Stone, called Christians or Stonites, the commitment to freedom was so strong, it caused them to avoid developing an orthodox theology, a standard liturgy or an ecclesiastical structure.

New Light Presbyterianism infused the ideal of freedom within the thought of Barton Stone. It was a time in the religious history of America when the dynamic of change and reformation swept across a young nation. A part of that change, absorbed by Barton Stone, was rooted in the reforms of John Knox. From *Scottish New Light Presbyterianism* Stone received nurture in “New Light” preparation for ministry, he acquired an understanding of the ideals of both freedom and unity, he internalized an appreciation for a warm, experiential & evangelical religion, he developed his enduring respect for and commitment to education, and it was from New Light Presbyterianism that he received license, ordination, along with his first selection as pastor of the Presbyterian congregation at Cane Ridge. The essence and pathway of his intellectual, spiritual and religious thought can be traced to the mind and heart of John Knox---a line that coursed its way through the personal convictions of covenanters who carried it with them on their migration from Scotland to Ulster, through the Scotch-Irish voyagers who crossed an ocean to an unknown Pennsylvania wilderness where one of their first acts was establishing a church to preserve their convictions. The line of thought continued its journey through great souls like the elder itinerant Thomas Craighead, the learned John Blair, the New Light evangelist William Tennant, Princeton’s New Light presidents—Samuel Davies and John Witherspoon, and through the legendary educator and New Light Presbyterian Minister David Caldwell who prepared ministers and laity alike, to edify Biblical faith. And that line of thought also moved steadily through countless lives within the invisible masses who made up the congregations--the living church—names unknown and unheralded in church history. The pathway of the Scottish Presbyterianism ideal of freedom tracked its way from Edinburgh, Scotland to County Down Ireland, to the Cumberland valley of Pennsylvania, to the sandy pinelands of central North Carolina, into a little log college in Guilford County, and infused itself in the mind and heart of Barton Stone---where a spirit and intellect were shaped and equipped to help found an American religious movement---the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), that continues to proclaim: **autonomous, self-sufficient congregations, democratically governed, with the right of private judgment and liberty of conscience the privilege of all.**

