

Lecture: Barton Stone: Pathway to the ideal of Spiritual Unity
Date: June 25, 2016
Place: Cane Ridge, Kentucky
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The second significant ideal influencing the thought and spirit of Barton Stone was the spiritual heritage of New Light Presbyterianism and its embrace of the Second Great Awakening spanning the years 1795-1835. We have followed the genealogical pathway of religious freedom all the way to Caldwell's Academy in the first lecture. In this lecture, we add a companion ideal, spiritual unity, and follow the pathway of the two ideals continuing from the Academy into the Kentucky and Tennessee frontier, to the famed point of gestation---Cane Ridge, proceeding then to the Springfield Presbytery and finally to the triumphant moment of unity at Hill Street Christian Church in 1832.

The great historian Perry Miller spoke of this awakening as "Romantic Nationalism," and of its religious core as "Romantic Evangelicalism." The second awakening occurred in the socio-cultural context of the Age of Romanticism and is often viewed as an interaction between the 18th century *Age of Reason* and the 19th century *Age of Romanticism*.

Revivals flourished, becoming a staple feature of the second awakening, and were considered uniquely American. Perry Miller wrote that, "the dominant theme in America from 1800 to 1860 was the invincible persistence of the revival." He noted further:

In the west...the Presbyterian church fragmented...Stone led his his followers into a "Christian" body which joined with Thomas and Alexander Campbell...But these denominational conflicts, though they make up the substance of denominational histories, were not of great importance in the area of religious mentality. There, the simple fact of the revival was central. Whether it produced formal unity or produced new churches was of less import than the omnipresence of the revival.

Evangelicalism brought religion to the people in language they could understand, making the gospel seem more accessible and more liberating while generating a more compelling spirituality. It achieved this by relying on intuition and inspiration rather than learning and doctrine---"fervent evangelicalism"

without intellectual discipline. It scorned complex theology on the ground that it was not understandable to the common person. *Evangelism addressed the heart rather than the mind---the emotions rather than the intellect.*

In his boyhood, Stone heard primarily Methodist and Baptist ministers in the backwoods of Pittsylvania county Virginia. Baptists called Methodists “locusts of the Apocalypse” and the Methodists responded in kind. For a time, Stone vacillated between the two but soon quit both and engaged in the “youthful sports of the world.” Then at age 17, he entered Guilford Academy, where he encountered David Caldwell along with a great “religious excitement” among the students. Nearby was James McGready, a former Caldwell Academy student, a bold, uncompromising, high octane Presbyterian evangelist and eventual architect of the Second Great Awakening, who, beginning in 1789, became pastor at Haw River and Stoney Creek in Guilford County. At first Stone tried to ignore the student excitement and “attend to my own business and let everyone pursue his own way.” But his roommate, Ben McReynolds insisted that he hear James McGready preach. Stone agreed, and was smitten by what he heard, writing that his “mind was chained” by McGready. He heard McGready a second time in February of 1791, and finding himself in the throes of confusion, went home for a time, but returned to the academy and soon heard another minister, also a Caldwell Academy graduate, William Hodge in the nearby church at Alamance, who, like McGready, would become a leader of the Second Great Awakening. There can be little doubt that Caldwell, Hodge and McGready made a profound and lasting impression upon Stone, giving certainty and clarity to his thinking at a turning point in his own spiritual journey. Stone then took the first step in his ecclesiastical career---he joined the Presbyterian church, and yielded his life to ministry. It is important to note that Caldwell’s Academy had become the center of development for several leaders of the coming Second Awakening.

From Caldwell’s Academy Barton Stone acquired his New Light Presbyterian spiritual heritage. His spirituality was not Pentecostal or Charismatic. It was Stone’s belief that when a person came to Christ, he or she received the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the “Spirit of Promise.” Spirit meant to Stone “Christ dwelling in us,” enabling persons to believe, honor and glorify God; it transformed persons into new creatures in Christ, enabling them to find happiness through knowing and honoring God. To Stone, spirit was a “power”; but it was not to be confused with “vociferous zeal.” And of vital importance to Stone, spirituality also meant glorifying God through the “love of neighbor.” Spirituality, in Stone’s view, *enabled Christian union!* As his career in ministry unfolded, Stone

The legendary 1801 Cane Ridge “Communion,” more often called “revival,” was a major event in Stone’s life. Occurring in August, The Cane Ridge Communion is characterized by Paul Conkin as a “small landmark in the history of Christianity,” and described by Sydney Ahlstrom as a “landmark in the history of revivalism” and a “watershed in American Church history.” Perry Miller labeled it a “religious revolution,” and Peter Cartwright wrote, “there was hardly ever a greater revival of religion than at Cane Ridge.” Rooted in New Light Presbyterianism, and simultaneously an outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening, the Cane Ridge event echoed the old 17th & 18th century Scottish religious festivals, called “Communion Seasons,” celebrating the Lord’s Supper.

At that time, the principal field for the new wave of religious revivals, or sacramental occasions, encompassed the Appalachian Plateau, centering on the Kentucky-Tennessee border in Logan County, often called the cradle or birthplace of the Great Western Revival. After receiving a threatening letter written in blood and finding his pulpit burned by those who opposed him, James McGready wisely decided to leave North Carolina in 1796 and move to Logan County. McGready, known as one of the “Sons of Thunder,” had participated in several “Sacramental Occasions” during his Pennsylvania years before moving to North Carolina. Now in Logan county, he became pastor of three new congregations: Red River, Muddy River and Gasper River. During the summers of 1798 and 1799 he held small sacramental meetings in each of those congregations---and each experienced an awakening. In June 1800 he held a second sacramental meeting, part ritual, part revival, at Red River attended by 1,000 persons. Among the preachers assisting him were William Hodge and William McGee, both friends of Stone. The next month he held a similar meeting at Gasper River. Eight more meetings were held that summer, the largest at Shiloh Church in Sumner County, Tennessee, where William Hodge had succeeded William McGee as pastor.

Stone---due to his mother’s death---was in Virginia during this time, but he learned of these awakenings upon his return to Kentucky. And in May of 1801, Stone traveled 200 miles to attend a camp meeting at Red River in Logan county, led by McGready. Fifteen-year old Peter Cartwright attended that same revival, experienced conversion, and later became one of the most famous Methodist circuit riders and evangelists in the 19th century---baptizing some 12,000 persons. Stone described the scene he witnessed as “passing strange and baffling description” calling some of it “fanaticism,” but in the context of his New Light Presbyterian spiritual heritage, he found himself convinced of its genuineness, so inexplicable that it must be the work of God.

In June, Stone conducted a sacramental meeting at Concord with an estimated 5000 in attendance. It lasted 5 days with 7 Presbyterian ministers and one Methodist. Later in June, Stone was one of the preachers at sacramental meetings held in Lexington and Indian Creek, with an estimated 10,000 gathering. Near the end of June, Stone began to publicize a sacramental meeting to be conducted at Cane Ridge during the first week of August.

The Cane Ridge Communion or Revival began on August 6 and ended on the 12th. An estimated 125 to 148 wagons were on the grounds, attendance ranging between 12,000 and 20,000, and between 18 and 40 ministers participating, Presbyterian—Methodist—Baptist, with 5 to 7 preaching simultaneously. (All of these attendance figures are pastor's estimates). Among the ministers were Richard McNemar, Robert Marshall and Barton Stone---although Stone, who spoke only twice, was never particularly dynamic in the pulpit. Some thought the extravagant behavior of the people bizarre, even outrageous, while others saw it as the direct action of the Holy Spirit. From Stone's New Light perspective, the behavior did not discredit Cane Ridge:

*That there were many eccentricities and much fanaticism in this excitement, was acknowledged by its warmest advocates; indeed it would have been a wonder if such things had not appeared in the circumstances of that time. Yet the good effects are seen and acknowledged in every neighborhood, **and among the different sects... it promoted unity...***

In Stone's view, religious collaboration was one of the Great Awakening's important contributions. Stone saw how the revival had generated a harmonious association and a reduction of denominational differences among various participants during the frontier meetings. His idea of Christian Unity, associational & spiritual, claim some scholars, had its genesis in the revival experiences---born of evangelistic enthusiasm, sparking an attitude of a unified church. Stone noted:

Wherever this revival is going...there, Christians lose sight of their creeds & confessions...and flock together as members of one body, knit by one spirit.

Some historians claim that as result of the Cane Ridge experience, Christian Unity became a "guiding tenet" of Stone's future ministry. William West supported that claim:

The revival had opened to Stone the doors of a new idea...If men of many denominations can be united in a revival, there is no reason why they should not be united all of the time.

Most authorities, however argue that Stone was a Millennialist who thought Christ's earthly reign of peace and justice was near but that it could not begin until Christianity cleansed itself of "the spirit of party" and "national attachments." Stone advocated "mutual forbearance, less disputation and that all heartily unite with Christian brethren of every name" as a means of preparing for the millennium---**not** ecumenical partnership.

The Appalachian Plateau region that connects portions of Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio, experienced a religious tremor in 1801 when the tectonic plates underlying its ecclesiastical landscape unexpectedly moved. Controversy erupted within three months after the dust settled from the last wagon departing the Cane Ridge campground. Three elders accused Richard McNemar of holding dangerous ideas "hostile to the standards of the Presbyterian Church." The Presbytery took no action. McNemar, however, moved to Ohio in early 1802. Six months later seven Ohio congregations asked that he be reexamined. The local Presbytery ruled the request out of order, so the congregations appealed to the new synod in Lexington, Ky., where "anti-revivalist" Presbyterians strongly disapproved of the disorderly exercises of the participants at Cane Ridge.

In September 1803 that synod charged McNemar with heresy. But as the synod members were in the midst of preparing a resolution to formally indict McNemar, five ministers [Robert Marshall, John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, Barton Stone and John Thompson] suddenly entered the meeting and presented a document signed by all five, protesting the proceedings and announcing their withdrawal from the synod's jurisdiction. McNemar, Dunlavy and Thompson were all former members of Stone's Cane Ridge congregation. The document proclaimed the right to interpret the scriptures without threat of reprimand, and it closed with the statement, "We bid you adieu until, through the providence of God it seems good to your body to adopt a more liberal plan respecting human Creeds and Confessions." **It was the Movement's first declaration of freedom.** The five were abruptly suspended and their pulpits declared vacant.

Immediately following their expulsion, the five dissenters created the Springfield Presbytery, September 12, 1803. They claimed the Bible alone would be their guide, and they denounced the rule of Creeds. The five did two more things. In January of 1804 they issued a 100-page justification for their action,

entitled: *An Abstract of an Apology for Renouncing the jurisdiction of the Synod of Kentucky, Being a Compendious View of the Gospel and a Few Remarks on the confession of Faith*. Part one was written by Robert Marshall; part two by Barton Stone, in which he stated their position on important theological matters: oppositions to all confessions & creeds; Christ died for all; faith is belief of testimony; the gospel is the only rule of faith. The second part also contained one of the fundamental ideas for what would become Stone's "Christian Movement"---**unity**---achieved through rejection of creeds. Stone wrote:

*The Christian church has long been divided into many different Sects. Each has a creed, confession of faith or brief statement of Doctrine...the people have no privilege to examine it by scripture ...If any should do this he is cast out as a heretic...Is it not better to clear away all the rubbish of human opinion and build the church on the Rock of Ages?...Creeds split the church...**Christians would be united if human creeds were laid aside**....*

The second action of the five revivalists dissolved the Springfield Presbytery. When the group convened at Cane Ridge in June 1804 [from which Stone had resigned] Richard McNemar surprised them by arriving with a document he had written proposing dissolution. It was entitled *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. After several days of debate & revision, the group [Marshall, Dunlavy, McNemar, Stone, Thompson and David Purviance—neighbor and elder at Cane Ridge] approved and signed it on June 28. Newell Williams accurately defines it as a "Presbyterian document with a heavy dose of millennial enthusiasm." It is considered a founding document in Disciples history---opening with what is considered a classical unity principle:

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.

Selected excerpts:

- We will that our name of distinction be forgotten.
- We will that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease.
- We will that the Church of Christ resume her native right of internal government.
- We will that each particular church...choose her own preacher.
- We will that the people take the Bible as the only sure guide.

-We will that preachers and people, cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less.

By this action, they were no longer Presbyterians. Four of the signers soon defected, two joining the Shaker Movement and two returning to Presbyterianism. Stone, alone, remained faithful to what was called the Christian Movement. He continued to earn a living by preaching, teaching and farming. On August 8, 1810, five years after issuing the *Last Will & Testament*, and exactly nine years after the Cane Ridge Revival, a conference of 15 congregations convened at Bethel, where they reached agreement loosely uniting them as a group. Until then, aside from occasional informal gatherings of ministers, there had been no organization, no coordination of congregations, no blueprint or prospectus for a movement. From that moment, the loose association of Stone congregations grew rapidly, and by the time Stone first met Alexander Campbell in 1824, "Stoneites" had grown to 300 congregations with some 15,000 members, primarily in Kentucky, Tennessee & Ohio. By 1814 Stone was teaching English, Latin and Greek and serving as principal of Rittenhouse Academy in Georgetown where he had also founded a congregation, and served as its minister.

The attention of Barton Stone was suddenly fastened upon the conflict between the Baptists and Campbell's Reformers, ultimately leading to their separation. He saw in that impending separation, the possibility of unity with the Reformers. In the September 1829 issue of the *Christian Messenger*, Stone inserted a brief three paragraph statement urging union: *If there is a difference between us, we know it not. We have nothing in us to prevent a union; and if they have nothing in them in opposition to it, we are in spirit one.* Stone was clearly the initiator. Between September 1830 and December 1831, he and Campbell exchanged at least seven articles on the subject in the *Messenger* and the *Harbinger*. In 1831, a reluctant Campbell published an encouraging statement in the *Harbinger*:

We have very high respect for Barton Stone and the brethren who are with him. Many of them with whom we are acquainted we love as brethren; and we can, in all good conscience, unite with them, in spirit and form, in public or in private, in all acts of social worship.

The good efforts of his friend and neighbor John T. Johnson, a Disciples minister in Georgetown, also encouraged Stone. The two congregations began worshipping together. Both agreed they should be one. A four-day conference of Christians and Disciples was planned to begin on Christmas Day in 1831, organized by Johnson, "Raccoon" John Smith and Stone. A larger joint meeting followed at Hill Street

Christian Church in Lexington on New Years Day, 1832. Smith, chief spokesman for the Disciples Reformers addressed the gathering:

While there is but one faith, there may be ten thousand opinions; and hence if Christians are ever to be one, they must be one in faith, and not in opinions. Let us, then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites or Stonelites, New lights or Old Lights, or any other kind of lights, but let us all come to the Bible alone, as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need.

To seal the union, Stone and Smith joined in a handshake. There were no agencies, no societies to be merged; no legislative body to approve or disapprove, no negotiated agreement with terms and conditions. John Williams, biographer of “Raccoon” John Smith, recorded simply:

It was an equal and mutual pledge...The brethren of Stone did not join Alexander Campbell as their leader, nor did the brethren of Campbell join Barton Stone as their leader; but each, having already taken Jesus the Christ as their only leader...became one body.

Stone thought more in terms of a “heartfelt religion,” a “**spiritual unity**” born of sentimental attachment, fraternal association, a practical cooperation---rather than institutional unity or modern ecumenism. He did not have an articulated or measured position on the unity of church. He sought freedom from denominational tyranny without doctrinal agreements, without a concrete institutional merger or structure. There was an innocence, a naivete, about what church unity required. On January 19, less than three weeks following the handshake, the unity broke down within the Lexington congregation, requiring a year and a half to heal the breach.

The union---a small, local event, “little more than an expression of hope”—was in fact a turning point in the history of the Reformation Movement. Over time, as congregations joined one by one, approximately 200 Disciples congregations containing between 12,000 and 15,000 members---and an estimated 10,000 Christians ultimately united. Several Stone congregations, however, refused to do so, a disappointment to Stone. But he saw the long pathway to this union as a triumph, writing: “*This Union I view as the noblest act of my life.*” And the famous motto Stone chose for his Christian Messenger read: *Let the unity of Christians be our polar star.* Through the lens of New Light Presbyterianism and the Second Awakening, Stone caught a vision of unity in the abolition of ecclesiastical

structures and institutions; the renunciation of creeds and doctrine; and the cultivation of spirituality. Through those three things, Stone believed the church could achieve freedom, and the achievement of that freedom would lead to unity. **He sought freedom first, envisioning unity as the gift that would follow.**

Three centuries before Stone, on a May Sunday in 1557, John Knox stood below the pulpit in a small Geneva congregation cradling his his newborn son whom he was presenting for baptism. He joined with the congregation as together they repeated the Lord's Prayer. The togetherness of that moment sparked a profound satisfaction in John Knox, expressing one of his deepest sentiments---of being part of one flock, following one Shepherd. In Knox view, through obedience to the Shepard's voice, Christians became members of the people of God united across all ages. From the basin, the pastor took water and laid it on the boy's forehead, baptizing him in the name of the father, the son and the holy Ghost. In that congregation's worship, the superstitious ceremonies---exorcism with salt & spittal, covering the baby's body with ointment and oils, etc.--- all the things that Knox believed had defaced the sacrament, had been banished. Spare and unadorned, all parts of that 1557 ceremony rested upon the words of scripture alone; it was, Jane Dawson writes, in the mind and heart of Knox--- a moment of both **freedom and unity.**

It was a long journey for those two ideals, from that little congregation in Geneva across three centuries to the little congregation at Cane Ridge---from the heart of John Knox to the heart of Barton Stone. Like Knox, Stone was a man of his age, a man of his times, ministering in a context of change---a religious reformation sweeping the new American nation. By the 20th and 21st centuries, in the words of Paul Crow and Tony Dunnavant, "***Barton Warren Stone had become an icon of Christian Unity.***"