

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 87

The Restoration Movement

The Christian Church and the Churches of Christ

The stories of the Churches of Christ and the Christian Church (both “Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Christian Church (Church of Christ) can quite appropriately begin with two personalities: Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell.

BARTON W. STONE

On Christmas Eve, 1772 in Charles County, Maryland, Barton W. Stone was born to a family of good means. His parents baptized Stone as an infant into the Church of England. Early in Stone’s life, his father died and his mother moved the family near the North Carolina border with Virginia. Here, while Stone continued to attend an Anglican church, Stone was exposed to a number of Baptists and Methodists. Stone was able to learn a good deal through his local school, but at age 17, Stone, with an eye toward eventually practicing law, entered into a private academy run by a Presbyterian minister. While under the tutelage of the minister (James McGready), Stone was converted after hearing a sermon of William Hodge. In Stones words,

The truth I had just heard, ‘God is love,’ prevailed. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. ‘Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out.’ I yielded and sunk at his feet a *willing*, subject.¹

Stone gave up the pursuit of law for preaching the gospel. Stone studied hard to pass the Presbyterian examination for ministerial ordination. Although Stone found the issue of the Trinity troubling, he still passed the exam.² Before Stone could complete the work for ordination, several other views began troubling him, especially the issue of God’s will in electing some to salvation and others to damnation. These issues prompted Stone to delay his ordination and instead begin teaching school at a Methodist academy.

¹ Quoted in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004) p. 704.

² The Trinity seemed to violate the “enlightenment thinking (see lesson 79) of Stone. To Stone, logically there was one God or three, but not both one and three! It took Stone some time before he felt comfortable with the Trinity.

After traveling as an itinerant preacher in Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky for a year and a half, Stone was finally ordained to minister to a Presbyterian congregation in Cane Ridge and Concord Kentucky in the spring of 1798.³

Stone heard of “Sacramental Meetings” in Southern Kentucky where revival was breaking out among many people. The Sacramental meetings were typically three-day meetings stretching from Friday to Sunday ending with the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper by those present. Of the many attending these meetings, a good number would bring wagons or other camping gear and actually camp as families for the meetings’ duration. The meetings were unusual in several respects. First, those who were converted in the meetings would often fall down. Stone’s autobiography described it as:

Many, very many fell down, as men slain in battle, and continued for hours together in an apparently breathless 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.⁴

A second unusual aspect of these meetings was in the sudden conversion of those present. At the time, Presbyterian conversion typically involved a substantial time period of contemplation and distress over sin. Stone’s distress and search for God’s forgiveness took several years before the arrival of the assurance and joy of faith. At the camp meetings, however, as people were hearing the gospel preached, they were immediately responding with faith, accompanied by conversion and the joy of forgiveness.

The rapid conversion helped chart an answer to an intellectual problem that had plagued Stone since his early doctrinal studies. Stone was never satisfied with the Presbyterian teaching on God choosing those who would receive his salvation and those who would not. As Stone was taught, God had to send his Spirit to a person to convince the person of the power of sin. This would initiate the period of distress. The person was then chosen and ripe for the time of conversion when the gospel was received and understood by faith. The new revelation Stone perceived from the revivals was that the preaching of the gospel itself was the way God would convict of sin and dispense faith. Therefore, Stone reasoned, anyone who

³ The ordination almost did not occur because of certain questions Stone had over parts of the Westminster Confession (see lesson 65) he was required to ascribe to. These issues were related to the Trinity.

⁴ *Encyclopedia* at 707.

heard the gospel message was equally empowered to receive it; and those that chose not to, had personal responsibility for their condemnation.

Stone decided the camp meetings were a godly movement and took the idea back to his home congregation in Cane Ridge. The Cane Ridge revival meetings that ensued were presided over by a number of Presbyterian and Methodist ministers (and perhaps Baptist as well). Estimates of 10,000 to 20,000 were attending over the weekends and hundreds to thousands were experiencing the “falling” episodes of conversion and conviction.

Stone continued to preach for immediate calls to sinners to believe and be saved as a quick process, as opposed to the typical waiting on God’s movement to prompt people to first distress over sin then at a later time find the release of salvation. Stone and other like-minded Presbyterian ministers were called before the Synod of Kentucky⁵ in September 1803, apparently to suspend them for their renegade teaching. Realizing what was coming; Stone and four other ministers presented a declaration withdrawing from the Synod before the Synod had a chance to suspend them. These five ministers then formed their own Presbyterian Church structure terming it the “Springfield Presbytery.”

This new Presbytery did not last long! Just nine months later, the Springfield Presbytery members wrote, signed and published a Last Will and Testament dissolving the union. The reasons for dissolution centered on a desire to find unity in the Church at large. While the preachers were publicly teaching unity, they felt they were personally causing division. So, they dissolved their presbytery “from a principle of love to Christians of every name, the precious cause of Jesus, and dying sinners who are kept from the Lord by the existence of sects and parties in the church.”⁶

This move was especially imperative because of the preachers’ views about Revelation 20:1-6 and the establishment of God’s millennial kingdom on earth. Stone and the others believed they were soon to see fulfillment of the passage, “And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended.” (Rev. 20:2-3). Stone believed that he and the others could hasten that move of God by getting the church reunited and past its denominational divisions.

⁵ The “Synod” was the ruling body over the Presbyterian ministers in Kentucky. The Synod had the power to ordain and suspend ordination as well as pronouncing what was acceptable teaching by those ministers under its oversight.

⁶ *Encyclopedia* at 709.

Stone and others dissolved their presbytery and stated that henceforth they would simply be called “Christians.” Stone’s review of scripture led him to conclude that there was no authority for presbyteries anyway; hence, the move to abolish the Springfield Presbytery was disposing of something that was a creation of man, not God.

The next several years saw a good deal of dissension among the “Christians” as they tried to understand what they believed and stood for. Once stripped of any creeds and higher accountability it was almost an “every man for himself” approach to belief and teaching. Letters of dispute and books were published back and forth challenging various doctrines of Stone and others. Several of the founding members of the Springfield Presbytery left the Christians and became Shakers. Ultimately, the other two founders left and returned to their original presbytery. Eventually, Stone stood alone of the original five as the leader of the Christian movement.

Three years after the formation of the Christian group, in 1807, Stone and others changed their position on baptism, and were themselves baptized. They began teaching believers baptism, but noted that it was an issue for every brother or sister to make, and not an issue of fellowship.

As Stone continued his ministry in the Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee region, the number of believers who joined his movement and decided to wear “no other name than Christian” grew. But for Stone personally, his ministry was often at odds with difficulties in his personal life. Stone’s wife died, leaving him in charge of four daughters. Stone sent the four daughters to live with church members for a year or so until he remarried his deceased wife’s cousin. They had many more children (eventually Stone had 10!), but financial difficulties made it hard for Stone to preach full time and support his family.

Stone periodically taught school, farmed, and did family work to make ends meet, but he never stopped his preaching. By the 1830’s, the “Christian” church population stretched to Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, and Indiana with over 16,000 members. The conversions were not just member-by-member. Sometimes entire congregations would drop their denominational affiliation in an effort to unite around the simple name.

At this point, we need to interrupt this story and bring ourselves up to date with Alexander Campbell!

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

Our story of Alexander must begin with his father, Thomas. Thomas Campbell was born in 1763 in Ireland and lived almost 91 years! His own heritage was a Roman Catholic father who converted to the Church of England. Thomas was always a devout and religious man. While still young, Thomas left the Anglican Church and worshipped with the Presbyterians. He was well educated and always believed in the importance of knowledge and learning.

Thomas married in 1787 and he and Jane had Alexander just 15 months later, the first of seven children. Thomas supported his family by teaching school. He also preached for several local congregations of Seceder Presbyterians. Although Thomas ministered in Seceder congregations, his goal and desire was to see the various fractures of the church re-unite. Thomas worked to end violence in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants and also to see the various protestant groups rejoin each other in fellowship. His efforts did not meet with success and so Thomas was at a crossroads.

Thomas already had his large family, and had been supporting them by running a school. Thomas had his son Alexander as his first assistant at the school. Alexander was 16, but had been heavily influenced by his father. On education, Alexander had modeled his father's priorities and read extensively; especially the works of John Locke (see Lesson 79). Alexander had also studied Latin, Greek, French, and, of course scripture. Blessed with a remarkable memory, Alexander committed large portions of scripture to memory (as well as hymns and classic selections from world literature). Alexander was a natural to assist his father at the school.

Alexander not only had his father's love of learning, but also his father's devotion. From his earliest age, Alexander had believed in the facts and doctrines concerning Christ, his death and his resurrection. But Alexander had not "felt" the salvation that his faith taught him. As Alexander grew, he struggled greatly with a guilty conscience. Finally, however, Alexander reached a point where "after many struggles, I was able to put my trust in the Saviour, and to feel my reliance on him as the only Saviour of sinners."⁷ Alexander would later recognize this as the time where peace came to him in his salvation.

As a maturing believer, Alexander shared his father's concerns about the fragmentation among the protestant groups over doctrinal and fellowship issues. Alexander worked hand in hand with his father to bring unity to warring factions. Neither found much success in Ireland.

⁷*Encyclopedia* at 117.

In 1807, Thomas was having difficult health issues. His doctor suggested a long sea voyage and so Thomas left the school in young Alexander's hands and sailed to America. The plan was for Thomas to see if the new world was a suitable place for the Campbells and, if it was, to send for them. For 15 months, Thomas worked in the new world before finally getting his family to come over as well.

During the transatlantic voyage, a storm sent the ship aground, much to the consternation of then 20-year-old Alexander. It was during this voyage that Alexander decided to follow in his father's footsteps and dedicate his life to ministering for the gospel. While waiting for a year until another voyage attempt was possible, Alexander took advantage of the time to study at Glasgow University.

In 1809, over two years after Thomas had left, the family finally joined up with him in Philadelphia. Thomas had undergone some significant changes in his thinking since leaving his family behind. Thomas had allowed non-Seceder's to take communion, and the friction that created within the American Seceder church was great. So great, in fact, that Thomas resigned his ministry as a Seceder. Thomas was hesitant to tell his son how much his thinking had changed.

Alexander, meanwhile, had undergone extensive changes in his thinking as well. Alexander loved and respected his father deeply and was equally hesitant to tell of his changes. While in school at Glasgow, Alexander had made a decision to leave the Seceder church seeking instead something more biblical. The issues that troubled Alexander included closed communion, the presence of human creeds, and the lack of congregational autonomy and whether faith was based on testimony or the old Presbyterian concept of divine gifting.

So father and son came back together, both awkward over the changes they experienced. Only when both finally opened up did they realize that thought separated by several years and half the globe, through God's providence, they had both grown and changed their views in basically the same ways! Thomas had started a church out of a Christian society he had previously begun. This church became home to all the Campbells. During his first two years in America, Alexander continued his studies while working in the ministry with his father.

Alexander happened to meet a wonderful young lady, Margaret, who was merely 18 while on an errand for his father. They fell in love and married shortly afterwards. When Alexander turned 23, he and Margaret had their first child. Both having been raised Presbyterians; they had to decide whether to have their child baptized as an infant. In searching the scriptures, Alexander decided that

there was no basis for infant baptism. Instead of baptizing his child, Alexander decided that he should have himself baptized.

Alexander went to his father and told him of his decision. Thomas told Alexander to do as he saw fit, but when the time came for Alexander's baptism, Thomas and Jane (Alexander's mother) showed up with extra clothes to be baptized themselves as well.

With that bold move, Alexander and his family left the Presbyterian Church once and for all and moved into the Baptist Church. Alexander Campbell preached in the Baptist Church for a number of years, but one sermon marked the beginning of the end of his Baptist affiliation. In 1816 Alexander preached at an annual meeting of a Baptist Association from Romans 8:3 ("For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh" KJV).

Alexander preached that the Old Testament and the New Testament were different covenants and systems and that only the New Testament was binding on the church. This was upsetting to a number of the Baptists and Campbell was ostracized somewhat.

Alexander followed in his father's footsteps in many ways, including opening a school in his home as a way to both minister and make ends meet. While teaching, Alexander also began participating in public debates. The Baptists and the Presbyterians had ongoing debates at the time, although the general consensus was that the better-educated Presbyterians seemed to get the best of the Baptists in these verbal battles. Into this arena, however, no one was the educational or intellectual match for Alexander. He not only had the education, but coming from a Presbyterian background, he also was intimately familiar with the arguments that he had personally discarded.

The biggest debate issue seemed to be infant baptism. Alexander took the position that baptism was purposed to give the believer the assurance of salvation. Campbell believed that salvation came through faith at the moment of belief, but it was the act of baptism that "formally" or by appearance washed away sins. Almost two decades later, Alexander would clarify that baptism was "pardon-certifying" while faith alone was "pardon-procuring."

From ages 35 to 41, Campbell produced and edited the *Christian Baptist*, a monthly journal dedicated to "espouse the cause of no religious sect, excepting that ancient sect called 'CHRISTIANS FIRST AT ANTIOCH.' Its sole object

shall be the eviction of truth, and the exposure of error in doctrine and practice.”⁸ Alexander started this paper in 1823. The following year he met Barton W. Stone.

STONE AND CAMPBELL

Stone and Campbell became fast and dear friends. Both had a deep urging to follow the Bible simply and both saw the Bible as a means for uniting the church. Although both faced a number of preachers who stood against them, they worked toward finding a way to invite all to gather around the Bibles as a common means of fellowship. Even the name for their religious groups and congregations they thought should be found in scripture.

Stone and Campbell worked together, but their religious followings did not merge efforts for some time. Campbell was struggling with his Baptist connections while Stone was working through his “Christian” churches. Stone would have occasion to have Campbell come preach for him, but the real uniting of the two movements happened in 1832.

In seeking a name for their churches, Stone wanted the name to be simply “Christians” or “Church of Christ,” using Acts 11:26 as his text. (“And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.”) Alexander thought the title Christian was almost too presumptuous for no one truly seemed to deserve the title that meant “Christ like”. Alexander, therefore, preferred the title “disciples of Christ” thinking it more modest. Ultimately, all three titles and names were used by the various congregations with little to no distinction for many decades to come.

What happened next? Come back next week to find out!

⁸ *The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 1, p. IV (reprint by Gospel Advocate Co. 1955).

POINTS FOR HOME

There is a lot of history in this lesson, but what are the salient points we need to take home? Might we suggest something a bit different from what might be expected?

1. Think about Barton W. Stone and his movement. The movement had division and difficulty from the very beginning. Stone's theology was not always truly and fully orthodox on core matters like the Trinity. These were issues he struggled with and changed his views on a bit as time went by, yet his churches grew and grew and grew. Why? Certainly some was the appeal of a primitive Christianity. The idea of returning to the Bible to generate unity certainly has appeal. After all, Jesus prayed, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn 17:20-21). But there was something beyond merely appealing to unity that drew people in to Stone's churches. Stone was a good man. John Rogers wrote on Stone after spending decades around Stone and his family. With immeasurable opportunities to see Stone at his worst, Rogers wrote that he had "never heard him speak a harsh or unkind word to any member of his family; nor does he remember to have seen him angry."⁹

Rogers quoted an opponent of Stone as saying, "B. W. Stone has done more harm by his good conduct than by all his preaching and writing: because ... he has lived so much like a Christian, that the people take him to be one.

Why is this so? Because people see sermons more readily than they hear them! This is why Peter encouraged the church writing, "Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation" (I Pet. 2:12).

So, our first point for home is simple: Live as Christ would, knowing both the world and the church are watching!

2. Alexander Campbell loved his father, but more than that, he sought to be like him. With unusual closeness, he not only followed carefully in his father's footsteps, but he honored his father as he did so. Alexander's father Thomas lived nearly to age 91 and in his last years he was blind and

⁹ *Encyclopedia* at 704.

unable to care for himself. Alexander cared for his father. To Alexander, his father was the best teacher and most holy man he ever knew. In later years, Alexander would watch his now blind father when Thomas thought he was alone. Thomas would be quietly whispering scripture or singing hymns, living, as Alexander saw it, continually in God's presence.

We suggest that this closeness comes from at least two things: first, an investment of time and energy into the relationship by the father; and second, a respect for holiness seen at home, not merely taught with words. Surely, this is some of what Paul meant when he wrote to the Ephesian church, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Similarly, this is the love of which John writes, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth" (1 John 1:18).

3. As we move into next week, we will see the highs and lows of the restoration movement as it sought to bring unity around scripture and yet produced its fair share of schisms as people debated over the precise implications of scripture. We will see why it was so important to Jesus to pray for unity and the blessings of unity ("How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore" (Psalm 133). Yet, the unity is hard to come by! As Paul encouraged the church at Ephesus, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—"(Eph. 4:2-4). It does take effort!