

Troubled Waters

Though the followers of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell united in 1832, significant differences between the two leaders were never resolved and continued to crop up over the years. For example, Campbell was a wealthy farmer and landowner, while Stone often lived near the edge of poverty. Campbell had studied at the University of Glasgow, while Stone trained at a “log college” on the frontier and on-the-job apprenticeships. Letters between the two reveal they disagreed on the proper name for the movement (Christians vs. Disciples), the work of the Holy Spirit, the importance of baptism, the frequency of the Lord's Supper, church government, the meaning of atonement, the doctrine of the trinity, and other matters.

For Barton Stone, the bottom line of religious reform depended on lives characterized by the Spirit of Christ. He looked to the Bible as a model for holy living and believed the fruits of the Spirit were the ultimate outcome and real test of the Christian life. No doctrinal statement could do justice to the Holy Spirit. Freedom from denominational creeds and doctrines was so important to Stone and his followers that for many years they refused to develop any fixed church structure or tradition. Doctrinal uniformity could not produce Christian unity, Stone believed, but rather faith in Jesus and the spiritual oneness created by the Holy Spirit.

Campbell, on the other hand, approached the Bible technically, attempting to systematically reduce its narrative to the “facts.” Uniformity and orthodoxy, he believed, would ultimately bring about Christian unity. For him, the Holy Spirit worked only through the Bible, a notion widely held until more recently by the Churches of Christ. Campbell is also responsible for the common belief that the gifts of the Holy Spirit had ceased with the apostles. “As the Spirit of God has spoken all its arguments in Scripture,” he wrote, “all the power of the Holy Spirit which can operate on the human mind is spent.” Stone never bought this for a second.

Stone and Campbell saw the world and human society very differently. For example, Stone viewed human society, in general, as being in rebellion against God. He urged believers to live lives apart from the world and its values, as if the final rule of the kingdom of God were present in the here and now. He cared less about the “ancient order of things” and more about living ethical and holy lives in the kingdom of God. He believed that a Christian’s allegiance belonged to God alone, not to any human institution or government -- not even the American Republic. He called his followers to a life of pacifism and encouraged them not to vote or participate in politics or any human government. David Lipscomb and other later leaders would carry on this tradition in Churches of Christ well into the twentieth century.

Campbell, on the other hand, was highly optimistic about science, technology and human progress. He believed that America was the place prepared by God for the restoration of the church. Where Stone saw a world stalemated by human pride and willfulness, Campbell saw a progressing world in which science, joined with the restoration of the “ancient order,” would soon usher in a golden age. Whereas Campbell's reform was primarily rational and intellectual, focusing on the forms and structures of primitive Christianity, Stone's reform was primarily ethical and spiritual, focusing on inner holiness and the visible transformation produced in the lives of believers by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately the Stone-Campbell Movement would find itself moving down divergent paths that even their common goals would be unable to bridge.