

CIRCLE OF FIRE: BARTON W. STONE AND A SPIRITUAL MODEL OF UNITY

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The end of the twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest in Barton W. Stone among all three branches of our movement, as evidenced by the increased acceptance of the term “Stone-Campbell Movement” to describe us,¹ the popularity of a video presentation on the life of Stone,² and the biography by Newell Williams, entitled *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography*.³

What seems to fascinate us most about Stone is his deep spirituality. Like the Campbells, Walter Scott, and other early leaders of the movement, Stone was a child of the Enlightenment and certainly modern in his thinking. However, he combined this modern outlook with a firm belief in the current experience of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. In contrast to some who would place the work of the Holy Spirit solely in the biblical past, Stone writes:

The denial of the direct operation of the spirit [sic] ⁴cuts the very nerves of prayer. We have known some, who were once warmly engaged in the duty of prayer, lose the very spirit and practice of it, by speculating and philosophizing on this subject. We can conceive of no doctrine more dangerous to the souls of men, than that, which tends to destroy the spirit of prayer. Such a doctrine stands opposed to the spirit and practice of Jesus, our pattern, to the doctrines and example of the apostles and primitive saints, and to the experience of every living Christian.⁵

Many also find Stone’s emphasis on Christian unity attractive. Indeed, these two guiding principles of Stone—the experience of the Spirit and the call to Christian union—make him an appealing model for Christians in a postmodern culture that appreciates experience, tolerance, and community.

Stone’s Models of Union

How are these two principles, spirituality and unity, related in Stone? In a seminal article, he describes four kinds of union--book union, head union, water union, and fire union.⁶ These kinds also describe some of the models of unity that have characterized Christianity since Stone’s time.

Of “book union,” Stone says, “For these books [creeds and confessions] have, from their very introduction, been the unhappy cause of disunion—and as light and liberty progress will be banished from the Christian community.”⁷ In other words, creeds as tests of fellowship tend to divide rather than unite. In spite of the support of some of us for “book union,” we ultimately rejected this model of unity. Indeed, we all seem proud of our anti-credalism.

¹ This trend began with the publication by Leroy Garrett of *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin: College Press, 1981), although Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker used the term earlier in their *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 1975).

² Bill Humble, *Like Fire in Dry Stubble* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1992)

³ St Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.

⁴ One could argue that the lower case “spirit” indicates Stone’s low view of the person of the Holy Spirit. However, I think Stone is simply inconsistent in his capitalization and does intend the Holy Spirit in this quotation.

⁵ Barton W. Stone, “On Prayer,” *Christian Messenger* 1(August 25, 1827), 236-

⁶ Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospect,” *Christian Messenger* 7(October 1833), 314-316.

⁷ *Ibid*, 315.

Many still practice “head union” based on a common understanding of the Bible. In Stone’s words, “Each one believed his opinion of certain texts to be the very spirit and meaning of the texts—and that this opinion was absolutely necessary to salvation.”⁸ With some this attitude led to the worst of sectarianism—we alone were the whole church and others could be unified with us if they accepted “the truth” (that is, our opinions on certain texts).

It is clear that “head union,” that is, hermeneutical agreement on the Bible, will not produce true union but rather division and sectarianism. This does not mean that Stone, nor his theological heirs, place little emphasis on the authority of Scripture. Indeed, Stone’s comments on the all-sufficiency of Scripture are as strong as anyone in our heritage. However, he properly understood the Bible to point beyond itself to oneness in Christ, the unity of the Spirit. This spiritual reading of Scripture is quite different from hermeneutical agreement on issues. As Stone writes:

But by the reception of the Spirit, the Scriptures are experimentally known in their power and glory, and the person renewed in knowledge after the image of him who created him. They are no longer lead by the flesh but by the Spirit—they follow not after the flesh, but after the Spirit—they are justified and saved from sin, are new creatures, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works.⁹

“Water union” seems too weak to unite Christians. Stone says, “Water union was defined to be a union founded on immersion into water. But fact proves that this union is easily dissolved, and that immersion will not keep those who are immersed, united.”¹⁰ We cannot deny that there are many devout Christians who are unimmersed.

This review of Stone’s first three models of unity should remind us of the inadequate models we have followed in the past. Let us not dwell on past failures. Instead, we should embrace his final model or type, “fire union” or “the unity of the Spirit.” In Stone’s words,

How vain are all human attempts to unite a bundle of twigs together, so as to make them grow together and bear fruit! They must first be united with the living stock, and receive its sap and spirit, before they can ever be united with each other. So, must we be first united with Christ, and receive his spirit [sic], before we can ever be in spirit united with one another. The members of the body cannot live unless by union with the head—nor can the members of the church be united, unless first united with Christ, the living head. His spirit is the bond of union. Men have devised many plans to unite Christians—all are vain. There is but one effectual plan, which is, that all be united with Christ and walk in him.¹¹

A Postdenominational Model of Spiritual Union

In a paper written eighteen years ago for the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, Robert Welsh (then President and Ecumenical Officer of the Council on Christian Unity) says that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has shifted from “an emphasis upon structural and institutional unity to one that finds its focus in relationships and mission centered in Jesus Christ.”¹² This is a

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Barton W. Stone, “The Fourth Interview Between an Old and a Young Preacher,” *Christian Messenger* 14 (May 1844), 9

¹⁰ Barton W. Stone, “The Retrospect,” *Christian Messenger* 7(October 1833), 315.

¹¹ Ibid., 316

¹² Robert K. Welsh, “Models of Unity: A Changing Landscape,” unpublished paper, April 25, 2004.

healthy shift, also taking place in Churches of Christ, and in Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. Many in Churches of Christ would agree with the understandings of Christian unity outlined by Welsh. From my perspective as a teacher of undergraduates and graduate students at Lipscomb University, it is Welsh's fifth understanding, "Unity is more relational than institutional" that is particularly important to the younger generation.

We live in a time when God's people seem much more open to a relational and spiritual model of Christian unity. We can label that time as postmodern, postChristian, or as postdenominational. My own experience teaching in a university where many of the students were from a cappella Churches of Christ confirms this cultural shift away from the importance of denominational labels to a deep concern for relational and spiritual union. It is not unusual in a typical week for our students to attend a Monday night instrumental praise worship at a local Church of Christ, a Tuesday night ecumenical teaching session at First Baptist downtown, Wednesday night church at a fairly traditional Church of Christ, and Thursday night Taize worship at a Presbyterian church—all before going home on the weekend to their parent's Church of Christ where many think we are the only Christians!

A typical week could also find the same group of students protesting against the death penalty at the local prison.

Or to give another example. A colleague of mine taught a required ministry-major undergraduate course on "The Church." At the beginning of the course, he divided the students into groups of five, each constituting a "church." They then had to answer certain questions as a group: "What does our church believe?" "How do we worship?" "How are we organized?" "Are we part of a larger group or denomination?" For the last few years, in every case the students said their "church" was not connected to any larger group. Without any prompting from the instructors, they all chose to be postdenominational.

Are my students merely confused? Are they searching for the "right" church? No. Instead, they are pursuing the Spirit of Christ wherever they may find him. Generally, I find their descriptions of their spiritual, relational ecumenicity extremely healthy.

The question is "What about those of us from an older generation?" Are we willing to let go of some of our denominational distinctives to embrace other Christians? Are we actually willing, like our spiritual ancestors (including Barton W. Stone), to let our denomination "sink into the body of Christ at large"? Or are we so much denominational loyalists or perhaps so loyal to past models of ecumenicity that we will not be open to the "fire union" promised by the Spirit?

In other words, are we willing to embrace in prayer, worship, and service all those who exhibit the fruit of the Spirit? Are we willing to see the Spirit at work in an ordained woman and in one who opposes the ordination of women? In those for and those opposed to abortion? In those who believe the Bible is inerrant and those who do not? In all these "issues" of "book union" and "head union" it is clear to me which side God is on. However, God through his Spirit can work even through those who are wrong. I hope so, for I believe he works in me even when wrong

This is in no way an abandonment of our convictions but a clear expression of our deepest conviction on spiritual “fire” union. Unity is our reason for existence.

Are we willing to let our denominations die? For those in “undenominational fellowships,” the answer seems obvious. Yet when we talk about unity beyond the boundaries of those with our “name” and our distinctives, we begin to worry about losing our identity. In the words of Barton Stone’s generation (expressed in *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*), “we will that our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined and prepare for death before it is too late.” Must our distinctives and identity die in order for the Spirit to bring unity?

The Future of the “Fire Union” Model

So, what does it look like to work toward Christian union based on this model? It will not look like the ecumenicity of the past. Dialogues, papers, conferences, and councils may help with “book union” or “head union” but will have less value with “fire union.” Instead, this model of union begins and ends with prayer, worship, and service together. It will not be structural union, although structures will be found that promote such union and discarded when they no longer promote it. It will not be “doctrinal” or “Bible-based” union, not in the narrow sense of total agreement on Scripture and doctrine.

I submit that this is in no way an abandonment of our emphasis on the Bible or a straying from our commitments. Instead, this is the only way to be faithful to Scripture. In the words of Stone:

We have been too long engaged with defending *ourselves*, rather than the truth as it is in Jesus. Let us trust our little selves with the Lord; and rest not, till by faith in the promised Spirit and by incessant prayer we receive and be filled with it, like they were of old in the ancient order of things.¹³

Thus, union will be produced by the work of God among us and inside us through his Holy Spirit. As such, it is hard to predict, promote, or control that work of the Spirit. The question we face then is not “How can we work toward unity?” but rather “How will we be faithful to the call to maintain the unity of the Spirit?”

¹³ Barton W. Stone, “A Hearty Tribute to Merit,” *Christian Messenger* 8 (January 1844), 271