

Barton W. Stone

Barton W Stone would become another principal leader of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Stone was already deeply involved in his own reform movement in western Kentucky several years before the Campbells arrived in America. Born in Port Tobacco, Maryland in 1772, Stone grew up on the Virginia frontier, where he experienced the religious revivalism that broke out periodically on the American frontier. Ordained as a Presbyterian minister at the age of 26, he was assigned to a church at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, where he organized and participated in the largest and most famous camp meeting revival of what American historians call the Second Great Awakening.

As Scotch-Irish Presbyterians immigrated to America, they brought with them the practice of the communion festival. These communion festivals became the highlight of the church year, with people coming from miles around to attend. A wave of such revivals swept through southern Kentucky in the early 1800s, culminating with a camp meeting near the small community of Cane Ridge on August 7, 1801. An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people of all faiths converged on the area, where fiery sermons were preached day and night, often simultaneously, at different stations throughout the neighboring woods. The revival continued for almost a week with nearly a 1000 conversions. Stone, who had participated in the preaching, became convinced that it was the direct work of the Holy Spirit that moved men and women to put aside denominational divisions and join in Christian unity. Unity would emerge, he believed, only as the Holy Spirit worked in human hearts, transforming people into God's new creation.

In the years following Cane Ridge, tensions over revivalism escalated as conservative members of Stone's sect deemed the revivals disorderly and excessive. In late 1803, Stone and five other pro-revival ministers broke away to form their own association, the Springfield Presbytery. Nine months later, however, they disbanded, publishing a declaration of their intention to put aside all denominationalism in order to merge into the universal body of Christ. The declaration, entitled *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, reads in part, "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." In that spirit, they formally renounced all names but "Christian" and all creeds but the Bible.

Three central themes marked Stone's vision of non-denominational Christianity. First was the **restoration** of simple New Testament Christianity. Second was the **unity** of all believers based on a return to the Bible and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. Third was the **freedom** of individuals to understand Scripture for themselves, free of all coercive human creeds and traditions. Stone suffered a great deal of persecution from his Presbyterian friends because of his innovative ideals, but under his leadership, the new "Christian" movement grew substantially throughout Kentucky. By 1823 it numbered over 15,000 members.

At that time, Stone's "Christians" knew little or nothing of Alexander Campbell's "Disciples." Later that year, however, Campbell's movement entered Kentucky, where he preached at one of Stone's churches. Soon after, in 1824, the two men met for the first time. Although they would have lasting doctrinal differences, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell held each other in high esteem. Both sought a pure faith grounded in the Bible alone; both abhorred division among Christians. On January 1, 1832, the two groups came together in Lexington, Kentucky, where they issued a declaration of unity and thus began the Stone-Campbell Movement.