

STONE'S HINGE: THE RETURN TO PRIMAL RESTORATIONIST IMPULSES IN POST-RESTORATIONIST CHURCH PLANTS

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Whether in the diverse Northeast metropolis of New York City, NY, the Deep South seat of Birmingham AL, or the edgy Southwest city of Austin, TX, the Restoration Movement is undeniably birthing new expressions of church in the USA. Recent church plants that are moving beyond the “Churches of Christ” label—both in name and in practice—may actually be faithfully returning to Restorationist roots rather than defiantly departing from them.¹ Such church plants, referred to here as being “Post-Restorationist,” are showing marks of primal Restorationist impulses, especially as witnessed in the life of Restoration Movement leader Barton Warren Stone. It is the intention of this work to explore common impulses between Stone as a church planter and a sample of 21st Century Post-Restorationist church plants, and to put forward some modest conclusions based on the parallels that are discovered herein.

Such a task as connecting the two very different worlds of Stone’s context and present contexts is inherently problematic. Needless to say, the democratized, revivalist, and populist zeitgeist in which Stone lived and moved is far removed from today’s post-Christian, postmodern, and increasingly globalized society in which Post-Restorationist church planters find themselves.² Any substantial connectedness whatsoever between Stone and church planters today should be at

¹ Within this work, “Restoration Movement” and “Stone Campbell Movement” are phrases used interchangeably, while particular interest is given to church plants coming from Churches of Christ, or churches planted by leaders with a substantial connectedness to the Churches of Christ tradition.

² See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1989). Though he paints with broad brushstrokes, Hatch paints a clear picture of the zeitgeist in which Stone lived and worked, speaking directly of Stone’s populist preaching, his rejection of Calvinism, his religious press writings, his restoration of primitive Christianity, and his millennial outlook—all of which Hatch ties back the fervor of the age of democracy.

least surprising, keeping in mind the radical changes that have taken place in our world over the past century and a half.

On a sidebar, Stone as an apostolic church planter has received very little if any scholarly attention at all.³ Judging by the content of *The Christian Messenger*⁴, Stone spent much of his time doing the tedious and grueling work of doctrinal debate and dialogue—in his day a necessary endeavor toward the pursuit of unity. Here we depart from Stone’s in-depth doctrinal conversations and seek to look deeply at the practice of Stone—his spirituality and intellect in missiological and ecclesiological action. This will be accomplished through reading the margins, that is, the virtually untreated side of Barton Stone as a vigorous church planter.

Admittedly, in surveying Post-Restorationist church planters, questions may have already been loaded in a way that seeks to prove initial assumptions. Further, the survey of Barton Stone’s life could be tainted as read through the lens of current categories. Such tendencies are acknowledged here. What is more, “Post-Restorationist” (defined below) is a label that will be imposed upon recent church plants in a way that is too broad to capture the nuances of each community. There is no uniform agreement as to the definition of “Post-Restorationist” in describing the church plants mentioned here. Yet broadly defined, “Post-Restorationist” seems to capture the common ethos prevailing among such church plants. The aim here is not to impose commonalities but to reveal an authentic alignment of Barton Stone’s practice with recent church plants coming out of the Churches of Christ. Perhaps in some way, Stone’s life may both affirm and further energize such church planters today. We will begin by considering the life of Barton Stone, not only as a key leader in the Restoration Movement, but also as a prototype church planter.

³ This is in part due to the polity of the Churches of Christ moving away from a Stoneite apostolic polity to a more Campbellian polity.

⁴ Barton Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, reprint, (Fort Worth: Star Bible Publications, 1978), vols. 1-14.

“He was the harbinger of this restoration; a messenger of the Lord sent to prepare the way by calling men to repent, ‘for the restored kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ He was the John the Baptist of a new era of the gospel of the grace of God.”⁵ Such were the laudatory words of W. L. Hayden in homage to Barton Stone at the Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Christian Churches Centennial Address in 1909. Within this scope it may be questioned as to why Barton Stone’s life and ministry receives consideration over that of fellow-leader Alexander Campbell.⁶ When compared with Campbell, Stone comes forward as a street-level church planter whose spiritual DNA can be witnessed in Post-Restorationist church planters today, as will be explored below. Within the Stone-Campbell Movement, there was perhaps less Stone and more Campbell, especially as the Movement unfolded.⁷ So while Campbell—who Richard Hughes notes as the one who “emerged as the pivotal leader of the movement”⁸—had a more rational and scholarly bent, Stone could be said to have a more on-the-ground vocation. In contrast to Campbell’s scholastic orientation, Eugene Boring writes, “While Stone had a keen and vigorous mind, a good education by frontier standards, and saw the importance of disciplined study, he was busy farming, preaching, and *founding churches*”⁹ (emphasis mine).

⁵ W. L. Hayden, *Centennial Addresses Delivered in 1909*, ed. W.L. Hayden (Indianapolis, IN: W. L. Hayden, 1909), 24.

⁶ From a class lecture (September 26, 2007) at Abilene Christian University, Restoration Movement historian and Professor Dr. Doug Foster notes that we know more about Barton Stone now than anyone in the Restoration Movement 100 years ago, as Stone had been historically conflated with the more dominant Campbell until work by Disciples of Christ historians resurrected Stone’s identity in the 1930s. The Independent Christian Churches referred to the disappearance of Stone in Restoration History as “Stone silence.” A recovery of Stone’s contributions have been invaluable to the Restoration Movement, largely in thanks to the work of Star Bible Publications’ reprint of the dilapidated manuscripts of Stone’s journal *The Christian Messenger* in 1978.

⁷ See C. Leonard Allen, “The Stone that the Builders Rejected” in *Cane Ridge in Context: Perspectives on Barton W. Stone and the Revival*, ed. Anthony L. Dunnivant (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1992), 43-61. Allen argues, “The legacy of Stone has been almost entirely lost among Church of Christ in the twentieth century.” This was due to historic generalizations attributed to Stone based on the conflation of later leaders in the Stone-Campbell Movement. Further, Stone died just 12 years after his followers joined ranks with Campbell’s Reformers.

⁸ Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 11.

⁹ Eugene M. Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1997), 13.

Indeed, Stone was no stranger to the apostolic way of “constituting, “forming,” “organizing,” “founding,” or “planting” new churches,¹⁰ as witnessed in his autobiography that tells of at least four accounts in which he planted churches. The following excerpt offers a brief glimpse into one of Stone’s church planting endeavors:

At that time Georgetown was notorious for irreligion and wickedness. I began to preach to them that they should repent, and turn to the Lord. My congregation increased, and became interested on the subject of religion. Soon we constituted a church of six or seven members, which quickly grew to two or three hundred. I was every week baptizing, sometimes thirty at a time, of whom were a number of my pupils, some of whom became useful preachers afterwards. The work of conversion spread a distance round... The harvest was truly great, but the laborers were few.¹¹

Notably, Stone was not merely “shuffling the deck,” but his efforts here took root amidst a reportedly irreligious community, which speaks to Stone’s hardnosed evangelistic pioneering. Further, Stone was working with rather small numbers initially—“six or seven”—which was enough for Stone to “constitute a church.” Identifiable in this brief report are the marks of simplicity and organic beginnings, as well as discipleship, as Stone would turn his Georgetown pupils into gospel preachers.

Going back to Stone’s formative years, he found himself drawn into the Presbyterian tradition through a school of the New Light tradition in rural North Carolina. After much toil, depression, and deliberation, Stone converted to the Christian faith and was later ordained as a Presbyterian minister after “adopting” the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, in the course of ministry as a Presbyterian, Nathan Hatch writes,

¹⁰ See Barton Stone, *The Christian Messenger*, reprinted (Fort Worth: Star Bible, 1978). Such are the plurality of phrases found scattered throughout Barton Stone’s *Christian Messenger* used to describe the phenomenon that today is called church planting. *The Christian Messenger* was, of course, Stone’s popular print publication, which was published from 1826-1844 while working with very limited resources.

¹¹ Barton W. Stone, “A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone Written by Himself,” in *Voices from Cane Ridge*, ed. Rhodes Thompson (St. Louis: Bethany, 1954), 99. Within his autobiography, Stone twice mentions the planting and multiplication of a plurality of new churches, again mentions planting two churches, and also mentions planting one church—all at different points along his timeline and in different geographies. Knowing of Stone’s humility, old age, and the family audience to whom he was writing, it can be assumed there were other church plants he did not mention. Any self-hagiography in this context would seem highly unlikely.

Stone confessed that he was ‘embarrassed with many abstruse doctrines’: ‘Scores of objections would continually roll across my mind.’ What he called the ‘labyrinth of Calvinism’ left his mind ‘distressed,’ ‘perplexed,’ and ‘bewildered.’ He found relief from this dissonance of values only when he came to attack Calvinism as falsehood.¹²

It is clear that Stone had tension with his initial heritage. This tension was exacerbated by the famed Cane Ridge Revival, and Stone, along with the five other members, would go on to write “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery” in June 1804. This document declared in part, “We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large.”¹³ In the days before drawing up this document, Stone recalls the success of founding churches under the Springfield Presbytery, for with this group Stone notes “we went forward preaching, and constituting churches; but we had not worn our name more than one year, before we saw it savored of a party spirit.” So Stone, with five others, “threw it overboard, and took the name Christian” and experienced more success as “we advanced, and churches and preachers multiplied.”¹⁴ This was a significant turning point for Stone—a break from the tension of his inceptive tradition, and a newfound freedom to explore life in the “Body of Christ at large.” Further, being known simply as “Christians” was a mark of unity and simplicity for Stone and his followers, as well as a departure from a perceived spirit of partyism.

Stone’s lifestyle could be described as holistic—a life which embodied the love and justice of God. In contrast to Campbell’s reform, which was “primarily rational and cognitive,” Stone’s reform was “primarily ethical and spiritual, focusing on inner piety and outward holiness.”¹⁵ His biographer Rogers said of him, “He was deeply imbued with that humility that disposes us to esteem others

¹² Hatch, 173.

¹³ “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,” in Stone, *Voices*, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁵ Hughes, 92.

better than ourselves.”¹⁶ Stone strove for an embodied gospel, and he integrated faith, justice and holiness in an impacting way. For Stone, the gospel meant that one’s spiritual journey was never static but required movement and change. The implications of the gospel called for continual, dynamic reform of the Christian life among Stone and his followers.

Closely connected to an embodied gospel is Stone’s “apocalyptic worldview” which Hughes defines as a life “premised on obedience to the direct rule of God” that calls believers to live out their lives “in the shadow of the second coming.”¹⁷ Stone and his company viewed themselves as sojourners whose first allegiance was to the kingdom of God over and against the values of mainstream culture.¹⁸ This “kingdom-of-God theology” (although Stone was ambivalent toward *theology*) appeared in his writings as “God’s rule,” “God’s reign,” and “God’s government.”¹⁹ While Campbell’s view of the kingdom of God was in simple terms equated with the church, Stone held to a transcendent understanding of the kingdom that extends beyond the limited reach of the church. Hughes notes, “Stone’s understanding of God’s kingdom was thus a far cry from Campbell’s legal understanding of the same reality.”²⁰ This led Stone not to perfect the ritual of church, but to seek first the coming kingdom of God that could not be contained within walls and fixed hours of worship.

In terms of church polity and order, Stone’s views may take many present-day Restorationists by surprise. Stone saw Christ as the great Apostle (Heb. 3:1) who sent his disciples “to preach and baptize,” thus setting a pattern that the Apostle Paul would follow, and that Stone himself would

¹⁶ D. Newell Williams, “Barton Warren Stone” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, edited by Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 701.

¹⁷ Hughes, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 92-93.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

follow.²¹ Stone defined “apostle” simply as “those who are sent by the church.”²² He had an idea that the apostolic office would cause many of his readers to be confused in his day, and in an article entitled “Church Order,” Stone clearly explains his apostolic stance: “Though we grant from full conviction, that none are now called and sent as were the apostles of the Lord and Savior; yet we must contend that an order of men, called apostles, is yet by divine authority, given to the church and should exist in it.”²³ Exactly how this divine authority calls forth apostles is not fully clear, but what is clear is Stone’s endorsement of the apostolic office, as we see Stone himself often functioning apostolically.

In his argument for the office of apostles, Stone references Ephesians 4:11-13. For Stone, Christ is the head of the church, and he gives a five-fold ministry to the church for her edification and maturity. Elsewhere, Stone argues that the office of elders need not be in place to constitute a church (he references Acts 14:23), but that it is the work of apostles to appoint elders. Stone goes on to argue that it doesn’t take a great mass to establish a formal congregation. A small gathering can constitute a church: “It seems evident that our Lord gives directions, Mat. xviii. 15-20, to the smallest number that might thus meet in his name.”²⁴ And that number, of course, is two.

Stone saw the impending need for apostolic evangelists, and continually called for churches to support men who would preach the gospel. He writes, “Let each church or congregation, like the church of old, send their apostles into the world for the purpose of teaching, confirming, exhorting, and ordaining elders in every church, where there is need of them.”²⁵ Stone had a thoroughly domestic missiology, not simply relegating missions to foreign countries. Instead, he was honest

²¹ Stone, “Church Order,” *CM* 9 (April 1835), 75.

²² *Ibid*, 76.

²³ *Ibid*, 76.

²⁴ Stone, “Of Churches Observing the Lord’s Supper without Elders,” *CM* 9 (April 1835), 93.

²⁵ Stone, “Church Order,” 75.

about the pressing need for new Christian churches in the largely unchristian frontier of America. Living outside the enclave of a declining post-European Christendom, Stone lived on the edges of a religiously detached, largely pagan society.

At the end of every edition of *The Christian Messenger*, the editors would compile scattered reports of the sweeping movement of Christian churches. These sections entitled “Religious Intelligence” capture the stories of lay leaders tearing across the frontier on horseback that would send notice back to Stone of their successes. A young Tolbert Fanning, in this account 22 years of age, reports back to the elder and apostolic Stone: “I, though a youth, embrace this opportunity of letting you know that the gospel of Christ is spreading in middle Tennessee. I have been riding through several counties in this state for 12 months past, during which time, there has [sic] been about 150 immersed.”²⁶ Another horseback report comes from John Rogers: “Eld. J. Smith and myself were appointed as Evangelists to ride through the churches to promote the good work. In that capacity we served the churches for three years. Thousands of converts to the good cause...”²⁷ Not only does this speak to the five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4 and Stone as an apostolic commissioner sending out evangelists, this report comes near the end of Stone’s life, at a time long after Stone was able himself to ride across the country as he once did. Still from afar, he was revered apostolically as “Elder Stone” and greatly influenced younger men to further the cause of Christian unity.

Reflecting his very own nature, Stone held a very generous view toward communion, as he was known for advocating an open table of the Lord. This generosity—which moved beyond the rigid boundaries of Campbell’s doctrinal distinctives—can be heard in a statement after being pressed to put forth terms of fellowship:

Believing mankind to be fallible creatures, we therefore feel a spirit of toleration, and union for all those Christians, who...walk humbly in all the commandments and

²⁶ “Religious Intelligence,” *CM* 6 (January 1832) 28.

²⁷ “Letter of John Rogers,” *CM* 14 (August 1844), 105.

ordinances of the Lord Jesus Christ, and who live by faith in his name, though they hold opinions contrary to ours.²⁸

For Stone, a pursuit of the way of Christ—not the pursuit of the letter of the law—opened fellowship, and ultimately the Table of the Lord, to all believers. The Bible was the norm for Christian fellowship, but Stone admitted the complexity of the task of interpretation—there was still “light to break forth” from the Scriptures.²⁹ Again, this hermeneutic of humility flowed from Stone’s humble nature. Stone scholar and historian D. Newell Williams lauds Stone, noting that his posture toward other Christians “was the foundation of what became the normative stance of the Movement: that Christ is the host at the table, and that the church neither invites nor debars.”³⁰ This gets at the essence of Stone—Christ freely gave his life not for an elite and elect few, but for all who would come.

Without argument, the Churches of Christ departed from Barton Stone’s way long ago and pursued the “hard style” of the “radicalizing” Campbell.³¹ Yet there is of late a sense of return—whether intentional or not—to propensities more aligned with Stone. This “Post-Restorationist” movement can be witnessed most clearly in recent church plants moving beyond the Churches of Christ heading. Before pursuing such interconnectedness, however, we will move toward a definition of “Post-Restorationist.”

Writer Brian McLaren, himself raised in a strand of Restorationism outside the Stone-Campbell Movement (Plymouth Brethren), contends, “Beneath these squabbles over distinctives, one nearly always finds an idealism among restorationists.”³² It is that idealism that McLaren believes

²⁸ D. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Autobiography* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 154.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

³⁰ Williams, “Barton Warren Stone,” 720.

³¹ Hughes, 47.

³² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 128.

should be preserved, while the “less helpful static” should be jettisoned. Post-Restorationists seem to be capturing this (dis)continuation of Restorationism. The Post-Restorationist, as blogger and doctoral student Chris “Fajita” Gonzalez puts it, has “moved from a theologically loyal position in relation to the Restoration Movement to a theologically critical and explorative position” which Gonzalez argues was modeled by Stone and Campbell within their own initial movements.³³ Avid blogger, youth minister, and wordsmith Adam Ellis coined the descriptor “Post-Restorationist.” He defines it best by adapting Dallas Willard’s take on “Post-Evangelical”:

Post-Restorationism is by no means ex-restorationism. There are, of course, ex-restorationists, and even anti-restorationists, but Post-Restorationists are Restorationists, perhaps tenaciously so. However, Post-Restorationists have also been driven to the margins by some aspects of Restorationist church culture with which they cannot honestly identify.³⁴

Just as Barton Stone was in some sense driven to the margins in being eclipsed by Campbell and his followers, likewise Post-Restorationists find themselves on the fringe of their heritage.

Paradoxically, it is my thesis that there is an identifiable return to primal Stoneite impulses in Post-Restorationist church plants, and such a departure from the label “Church of Christ” in these church plants may actually be a faithful recovery of the vision upon which Churches of Christ originally built their identity.

Post-Restorationist explanations for “why we are the way we are” often do not come as by-the-book prescriptions, but are cloaked in journey narratives. So admittedly, there is difficulty in capturing concise statements that could easily tell of an alignment with Barton Stone. To get an authentic feel for the spirit of Post-Restorationist churches, one must experience their community life and listen to their stories. An attempt here is made to condense statements from these stories that speak to particular commonalities with Stone and the early Movement. A small sample of Post-

³³ Chris Gonzalez to Tyler D. Priest (Oct. 26, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal e-mail.

³⁴ Adam Ellis, “A Post-Restorationist,” *Next Wave E-Zine* <http://www.allelon.org/articles/article.cfm?id=146>, accessed 15 October 2007, adapted and modified from Dallas Willard, Introduction to *The Post-Evangelical* by Dave Tomlinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 11.

Restorationist church planters were interviewed, along with a handful of other leaders in these churches, all of whom represent their respective communities and a larger movement that is Post-Restorationist.

In line with Barton Stone, Post-Restorationist church planters, along with their communities, have experienced tension within their initial heritage—some to a lesser degree than others. For Greg Newton of Disciples’ Fellowship (Birmingham, AL), his Church of Christ identity changed while in the mission field as a church planter in Tanzania. It came as a realization that he did not want to export an American ecclesiology and thoughtlessly impose it upon foreign cultures. This gave way to an incarnational ecclesiology that was more in tune with the Tanzanian culture than with a bygone American religious subculture. Upon his return to work with American churches, Newton realized that the things he had learned in Africa were just as applicable to the church in America. But he notes, “I felt like I came up against a wall that wouldn’t move with the things I was talking about. The institution was pretty well set and firm.”³⁵ Yet in 2003, a Christian community was birthed that was in many ways willing to move in new directions concerning the mission of God in the Birmingham area. “It’s wasn’t a ‘We’re leaving and we’re angry and we’re never coming back’ kind of thing. It was just, ‘We’re just not going to be exclusive. We appreciate what we’ve received, but we’re not necessarily going to wear the name [Church of Christ] because it’s baggage among other things.’”³⁶

Growing up in Chicago, Kester Smith of Immanuel Austin (Austin, TX), never had the distinct Church of Christ identity that he later encountered in college at Abilene Christian University (Abilene, TX). Smith then saw that his heritage had in some ways been sidetracked from Stone and Campbell’s vision for unity and peace in the Church. He began to internally wrestle with his tradition, at one point asking, “Do I want to make a career of fighting these fights—is this really what

³⁵ Greg Newton to Tyler Priest (September 19, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal interview.

I wanted to get into ministry for?”³⁷ Smith notes that Restorationists often feel a sense of concern for his moving beyond the Churches of Christ. “People say, ‘Don’t you feel like you sort of deny your heritage?’ And really, we’re trying to say, ‘No, we want to embrace a 2000 year old history, not just a 200 year old history.’”

For Jared Looney of Bronx Fellowship (Bronx, NY), when the core church planting team came to New York City in 2001, it wasn’t so much about remaining within or leaving his heritage, but being faithful to the mission of Jesus—something Stone was certainly keen on doing. “We said at the very beginning, ‘We are going to be committed to theological and missiological responsibilities for the people of New York City, and not to traditions that would in any way hold us back from those responsibilities.’”³⁸ In Churches of Christ, as Greg Newton had also experienced, mission had become at times subservient to heritage—to the detriment of the heritage itself. Looney, in a doctoral class conversation with other simple church planters, agreed with another student articulating that one’s church background in America can actually inhibit the mission of God in urban contexts. If pushed to choose between heritage or the mission of God, Post-Restorationists seem to lean toward the *missio dei*.

Within the Churches of Christ tradition, there is room for tension and critical reflection upon the tradition itself, as modeled by one of its very founders in Barton Stone. Of course, this is a pedigree that can be traced through a genealogy of numerous Christian reformers, and even back to the Christ himself. Jesus, as witnessed in the gospels, both embraced and deconstructed religion in a paradoxical way that takes the form of religion lightly, but takes the heart of religion quite seriously. In Stone’s life, this “lightness” toward the form of religion was witnessed in “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” Here Greg Newton finds a kindred spirit with Stone towards his heritage. “I can resonate with the way they sarcastically pronounced death upon this

³⁷ Kester Smith to Tyler Priest (September 19, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal interview.

³⁸ Jared Looney to Tyler Priest (October 30, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” Skype interview.

thing [the Presbytery]. That tells me a lot about how and what they were thinking—I can envision doing very similar things.”

Just as Stone after years of tension became “Post-Presbyterian,” these church planters have in different ways taken the path of Post-Restorationism. Kester Smith (IA) notes that this new path “really didn’t feel like a huge shift because it wasn’t something I had a heightened awareness of growing up. *Christian* had a distinctive and definitive feel for me.” Of course, this “Christian alone” impulse squarely aligns with Stone and will be considered below. But what is clear among the Post-Restorationist communities is a healthy, almost non-reactionary journey that is more *toward* than *away from* in terms of a vision of God’s kingdom. Newton (DF) notes, “If we were reacting against anything, it was in not being a country club.” In some sense, Stone was against similar affinity groups in the sense of what he saw as creedal fellowship tests. Yet his chief aim was to move toward unity in the church, and bringing more churches of this kind into being.

Of course, some may wonder exactly why the name “Church of Christ” had to be forfeited in these church plants. Kester Smith notes that two of IA’s core community of six had a different background than the Church of Christ. So for IA, “It would have been disingenuous from the start to call ourselves that which we were not.” He further makes it clear, “In Austin, the distinctives that ‘C of C’ carries aren’t the ones I value, but the ones I was leaving behind.” Speaking to the specific context out of which several families of DF came, Newton notes, “One guy in our fellowship asked, ‘Who would start a new business and call it Enron?’” Yet often this kind of shift is not well received by some who remain in the Churches of Christ. Jennifer Stoves (DF) has experienced the response that is common to many who have gone out from beneath the Church of Christ banner. “To be “post-Restorationist” among current members of Churches of Christ is to be marginalized, either explicitly

or implicitly,” says Stoves.³⁹ But for Post-Restorationists, church titles are a matter of being honest. They simply do not claim to be something they are not.

Melissa Jerkins, a core leader of IA, perhaps says it best in terms of the (dis)continuous tension of the Churches of Christ heritage in speaking to the ideals of the Restoration Movement:

I think some of those ideals have been lost or obscured since they were originally articulated, but I believe our solution lies not in rejecting the ideals but in reclaiming them and reapplying them to our context. I see our group as a new incarnation of those ideals. We're trying to claim the best of our history--by which I mean both C of C history and all of church history--and in that attempt, we stand on the shoulders of people like Stone and Campbell who attempted it long before we did. Our identity lies more in what we're striving towards than in what we're leaving behind.⁴⁰

As mentioned earlier, Post-Restorationists are planting communities that are Christians alone, just as Stone had envisioned. Smith confesses, “I really am most comfortable with ‘Christian.’ Even with saying that, I am concerned with sounding naïve, but that’s the only name that encapsulates what I’m going for...It’s a fairly Restorationist idea.” Elsewhere the DF website reads, “We declare ourselves to be first and foremost disciples of Christ—to be Christians only.”⁴¹ However, it should be mentioned here that the Post-Restorationists maintain a certain reluctance towards labels—even the label “Post-Restorationist.” Some, like Melissa Jerkins (IA), if pushed to adopt a Restorationist label, would consider herself more Neo-Restorationist. Whether *neo* or *post*, Christians of this stripe seem more bent on embodying a true “Christians only” stance by their generous open fellowship with other Christians.

The “Christians only” impulse is affixed to a deeper end that Stone pursued, namely Christian unity. In Post-Restorationist communities, unity is not shrunk down to doctrinal conformity, but is generously broadened to extend fellowship to others pursuing the way of

³⁹ Jennifer Stoves to Tyler D. Priest (November 4, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal e-mail.

⁴⁰ Melissa Jerkins to Tyler D. Priest (November 2, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal e-mail.

⁴¹ Disciples’ Fellowship, “Our Vision of Christian Community,” <<http://web.mac.com/disciplesfellowship/DF/vision.htm>>; Internet, accessed 21 October 2007.

Christ. All of the aforementioned church plants are working with, rather than against, other denominations in their ministries. Jared Looney (BF) initiated and currently facilitates the Organic Alliance, a network of church planters in the NYC area from various backgrounds. Dialogue and fellowship across denominational lines has proven valuable and unifying in a largely irreligious city, as division or even non-communication across such boundaries simply cannot be afforded in light of the mission of God.

Some church plants have even found a new connectedness to other Restoration Movement branches. IA meets in a Christian Church building on Wednesdays for worship, and has joined with these believers in Austin during different worship events in the Christian calendar.⁴² And DF has welcomed leaders from other streams of the Christian faith to take part in their worship gatherings. Further, the DF website reads, “Valuing the grace of Jesus Christ [more than the traditions received from their Stone-Campbell heritage] we embrace believers who have inherited other religious traditions and search for what is valuable in them.”⁴³ Post-Restorationists, then, recognize that the Restoration heritage did not have a monopoly on orthodoxy. Other Christian traditions are heartily welcomed in the spirit of the Christ, who himself prayed that all believers may be one—the cornerstone verse that fueled Stone toward Christian unity.⁴⁴

The mark of “Christians only” along with low-structured, grass-roots churches in Stone’s ministry point toward yet another commonality with Post-Restorationist church plants: simplicity. For all of the Post-Restorationist churches surveyed, none own property or

⁴² Markedly, this is another commonality among Post-Restorationists—a participation in the Christian calendar.

⁴³ Disciples’ Fellowship, “History,” <<http://disciplesfellowship.com/>> Internet; accessed 21 October 2007. The website further notes, “For the sake of Christ, this group of Christians which is made up of people who have inherited good things from many traditions, allows God to form a unity of the Spirit which supercedes any historical Christian traditions, but which values God’s working in all.”

⁴⁴ Stone, “Of the Family of God on Earth,” *CM I* (November 1826), 13.

buildings—a great stride in the return to simplicity. Says Smith (IA) “We have made a commitment with the way we intend to grow to never own property or build a church building. So there’s some of that real simplicity we want to honor and get back to.” Again, this decision flows out of missional impulses. On many levels, Post-Restorationists see property maintenance as an obstacle to the embodiment and telling of faith in Jesus. Simplicity of this kind is opted for—at the expense of comfort, but in favor of the mission of God.

Just as Stone would confidently constitute a church with just a few, Newton (DF) has found value in smaller numbers. “I’m not sure that big is better. A lot of us came out of big and we just reveled in the small once we came out of the big. Small is relational, and we’ve been able to share a meal together from the very beginning.” Ken Haynes of DF agrees with Newton, noting that another mark of simplicity is the church’s “relational structure.”⁴⁵ For DF, there is no hierarchical polity, and as Ken Gunnells (DF) puts it, “We’re simple in that there’s very little structure. Greg and Mark (the student minister at DF) are seen as ‘reluctant’ leaders.” Gunnells further notes that at DF, “No one needs permission to do something... Things grow and die as needed.”⁴⁶ Newton echoes Gunnells’ former remark, saying he resonates with the Restorationist ideals: “the priesthood of all believers, and a disdain for titles—just plain, simple people.” Simply Christians, Newton would no doubt agree.

Jared Looney and fellow church planter Ben Cheek work in New York City with house churches, an expression of church that is perhaps the clearest mark of simplicity. For Looney, this mode of what he calls *oikos* (Gk. “house”) allows the gospel to get into the “cracks and crevices” of the Bronx. “Comparable to a liquid, the Gospel is able to flow into lives through other lives because it is not limited to the imposition of a rigid structure,” says Looney. It should also be mentioned that none of the Post-Restorationist communities represented are big on membership and head counting. DF intentionally has no membership. In some sense, this kind of simplicity is cultivated over and

⁴⁵ Ken Haynes to Tyler D. Priest (November 1, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal e-mail.

⁴⁶ Ken Gunnells to Tyler D. Priest (October 30, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal e-mail.

against the control strategies of the modern church which sought to quantify and clearly determine who is “in” and who is “out.” Simplicity takes on several dimensions in Post-Restorationist churches, all of which serve to proclaim the gospel.

Connected to simplicity, discipleship is central to the mission of the Post-Restorationists, just as it was in Stone’s life. In all the communities mentioned, discipleship happens in non-programmatic ways that naturally flow out of the simple, relational structures of the respective churches. Smith (IA) admits, “We want to make disciples and not just believers, and we understood that discipleship was going to take place in houses, and not so much at a worship gathering.” At IA, there is a recognition that “absolutely everyone, without exception...needs to be discipled to follow Jesus.” Melissa Jerkins (IA) echoes Smith: “We feel that spiritual formation happens more easily in the house church environment, and if people can only come to one event per week, we want it to be the house churches.” Further, tightly knit groups of 2 and 3 are formed naturally at IA, fostering discipleship outside the ordinary gatherings. For DF, intentional discipleship takes on as many modes as there are relationships, for so much of discipleship is simply being with others, something DF does well. This happens through weekly shared meals, daily morning lauds, student prayer breakfasts, women’s Salad/Suppers, numerous prayer groups, intergenerational classes, and the like. In the spirit of Stone, Post-Restorationists pursue discipleship in serious but also natural and healthy ways.

Further likened to Stone, Post-Restorationists are exploring what it means to participate and live into kingdom of God—for them a reality that unquestionably extends far beyond the walls of the church. Newton (DF) notes that in the Churches of Christ tradition, “the church and the kingdom were seen as synonymous...but the kingdom is something different. The kingdom is what God is doing, and the church is more about how we’re responding to what God is doing.” Haynes (DF) has

found the journey with his community to be a refreshing one, with the freedom to explore this kingdom of God.

It has been so rich to swim in the larger pool of the Christian community. I feel like I am attempting to practice non-sectarian Christianity that honors Restoration Movement sensibilities...while guarding against a naïve ahistoricity by embracing more of Christian history than my Restoration tribe has tended to do.”

A turn of phrase coined by DF is often spoken lightly but carries a weighty meaning: “You are now free to move about the kingdom.”⁴⁷

A kingdom theology informs the conversations at IA, as well. “We talk a lot more about inbreaking than outreach,” notes Smith. He adds, “Our mission statement at Immanuel is ‘Bringing people to Jesus and being Jesus to people.’ We believe that Christ came to put His world to rights, to redeem His creation, to bring about the kingdom. We believe that we exist as citizens of that kingdom, and are redeemed as a part of that creation.” Ben Cheek, who heads up a network of church planters in the New York City Area (MetroSoul), admits, “A kingdom theology very much informs what we do at MetroSoul, because we’re not looking for church control.” With Cheek, there is resonance with Barton Stone’s apocalypticism in terms of living under the direct rule of God. “If there was one way I am closer to Stone than to Campbell, that would be it.”⁴⁸ Interestingly, Cheek comes from a family tied to Barton Stone and his followers that runs five generations deep. It seems a Stoneite DNA has been preserved in Cheek’s ministry to Queens, NY.

In line with his apocalyptic kingdom theology, Stone’s ecclesiology manifested itself in what can be described as a “missional polity.”⁴⁹ As such, Stone made room for the office of apostle, one who is sent. Ben Cheek (MS) notes that the common word “missionary” never appears in the New Testament. Instead, the more accurate NT term is that of apostle (Gk. *apostelos*). Cheek recognizes

⁴⁷ “Disciples Fellowship, <<http://disciplesfellowship.com>>, Internet; accessed 21 October 2007.

⁴⁸ Ben Cheek to Tyler Priest (October 29 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal interview.

⁴⁹ “Missional” here can be simply defined as of or relating to the mission of God.

the abuses within and without the Restoration Movement with the title “apostle.” But while this term may be reason for concern for many in the Restoration Movement, both Stone and Cheek find that small “a” apostle is a valid office of the church. Just as missionaries in foreign contexts work with several different churches at once, so do domestic missionaries, especially Post-Restorationist church planters.

Jared Looney defines MetroSoul as a leadership support group, a decentralized network of leaders, and a team of commissioned church planters in the NYC area. It could be said that MS is a gathering of local apostles that fosters mutual encouragement, networks local resources, and works together to bring about the kingdom of God in NYC. For Cheek and Looney, such a network is fully consistent with Stone’s polity. The traditional church polity in the Churches of Christ ensures that each church has a plurality of elders, a requirement Stone said was unnecessary to form a new church. And for one of the Bronx Fellowship house churches that Looney works with, having an eldership is a practical impossibility. The oldest of the community is 23 years of age, and the church was started by a teenager just eighteen years of age. Looney notes, “Elders there would be 19.” New contexts call for new expressions of structure, and such a Stoneite missional polity makes much needed room for diversity.

Interestingly, all of the Post-Restorationist church plants surveyed have at least explored the five-fold ministry that Stone endorsed in Ephesians 4:11-13. This has often meant that rather than handing out explicit leadership roles in the church, Post-Restorationist churches simply allow the leaders to live into these roles implicitly, shunning titles and positional authority. At DF, there are no explicit elders, and yet the community of DF knows who her pastors are. For IA, Kester Smith echoes similar sentiments. “We’re not going to hand out titles to different folks—we’re going to begin to look and see who is already living into these leadership positions.” And in terms of church leadership, Melissa Jerkins sees early church structures not as prescriptive, but descriptive of

different contexts. “Although I do believe the early church offers us important examples, I don’t think the church’s ultimate mission today is to become exactly like the church was then.” For Smith, Jerkins, and the IA community, a missional polity has been built in to the architecture of IA. Smith hopes to see a mushroom effect of a network of churches in Austin, and presently, things are beginning to head in that direction.

In this way, IA is representative of other Post-Restorationist churches. There is an absence of the desire to grow into a monumental institution and achieve church growth goals, and yet present is the desire to plant more churches. DF hopes to plant 3 more simple communities in the next year, none of which are expected to look anything like DF. For BF in the metro area, the proliferation of house churches continues. Looney notes that theirs is a liquid polity, which allows the kingdom to seep into all kinds of contexts that large institutions cannot get. Resonating with Stone, Post-Restorationist church planters do not despise the small things as they choose to plant more churches rather than grow existing ones.

Clearly, the movement of Post-Restorationist church planting can be hardly confined to the aforementioned churches. Mark Willis, who works with Missionary Residency of North America (MRNA) at Abilene Christian University, is heading up a church planting team that will journey to Chicago in 2008. Mark represents one among many emerging church planters from the Churches of Christ with a similar vision and ethos to those of BF, IA, DF, and others. For Willis, there has been much exploration of the five-fold ministry in Ephesians 4. This leadership structure lends the church toward mission and can restore the missional genetics lost in traditional church models. “In terms of missiology, it’s been a come-to-us, centripetal outlook in most traditional structures, but centrifugal is the goal.”⁵⁰ Indeed, centrifugal force—outward propulsion—is the apostolic way. In a like fashion, Barton Stone would not wait for the people to come to him, but he saddled up his horse and rode

⁵⁰ Mark Willis to Tyler Priest (November 3, 2007), “Post-Restorationists,” personal interview.

across the frontier, planting gospel seeds throughout the East and Midwest while instilling such a vision in younger leaders. Today, these younger leaders, represented here by Willis, are sure to continue the Post-Restorationist shift.

To end our exploration of Stoneite commonalities on a lighter note, there is an old Restorationist joke that says the Churches of Christ don't have bishops, just editors. The editor Barton Stone with his prolific journal, *The Christian Messenger*, had a strong influence on the Restoration Movement and was inspiration for numerous other Restorationist editors. So if Churches of Christ have editors, Post-Restorationists have bloggers. Post-Restorationist bloggers continue the Stoneite way of popular print that can reach the crowds. All of the surveyed church planters keep a weblog. For DF, Newton's blog⁵¹ and podcast⁵² are more internally purposed for DF. But undoubtedly these mediums are reaching well beyond the church community. Kester Smith of IA also keeps a blog,⁵³ and his offerings can often be found at Next-Wave E-Zine.⁵⁴ And Ben Cheek of MetroSoul is the mastermind behind the popular website rUrevolutionary.com,⁵⁵ getting hundreds of thousands of hits in its first year of existence. The gospel according to the Post-Restorationists is being received by a virtual audience around the globe.

It is as Leonard C. Allen cleverly puts it in the title of an essay: the Stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.⁵⁶ Refreshingly, the life of Barton Warren Stone is being revisited in the Restoration Movement. His legacy—a rich one marked by simplicity, discipleship, and missional-apostolic church planting—has resurfaced in an unusual way among church plants that

⁵¹ See <http://web.mac.com/disciplesfellowship/iWeb/Travelers/Journal/Journal.html>.

⁵² See <http://web.mac.com/disciplesfellowship/iWeb/Travelers/Unfinished/Unfinished.html>.

⁵³ See <http://pastorkes.blogspot.com/>.

⁵⁴ See <http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue107/>.

⁵⁵ See <http://rurevolutionary.com/>.

⁵⁶ Allen, "The Stone that the Builders Rejected," 43.

are often considered to have moved outside the Restoration Movement. Yet just as it is impossible to deny one's biological DNA, Post-Restorationists cannot deny their ecclesiological DNA. Although many of the Stoneite parallels may be implicit in these church plants, it seems there is an explicit and substantial connectedness with Post-Restorationists to the way of Barton Stone that should be acknowledged and embraced by the Churches of Christ heritage.

On many levels, these Post-Restorationist church plants are blazing a trail for a future of the Churches of Christ branch of the Restoration Movement. And they seem to be having fun doing it. Many of those surveyed report an excitement in what is going on, and Melissa Jerkins (IA) captures the Post-Restorationist spirit: "The past two years have been amazing, and I can't remember the last time I felt so spiritually alive. God is constantly surprising us." Like Stone, rather than longingly looking backwards to a bygone era of yesterday's glory, Post-Restorationists are excitedly looking forward to the continued inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

If Barton Warren Stone would be unsettled to have been construed in such a light as this, let us give him the last word. Perhaps this pastoral imagery Stone once wrote now returns full circle to resonate with the stories of an emerging Post-Restorationist movement:

I have seen sheep pent up in a lean pasture, looking through the crevices of their enclosure at a flock grazing on a rich field at liberty—I have seen their manifestations of anxiety to be with them, in their bleating, and running along the fence to find a place of escape. At length, one made the leap and many followed.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Williams, "Barton Warren Stone," 720.

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