

The Restoration Movement

Barton Stone, the Campbells, and the American hunger to restore the New Testament church — the origins of Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ • c. 1801–1906

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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Where this fits: Lesson 23 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series. The Restoration Movement emerged from the same soil as **the Second Great Awakening (Lesson 22)** — indeed, its founding event was Cane Ridge. It is the distinctively American contribution to Protestant church organization. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

If the First Great Awakening gave American Christianity conversion and the Second gave it revival and reform, the Restoration Movement gave it one of its signature theological instincts: **the conviction that the true church is the New Testament church — simply, literally, without creeds or later accretions — and that every honest Christian can read the Bible and find it.** Out of the revival fires of Kentucky and the Scots-Irish Presbyterian migration into western Pennsylvania, two separate movements of reform within American Presbyterianism arose in the first decade of the 1800s, joined in 1832, and produced what historians call the **Stone-Campbell Movement** — from whom today's **Disciples of Christ** (Christian Church), the **Independent Christian Churches**, and the **Churches of**

Christ all descend. Together these churches number around 3–4 million members worldwide today, concentrated in the American South and Midwest.

The movement’s founding slogans still shape the DNA of much of American evangelicalism:

- **“No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.”**
- **“We are Christians only, but not the only Christians.”**
- **“Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.”**
- **“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”**

(Attributed; originally a 17th-century Lutheran maxim popularized by the movement.)

Nearly every American non-denominational, Bible-church, community-church, and much of the Southern Baptist instinct traces theological ancestry to these slogans — even congregations that have never heard of Alexander Campbell.

Greek NT (1 Cor 1:10): παρακαλῶ δε ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί... τοῦτο λέγητε πάντες καὶ μη ἢ ἐν ὑμῖν σχίσματα, ἥτε δε κληρισμένοι ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ νοῦ καὶ ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ γνώμῃ.

1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV): “I appeal to you, brothers... that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

PART 1 — THE STONE STREAM (1801–1824)

Barton W. Stone (1772–1844)

BORN PORT TOBACCO, MARYLAND • EDUCATED AT DAVID CALDWELL’S LOG SCHOOL IN NORTH CAROLINA • PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER IN KENTUCKY FROM 1796 • ORGANIZER OF CANE RIDGE (1801)

Stone was a Scots-Irish Presbyterian minister pastoring the congregations of Cane Ridge and Concord in Bourbon County, Kentucky, when he organized the massive sacramental meeting of August 1801 (see **Lesson 22 Part 3**). Stone had already been uneasy with what he considered the excessive rigor of Westminster Calvinism, and Cane Ridge pushed him further. Within three years he and four fellow Presbyterian ministers (Richard McNemar, John Thompson, John Dunlavy, Robert Marshall) had broken with the Synod of Kentucky on grounds that the Westminster Confession was an unscriptural test of fellowship.

June 1804 • The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield

Presbytery. Rather than simply form a new denomination, Stone and his colleagues published a remarkable document dissolving their breakaway presbytery in order that “its people may be able to say with us: we are Christians.” The document is one of the most original ecclesiological texts in American religious history. Key lines:

“We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the body of Christ at large... We will, that our name of distinction, with its Reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God’s heritage, and His name One... We will, that candidates for the Gospel ministry henceforth study the Holy Scriptures with fervent prayer, and obtain license from God to preach the simple Gospel, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, without any mixture of philosophy, vain deceit, traditions of men, or the rudiments of the world.”

— Stone et al., *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, 28 June 1804

Stone and his associates took the name “Christians” only — not Presbyterian, not Methodist, not Baptist. By 1826 there were probably 15,000 “Christians” in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Ohio. They practiced believer’s baptism by immersion (though Stone himself was slow to insist on it), weekly Lord’s Supper, congregational polity, and a strict biblical simplicity in worship.

Thomas Campbell (1763–1854)

BORN IRELAND • SECEDER PRESBYTERIAN MINISTER • EMIGRATED TO WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA IN 1807 • WROTE THE *DECLARATION AND ADDRESS* (1809)

Seceder Presbyterian

Declaration and Address

Thomas Campbell was a Seceder Presbyterian minister — a member of one of the smaller Scottish Presbyterian splinter groups — who emigrated to western Pennsylvania in 1807 due to ill health. When he began administering communion to non-Seceder Presbyterians in the Washington County revival atmosphere, his own Seceder colleagues censured him. In September 1809 he responded by writing the *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington*, one of the founding documents of the Restoration Movement.

“The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to Him in all things according to the Scriptures.”

— Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, Proposition 1 (1809)

Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) — the movement’s theological giant

THOMAS’S SON • BORN NEAR BALLYMENA, IRELAND • EDUCATED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW • ARRIVED IN AMERICA 1809 • SETTLED IN BETHANY, VIRGINIA (NOW WEST VIRGINIA)

Debater

Publisher

Theologian

Alexander Campbell joined his father in America in 1809, when the *Declaration and Address* was already at the printers. The son quickly proved the more aggressive theologian. Convinced by his own study of Scripture in 1812 that infant baptism was unwarranted, he and his wife Margaret were immersed as believers by a local Baptist

minister; the whole family followed. The Campbell movement associated itself with the Redstone and Mahoning Baptist Associations for about two decades (1815–1830) while gradually developing its distinctive theology.

Alexander Campbell's distinctive teaching:

- **The Scripture alone.** Rigorous biblicism: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” Every doctrine and practice must be grounded directly in the New Testament.

- **Believer's baptism by immersion, “for the remission of sins”** (citing Acts 2:38). Campbell taught that baptism is the *occasion* on which God graciously forgives the penitent believer. This is a higher view of baptism than Baptist or Reformed theology typically allows, and it remains a distinctive of the Churches of Christ and many Christian Churches.

- **Weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.** Every Lord's Day, as in Acts 20:7 (“on the first day of the week... we met to break bread”). The Restoration churches remain, with the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox, among the few Christian traditions in which the Supper is celebrated weekly as a matter of principle.

- **Congregational autonomy.** Every local church is self-governing, with elders and deacons; no denominational hierarchy is permitted, since none is found in the New Testament.

- **No creeds, no confessions, no denominational names.** The only required confession is “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). “I am a Christian; I belong to the Church of Christ” was the preferred self-description.

Campbell's publishing empire. From 1823 Campbell edited *The Christian Baptist* (later *The Millennial Harbinger*), the most widely read religious journal on the American frontier. He engaged in a series of public debates — with the Presbyterian W. L. McCalla on baptism (1823), the skeptic Robert Owen (1829), the Roman Catholic

Bishop John Purcell (1837), and the Methodist N. L. Rice (1843) — each of which ran to hundreds of printed pages and went through multiple editions. By 1840, “Campbellism” (a label Campbell disliked) was one of the most discussed theological positions in America.

Campbell founded Bethany College in 1840 in what is now West Virginia; it remains the oldest college in West Virginia and a Disciples of Christ institution.

PART 3 — THE MERGER (1832)

The Stone “Christians” and the Campbell “Reformers” (or “Disciples”) had been growing in parallel for twenty years. They shared core convictions: Scripture alone, no denominational creed, believer’s immersion, weekly Lord’s Supper, congregational polity. By the late 1820s their leaders were aware of each other. On New Year’s Day 1832 at the Hill Street Meeting House in Lexington, Kentucky, representatives of the two movements met for a formal handshake.

1 January 1832 • Lexington Handshake. Stone representing his “Christians” and “Raccoon” John Smith representing the Campbell “Disciples” publicly declared the movements one. Smith’s key sentence: *“Let us, then, my brethren, be no longer Campbellites or Stoneites, New Lights or Old Lights, or any other kind of Lights, but let us all come to the Bible and to the Bible alone, as the only book in the world that can give us all the Light we need.”*

The merged body was a loose federation of autonomous congregations — they had no national organization, no denominational structure, no shared name beyond “Christians” or “Disciples of Christ.” Estimates at the merger: approximately 22,000 Stone Christians, 12,000 Campbell Disciples. By 1860, the combined movement numbered about 200,000. By 1900, about 1.1 million.

An inherent tension. The founding conviction — that every Christian reading the Bible will naturally reach the same conclusions — proved optimistic. Within a generation of the merger, the movement was disagreeing internally about missionary

societies, instrumental music, educational institutions, and a host of other questions the New Testament did not explicitly address. Those disagreements produced the division of 1906.

PART 4 — THE 1906 DIVISION

The Restoration Movement's first major split appeared in the U.S. Religious Census of 1906, when the Census Bureau formally recognized two distinct Stone-Campbell bodies: the **Disciples of Christ** and the **Churches of Christ**. Two issues drove the divide:

- **Missionary societies.** The Disciples had formed the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. The more conservative branch (eventually the Churches of Christ) argued that Scripture authorizes only local congregational action — the New Testament contains no warrant for the para-church missionary society. David Lipscomb and the *Gospel Advocate* (Nashville, from 1855) led this critique.

- **Instrumental music in worship.** The more conservative branch held that the New Testament commands congregational singing (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16) but is silent on instruments; therefore, on the “where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent” principle, instruments are not permitted in worship. The more progressive branch argued that silence was permissive, not prohibitive. By 1906 the two sides had been worshipping in different congregations for decades.

The 1906 census formalized what had already happened on the ground. Over the following century the movement further fragmented into three main streams:

PART 5 — THE THREE STREAMS TODAY

CHURCHES OF CHRIST

~1.5 million members in the U.S., concentrated in the South and lower Midwest.

A cappella worship only; strongly congregational; believer's immersion for the remission of sins; weekly communion. No denominational organization — each congregation is fully autonomous. No paid missionary societies separate from local churches. Concentrated in Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama. Leading institutions: Abilene Christian University (1906), Lipscomb University (1891), Harding University (1924), Pepperdine University (1937).

INDEPENDENT CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

~1 million members, mostly in the Midwest and West.

Instrumental music permitted; congregational; believer's immersion; weekly communion. Moderately conservative theologically. No formal denominational organization but supports independent mission societies, Bible colleges, and the annual North American Christian Convention. Leading institutions: Cincinnati Christian University (1924–2019), Ozark Christian College (1942), Johnson University (1893), Lincoln Christian University.

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST (CHRISTIAN CHURCH)

~275,000 members, declining.

Formally organized in 1968 as a national denomination ("The Christian Church — Disciples of Christ"); instrumental music; historically more theologically progressive and ecumenical than the other two streams. Affiliated with the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches. Influential in 20th-century mainline Protestant ecumenism. Leading institutions: Disciples Divinity House (University of Chicago), Brite Divinity School (Texas Christian University), Phillips Theological Seminary.

A global reach. The Churches of Christ have planted significant congregations across Africa, India, the Philippines, Ukraine, and Russia. The Independent Christian Churches have active missions in Brazil, India, Mexico, Kenya, and the Philippines. The Disciples are active in Jamaica, the Congo, Puerto Rico, Central America, and elsewhere.

The Stone-Campbell movement's deeper influence on American Christianity is larger than its direct membership. Four theological instincts the Restoration Movement seeded have become common property across American evangelicalism:

1. The non-denominational ideal. The conviction that denominational names and structures are a problem to be overcome rather than a gift to be received — that real Christians should simply be “Christians” — is Campbell's conviction, and it now shapes tens of millions of American evangelicals in community churches, independent Bible churches, and mega-churches whose theology they rarely articulate confessionally.

2. “Just the Bible.” The American evangelical suspicion of creeds, confessions, tradition, and denominational theology owes much to Campbell. This is a double-edged inheritance. It has democratized Christian teaching and produced astonishing energy. It has also produced a great deal of biblical illiteracy masquerading as Bible-onlyism, and enabled theological novelties that earlier confessional traditions would have caught.

3. Weekly Lord's Supper. Many modern evangelical congregations that practice weekly communion — Baptist, non-denominational, Vineyard — are drawing on a stream the Stone-Campbell churches preserved while most of the Protestant world celebrated monthly or quarterly.

4. The plea for Christian unity. Campbell's *Declaration and Address* insisted that the visible divisions of Protestant Christianity were a scandal before the world. The modern ecumenical movement owes more to Restoration Movement instincts than historians sometimes acknowledge — though, ironically, the movement itself eventually split three ways.

• **A non-denominational impulse is not a neutral impulse.** The desire to “just be a Christian” sounds modest. It is actually a strong theological position, with a specific lineage. It produces real strengths (unity, biblical focus) and real weaknesses (repeating old heresies because no creed catches them; splitting over novel issues because there is no shared confessional framework).

• **Campbell was optimistic about Bible-reading that the New Testament itself is not.** “All honest Christians reading the Bible will reach the same conclusions” was disproven by the Restoration Movement’s own three-way split within a century. Scripture is our final authority; but it reaches us through a church that teaches it — a reality closer to Paul’s instructions in the Pastoral Epistles than to Campbell’s early rhetoric.

• **Weekly Communion and congregational polity remain gifts.** Whatever a modern evangelical congregation thinks of the Restoration Movement’s theological history, its two most distinctive practices — weekly Lord’s Supper and fully congregational polity — are worth serious consideration.

• **The quest for simple New Testament Christianity keeps returning.** Every generation of American evangelicals, roughly every forty years, produces another “let’s just be New Testament Christians” movement. Most of them do not know they are repeating Stone and Campbell. Knowing the history makes the next round of the conversation more honest.

Greek NT (John 17:20–21): ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ ἔκαγῶ ἐν σοί... ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύσῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας.

John 17:20–21 (ESV): “That they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stone's *Last Will and Testament* dissolved a new denomination rather than organize it. Is that holy nonchalance or spiritual escapism? When is it right for a church body to dissolve itself?

2. "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians." Is the second half really compatible with the first? If every Christian should "just be a Christian," does that quietly imply that those with denominational names are something less?

3. Alexander Campbell taught that baptism is the occasion on which God forgives the penitent believer. Most Baptist, Reformed, and Methodist traditions disagree — the forgiveness happens at faith, baptism is its sign. Which is the better reading of Acts 2:38? Of Romans 6?

4. The Restoration Movement split over whether instrumental music in worship is permissible because the New Testament does not mention it. Where else does the "where the Scriptures are silent" principle apply to your congregation's practice — and where does it break down?

5. Most modern American non-denominational churches are, historically speaking, Restoration Movement descendants without knowing it. What would change about how your congregation thinks about itself if it knew its own lineage?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, head of your one church, we thank you for Barton Stone at Cane Ridge and in the Springfield Presbytery; for Thomas Campbell at Washington, Pennsylvania, writing his *Declaration* in poor health; for Alexander Campbell debating for hours and

editing his paper by lamplight; for every “Raccoon” John Smith who ever shook hands across a denominational line. Thank you for their hunger to be “Christians only,” and forgive them and us where that hunger hardened into its own partisanship. Where we inherit their best instincts — biblical seriousness, weekly communion, open table, congregational care — make us faithful stewards. Where we inherit their blind spots, open our eyes by your Word. Unite your people, Lord Jesus, because you prayed for it the night before the cross. Amen.

FURTHER READING

Primary sources:

- Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (1809).
- Stone et al., *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* (1804).
- Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (1839) — his most systematic doctrinal work.
- *The Christian Baptist* (1823–1830) and *The Millennial Harbinger* (1830–1870) — Campbell’s journals.
- The four major Campbell debates (McCalla 1823, Owen 1829, Purcell 1837, Rice 1843) are in print.
- Barton W. Stone, *A Short History of the Life of Barton W. Stone* (1847).

Modern studies:

- Douglas A. Foster et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (2004) — the definitive reference.
- Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (1996).
- Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989) — puts the movement in its American populist context.
- Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (rev. ed. 2002).

- D. Newell Williams et al. (eds.), *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (2013).

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