**THE IRENIC SPRIT OF BARTON W. STONE**

The word irenic means “peaceful.” It conveys the idea of a peace loving spirit: one that is mild, calm, and gentle. It is with reference to a person’s nature or disposition that the word is used in regard to Barton W. Stone. No other implication is to be inferred. Stone was simply a reformer with an irenic spirit. His gentle disposition did not dampen his devotion to the fundamental principles of the Restoration: that the Bible is the supreme authority in religion and that individuals are free to study the Bible and draw their own conclusions as to its truths, without the interference of human creeds, ecclesiastical orders, or individuals that assume lordship over the faith of others. In this study, we will consider some causes of Stone’s irenic spirit, traits essential to his irenic spirit, and the effect of his irenic spirit on his life and work.

**I. The Causes of Stone’s Irenic Spirit.**

We cannot know all the dynamics that molded the irenic spirit of Barton W. Stone, but they include heritage, environment, religion, circumstances, and preferences. He seemingly possessed all the essential ingredients of greatness, except the promotional proclivities of leadership. However, his irenic spirit contributed to his often being relegated to a secondary role in the Restoration Movement. “This conception of Stone and his movement is wholly unwarranted by historical fact. To Stone belongs the priority in time, priority in American experience, priority in the ideal of unity, priority in evangelism, priority in the independency of his movement, priority in the complete repudiation of the Calvinistic system of theology, and, finally, priority in sacrificial devotion to his cause.”1 But consider now some of the influences that helped shape Stone’s gentle and kindly spirit.

To begin with, Stone was born with a sensitive nature. He inherited a quiet and peaceful disposition, which may have been a family trait. It is said of Thomas Stone, his famous second cousin who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, that he was “‘rugged, reticent, and reserved,’ and that ‘his chief characteristic was his quiet, firm demeanor.’ He was ‘absolutely fearless and free from every taint of egotism,’ and that ‘his life might well be emulated in that he did much and said little.’”2

The family belonged to the Church of England and Stone was sprinkled as an infant. But the family was not overtly religious. Stone said: “Indeed, our parson himself mingled in all the sports and pastimes of the people, and was what may be termed a man of pleasure.”3 The Anglican priesthood seems to have had little influence on him. However, he early developed a keen sense of morality. His father died when he was three and his mother moved her large family to Pittsylvania County, Virginia. The frontier community where he was reared was in the backwoods. A biographer says: “Stone was a child of the frontier.” The cooperative spirit among the settlers of that region helped him to see the importance of neighbor helping neighbor.

Stone grew up in the Revolutionary War period. In his ninth year, the British invaded the South, and patriots of his home county went off to fight them. His experiences as a war child indelibly marked his personality. It created in him a love of liberty. In an adjoining county, Patrick Henry inspired the Revolution with his eloquence. Stone said: “From my earliest recollection I drank deeply into the spirit of liberty, and was so warmed by the soul-inspiring draughts, that I could not hear the name of British, or tories, without feeling a rush of blood through the whole system.”4

The conflict created in Stone a hatred of war. He saw the effects of warfare at close range. He said: “Never shall I forget the sorrows of my widowed mother when her sons shouldered their firelocks, and marched away to join the army. Never will the impressions of my own grief be erased from the tablet of my memory, when those scenes occurred. We knew that General Green and Lord Cornwallis would shortly meet in mortal combat not far from us…. Nothing was secure from the depredations of the tories, and of bandits of thieves worse than they…. This was to me, even then, a gloomy day. It was the day when Green and Cornwallis met at Guilford Court-House in North Carolina, about thirty miles distant from us. We distinctly heard the roar of the artillery, and awfully feared the result.”5

The war and its aftermath sullied the land. Stone said: “The soldiers, when they returned home from their war-tour, brought back with them many vices almost unknown to us before; as profane swearing, debaucher, drunkenness, gambling, quarreling and fighting…. These vices soon become general, and almost honorable. Such are universally the effects of war, than which a greater evil cannot assail and afflict a nation. In such society were my youthful days spent; but in these vices I never participated.”6 Stone became a pacifist in carnal conflicts as well as in religious warfare. He was not reluctant to contend for the faith, as he understood it; he had no use for quarreling and fighting, with sectarians or brethren. He saw strife among those trying to follow the Bible in the context of war and its aftermath: it engendered hostility, caused the spiritual death of many, and developed in the antagonists the works of the flesh rather than the fruit of the spirit.

An autocratic teacher also may have aided Stone’s gentle spirit. He said: “I was early sent to school to a very tyrant of a teacher, who seemed to take pleasure in whipping and abusing his pupils for every trifling offence. I could learn nothing through fear of him. When I was called on to recite my lessons to him, I was so affected with fear and trembling, and so confused in mind, that I could say nothing…. Here I must enter my protest against tyrannical and ill-disposed teachers. Such are a curse to any neighborhood in which they may teach. Teachers should be the most patient, self-possessed, and reasonable of men; yet of such firmness as to secure authority and respect. The rod should be rarely used—only in cases of necessity; and then by the arm of mercy.”6 Stone applied these principles to his ministry. He abhorred the disposition of preachers who, like his tyrannical teacher, seemed “to take pleasure in whipping and abusing” their hearers “for every trifling offence.”

In 1796, Stone passed through Charleston, South Carolina, where he for the first time “saw the two extremes of society. He saw ‘splendid palaces’ and ‘a rich profusion of luxuries.’ Against this background of amiability and impressive wealth, he saw the pain and misery of dark-skinned people. This experience marked the awakening of his conscience to on this social evil.”7 In describing this, Stone said: “But in the midst of all this glory, my soul sickened at the sight of slavery in more horrid forms than I had ever seen it before; poor negros! some chained to their work—some wearing iron collars—all half naked, and followed and driven by the merciless lash of a gentleman overseer—distress appeared scowling in every face.”8 The harshness of slavery shocked Stone. He imbibed the spirit later expressed by Abraham Lincoln: “As I would not be a slave, neither would I be a master.” He refused to wear the iron collar of religious tyranny and he never imposed his religious views on others.

While at David Caldwell’s Academy, where he originally planned to study law, Stone took an interest in religion, but tried to resist it. He feared it would incur the displeasure of relatives and friends, make him the object of scorn, and end his plans for worldly honor, wealth, and preferment. But if he rejected it, he believed he would suffer eternal fire? He said: “I impartially weighed the subject and counted the cost.” He chose religion, but the struggle continued. James McGready, the great frontier Presbyterian evangelist, preached at the school. He convinced Stone of sin and showed him the joys of heaven and the horrors of hell, but he could not give him relief. Stone said: “For one year I was tossed on the waves of uncertainty—laboring, praying, and striving to obtain saving faith—sometimes desponding, and almost despairing of ever getting it. The doctrines then publicly taught were, that mankind were so totally depraved, that they could not believe, repent, nor obey the gospel—that regeneration was an immediate work of the Spirit, whereby faith and repentance were wrought in the heart…. *Now* was not *then*… the day of salvation; but it was God’s own sovereign time, and for that time the sinner must wait.”9

Stone again heard McGready, but when the sermon ended, he “lost all hope—all feeling, and had sunk into indescribable apathy.” When McGready asked the state of his mind, Stone said: “I told him his labors were lost upon me—that I was entirely callous. He left me in this gloomy state, without one encouraging word.”10 Stone remained in that state for several weeks and became severely ill. He said: “my strength failed me, and sighs and groans filled my days.” It was while wrestling in hopelessness that he heard William Hodge, another Presbyterian minister whom he described as “a strange young preacher.” Hodge’s sermon had a lasting impact on Stone’s life.

Hodge’s text was, “God is love.” Stone said: “My heart warmed with love for that lovely character described, and momentary hope and joy would rise in my troubled breast. My mind was absorbed in the doctrine—to me it appeared new…. The discourse being ended, I immediately retired to the woods alone with my Bible. Here I read and prayed with various feelings, between hope and fear. But the truth I had just heard, ‘God is love,’ prevailed. Jesus came to seek and save the lost—‘Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out.’ I yielded and sunk at his feet a willing subject. I loved him—adored him—I praised him aloud in the silent night,—in the echoing grove around. I con-fessed to the Lord my sin and folly in disbelieving his word so long—and in following so long the devices of men. I now saw that a poor sinner was as much authorized to believe in Jesus at first, as at last—that *now* was the accepted time, the day of salvation.”11

The greatest impact on Stone’s irenic spirit was the word of God. “The note of a ‘Sermon-on-the-Mount’ primitivism was strong in Stone…. In a day of violent religious controversy in a section of the country that debated public questions with considerable feeling, Stone preached humility and love. He embodied ‘good will’ in his own personal life in such a way that every his severest critics seemed to acknowledge that he was something of a saint…. He attempted to practice the virtues of humility, sacrifice, and patience all of his days. He loved harmony, and the goal of peaceful relations among men, especially Christians, encouraged him to reject controversy, bickering, and quarreling in the churches.”12

Stone’s irenic spirit arose from his innate sensitivity. It was shaped by his social, moral, educational, and religious experiences. And it was honed to a marvelous maturity by the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, as he understood and appropriated these to his life and work.

**II. Traits Essential to Stone’s Irenic Spirit.**

A gentle nature does not dwell in a person apart of from essential underlying and supporting qualities. However, the traits that produce a man like Barton W. Stone must dwell in him to an exceptional degree. Such gentleness is not often associated with a resolute rebel reformer like Stone. In the first issue of the *Christian Messenger*, he wrote: “It is universally acknowledged, by the various sects of Christians, that the religion of Heaven, for centuries past, has fallen far below the excellency and glory of primitive Christianity. The man, who honestly investigates the cause of this declension, and points the proper way of reformation, must certainly be engaged in a work, pleasing to God, and profitable to man. This is our design; and to accomplish this desirable end shall our best exertions be enlisted and engaged.”13

Stone was a fifth generation American. His great-great-great grandfather was the first Protestant governor of Maryland. A maternal ancestor is said to have come to American on the Mayflower. His maternal lineage is traced to English royalty. Yet, in all his writings, he did not mention these things that many might find frequent occasion to boast of, or insert into a sermon as an “illustration.” Stone’s deep humility was Bible based. Regarding the “poor in spirit,” he said: “This humility arises from a knowledge of themselves—of their God—and of others—they have the knowledge of themselves—their weakness, ignorance, depravity and imperfections; they view themselves entirely dependant upon their God for all things.” This was more than exposition. It was the essence of the man. To him, a Christian without humility was “a caricature of religion, unlike the meek and lowly Jesus.”14

“Stone was modest. He esteemed others better than himself. He was free from envy.” He said: “I will not say, there are no faults in brother Campbell; but that there are fewer, perhaps, in him than any man I know on earth; and over these few my love would throw a veil, and hide them from view forever. I am constrained and willingly constrained to acknowledge him the greatest promoter of this Reformation of any living man.”C.C. Ware said: “His attitude toward Campbell proved that he could practice Christian union as well as preach it. This is a fact of pivotal significance in the union of the Christians and Reformers. It hangs on the inherent modesty of Stone.”15

T. M. Allen said: “I doubt whether there ever was a purer, better man that Elder B. W. Stone. His entire life was little else than a practical commentary on the purity of faith and morality of the gospel he professed. While many have denounced him for heresy all, I believe, concede the fact, that the meekness of his temper, quietness of his spirit, his humility were those of a Christian…. Those who are now pleading for the union of Christians upon the Bible alone, are as much indebted to Elder Stone, if not more so, than to any other man…. His object has ever been truth—the union of Christians—the salvation of sinners and not the founding and building up of another sect.”16 Tolbert Fanning wrote of him: “To be sure his talent was not, perhaps, quite so brilliant as some others; but his acquaintance with the Scriptures was extensive and critical, and a more humble, conscientious, and pious man cannot be found. If justice is ever done to his memory, he will be regarded as the first great American reformer,—the man, who, to much purpose, pleaded the ground that the Bible without note, commentary or creed, must destroy antichristian powers, and eventually conquer the world. Although I have heard Father Stone slandered and his views grossly perverted, yet never did I hear mortal man utter a syllable derogatory to his moral worth. A man more devoted to Christianity, has not lived nor died, and many stars will adorn his crown in a coming day.”17

John Rogers stood with Stone, John Smith, and J.T. Johnson in the Kentucky union meetings at Georgetown and Lexington. Rogers said of Stone: “I never knew a man more scrupulously honest and conscientious.”18 Without such honesty he would not have surrendered worldly ambition for divine service. He would not have freed his slaves, denied himself a comfortable salary, and subjected himself to arduous farming and teaching to support his family. He would not have endured scorn and ridicule, misrepre-sentation and slander. Without such honesty, he would never have become the leader of the movement commonly identified by his name. Campbell was never lavish in his praise of Stone, but he once said: “You do not write for victory but for truth … no one could impute to you anything uncandid.”19

When the veil of Calvinism darkened Stone’s soul so that he had no hope of salvation and almost despaired of life, it was that text—“God is love”—coming to him as though a new revelation, that lifted the veil and warmed his heart with hope and joy. “The love of God” so captivated his tender soul that it became the motivating force of his ministry. He constantly emphasized “brotherly love and forbearance” as basic to Christian unity and the Christian life. Even when a stroke slowed his work, it remained his objectives to break the barriers “to Christian love and union.”

Stone’s love for God found expression in his compassion. William West says: “Campbell put more stress on a restoration of New Testament doctrine; Stone placed his emphasis on New Testament love.”20 This may oversimplify their difference, but it is generally true. As Stone’s compassion freed the chattel slave, so it gently lead those in bondage of religious error into the liberty of the gospel. It is not surprising that this good man had compassion even for the beast that conveyed him to his appointments. N.S. Hayes tells of a time when Charles Jones was transporting Stone from town to his father’s farm. Stone thought the young man’s horse was being driven too hard and asked him if he had heard the horse’s prayer to his master. Charles said he had not and Stone related it: “On the hill speed me not, down the hill push me not, on the plain spare me not, and in the barn forget me not.”21

Although not a personal trait, another factor in Stone’s irenic spirit was his belief in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians. “He was a strong believer in the work of the Spirit in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church.”22 This is significant because of its bearing on his irenic spirit. “The primary work of the Spirit for Stone was not to give religious knowledge, but to work moral transformation in people. When the ‘Disciples’ prompted by Walter Scott … used the five finger exercises, Stone adopted the plan…. The five steps used by both Stone and Scott were faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, and gift of the Holy Spirit.”23

Stone regarded the indwelling of the Spirit as essential to the fruit of the Spirit in the Christian’s life, as to success in preaching the gospel to the lost, and to the unity of Christians. He said: “Let every Christian begin the work of Union in himself. Wait upon God, and pray for the promise of the Spirit. Rest not until you are filled with the Spirit. Then, and not till then, will you love your God and Saviour—then and not till then will you love the brethren who bear the image of the heavenly—then you will have the spirit of Jesus to love the fallen world and like him to sacrifice all for their salvation…. The secret is this, the want of this spirit, the spirit of Jesus, is the grand cause of division among Christians: consequently, this spirit restored will be the grand cause of union.”24

In Stone’s view, the indwelling Spirit, bearing in the Christian the fruit of the Spirit, if fully received and displayed, could produce no other kind of spirit but one characterized by humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. These traits were abundantly evident in Stone and contributed directly to his gentle nature in all that he did as a preacher and reformer. Near the end of life, he wrote: “What means so much written on organization? The first link is loose—unfastened—and that link is love. Without this the church may be chained together by human device, but this is not the organization of the head of the Church…. The great secret of Church government has almost been overlooked. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each believer, and member of the church…. Such a church as is composed of such members, is easily governed by the law of Christ, and they need no other…. Let us be filled with the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, and the simple government of Christ will be all sufficient.”25

The character traits essential to the irenic spirit evident in Stone include modesty, humility, meekness, longsuffering, and forbearance. Others that gave a special essence to him include honesty, purity, love, and the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. A person may have an irenic spirit without being a Christian, but Christianity gives such a spirit a hallowed glow that makes it all the more valuable. The irenic spirit of Stone began before he became a Christian, but it matured and mellowed in Christ. A.G. Comings touches on this aspect of Stone’s life when he said: “I regarded him as the greatest of the Christian reformers of this century, because he was great as a Christian.”26

**III. The Effect of Stone’s Irenic Spirit on His Work.**

The influence of Barton W. Stone’s spirit on his life and work is attested by contemporaries. None spoke more eloquently than Alyette Rains, who said: “Goodness was his chief greatness. He was great besides his goodness; but goodness was its crown—his glory was goodness. It was his breastplate and strength. His bitterest opponents were constrained to say, ‘*his moral character is unblameable*.’ His motto was ‘*Christian Union* and the *Bible*, and the *Bible alone*.’ His *Banner* was the *Cross*, gemmed with *Bethlehem’s Star*! His employment was like that of his Master, to do good to the souls and bodies of men. Kindness sat smiling on his brow. Many loved him, because he first loved them. Thus has he embalmed himself in the warm, pure affections of a great multi-tude; and aided in originating, and giving impulse to a reformation wave, whose onward roll shall be commensurate and co-extensive with eternity.”27

It is fair to say that Stone’s irenic spirit took him to unwarranted positions within the expedient bounds of truth and contributed to some positions beyond those bounds. This is a danger in men characterized by Stone’s disposition. However, it may be no greater a danger than the extremes of more aggressive brethren. We have no desire to justify any teaching of Stone that may be inexpedient or erroneous, except to say they were mistakes within an earnest effort to please God and to fully walk in his way. There has never been a preacher of worth, no matter how learned in or committed the will of Christ, who has not missed the mark at some point.

Stone abhorred the party spirit among Christians, which he associated with controversy, name calling, and debating. In 1829 he wrote: “I am disgusted, weary, and sickened, at the spirit and practice of the times. Righteousness and peace, mercy and truth, are so outraged and abused by men, that they appear on the point of forsaking the world entirely. Instead of harmony, discord rages; instead of love, hatred; instead of peace, war; and instead of forbearing, intolerance every where presents her scowling face. Were these things to be seen among the men of the world alone, we should pity and weep over their miseries, and be urgent to reform them. And how pleasant and easy would be the work of reform, if all, who professed religion, were Christians indeed. Truth shining in the humble, holy lives of Christians, has an overwhelming influence, and produces an irresistible effect on the minds of the wicked and profane. But alas! the still small voice of truth is drowned in the din of party strife and unhallowed declamation.”28

It is not surprising that Stone opposed debating, which he believed contributed to and entrenched partyism. To appreciate his attitude, it would be necessary to consider the manner of debating and preaching in his day. The fact that he carried on controversies in his paper shows that it was not the warrior spirit per se to which he objected, but the manner of the warfare and the attitude of the combatants. He spoke favorably of the war that was waged for reformation, saying: “We had to combat for every inch of ground we possessed, and for every fortress we gained.”29 Many debates in the early nineteenth century were more like modern wrestling matches than honorable discussions of differences in search of truth. Men of the frontier liked fighting for its own sake, whether physical, political, or religious.

Stone did not oppose all debating, believing that debates were sometimes necessary. He wrote: “We do not contend against the public defense of the truth as opposed to error if it be conducted aright; but alas! few in our day have christianity enough for such debates. The pride of opinion and the love of victory predominate over the love of truth. We cannot bear to be counted errorists in any opinion or speculation we may have advanced or received, however plainly exposed. Our prejudices are too strong to yield to a contrary doctrine from that we have received by tradition from our fathers. This state of things we fear, will continue until the religion of heaven prevails.”30 However, he tried to maintain an even temper, and perhaps succeeded as well as any man could.

A lack of love, Stone felt, hampered the winning of sectarians to union in Christ. He said they could not be won by derision or insult. In the last year of his life, he observed that: “We should labor in love, in the meekness of wisdom, and plain truth, to convince them. Such arguments alone can prevail, and bring them into the knowledge and acknowledgment of the truth that is in Jesus. Had such a course, connected with an humble, holy life, been pursued by us from the beginning, what incalculable good would have followed? The prejudices of the sects would have been uprooted to a great degree, and the truth received in the love of it by thousands, who have been driven from our assemblies by hard, intolerant speeches,”31

Stone was a peace maker. He saw the *Christian Messenger* as a promoter of peace rather than, as was often the case, an instrument of war. During a suspension of *The Messenger* he said: “‘A paper we greatly need, if only to keep the peace.’ Once he exhorted his fellowservants of the press: ‘We have a superabundance of hard speeches against us by our sectarian neighbors without our adding to the number of them…. ‘Be humble … Avoid all reproachful, irritating language; it genders strife, and cools brotherly love; and may from small beginnings, end in an exterminating war…. Say and do nothing to the injury of a fellow-editor, nor admit into your columns any offensive communi-cations. It will neither add to your celebrity nor interest.’”32

Stone’s main interest in preaching was to save the lost and unite Christians on the Bible. His preaching was distinguished by kindness, love, patience, and forbearance. He taught the truth and exposed error, but aimed to remove from the process the harshness so often associated with it. The difference in temperament between Stone and some brethren was sharply drawn. David Purviance said: “[Stone’s] manner and talent and mine, were somewhat different. He would preach the word and substantiate the truth, but seldom attack the opposite error…. One day I handled Calvinism without gloves. Next morning he said to me, that he thought my preaching yesterday was too hard.”33

His view of fellowship affected his attitude toward unity. Some accused him of laying his basis of unity upon a denial of biblical doctrine. In reply, he dealt with two connected aspects of unity: doctrine and fellowship. He said: “We must distinguish between a doctrine of the Bible, and human opinion of that doctrine. No Christian of any name among us, but receives every doctrine of the Bible, clearly stated; yet Christians may have various opinions respecting the doctrine. Here let the old neglected virtues of forbearance and long suffering be cultivated, and the spirit of humility and brother love be maintained, and the soul-revolting idea of a general union of Christians will be banished, and religion in its glory, be restored.”34 Stone thought that only those whose conduct was ungodly or immoral, or whose teaching led to or was directly connected with sin should be excluded from Christian fellowship.

Upon no subject did the irenic spirit of Stone manifest itself more obtrusively that on the unity of Christians. In an 1828 editorial, he wrote: “We have … stated our convictions that [Christian Union] can never be obtained, while the various parties are tenacious of their creeds and names. The reasons by which our convictions have been produced, are, we think, irrefutable. On no other foundation can the parties ever meet, than on the Bible alone, without note or comment; and in no other name will they ever unite, but in *that* given to the disciples at Antioch—CHRISTIAN. But should all the professors of Christianity reject all their various creeds and names, and agree to receive the Bible alone, and be called by no other name than Christian, will this unite them? No: we are fully convinced that unless they all possess the spirit of that book and name, they are far, very far, from Christian union.”35

Four months before the union of Christians and Reformers began in 1831, Stone said they were united in spirit and he saw no reason to prevent their union in form. Then he said: “For nearly 30 years we have taught that Sectarianism was anti-christian, and that all Christians should be united in the one body of Christ—the same [the Reformers] teach. We *then* and ever since, have taught that authoritative creeds and confessions were the strong props of sectarianism, and should be given to the moles and bats—they teach the same. We have from that time preached the gospel to every creature to whom we had access, and urged them to believe and obey it—that its own evidence was sufficient to produce faith in all that heard it, that the unrenewed sinner must, and could believe it unto justification and salvation—and that through faith the Holy Spirit of promise, and every other promise of the New Covenant, were given. They claim the same doctrine…. We rejected all names, but Christian—they have acknowledged it most proper, but seem to prefer another. We acknowledge a difference of opinion from them on some points. We do not object to their opinions as terms of fellowship between us. But they seriously and honestly object to some of ours as reasons why they cannot unite.”36

Campbell showed little interest in Stone’s overtures for union. His response was less than cordial. William West writes: “He discovered a ‘squinting at some sort of precedence or priority in the claims’ of the Christians in having discovered the principles of ‘the Reformation’ before his own followers appeared on the American religious scene…. Obviously, Campbell did not want Stone or any other group to diminish his stature as the initiator of a completely ‘new Reformation.”37 He allowed that he could in good conscience unite with many of Stone’s group, but not immediately. He wanted “further correspondence” on the subject.

Here for once Stone’s devotion to unity overrode his irenic spirit and he answered Campbell’s negative and condescending response with a stinging reply. “Campbell was doubtless surprised that a kind and mild-mannered man could be so pointed in his writing.” Stone said: “Bro. A. Campbell has made some strictures on my essay on union, and the name *Christian*. These I have carefully read…. I once heard an old Baptist preacher say, that the enemies of christian [sic] Union, were the world, the flesh, and the Devil; and I will add, said he, the fourth, more mischievous than all, the preachers…. Since that time the impression has remained indelible on my mind, and to good effect. I am aware of the deceptibility of the human mind, and of its strong propensity to make for ourselves a *great name*. This was the spirit of the builders of ancient Babylon ... Until the proud spirit sink at the feet of Jesus, and we become cordially and joyfully willing to decrease, that Christ may increase, I cannot anticipate as near that happy period of the church, so much talked of and prayed for at this time.”38

West makes two significant statements regarding Campbell’s rejection of Stone’s proposals on union. “Thus historians have missed an important clue to the intense personal feeling existing between Campbell and Stone on the eve of the celebrated union between the Christians and Reformers.”39 Second, he says: “Historians have not realized how narrowly the Christians and Reformers escaped coming together. Campbell doubtless would hereafter have remained adamant in his attitude, thus closing the door permanently. Other leaders, however, believed that immediate unity was desirable and Stone’s practical interest in unity led him to participate in conferences on unity before controversial questions were settled. Even while Campbell was closing the door, plans were being made for meetings between the Reformers and the Christians in Lexington and Georgetown, Kentucky.”40

While the resounding echoes of Campbell’s slamming door in the December issue of the *Millennial Harbinger* were reverberating from the hills of Bethany, in that same month, Stone simply ignored his obstructionist brother’s bolted door and proceeded with the now famous union meetings that led to the greatest period of apostolic Christianity in modern times. We need not review these here, except to say that if the irenic spirit of Stone had not prevailed, if he had not chosen to surrender any claim he may have had as the head of a great religious party, or if he had pursued an embittering battle with Campbell over unity, the union of the Christians and Reformers might never had occurred.

William West says: “[Stone] received little or no practical help from … Campbell, who constantly raised objections and placed obstacles in the path of unity. Nevertheless, Stone held to his goal, undaunted by the failure [of Campbell] to make concessions and to cooperate actively in the movement for unity. With … Campbell, Christian unity would be the culmination of a primitive gospel plan in history which would find its epic expression in the introduction of the Millennium; with … Stone, Christian unity would be the fulfillment of Christian trust, love, and concession based on the Sermon-on-the-Mount type of primitive Gospel which is actually expressed in every present moment of time…. For Stone, the spirit of love manifested by Jesus and his disciples must underlie any attempts to lay foundations for the unity of the Christian community.”41

**Conclusion.** Barton W. Stone died at Hannibal, Missouri, November 9, 1844. His gentle and serene spirit that guided him through life helped ease his troubled passing. Dr. David T. Morton, who attended his death, said: “I esteem it one of the greatest privileges of my life, to have been permitted to witness the bright display of faith and hope—patience and resignation, manifested by him during a series of painful paroxysms, more lingering and acute, than ordinarily falls to the lot of expiring mortals…. While beholding his sufferings, the question involuntarily suggested itself to my mind, Why does our kind heavenly Father, in whose service he spent his life, permit his aged and faithful servant thus to linger in torturing pain to the close of his life? The next moment perhaps, found me enraptured with admiration at his patience and resignation—thus furnishing myself, an answer to the query. For had not Abraham believed the word of the Almighty, and father Stone not died with lingering pain, we could never have been exhorted by the faith of the one, nor encouraged by the patience of the other, when surrounded by similar trying circumstances.”42

James D. Murch identified three things that he believed constituted Stone’s most important impact on the Restoration Movement. “His major contribution lay in his irenic spirit, his promotion of practical unity, and his deep concern for the salvation of lost souls.”43 In this, Stone left us a marvelous legacy. What might have become of the movement if the irenic spirit of Stone had not tempered the more structured and unbending goals of Alexander Campbell? What effect would it have had on the church since then if men of irenic spirit were all excluded from the churches of Christ? Men like T. B. Larimore might have been cast out, but the same standard might also have eliminated David Lipscomb, E. G. Sewell, F. B. Srygley, and H. Leo Boles, who, although more like Campbell in their teaching, possessed a Stone-like attitude toward brethren whose opinions differed from theirs.

Unity on the Bible alone is probably impossible without the influence of men of irenic spirit. While there appears to be a constant need for men such as Alexander Campbell was in his *Christian Baptist* days, there is also a need for men of the gentle, kind, and compassionate spirit, such as characterized Barton W. Stone. May the time never come when it will be all of one or all of the other? We pray that all may imbibe enough of Stone’s spirit for us to respect one another and recognize the value of each in the cause of Christ. The church needs sons of thunder, but it also needs sons of consolation.

Finally, Stone believed that unity on the Bible alone, however near it may be to perfection in practice, can never be truly achieved without the spirit of Christ, and he bound that emphatically with the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit in Christians. This, he believed, wrought in them a moral transformation reflected in the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. “Against such there is no law.” Those whose lives are adorned by these virtues cannot be condemned by any law of God or man, for the whole purpose and design of the moral law of God is fulfilled in those who have the Spirit of God, which produces this righteous fruit in their hearts.

Earl Kimbrough

**Notes**

1 C.C. Ware, *The Life of Barton Warren Stone*.

2 Ibid.

3 John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone*.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone*.

8 Rogers, *Biography*.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 West, *Stone*.

13*Christian Messenger*, November 1826.

14 Ibid, November 1841.

15 Ware, *Stone*.

16 Ibid.

17 *Christian Review*, December 1844.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 West, *Stone*.

21 Ware, *Stone*.

22 Ibid.

23 West, *Stone*.

24 *Christian Messenger*, June 1841.

25 Ibid, August 18 .

26 Ware, *Stone*.

27 Rogers, *Biography*.

28 *Christian Messenger*, September 1830.

29 Ibid, August 1844.

30 Ibid, May 1844.

31 Ibid, September 1844.

32 Ware, *Stone*.

33 West, *Stone*.

34 *Christian Messenger*, March 1827.

35 Ibid, December 1828.

36 Ibid, August 1831.

37 West, *Stone*.

38 *Christian Messenger*, November 1831.

39 West, *Stone*.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 *Christian Messenger*, December 1844.

43 James D. Murch, *Christians Only*.