

Influence of the Kentucky Revival Upon the Christian Movement  
225th Anniversary of the Kentucky Revival  
Scott Harp, October 11, 2025

## Introduction

I want to begin by expressing my deep appreciation to the Rulys, the Moores, and the Red River Meeting House Association for inviting me to be part of this wonderful event. Some years ago, I had the privilege of speaking here during Heritage Festival Weekend, and I'm honored to return for the 225th anniversary of the Kentucky Revival — one of the most extraordinary movements in American religious history.

## The Christian Movement

When we talk about the Christian Movement in Kentucky, the phrase can sound a little strange. After all, everyone who follows Jesus calls themselves a Christian. But this particular “movement” was a conscious effort to return to the simple faith, unity, and practice of the church we read about in the New Testament.

From the very beginning, Christianity centered on Jesus' Great Commission — “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believes not shall be damned.” Mark 16:15-16. Just days later, at Pentecost, the apostles began doing exactly that. In Acts 2, three thousand people were baptized into Christ, forming the first church — followers of Jesus who simply believed, repented, were baptized, and were committed to steadfastly following the apostles' teachings, Acts 2:42.

Over time, however, the purity of that message began to erode. As the centuries passed, man-made creeds, councils, and denominational divisions clouded what had once been clear. By the time America was young, many believers longed to strip away those layers of tradition and return to the Bible alone as their authority.

And in Kentucky, that longing became a movement — a movement to “do Bible things in Bible ways,” and “call Bible things by Bible names,” to “speak where the Bible speaks, and to remain silent where the Bible is silent,” to simply be the church you read about in the New Testament, nothing added and nothing taken away.

## Setting the Stage: North Carolina Roots

To understand how that movement began, we have to go back a few years before the great revival — to North Carolina in the late 1700s. This region, especially around Guilford County, was a stronghold of Presbyterianism. There were two branches — the Old Lights and the New Lights.

The “Old Lights” held to traditional Calvinism — that God had already chosen who would be saved, and in His own time would make that clear. The “New Lights,” on the other hand,

believed that people could experience the Spirit's power directly, and be drawn to conversion through revival preaching and heartfelt repentance.

One young man growing up in that world was James McGready (1760-1817), who would later become one of the central figures of the Kentucky Revival. Though raised among the Old Lights, he came under the influence of a remarkable teacher — Dr. David Caldwell (1725-1824), a Princeton graduate and a “New Light” preacher who also ran a small log school called the Guilford Academy. It was there that McGready studied as a boy — and later, another student named Barton W. Stone would do the same.

### Barton W. Stone: A Seeker of Truth

Barton Warren Stone was born in Maryland in 1772. His father died when he was very young, and a few years later, his mother moved the family to Guilford County, North Carolina. As a teenager, in 1791, Barton enrolled in Guilford Academy, intending to study law — but God had other plans.

At school, he encountered passionate preaching that stirred the hearts of students. The most powerful of those preachers was James McGready — a man with a commanding presence and a voice that thundered like a storm. McGready's sermons convicted listeners of their sin and painted vivid pictures of eternity.

At first, young Barton was put off by such fiery preaching, seeing it as harsh and unloving. But later, through the gentler messages of another preacher, William Hodge (1747-1819), who emphasized God's mercy and grace, Stone's heart began to soften. He turned his life over to God and entered the ministry himself.

During his time in the region, the relationship that Stone had with McGready deepened. Stone had deep respect for McGready, who was 12 years his senior.

Key Year — By 1796, Barton Stone was ordained as a Presbyterian preacher. That same year, McGready moved west into Kentucky — to Logan County — and began preaching with great zeal among the frontier Presbyterian churches here. Stone soon followed west, accepting calls to two small congregations — Concord and Cane Ridge, near Paris, in Northern Kentucky.

### The Spirit of Revival

By the turn of the 19th century, Kentucky was a rugged and spiritually dry frontier. Churches were scattered, pastors were few, and morality was often at a low ebb — Rogue's Harbor! But something was stirring — a movement of prayer, conviction, and repentance that would sweep across the region, “like fire in dry stubble, driven by a strong wind” as Stone would later describe it.

For the sake of time, let me jump to the spring of 1801, when Barton Stone decided to travel down to Logan County to see firsthand what people were calling “the great revival.” What he witnessed here changed his life.

At those meetings on Gasper, Mudd and here at Red Rivers, he saw hundreds of people deeply moved by the preaching — men and women confessing sin, crying out for mercy, and rejoicing in forgiveness. Stone later wrote that he watched people he knew well — once indifferent to religion — falling as if dead, and sometimes, many hours later, awakening in repentance and rising with joy and peace. He saw many different “exercises” and wrote about at least seven of them in his autobiography, a few years before his death in 1844. He recalled, “My conviction was complete that it was a good work — the work of God.”

He returned home to Cane Ridge filled with holy excitement. The following Sunday, he took for his text, Mark 16:15-16, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believes not shall be damned.” He related to all about what he had witnessed—and the same power he saw in Southern Kentucky, began falling upon his congregation. People wept, prayed, and shouted praises to God. It spread from Cane Ridge to Concord, and soon across the countryside.

By mid-summer, camp meetings were taking place every weekend, and the numbers were growing weekly through May and June: 4000, and then 8000, and 10,000 in different locations in Northern Kentucky.

### The Great Cane Ridge Revival

After about a six-week break for farmers to harvest crops and other life-business (Stone made a quick trip back to SK to marry a young Muhlenberg County girl named Elizabeth Campbell on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. He was 29, and she was 17. They quickly got back to North Kentucky.

Then came August of 1801 — the famous Cane Ridge Revival. What happened there remains one of the most remarkable events in American church history.

As Stone described it, “The roads were literally crowded with wagons, carriages, horsemen, and people on foot, all moving toward the solemn camp.” Estimates vary, but somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 people gathered on that Kentucky hillside — Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and many others — all united in a shared desire for renewal.

Multiple preachers spoke at once in different parts of the camp. The sound of singing, praying, and shouting filled the air day and night. People fell under deep conviction, then rose rejoicing in forgiveness. Stone said, “We all engaged in singing the same songs, all united in prayer, all preached the same things — free salvation by faith and repentance.

For nearly a week, the revival continued — day and night — until food supplies ran out. People returned home transformed. And they carried that same revival spirit back to their communities across Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee.

## From Revival to Restoration

The effects of the Kentucky Revival were both **spiritual** and **structural**. While many rejoiced, others — especially within the established Presbyterian hierarchy — were suspicious. Some accused the revival preachers of emotionalism or fanaticism. Soon, tensions rose between the “Old Light” Presbyterians and the “New Light” revival leaders.

When the Synod of Kentucky began to discipline and even expel some of the revival ministers, a group of them — including Barton W. Stone and several others of his Presbyterian allies — met to decide their future. In 1803, they formed what they called the Springfield Presbytery — but even that, they realized, was too much of a human institution.

So, in June 1804, at Cane Ridge, they shared a short but powerful document titled “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.”

In it, they declared that this new presbytery would “die and be dissolved” — that all titles, creeds, and human authorities would end — and that Christians should take the Bible alone as their only rule of faith and practice. They wanted to be known simply as “Christians,” belonging to no denomination but identifying themselves with the single church Jesus built beginning in Acts 2.

That moment marked the birth of what we call the Christian Movement in Kentucky — a movement dedicated to unity, simplicity, and a return to apostolic Christianity.

## Growth and Legacy

In the years that followed, this movement grew rapidly. By 1807 there were more than twenty congregations in Kentucky and Ohio, and by the 1830s, thousands of believers, spreading to Tennessee, Alabama, Illinois, Indiana & Missouri, identified simply as “Christians” — following the pattern of the New Testament church. Ultimately, it spread all over the nation & around the world.

As stated in John 1:12 – “to those who believe He gives the power to become children of God.” When and wherever revival is seen, it has the potential, if directed solely by the Scriptures to bring about what Jesus intended—His church in every age.

Barton W. Stone continued to preach that simple message: that believers should take the Scriptures alone as their guide, lay aside denominational divisions, and find unity in Christ. Later, his followers would join with those of another reformer, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), to strengthen that message — forming what became known as the Restoration Movement.

But at its heart, it all began here — with the Kentucky Revival — where spiritual fire, unity, and a hunger for truth burned brightly on the frontier.

## Reflections and Application

So, what can we take from this today, 225 years later?

First, revival begins with a heart renewed by God's Word. The men and women of that era weren't looking to create a new denomination. They simply wanted to return to the Bible, to the purity and passion of the first-century church.

Second, unity comes through humility. Stone and his companions were willing to lay down every human creed and title to stand together on the simple foundation of Christ. As they wrote in the Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery of June 1804, "There is but one body, and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism."

And third, the fire of revival spreads through testimony. What began in the hearts of a few in Logan County spread across Kentucky and beyond — not by programs or organizations, but by people whose lives had been changed by the Word Of God, and who could not keep silent.

## Conclusion

The Kentucky Revival reminds us that when God's Spirit moves, through the gospel, and as Hebrews 4:12 says, through the living and active and sharper than any two edged sword, WORD of God, barriers fall, hearts are softened, and lives are transformed. It reminds us that faith is not just about doctrine — it's about surrender to the truth that doctrine teaches. It's about men and women hearing the call of Christ and saying, "We will follow Jesus alone." Today churches of Christ seek to carry this banner, not in a spirit of arrogance or exclusivity, but humbly, with a sense of respect for biblical authority in life and in all religious practice. Our invitation to all is to come and join us as we seek to experience true 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond.

May we, like Barton W. Stone, and those early Christians in Kentucky, seek not to start something new, but to restore what Jesus began — a church united by love, grounded in Scripture, and alive with the Spirit of God.

Thank you!

Scott Harp = Christian  
Crittenden Drive church of Christ  
CrittendenDrivechurchOfChrist.com  
TheRestorationMovement.com  
[sdharp1@gmail.com](mailto:sdharp1@gmail.com)  
770-652-1611

### The Last Will And Testament Of The Springfield Presbytery

The Presbytery of Springfield, sitting at Caneridge, in the county of Bourbon, being through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily, and in perfect soundness and composure of mind; but knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our Last Will and Testament, in manner and form following, viz:

Imprimis. We will that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large: for there is but one body and one spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

Item. 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.

Item. We will, that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that, the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Item. 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, [2] traditions of men, the rudiments of the world. And let none henceforth take this honor to himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.

Item. We will, that the church of Christ assumes her native right of internal government--try her candidates for the ministry, as to their soundness in the faith, acquaintance with experimental religion, gravity and aptness to teach; and admit no other proof of their authority, but Christ speaking in them. We will that the church of Christ look up to the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into his harvest; and that she resumes her primitive right of trying those who say they are Apostles, and are not.

Item. We will, that each particular church, as a body, actuated by the same spirit, choose her own preacher, and support him by a free will offering without written call or subscription--admit members--remove offences; and never henceforth delegate her right of government to any man or set of men whatever.

Item. We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose: for it is better to enter into life having one book, than having many to be cast into hell.

Item. We will, that preachers and people, cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance, pray more and dispute less; and while they behold the signs of the times, look up and confidently expect that redemption draweth nigh.

Item. We will, that our weak brethren, who may have been wishing to make the Presbytery of Springfield their king, and wot not what is now become of it, betake themselves to the rock of ages, and follow Jesus for the future.

Item. We will, that the Synod of Kentucky examine every member, who may be suspected of having departed from the Confession of faith, and suspend every such suspected heretic immediately; in order that the oppressed may go free, and taste the sweets of Gospel liberty.

Item. We will, that Ja-----, the author of two letters lately published in Lexington, be encouraged in his zeal to destroy partyism. We will, moreover, that our past conduct be examined into by all who may have correct information; but let foreigners beware of speaking evil of things which they know not.

Item. Finally we will, that all our sister bodies, read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined, and prepare for death before it is too late.

Springfield Presbytery, June 28th, 1804. } (L. S.)

Witnesses: ROBERT MARSHALL, JOHN DUNLAVY, RICHARD M'NEMAR, B. W. STONE, JOHN THOMPSON, DAVID PURVIANCE.