

cu-d03

Barton W. Stone to the Christians in churches of Christ

Note that the essay which follows
can be read in its original form on
the internet at

http://stone-campbell.org/Stone/an_address_to_the_churches_of_ch.html.

Reprinted by Ray Downen in 2011

An Address to the Churches of Christ

by Barton W. Stone

I am now near three score years of age — near 36 of which I have labored in word and doctrine. I labored seven years with the Presbyterians, and should have continued with them if they had permitted me to read and understand the scriptures for myself and to preach them according to my understanding of them. But this I was not permitted to do.

Honesty I preferred to hypocrisy, liberty to slavery, poverty to wealth, a good conscience to ease and popularity, and the glory of God, and the honor of his truth, to every other consideration. Therefore, with a few other free spirits, I resigned all my friends, my ease, my good name, my living, to Jesus and his truth, determined to follow him wherever His word should direct me. By any human authoritative creed, confessed to be fallible, I could not, I would not be bound. Determined to be free myself, I dared not attempt to impose such a creed on others.

2 I thought if Presbyterians had a divine warrant to exclude me and my brethren from the ministry because we could not conscientiously receive and preach their peculiar doctrines then must they have a divine warrant to exclude every other sect that does not receive and preach their doctrines. If they have not this right to exclude other sects, they had none to exclude us. All sects claim this right; and were they to act up to it, they would be mutually excluded by one another. Can this be of God? As much so as the claims of the Pope to infallibility.

I confess I see no difference unless it be this that the Pope boldly claims to be infallible. The sects deny infallibility in word but act upon the *principles* of infallibility, for they exclude from the kingdom (such they call their sectarian establishments) all who cannot receive and proclaim the doctrines of their creed. Would they dare do this if they did not really think that their creed was infallible?

There are two kinds of human authoritative creeds. One is drawn up in articles, and written or printed in a book. The other is a set of doctrines or opinions received but not committed to writing or printed in a book.

Each of these kinds of creeds is used for the same purpose, which is to exclude from fellowship the man who dares to dissent from them. Of the two, we certainly give the preference to creeds written and published; because we can then read them, and form a more correct judgment of the doctrines contained in them.

There are some among us very clamorous against written or printed creeds who yet have a creed of their own of

which they are as tenacious as any other sectarian is of **3**
his written creed; and they are equally intolerant against
those who dissent from their doctrines or opinions.

From several sources we have received accounts of
some (I am sorry to say teachers too) who have received it
as an article of their unwritten creed that none should be
baptized but such as are saved and have their sins forgiven,
and who have in themselves the evidence of that forgive-
ness and salvation.

These teachers, therefore, oppose zealously those who
act up to the old commission, “preach the gospel to every
creature. He that believes and is baptized *shall be saved*,”
and “Repent and be baptized for the remission of sins,” etc.
Do they preach that a man must be saved from his sins,
and must have his sins remitted before baptism? This is
their creed; and the plain scripture to the contrary must be
frittered away, in order that their creed may stand se-
curely.

I have no doubt that many brethren who differ on this
subject do not understand it. Disputations, founded on ig-
norance, are generally very warm, and always endless.
Many advocates for the doctrine of being baptized for the
remission of sins have, by their ignorance of the doctrine,
done infinite injury to the cause, and have given just rea-
son to others to be alarmed and to oppose their real error.
And these opposers have done equal injury to the cause,
and have by their unguarded, not to say unchristian zeal,
given just cause to others to be offended. My dear contend-
ing brethren, will you candidly attend to an old servant and
brother while he pleads for reconciliation?

4 Does the advocate for remission of sins by baptism, plead that by baptism the heart of a sinner is changed — that he is saved from the love and reign of sin? If he does, he is entirely ignorant of the doctrine, for this change must take place *before* he is a fit subject for baptism. He must believe and repent or reform before he should be baptized. And what is reformation but a change of heart?

Can a man be said to be reformed from sin, and yet love sin? No. He cannot. By faith in Jesus who lived, died and rose again the sinner is reconciled to God, and consequently hates sin and is determined to reform and turn from all iniquity, and to obey God in all things.

Yet he is not already saved from the condemnation of sin. His sins are not yet remitted or forgiven. He is therefore commanded by the authority of Jesus to be baptized for the remission of sins, for salvation. He submits to be baptized, and now the pardoning act of God is passed. He is forgiven. Wrath and guilt are removed.

A poor criminal is chained in jail, condemned to be hung. The Governor offers to save him from this penalty of death, or to remit or forgive his sin, which is the same thing as to save him from being hung, provided he will reform and be immersed.

The terms are proposed. The poor criminal, seeing the mercy, goodness and favor of the governor, is brought to contrition and melted to tears. He is heartily determined on reformation. “O,” says he, “I am determined to sin no more. I do and will reform.”

Is he now forgiven? No: he has complied with but one term. He must still be immersed in water. He does not cavil, but immediately is immersed. Now he is pardoned. "Now" says he, "I am saved from the gallows. Now my sin is remitted. I know I am forgiven, if the word of the governor be true." So says the poor repentant sinner who in the name of Jesus is immersed for the remission of sins. Baptism is a confirmation and seal of his pardon.

What we understand by reformation then is a change of heart. This by some is called regeneration. With such I have no dispute while we believe the same thing. Regeneration, we believe, is a change of our state, and not only of our heart. It is to be inducted into the kingdom of God, into the full privileges of the new dispensation.

But is nothing more necessary besides faith, reformation and immersion? Yes. Peter promises, "And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

This is the crowning blessing of all blessings. This Spirit we are said to receive through faith. Gal. 3, 14. "This Spirit is also given to them whose faith causes the person to *obey him*." Acts, 5, 32. It is given to them that ask Him.

God's plan appears to be this, that whoever believes, reforms, is baptized, or obeys the gospel shall be saved, shall receive remission of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But, says the opposer of the doctrine, "Is baptism regeneration?" I answer; no, not in your understanding of the word, as meaning a change of heart; this change we think is reformation, which must precede baptism.

6 But, you may still say, can God forgive none but the immersed? We are assured he will forgive the immersed penitent because his word has assured us he will. We cannot be so sure that he will forgive the unimmersed penitent. Could a person be brought by doctrine to believe that faith and repentance only were necessary to remission, and that baptism was entirely unnecessary to this effect, he might receive this word with gladness, and this he might take for evidence of remission; but we should ask the important question, “What says the scripture?”

We have no doubt that multitudes have been changed, are pious, and will ultimately be saved with an everlasting salvation who have not been immersed. We are far from saying, that God has so bound himself by His plan, that He cannot pardon an humble penitent without immersion! Far from us be this sentiment.

But say some; “Campbellism we will oppose.” In this we wish you success. But beware lest you are either beating the air, not understanding what it is; or lest you oppose the truth of God, because bro. Campbell has advocated it. There is danger, and therefore, you ought to be cautious.

But says another, “I am determined to oppose Stone's Arianism, and Socinianism, with all my might.” Amen! But be sure, you fight not an image made by yourself or by others, and call it Stone's doctrine; and beware lest in your opposition you lift your arm against the truth of God and do a great injury to yourself. Campbell and Stone are but fallible men, and therefore should not be followed farther than they follow Christ.

Our opinions we wish no man to receive as truth, nor do we desire to impose them on any as tests of Christian fellowship. This is the principle on which we as Christians commenced our course many years ago, and I cannot but view those as departed from this principle who will not bear with their brethren because they believe in baptism for the remission of sins and because they meet every Lord's day to worship the Lord in praying, singing, exhorting, and breaking bread.

Oh brethren, these are subjects concerning which many of us differ. But for this difference we ought not separate from communion and Christian fellowship. All believe that immersion is baptism. Why should they who submit to the one baptism contend and separate because they do not exactly view every design of it alike?

We have opposition and war from every sect. They appear to be combined against us. Shall we fight one another? We, who profess to stand upon the Bible alone, and contend that opinions of truth should not be made terms of fellowship? Shall we be intolerant toward each other because we may differ in our opinions?

Forbid it, Heaven! If you think your brother in error, labor in the spirit of love and meekness to convince him. But imposing zeal against him will only harden him against any good impression you would make. It will probably stir up strife and ultimately destroy the love which is the bond of union.

Preach the word, was an apostolic command to a young preacher. It would be well for us all to attend to it dili-

8 gently. In doing this we shall both save ourselves and others. This cannot be done by preaching our opinions.

Let the unity of Christians be our polar star. To this let our eyes be continually turned, and to this let our united efforts be directed — that the world may believe, and be saved. A little longer forbearance with each others' weakness, and truth will triumph. But let that man who opposes Christian union, remember that he opposes the prayer of Jesus and the salvation of the world. How will he meet his Judge?

B. W. Stone, Editor.

[Christian Messenger]