

“God Has Spoken: Scripture in the Restoration Movement - Experientialism, Creedalism, and Scripture: The Search for Confidence in the Early Restoration Movement”

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As a backdrop to our study, it is necessary to identify some terms and concepts. Chiefly among them are the words **Experientialism**, **Creedalism**, and **Scripture**.

When we speak of **Scripture**, we identify the Bible interpreted correctly to give man all he needs for salvation, as Paul wrote his student Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (ESV).

**Creedalism** is represented in bodies of man-made documents anterior to the Bible, such as those appearing in at least 21 Ecumenical Councils of Catholicism down through the ages. Most noted would be the first Council of Nicaea in 325AD and the Second Vatican Council of the Vatican from 1962-1965. Then, in Presbyterianism, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1640, and the Baptists adopted a version of it in the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742. All these councils, creeds, and the like are deemed equal to, if not superior to, the teachings of Scripture by their respective denominations.

**Experientialism** finds its origins deeply embedded in the teachings of John Calvin. It has long been the consensus among Calvinists that a relationship with God can only be attained through what appears as random, yet pre-ordained, choices of God, immaterial to the kind of life one lives. Identified in their acrostic, TULIP theories, the first tenet being Total Hereditary depravity, man is so totally depraved in his lost state through the sin of Adam, incapable of doing anything about his sinful state, that he in no way can accomplish salvation on his own. Yet, God, of His own will, appearing most random to man, chooses those he has pre-determined to elect to be saved while rejecting the greater portion of mankind to endure a Devil’s hell. God elects this small group of people through His Irresistible Grace, thus eliminating the ability for man to exercise free choice. They believe that Jesus came to die on the cross only for the elect, and once they are saved, they cannot, through any action of his own, lose their salvation. Thus, Calvinists see experientialism as the Divine instigator in the salvation process.

Enter, The Kentucky Revival of 1799-1801 – James McGready was born on the Monongahela in western Pennsylvania in 1763. Not long after his birth, his family moved to North Carolina, near present-day Greensboro. He returned to the region of his birth for education and attended a log school in Canonsburg, then Virginia, run by Presbyterian minister John McMillon. Incidentally, Dr. McMillon had been ordained by the Chartiers Presbytery, the same presbytery Thomas Campbell was temporarily preaching under after arriving in America in 1807. In fact, McMillon’s school later became Jefferson College and ultimately

merged with Washington College, Washington, PA, the campus of which was across the road from the Campbell home when Alexander arrived in 1809. Though, to our knowledge, their ministries never crossed, be sure to note the proximity of McGready to the Campbells, just 20 or so years before their arrival in America. But, this was the school McGready attended, and ultimately “got religion” and joined the Presbyterian church in 1786.

Within 3 years, McGready was back in North Carolina preaching in the neighborhood surrounding Dr. Caldwell’s log school in, again, what is today the city of Greensboro. It was McGready’s preaching that indirectly led to the conversion of one young student by the name of Barton W. Stone. When I say indirectly, McGready’s preaching style resembled that of Jonathon Edwards’ famous “Sinner in Hands of An Angry God!” It was his style that initially led to Stone’s rejection of Christianity. However, soon thereafter, it was under the calmer and more grace-filled, heartwarming preaching of William Hodge, a former student of Caldwell, that led Stone to “get religion” and become a Presbyterian.

By 1799, Stone, Hodge, and McGready had made their way across the Cumberland Gap to Northern Tennessee and Kentucky, where they preached for their respective Presbyterian congregations. Hodge went to Shiloh church in Sumner County, Tennessee, Stone to northern Kentucky, to Cane Ridge and Concord in Bourbon County, and McGready to the south-central part of the state in Logan County, where he preached for three churches, one on Mudd River, one on Gasper River, and one on Red River. James Smith’s History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church states that all these churches during this time “were in a state of coldness and declension, and many of the members were strangers to regeneration.”<sup>1</sup> Reporting on the revival that followed, McGready “laid before the few living Christians of his charge, the desolations of Zion, the promises of their covenant God, and the efficacy of faithful, persevering and effectual prayer.”<sup>2</sup> McGready wrote, “When we consider the word and promises of a compassionate God, to the poor lost family of Adam, we find the strongest encouragement for Christians to pray in faith—to ask in the name of Jesus for the conversion of their fellow men.”<sup>3</sup> Smith further explained that “Mr. M’Gready, in his public exhibitions at this time, uniformly preached repentance, faith, and regeneration.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Experientialism’s Place In Salvation In The Kentucky Revival**

“Experiences,” sometimes called “exercises,” among groups appeared indiscriminately. Young and old, women and men, saved and those considered unsaved, were recipients of these demonstrations of what was believed to be spiritual activity and having the appearance through their awakening as God approved.

In May 1797, McGready reported on the “conversion of a female member of the church in full communion, who found that her hope of salvation was false and delusive, upon which she became deeply convicted, and in a short time obtained peace and joy in believing. On experiencing this happy change from death unto life, and no doubt moved upon by the Holy Spirit, this new-born Christian visited her relatives, friends, and neighbors from house to house; warned them of their danger, and earnestly exhorted them to repent, and seek an

interest in the blood of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> So, those who had “experiences” became extremely evangelistic.

Later, when Barton W. Stone attempted to explain what was happening during the Cane Ridge Revival in August 1801, he spoke of various and peculiar “exercises” that, though uncertain was the actual work of the Holy Spirit, he was convinced it was in some way the work of God. Some have accused Stone and others of having these camp meetings simply for the opportunity to experience the exercises, but in his thinking—as he later related in his autobiography—all the preachers, including representatives from the Methodists and Baptists as well as Presbyterian, were, and I quote, “of one mind and one soul, and the salvation of sinners seemed to be the object of all.”<sup>6</sup>

It is well worth reading Stone’s autobiography, which details the mindset of the day. Chapter six explains what he called “bodily agitations or exercises” or experiential events that he witnessed, including, “the falling exercise—the jerks—the dancing exercise—the barking exercise—the laughing and singing exercise, &c.”<sup>7</sup> In another place, he said, “Many things transpired there, which were so much like miracles, that if they were not, they had the same effects as miracles on infidels and unbelievers; for many of them by these were convinced that Jesus was the Christ, and bowed in submission to him.”<sup>8</sup> Stone’s sentiments leave us with the impression that he wasn’t so sure as some that these experiences were, in fact, outpourings of the Holy Spirit, as seen at Pentecost in Acts 2. He couldn’t explain them, but he thanked God for the result.

Other early restorers of New Testament Christianity struggled to weigh out the experiential events as to whether they were in keeping with the Word of God. I would go as far as to say that Stone and others had the same struggles in the early days of the Restoration as we have today. The question arose then and does today, is the Word of God sufficient? To bring life to a lost soul, does the Spirit of God have to enlighten the soul beyond the limits of Scripture? Or is the Spirit-inspired Word sufficient?

In 1811, David Purviance wrote,

“I acknowledge it has been the case, in the course of the revival, both before and since the separation from the Presbyterians, that with many individuals, a thirst for novelty has been prevalent, and some have been charmed with enthusiastic notions, yet I believe there is no better correction for these things than the word of God.”<sup>9</sup>

In another place Purviance added,

“We all admit that the Lord is our lawgiver; and that the doctrines taught, and rules for discipline prescribed in the sacred scriptures, are perfect; being dictated by the unerring spirit of God. It appears to me, if more is necessary, the defect can only be supplied by the same spirit; or that men who make, ordain, and establish other standards and forms for the church of Christ, or any branch thereof; ought to be able to show from the word of God, that they

possess a delegated power from the supreme lawgiver so to do; otherwise their acts are unauthorised, and may be violated with impunity.”<sup>10</sup>

A quick perusal of the early document of the Christian movement, the Last Will And Testament of the Springfield Presbytery of 1804, will demonstrate that three of the twelve declarations, items three, six, and twelve, focus on taking the Bible alone for their rule. Then, in the summer of 1809, Thomas Campbell, writing in the Declaration And Address, repeatedly, nearly 100 times, called for a return to Scriptural authority, a call that a young Alexander Campbell, later that fall, determined to devote the rest of his life to achieve.

### **Experientialism And The Call To Ministry**

In his 1879 edition of *The Life and Work of Raccoon John Smith*, John Augustus Williams described the mindset of Kentucky Baptists in the early days of the Restoration Movement, particularly surrounding the role that Divinity played in choosing preachers. He wrote, “On the subject of the call to the ministry, the Baptists of that day were by no means universally agreed. Many looked for extraordinary visions or listened for miraculous voices, while some few believed that the Lord called only through the Church. ‘If a Christian has talent, and the Church says preach, he may go on safely,’ said an old minister, who, in his youth, however, had waited long for some supernatural call without receiving it. ‘The voice of the Church,’ said he, ‘is the voice of God.’”<sup>11</sup> A good bit of detail in Williams’ writings concerns Smith’s struggle in his call to salvation and, still later, his call to ministry, which he never could identify with any certainty.

Samuel Rogers, baptized by Barton W. Stone in 1812, became an exhorter to the Christian faith and yet had never been officially called by his estimation. In volume 2 of the *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, Rogers’s own words express his frustration of not being able to accurately pinpoint what the call to the ministry was. He said:

I was ordained by Stone at Caneridge fifty-two years ago. He then gave me a Bible, saying: “Preach its facts, obey its commands and enjoy its promises.” I was greatly troubled about my call. I contended that if I was called, as were the apostles, I ought to have their credentials and be able to prove my apostleship. I attempted to draw from dreams and visions and vague impressions, some super-human aid; often went on long tours upon a mere impression of the mind, taking it as a call. I thought I ought to perform miracles. My mind was often in a wretched state. About this time I got the ‘Christian Baptist’ and found relief. I believe I should have gone crazy but for Alexander Campbell. I was not slow to embrace his view, but knew it to be truth the very moment I saw it, and at once and in haste adopted it. This was about 1825. I had traveled thousands of miles, preached all over the wilds of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri—swam rivers, exposed myself to every danger, saying, ‘Wo is me if I preach not the gospel!’ I was ardent, impulsive, enthusiastic, and my labors were greatly blessed. But a heavy gloom hung over me when I would think of my call and compare it with that of the apostles.

“Bless the Lord! Alexander Campbell came to my relief. His debate with Walker and then with McCalla waked up the people; to me, it was like the rising up of the sun after a long gloomy night. I heard him at Wilmington, Ohio, on his first visit. I compared him to Ezra of old, that great reformer who restored to Israel the lost law of God. Stone had given me the book, but Campbell taught me how to read it in its connection. I took his first periodical, the ‘Christian Baptist,’ and since that time have taken and read everything he ever published. I owe him more than any man since apostolic times. He preached no new gospel and brought in no new God, but taught us to worship intelligently the God whom we had ignorantly worshiped, and to go back over the heads of all human teachers to the great Fountain of truth for our faith and practice.<sup>12</sup>

### **Experientialism And Church Membership**

Alexander Campbell distanced himself from experiential activity, arguing for the sufficiency of the Scriptures to bring about and maintain faith. In March of 1825, he began a series of five articles in the Christian Baptist, which he entitled “A Restoration Of The Ancient Order of Things.” In the third installment, appearing in the April 4, 1825, issue, pages 172-177, he argued at length against the then practice among churches of having those who desire church membership to relate a divine experience to a body of leaders in a church, whose self-appointed duty it was to determine if said experience qualified them as naturalized in the Kingdom of Christ. Campbell contrasted their contrived process of salvation with the example found in Acts 8 when the Eunuch said to Philip, “See, here is water, what hinders me from being baptized?” To this Philip responded that if he believes he may. To this, he said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.” With that the chariot stopped and both he and the Eunuch went down into the water where Philip baptized him. Campbell surmised with God’s simple plan, the “baptized is baptized into the faith, but in the modern plan he is baptized into his own experience.”<sup>13</sup>

This struggle between Calvinistic Experientialism and the Bible alone surfaced time and again among the preachers of the American Frontier in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Augustus Williams recalled a pivotal event while John Smith was preaching at one of the Baptist churches he ministered to near Mt. Sterling, Kentucky. Williams reported,

“On a certain occasion, in March, 1822, at Spencer’s Creek, he [Smith, *sdh*] was urging sinners to repent, and to believe the gospel. “Jesus died for you,” said he; “but if you believe not, you must be damned.” [John 3:16-18; *sdh*] His mind was suddenly confused with the thought that if the elect should not believe, his preaching was false, for they would not be damned; and if the non-elect should believe, their faith would be false, for, according to his creed, Christ did not die for them. Must the non-elect, then, thought he, be damned for not believing what is false? Or the elect be saved, though denying the truth? Too honest thus to exhort the people any longer, he closed his address.

“Brethren,” said he, “something is wrong; I am in the dark—we are all in the dark; but how to lead you to the light, or to find the way myself, before God, I know not.”

He took his seat. The song hardly arose from the lips of the congregation; but a prayer for light went up in that hour from the honest heart of John Smith that was heard in heaven by the Father of lights and Author of all truth.

The crowd dispersed, and he went directly but silently home, as if he would find in the sacredness of that humble spot, and in the counsel of his wife, some ray of light to dispel the darkness from his mind. Into the bosom of that wife—so often his strength in weakness and his comfort in trouble—he poured the confusion of his thoughts. They bowed down together in prayer; and, while he begged for light, he pledged himself, both to heaven and to her, that he would take God’s word as his only oracle, examine it carefully, and, calling no man master, follow its teachings wherever they might lead him.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Mourner’s Bench: Experientialism’s Last Stronghold**

Again, feelings-based salvation, coined “experientialism” as per our topic of discussion, met its final battle at the mourner’s bench. A leftover from the early days of the Kentucky and Tennessee revival, the mourner’s bench was considered in the same sphere as other emotion-driven evidence of a relationship with God. Like the jerks, the barking, and the dancing exercises, the mourners’ bench was the place where people came to “get religion.”

In the early days, most revival sermons involved two ministers: a preacher of doctrine followed by an encourager. Not everyone could be an encourager. These were a unique breed. These were men who had the power to so emotionally grab the heart of an individual as to make them almost irresistibly leave their seats and head to the mourner’s bench, where the sinner would cry and wail until the feeling of guilt would pass with the emotional illumination of the saving power of Jesus.

Benjamin Franklin Hall, a Stoneite preacher, while on a preaching tour in North Alabama in the winter of 1825,<sup>26</sup> became frustrated with the inability of responders to his preaching to get relief at the mourner’s bench. Determining to return to Kentucky, he spent the night at the Gess family farm on Line Creek, on the Tennessee/Kentucky line. There, he came across a copy of the 1823 debate between the then-Baptist Alexander Campbell and Presbyterian W. L. McCalla on baptism. When Hall came to Campbell’s comments on Acts 2:38, where he noted that baptism was for the remission of sins, he arose and said, “Eureka! Eureka! I have found it! I have found it!” It was there that the question about why relief could not be found at the mourner’s bench was answered. Soon after, he went to brother Stone and asked why the Christian movement had not adopted the essentiality of baptism for salvation. Stone responded that earlier in the movement, he had tried to teach it, but it was like pouring cold water on a flame, so he stopped teaching it, allowing the old emotional system of the mourner’s bench to prevail.

In the fall of that year, [1826] Hall was preaching baptism for the remission of sins at a meeting in Lauderdale County, Alabama when a few young people responded to the invitation. The following morning, James Matthews baptized Tolbert Fanning and Allen Kendrick, the brother of Dr. Carroll Kendrick, for the remission of their sins in Cypress Creek.

A few years later, Tolbert Fanning was preaching at Owl Hollow, a Stoneite, “Newlight church,” in Franklin County, Tennessee. When he walked into the building, there in the front and center of the hall was the old and prominent still hallowed “mourner’s bench.” Fresh straw had been carefully laid all around it, just like in the early days of the movement. Most churches had given up such practice, but this congregation had not entirely moved beyond it. During the first break, and much to the horror of some of the “faithful few,” he picked up the bench, gathered the straw, took it out of the building, and cast it down the side of a nearby hill. Amidst great and strong verbal lashings, he sat silent until it was his time to speak. He approached the pulpit and proceeded to preach a sermon on the evils of the mourner’s bench system, showing that experientialism artificially removes choice from salvation, whereas the Scriptures reveal that the gospel call demands a choice and action on the part of the unsaved, simply, “belief” followed by “baptism” that is sufficient.

In 1834, there was a young blacksmith from Calhoun, Tennessee, by the name of Rees Jones. He was a product of the Stone movement and occasionally would have preachers come to his house and preach. When they would come, he had a mourner’s bench he would bring into his home. One evening, a preacher came in, and a furor of emotional excitement overtook the assembly. People went to the mourner’s bench and wailed. Yet, the people observed Jones sitting in the corner, away from the excitement, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. When he was later asked about his actions, he said of the mourner’s bench, “The work was not only unscriptural, but anti-scriptural; that it set aside the gospel as the power of God unto salvation.”<sup>15</sup> His preaching efforts took another five years to remove that artificial–man-emotion-based mode of salvation from the assemblies and out of the uses among churches of Christ in Southern Tennessee.

The gravitational pull toward the Scriptures alone in the Restoration Movement was not unique to church history. Down through the ages, voices have arisen at different periods to do all things according to the Bible. Men like Wycliffe, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin raised the banner of Biblical authority time and again. The Protestant Revolution was born out of an intense desire to move away from man’s creeds to take the Bible alone. In 1638, William Chillingworth, regent at the University of Oxford, wrote a work entitled, *The Religion Of Protestants, A Safe Way To Salvation*, where he coined the phrase, “The Bible, the Bible I say, the Bible only, is the Religion of Protestants.”<sup>16</sup> Alexander Campbell and other early Restoration figures were mightily aware of Chillingworth’s convictions and the efforts of early Reformers but, on the whole, rejected their efforts as not going far enough. What most Reformers had in common was that while they desired to go back to the Bible for authority in all things, they were so totally absorbed in the “church and state” environment that a valid return to the New Testament Church standard was impossible. Especially in the writings of Alexander Campbell and even his father Thomas before him, there was a strict

determination not to start a new Church but to identify themselves solely with the original one, with all its order and nuances borne out in the Scriptures alone. Even the designations they called themselves, “Disciples of Christ,” “Churches of Christ,” and “Christians,” were purely descriptive and lifted right out of the New Testament so as to not create even the slightest hint of the founding of a new church.<sup>17</sup>

Let me close by saying that the restoration of the ancient order of things was gradual and not immediate. When Thomas Campbell stood on the porch of Abraham Alters, near Washington, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1809, saying the words, “We will speak where the Bible speaks, and remain silent where the Bible is silent,” one has to wonder that when he made that statement if he realized it would mean that he would have to discount his own infant baptism and have to be immersed himself. When Barton W. Stone signed The Last Will And Testament Of The Springfield Presbytery in 1804, would he ever have realized that before he died, he would insist on giving up every vestige of experiential and creedal religion to take the Bible alone for complete authority in religious practices? These men were determined to do what was necessary to bring themselves entirely within the boundaries of apostolic teaching.

Recent revivals on college campuses across America, like that at Asbury College and Ohio State University, for example, evoke the feelings among many that Pentecost-type events are still possible, where experiential movements of the Holy Spirit anterior to clear Biblical revelation, carry the day, and supersede the need to follow specific Scriptures concerning what one must do to be saved. While it is exciting to hear that young people are seeking the Lord in any circumstance, we must remember that God set the standard for access to forgiveness in the long ago. We cannot improve on the words of Isaiah, and later parroted by the apostle Peter, “A voice says, ‘Cry!’ And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Smith, *History of the Christian Church From Its Origin To The Present Time*, Nashville: Cumberland Presbyterian Office, c.1835. p. 564.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p.565.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 566.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Rogers, John, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself: With Additions And Reflections*, c.1847, p.38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p.38.

<sup>9</sup> *Observations On The Constitution, Unity, And Discipline On The Church Of Christ. Addressed To The Brethren Of The Christian Church*, 1811, Cincinnati, J. W. Browne & Co., p.11.

<sup>10</sup> *Observations On The Constitution, Unity, And Discipline On The Church Of Christ. Addressed To The Brethren Of The Christian Church*, 1811, Cincinnati, J. W. Browne & Co., p.4.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, John Augustus, *Life Of Elder John Smith*, Cincinnati: Central Book Concern, c.1879, p.81-82.



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<sup>12</sup> Richardson, Robert, *Memoirs Of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 2, 1869, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., pgs.332-333.

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, Alexander, *Christian Baptist*, Vol II, #9, April 4, 1825, p.177.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, John Augustus, *Life Of Elder John Smith*, Cincinnati: Central Book Concern, c.1879, p.145-146.

<sup>15</sup> J. D. Floyd, *Gospel Advocate*, Thursday, March 28, 1895, p.205.

<sup>16</sup> William Chillingworth, Master of Arts of the University of Oxford, *The Religion Of Protestants A Safe Way To Salvation*, 1638, p.375.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Acts 11:26, Romans 16:16.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 40:6-8; 1 Peter 1:24.