

RESTORATION APPRECIATION  
WEEK 2021

DAN CAMERON & JAMES RILEY ESTEP JR.

*Edited by John C. Nugent*



Great Lakes  
Christian College

*Pamphlet #6*

Restoration Appreciation  
Week 2021



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Pamphlet 6 of the Restoration Appreciation series of GLCC Pamphlets

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[www.glcc.edu](http://www.glcc.edu)

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Typeset, Design, and Printing by

Wipf & Stock

199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3

Eugene, OR 97401

## Preface

Great Lakes Christian College proudly embraces our heritage in the Restoration Movement and celebrates that heritage with our constituent churches. To foster greater appreciation for our rich heritage among our students, staff, and affiliated churches we launched GLCC's first annual "Restoration Appreciation Week" back in 2016.

We were pleased to host our sixth annual Restoration Appreciation Week, October 19–22, 2021. Our celebration kicked off during Tuesday chapel with Dan Cameron's provocative address on the usefulness of creeds, titled "Stone-Campbell Anti-Creedalism: Assessment and Trajectories." Dan taught theology for many years and now channels his expertise into Elevate, GLCC's Adult Continuing Education program. He raises the important question, Does faithfulness to our heritage require us to shun every and all written belief statements or could some forms help curtail the false teaching that creeps into many churches today? On Friday, James Riley Estep Jr., former professor and Academic Dean at GLCC and now Vice President of Academics at Central Christian College of the Bible, helped us think through what it looks like for churches to remain relevant in the twenty-first century. What practices of the past need to remain constant as we go forward? How might we strive to remain relevant without compromising our core? These presentations provoked lively discussions as we packed the room for Q&A with both speakers on Friday af-

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ternoon. We hope to keep the conversation going by making both presentation available in this pamphlet.

Both sessions were also live streamed, recorded, and made available to watch on GLCC's website at <https://www.glcc.edu/advancement/restoration-appreciation-week>. Also available online are resources and pamphlets related to prior Restoration Appreciation Week celebrations.

GLCC is continuing this tradition by hosting Restoration Appreciation Week in October of 2022. We invite you to join us during chapel on the 18th and 21st – whether in person or online. We also encourage your congregation to join others in naming Sunday, October 23, Restoration Appreciation Sunday. For the most up-to-date information and congregational resources for past and future events, frequent our website at <https://www.glcc.edu/advancement/restoration-appreciation-week/>.

# Stone-Campbell Anti-Creedalism

## Assessment and Trajectories

*Dan Cameron*

### INTRODUCTION

As a son of the Restoration Movement I am indebted to it and its many beliefs and practices—ones I have known and assumed from my youth up. One of the most notable ideas inculcated in me that derives from the earliest Stone-Campbell days is an *antipathy* toward creeds and confessions—our anti-creedalism. This idea has shaped us and defining us as much as our stand on baptism. In this essay I assess our anti-creedalism by describing it, noting some of its consequences, and then suggesting some possible trajectories for the future.

### DESCRIPTION OF OUR ANTI-CREEDALISM

It is uncontested that anti-creedalism was the view of the founders of our movement and others. To clarify the *nature* of this heritage it is helpful to identify some of the discussions and conclusions which arose from the struggle of those early days. We'll begin with Barton W. Stone's negative view of creeds and creedalism. The first major document of the Stone-Campbell movement, the *Apology for the Springfield Presbytery*, is found in his biography. The five

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men who withdrew from the Synod of Kentucky cited among their reasons for withdrawal the Synod's need to "adopt a more liberal plan, respecting human Creeds and Confessions."<sup>1</sup> Later in that initial Restoration document, Stone goes on to assert the following regarding creeds,

It is an established maxim, that when any law, or rule of conduct is *authoritatively* explained, the explanation is the law; and we are necessarily bound to understand the original according to the explanation. A creed, or confession of faith, is considered both as a summary of the doctrines taught in the Bible, and an explanation of them. If it were left in its own place, to occupy the low ground of human opinion, it might do some good. But the moment it is received and adopted as a *standard*, it assumes the place of the Bible; it is the explanation, according to which we must understand the original law, the *word* of the living God. If such a church is founded on the Scriptures, it is not immediately; but by means of this *standard*, or pillar. But if there is a mistake in the business, and any part of the pretended *standard*, or pillar should not be founded on the rock, will not the whole church tumble to the ground? Is it not better to clear away all the rubbish, of human opinions, and build the church immediately on the rock of ages, the sure foundation which God has laid in Zion?<sup>2</sup>

Stone went on to affirm that "these human aids fail to attain the end designed by them, that is unity."<sup>3</sup> Then he compared creeds to the Roman Catholic use of images, as helps to enliven their faith, and concluded, "Thus we conceive that confessions of faith, keep the soul away from the word of God."<sup>4</sup> Stone found creeds and confessions to be possibly helpful if they are not adopted as

1. B. W. Stone and Elder John Rogers, *The Biography of Elder Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself with Additions and Reflections* (Cincinnati: By Author, 1847), 171, found in Hoke S. Dickinson, ed. *The Cane Ridge Reader* (Paris, KY: Cane Ridge Preservation Project, 1972).

2. *Ibid.*, 232.

3. *Ibid.*, 234.

4. *Ibid.*, 235.

a standard, but they certainly lead to disunity and will keep one from God's word.

Next, we'll consider Thomas Campbell. In 1807, a minister brought informal charges accusing him of heretical teaching and "procedures not in harmony" with their tradition.<sup>5</sup> He defied the rules and regulations of the Anti-Burgher Presbyterians near Pittsburgh. From the minutes of the October 27, 1807 meeting of the Presbytery of Chartiers, we find that Campbell was charged with maintaining "that we have nothing but human authority or agreement for Confessions of faith, testimonies, covenanting, and fast days before the dispensation of the Lord's Supper."<sup>6</sup> Regarding the charges against Campbell's teaching, Max Randall notes that "It was claimed that he was teaching falsely on these matters: the nature of saving faith, rejecting creeds as lawful terms of fellowship."<sup>7</sup> So Campbell described the authority of creeds and confessions as merely "human" and denied their use as tests of fellowship.

The last founder we'll discuss was the most prolific. Alexander Campbell had much to say about the issue of creeds and confessions. In his *Christian System* he sought to set before the world in "plain style" the principles that developed in the movement. In the preface he said,

The principle which was inscribed upon our banners when we withdrew from the ranks of the sects was, "Faith in Jesus as the true Messiah, and obedience to him as our Lawgiver and King, the only test of Christian character, and only bond of Christian union, communion, and co-operation, irrespective of all creeds, opinions, commandments, and traditions of men."<sup>8</sup>

5. W. E. Garrison and A. T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ, A History*, Rev. ed. (St. Louis: Bethany, 1958), 130.

6. *Ibid.*, 131.

7. Max Ward Randall, *The Great Awakenings and the Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983), 102.

8. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1989), xii. Originally published by Campbell in 1835. Emphasis added.

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Further on, he states even more emphatically of creeds that “those human institutions supplanted the Bible, made the word of God of none effect, were fatal to the intelligence, union, purity, holiness, and happiness of the disciples of Christ, and hostile to the salvation of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Campbell believed that creeds were counterproductive to the kingdom to say the least. Creeds even nullify the Bible and make it of no affect. In their place he offered that faith in Jesus and obedience to him is the proper ground of fellowship. Usually *we* have said that we insist upon belief in Jesus and the Bible as our ground of fellowship.

Perhaps Stone best expressed the sentiments of Restoration Movement’s founders in the *Christian Messenger* when he said,

It may be asked again—Have you no creed or confession as a common bond for union? We answer, yes. We have a perfect one, delivered us from heaven, and confirmed by Jesus and his Apostles—we mean the New Testament. We have learned from the earliest history of the church to the present time, that the adoption of manmade creeds has been the invariable cause of division and disunion. We have, therefore, rejected all such creeds as bonds of union, and have determined to rest on that alone given by divine authority, being well assured that it will bind together all who live in the spirit of it.<sup>10</sup>

We rejected creeds and confessions—not only because they were unnecessary, but because they were harmful to the life, purpose, and unity of the church. All we need is the New Testament and faith in Jesus. The creeds and confessions added nothing to this that mattered and they ultimately became items for contention among Christians. So, creeds and confessions were jettisoned in favor of the unity of the New Testament. This writer believes serious consequences have arisen from this move.

9. Ibid., xiii.

10. B. W. Stone, *History of the Christian Church in the West*. (Lexington: College of the Bible, 1956), 51–2. This was originally published by Stone in *The Christian Messenger*, Vol. VI, January, 1832, 7.

## CONSEQUENCES OF ANTI-CREEDALISM

The Stone-Campbell rejection of creeds had many consequences, many of which I suspect were not intended. Here we consider five of them.

### Equating Creeds and Confessions

Sadly, in our rejection of “creeds” and “confessions” we grouped together two very different kinds of belief statements. Obviously our early reformers knew the difference between them, but over time this difference was ignored or at least blurred. Because of this, many of our church members today do not know the difference. The early Ecumenical Creeds of the church—Apostles’ Creed, Nicæan Creed, Constantinopolitan Creed, and Chalcedonian Creed—are surely *very* different from the various confessions written by various Christian groups inculcating denomination-specific doctrine. Yet still our founders put them together and dismissed them. The four Ecumenical Creeds keyed in on major, foundational beliefs held by virtually all Christians. Except for the phrase “descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed, which Alexander Campbell took to simply mean that Jesus died, I find nothing objectionable in them. Moreover, to conflict with them would put one outside of the established church-wide core theology that has always been affirmed. This has created a great loss in our theological depth and informed discussion.

### Deemphasizing the Importance of Beliefs within the New Testament Itself

The issue goes even deeper. The Latin term *credo* from which we get the word “creed” simply means “I believe.” In this sense, of course the church is creedal! She *has* to be to be Christian. So another consequence of rejecting creeds is that it has perhaps blinded us from taking stock of numerous biblical texts that are believed

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by many scholars to be primitive creeds. The presence of such texts in our Scriptures suggests that the people of God are implicitly or inherently credal. One such text is Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.”<sup>11</sup> Another is found in Matthew 16:16. Simon Peter replies to the Lord, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Surely we recognize this as the heart of *our* creed: “we have no creed but Christ.” Some consider the lengthy hymn/poem that Paul quotes in Philippians 2:6–11 to be credal in nature. Others consider Romans 10:9 an early creed: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Perhaps Colossians 1:15–17 was also an early creed: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Some, like Rubel Shelley, have identified the seven “ones” in Ephesians 4:4–6 as “essential elements” of the faith: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God.<sup>12</sup> I’m sure he wouldn’t call them a creed, but it’s at least a summary of basic, necessary beliefs. So how does that differ from a creed? Did Paul assume all Christians believed them? Another possible early credal formula is found in 1 Timothy 3:16, which reads, “Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.”

11 NRSV. All Bible quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted. Many of the following passages are suggested as early creeds by John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches*, Rev. ed. (Richmond: John Knox, 1973), 12–16. Also see Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) II, 3–8.

12. Rubel Shelley, *I Just Want to Be a Christian* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1984), 90–1.

One of the earliest possible creedal formulas dates back to before Paul's conversion in or before AD 35. It is preserved in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."

This litany of *possible* New Testament creeds suggests that the early church probably thought in terms of distilling doctrinal teaching for the sake of instruction and living. Is there anything inherently wrong or ungodly about distilling beliefs into easily understood patterns? It seems the early church thought not. Moreover, since the leaders of the earliest congregations both taught and guarded their doctrines, do you not suppose these incipient creeds figured into their doctrinal teaching?

Consider these words from Tertullian, from around the year 200, as he described the *Creed* or *the Rule of Faith* of the early church:

Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is only one God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, *and*, under the name of God, was seen "in diverse manners" by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power

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of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises amongst ourselves no other questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.<sup>13</sup>

Tertullian claimed that the ideas found in this Rule were taught by Christ and raised *no* question among the brothers. Also consider that this list of foundational, non-disputed doctrines goes *beyond* the simple plea of our founders—that is, “Jesus and the Bible.”

It is odd how we dismiss the creeds and confessions as non-essential, unnecessary, and even divisive to the church, but we will write authoritatively, debate profusely, and argue incessantly about cherished Christian beliefs. Do we consider these conversations unimportant and useless? Obviously not. Writings and debates defined us in the first third of the Movement’s life (and still does in some quarters). Is it that we just don’t want others’ advice or theological comment? In this matter, interestingly, Philip Schaff comments that, in Protestantism, the authority of symbols [creeds and confessions] “is relative and limited . . . always subordinate to the Bible. . . . The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. . . . In the best case a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the church.”<sup>14</sup>

### Denigrating Hard Fought Theological Victories

Another of the more serious consequences of our anti-creedalism is that it has led us to ignore and even *denigrate* the hard-fought

13. *Against Heretics*, ch. XIII. Available at [http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-24.htm#P3310\\_1166118](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/ANF-03/anf03-24.htm#P3310_1166118), accessed March 16, 2004.

14. Schaff, Vol 1, 7.

victories of nearly 2000 years of Christian theology. In fact, the terms “theology” and “theologian” have been unflattering appellations at best among us. But where would Christian theology be had the church not debated Arianism, the Trinity, or the hypostatic union of Christ? Heresy required the pursuit of orthodoxy and forced the church to study and reflect on biblical doctrines more deeply in order to draw biblically informed conclusions. Their galvanized convictions were put into creedal statements to help guide the church to right doctrine. To neglect and ignore those tremendous discussions and subsequent doctrinal formulations is to impoverish ourselves almost beyond repair.

### Propagating Privatized and Unbalanced Theology

Perhaps the most significant consequence we have suffered from our abandonment of the creeds is the abundance of privatized and unbalanced theology within our churches. By this I mean that without guidelines or consensus on the valuation, let alone definition of doctrines, that determination is left to the individual. Hear Rubel Shelly: “Neither do we need Scripture interpreted via a confession or catechism. I do not need my faith run through the sieve of your understanding, nor do you need yours passed through the sieve of mine.”<sup>15</sup> This mindset has led to some serious theological inequities among us. Perhaps some of the doctrinal aberrations of Barton W. Stone are most descriptive of this phenomenon. Just three doctrinal areas showcase some significant differences in theology: his views on the atonement, the eternity/deity of Jesus Christ, and the Trinity.

Stone denied what is usually considered the orthodox view of the atonement of Christ. Granted this is the least critical of the three doctrines under consideration, yet still it is significant (I am aware there is an ongoing debate about this). Stone went to great lengths to defend his denial of the more typical creedal expressions

15. Shelly, 38.

of the vicarious atonement of Christ, expressing more the idea that Jesus' death simply rectified matters between God and man.<sup>16</sup> He differed greatly with Thomas and Alexander Campbell on this.

Far more significant is Stone's view of the eternity and deity of Christ. While he believed in the deity of Christ, it is much more than a merely *nuanced* understanding of it. Regarding the origin and nature of Christ he says,

There are three general opinions respecting the Son of God. One is, that he is the eternal Son of God—eternally begotten of the Father. Another is, that the Son of God never existed until he was born of Mary 1820 years ago. The third is, that the Son of God did not begin to exist 1820 years ago; nor was he eternally begotten; but that he was the first begotten of the Father, the first born of every creature; brought forth before all worlds.<sup>17</sup>

He chose option three and marshalled ten arguments to establish it. Lest there be any doubt of this, he later writes, “My own views of the Son of God are that he. . . was the first begotten of the Father before time” (by which he meant first created).<sup>18</sup> He went on to say, “This proves that there are two distinct beings. . . . To say that the Son was very God, and yet that the Father created all things by him, is the same as to say, that one God created by another God. ‘But to us there is but one God, the Father.’”<sup>19</sup>

Stone makes no attempt at explaining “begotten.” This may be because he believed it meant “created.” Stone believed that Jesus

16. The amount of his discussion on this doctrine—especially with Thomas and Alexander Campbell—is *large* as evidenced by the 3 volumes of collected essays and interchanges on the atonement, compiled by Enos Dowling in 1983, titled *Discussions of the Atonement*. These volumes are available in the library of Lincoln Christian University.

17. Elder James M Mathes, ed. *The Works of Elder B. W. Stone, to Which is Added a Few Discourses and Sermons, 2nd ed.* (Cincinnati: Moore, Wilstach, Keys & Co., 1859), 59. This book was reprinted by Old Paths Book Club of Rosemead, California in 1953.

18. *Ibid.*, 66.

19. *Ibid.*, 68.

was a created being—albeit the first created being before all time. To him Jesus and the Father cannot both be God in the same way. Stone further believed that the enshrined phrase in the revised Nicæan Creed, “eternally begotten” was nonsensical and confusing. He would argue that one cannot be “eternally being begotten,” that would make no biblical or logical sense at all. He treated this term and other theological terms with little kindness or patience. If they didn’t fit a simple, easily understood definition—it was to be rejected.<sup>20</sup> “Hence,” he concluded, “it is evident that a person which was not very God, existed with the Father before the world was.”<sup>21</sup>

In my judgment, Stone’s position is hardly discernable from that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. It needs to be noted that this appellation, “eternally begotten” is an unfortunate theological phrase that indeed can mislead and does not well describe the doctrinal intent of the authors as they tried to clarify that Jesus relates to the Father as “begotten” and is so “from eternity.”<sup>22</sup> To Stone, mystery had little or no place in the Bible. He even says, “Mystery is one of the names of the whore of Babylon.”<sup>23</sup> Stone’s rejection of mystery is embarrassingly contradicted by his embracing it to explain the “unexplainable” (according to his theology) in Colossians 2:9: “Should any ask how it is that the Father in all his fullness dwelleth in the Son? I reply, ‘Great is the mystery of godliness, God was manifested in the flesh.’”<sup>24</sup> So “mystery” is ok when it suits Stone’s argument, but not if it suits a rival position.

The foregoing necessarily leads to a denial of the Trinity, which Stone did in fact deny and attempt to refute. After lengthy discussion, he declared the doctrine of the Trinity incredible and

20. *Ibid.*, note his discussion on 59–62.

21. *Ibid.*, 69.

22. See Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 131–135 as he tries to untangle the understanding of the Church Fathers on eternal generation.

23. *Ibid.*, 65.

24. *Works of Elder B. W. Stone*, 75–76.

incomprehensible.<sup>25</sup> He opts for the unity described of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to be only unity in “spirit, purpose and mind.”<sup>26</sup> He allows for no one to take solace in the “mystery of God” to justify this doctrine. His concluding word on the Trinity is as follows: “If a doctrine be revealed, however mysterious it may be, I will humbly receive it. My reason shall ever bow to revelation; but it shall never be prostrated to human contractions and inventions. Pious and good men have received such doctrines. God loves and pities them; and so will I.”<sup>27</sup>

The histories of the Stone-Campbell Movement have referred to the doctrinal differences between Alexander Campbell and Stone, but the differences are usually minimized and relegated to items of curiosity. It is interesting that Stone’s beliefs in these matters could not stand the test of the doctrines that Rubel Shelly identifies as foundational: “the doctrine of God, the incarnation and vicarious death of Christ, and obedience to the gospel in repentance and baptism.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the Stoneites and the Campbellites joined their groups together in Lexington Kentucky in 1832, despite significant theological differences.

### Floating Adrift Theologically

A final consequence of our anti-creedalism is how this has set us adrift theologically—and has effectively isolated us. This point is more an observation—but one I believe is obviously true. Consider the radical individualism of our theologies. No one has a right to tell us *what* to believe or *how* to think about something. As Shelly said, “Neither do we need Scripture interpreted via a confession or catechism. I don’t need my faith run through the sieve of your understanding, nor do you need yours passed through the sieve

25. *Ibid.*, 58.

26. *Ibid.*, 54.

27. *Ibid.*, 58.

28. Shelly, 33.

of mine.”<sup>29</sup> But it is precisely this theological isolation that fosters splintering within our movement. What is a major doctrine to one doesn’t matter to another.

We have a minimalist doctrinal expectation rather than a maximalist or even moderate one. For example, historian Leroy Garrett writes of how Samuel Rogers described the defense of Aylett Raines by Thomas Campbell before the Mahoning Association in 1828. Raines was baptized by Walter Scott and proceeded to baptize many of his Universalist friends—but he himself, though an “effective preacher among the reformers,” privately still held to universalism. Thomas Campbell argued before the Association that if they excluded Raines, they “might as well exclude him since he had spent the prime of his life preaching Calvinism and was still philosophically a Calvinist. But he held his Calvinism as private property, he explained, just as Raines held his speculation as opinion.”<sup>30</sup> Are universalism and Calvinism on the same level and both inconsequential? I don’t think we’d sign off on that today.

## NEW TRAJECTORIES

Without a doubt, this is the hardest part of this paper. I have tried to fairly describe, at least partially, the rejection of creeds and confessions as they came from the Restoration Movement’s founders. Then I suggested some of the more serious consequences of this position:

1. We have blurred the line between Creeds and Confessions and usually ignored both, losing their wisdom and theological help.
2. We may have ignored or at least lost sight of how the biblical text seems to contain a number of incipient creedal formulas—the church is inherently creedal.

29. *Ibid.*, 38.

30. Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement*, Rev. ed. (Joplin: College Press, 1994), 205.

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3. We have often denigrated “theology” in such a way that this became a part of our heritage thereby enshrining an atheological bent.
4. This led to an unbalanced theology where improper weight is put on various doctrines and major doctrines are slighted.
5. We have been set adrift theologically and isolated so that individual preference seems to determine doctrinal pursuit.

So, what might be done to address these consequences, which really have become weaknesses? First, we should admit and embrace the obvious—that being “creedal” is not bad or evil. After all, the verb, *credo*, simply means, “I believe.” The church *is* creedal! She *has* to be, to be Christian! We recognize that our unease with creeds was over the *misuse* of them, not the fact that believing some things is essential. But we do avow a creed (the “good confession” of Peter) although “unwritten.” In actuality, we have many unwritten creeds—and they are just as powerful. And still we have treated being “creedal” as anathema, refusing to acknowledge it at all, while insisting on several unwritten creeds. This seems disingenuous at best.

Second, let me humbly suggest that we can still learn from others—especially the creeds of the historic church and possibly the confessions of the denominations. The early Ecumenical Creeds may serve as at least a partial guide for what doctrines are most important. Would the divisions within our Movement have taken place had we steered the course of deciding the “essentials” with the assistance of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creed rather than private interpretation without recourse? By encouraging privatized interpretation of Scripture with no additional canon or community by which to judge, we created a level playing field on which all beliefs can play and where none can win. It’s as if we are saying that all doctrines are equal. But surely key or essential doctrines *are* more important than others.

Third, we should submit our theology to the scrutiny of peers via writing and dialogue. (By the way, we *are* doing this by means of this annual conference and the Stone-Campbell Journal Conferences, among others.) Proposing that our creed is “the New Testament” will hardly suffice for this type of discussion. Those who believe in creeds and confessions also believe in the New Testament and usually subject them under Scripture.<sup>31</sup> To pit creeds in general against the New Testament is to commit a category mistake. Creeds grew out of interaction between the New Testament and false teaching—they are not antithetical.

Last, we could take the daring (controversial) move of having congregations publish doctrinal statements as some of our parachurch ministries have done. The colleges I have worked for do indeed have doctrinal statements that faculty and administration are expected either to sign or agree with. Couldn't churches do the same?

Why not more openly affirm what we believe in terms of significant yet simple theological statements. Regarding such statements, Charles Gresham wrote, “This is not creedalism, it is Christian witness.”<sup>32</sup> As a minister in the Stone-Campbell movement for 49 years, I have often been asked by visitors or prospects, “What do you believe?” The elusive answer “the Bible” does not honor the intent of this honest question. It is a fair question to ask a prospective church what she believes. To answer “the Bible” actually hints that we all view and interpret it alike—which we don't. If we don't answer the question with “the Bible,” what would we offer? Campbell's *Christian System* with 315 pages of small type? Or maybe his *Christian Baptism* at 364 pages. What about *Christianity Restored* at 404 pages? If the New Testament is too large and unwieldy for summarizing core beliefs, surely these books are even

31. See ch. 1 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* where it affirms that the Bible “is the rule of faith and life.” All things are obviously submitted to it—even the confession.

32. Charles Gresham, “Creeds, Statements of Faith, Practical Wisdom” in *Restoration Herald*, (March, 1991), 8.

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*more* so. I submit that our historic rub with creeds was over their *use*, not their *existence*. If we are truly committed to the slogan, “In essentials, unity. . .” then wrestling with the essentials and mutually agreeing on them actually seems to fulfill the intent of the slogan.

In summary, historically we have not allowed ourselves to distill our beliefs into creedal forms fearing this may lead to “tests of fellowship” disallowed by Scripture. Somehow a brief, clear list of core doctrines we can affirm is deemed inappropriate. Yet somehow producing 300–600 page books of intricate theological argumentation that are “not binding on anyone” but explain what some individuals among us believe *is* appropriate. Forgive, please, but this is *odd*. We still have no agreed upon truth, and for a “people of the book” this seems to beg the question, Is theology a solo, private discipline where anything goes, or is theology the *church* thinking God’s thoughts after him?

## Generation to Generation

### Navigating the Passage between Scriptural Adherence and Cultural Relevance

*James Riley Estep, Jr.*

**I**T IS good to be back on the campus of GLCC and to see familiar faces, some of whom I first saw in the classroom and now in the faculty hall. I come back to this place after departing twenty-one years ago. So much has changed, and yet so much is still the same. There is continuity and discontinuity as we go through life. Even this morning, I was speaking with Dan Cameron when a pair of hands grabbed my shoulders from behind. I couldn't see who it was, then I saw the sweater and said, "Lloyd!" Yes, there is continuity in an ever-changing world.

On the screen you see a picture of two communion cups. I have these in my office. On the left is one from the Holy Land, hand carved from olive wood, a gift from a colleague. On the right we see a plastic cup that became popular during the pandemic. You may recognize the peal-back aluminum and cellophane tops with the juice on one end and wafer on the other. When I saw them on my desk, side by side, it reminded me of something.

*As Christians we live in two worlds: the world of the Scriptures and the world in which we currently exist. Oftentimes we find ourselves having to navigate between these two worlds, and it is not*

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always easy. In fact, when pressed, it's never really easy. We find ourselves on one hand affirming a 2000+ year old Scripture and tradition, while on the other living in a contemporary, technologically sophisticated, scientifically advanced world. The tension of navigating between the two, adhering to our faith while being relevant to our culture is enormous.

I had one person ask, "What does this have to do with the Restoration Movement?" *Everything!* How do you faithfully adhere to the biblical portrait of the church in the New Testament, yet remain effective at fulfilling its mission twenty-one centuries later?

Let me ask it another way: In ministry, is it more important to be theologically correct or culturally relevant? When writing a sermon, should I adhere to the biblical text or connect with the audience? While preparing a lesson, should I engage it through exegesis or endeavor to facilitate personal reflection and application? When developing a worship service, should I focus on exalting the One True Living God or make sure people of all generations are participating? The answer is "Yes!"

Every congregation and Christian leader is confronted with this dilemma. Every theological tradition, including the Restoration Movement, is caught in the controversy. We all live in the tension between faithfulness to Scripture and relevance to the culture in which we minister . . . between *being* the church and *doing* the church's mission. On one side we shout, "Theologically correct ministry!" As Christian leaders, we obviously need to side with theological correctness and alignment with Scripture. However, far too often we mistake tradition for Scripture and familiar pastoral approaches for biblical correctness. "Culturally relevant ministry!" is the other option. As Christian leaders, we obviously desire a ministry that is attractive and compelling to those whom the church endeavors to reach and disciple. We are seeing the effects of increasing cultural irrelevance with each successive generation of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What could be more

important than fulfilling the Great Commission in the most effective way possible? When the church is not culturally relevant, it fails to *do* what it has to do. Churches that are not aligned with Scripture become indistinguishable from other social organizations; they forget their identity as the church. Do these arguments sound familiar? Have you pondered the tension between what is theologically correct and what is culturally relevant?

### HOW DO WE DO THIS?

How do we adhere to a 2000+ year old Scripture and tradition and still remain relevant to the twenty-first century world? With the tension in between! Maybe you're thinking, that's a little above my pay grade. Okay, more specifically, to North America? Still a little out of reach? Let's bring it home where it impact us all: one church composed of five generations, each with their own preferences, expectations, priorities, and values. We are expected to navigate these waters.

This challenge is nothing new! Dave Stone, a former college floor-mate and past Lead Servant at Southeast Christian Church (Louisville, KY) said it this way, "How do we reach an MP4 generation with 8-Track method? The real problem is half of you are asking 'What's an 8-track?' and the other half 'What's an MP4?'" John Stott, a British Evangelical and at one time Queen Elizabeth's confessor, relayed a story about dialoging with two students at Oxford as to why they abandoned their faith. They began to extoll the marvels of the modern world and concluded, "What can an ancient religion of the Middle East say to us who live in the exciting, kaleidoscopic world of the end of the twentieth century? . . . What possible relevance can a primitive Palestinian religion have for us?"<sup>33</sup> More recently, Timothy Paul Jones of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who wrote a book asking why he should trust the Bible, confessed, "I found myself holding a document

33. John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 139.

[Bible] penned by men who would have viewed my children as potential property, and they would have quoted the Bible to prove their point.”<sup>34</sup> Perhaps from the opposite side, during his appearance on *The Late Show*, HBO show-host Bill Maher, noted that the Bible’s authors “did not know what a germ or an atom was or where the sun went at night” before exclaiming, “and *that* is where you are getting your wisdom!”

It’s not that the Bible is untrue, in their view, it’s just out of date . . . irrelevant! The church is playing chess while the world is playing Fortnite.

Once again, how can the church remain faithful to the Scriptures *and* culturally relevant to the multigenerational culture in which it exists? How do we navigate? I have seen the strategies of many churches as they try to steer themselves through this issue. What kinds of churches are there?

### Time Capsule

Have you ever gone to your grandparents’ house? They still have a VHS player. The clock on the DVD is still flashing 12:00, as it has since they plugged it in. You may even find a landline still attached to the wall or a TV that is just huge. Their home is like a museum, a tribute to the past. Churches can be like this. They see danger in change—danger in the community surrounding them. Don’t get me wrong. At one time they were very enculturated and relevant to the community, but now . . . time seems to have passed them by. For that reason, they equate faithfulness with having never changed. They’re still listening to Sandi Patti, Amy Grant, and Michael W. Smith. And some of you are asking, who are they? Nothing has changed in 30 years because why would it? They also have not seen a baptism in 20 years or a guest who stayed for that matter.

34. Timothy Paul Jones, *Why Should I Trust the Bible?* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publication, 2019), 141.

Dr. Billy Strother of Central Christian College, while driving by a small church, retorted, “You know your church is dying when your cemetery is larger than your parking lot.” These churches read Hebrews 13:8 – “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” – and think it is about the worship service and how to do ministry. This is one extreme that we ought to avoid, but on the opposite end of the spectrum is another kind of church that is equally problematic.

### Sail

Some congregations value relevance to a fault. Like a sail in the wind, they are moved by whatever wind of culture may blow. For them, it’s whatever is cutting edge, current, hip, woke, or bright-and-shiny for the moment. They don’t pay heed to Paul’s admonition not to be “carried around by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14) or James’ concern for being “tossed by the wind” (Jas 1:6).

I’ve seen many churches that adopted “fad-driven” methodologies. Forty days of purpose, forty days of prayer, followed by forty days of study, and then forty days of whatever they could come up with in forty days. They overvalue culture, and it usually proves ultimately to be ill-fated for the church’s ministries, which are virtually indistinguishable from social services and civic organizations.

### Rubber Band

Other churches are more like rubber bands. They sustain a sort of dualism—both/and rather than either/or—and live in the ever-growing tension between the sometimes opposing directions of Scripture and culture, the Bible and generational preferences whether from the pew or the folding chair. We navigate circumstantially, expediently . . . until one side snaps. Conflict often prevails. They are riddled with indecision: trying to please one

generation at a time, only for a while, eventually exhausting the staff.

I remember serving at a church wherein the elder team flip-flopped their opinions every two months: “We need more contemporary music, shorter sermons, and more media.” Then a complaint would reach their ears, and now it’s “We need to return to a more traditional posture.” Two months later, it’s back to contemporary. Eventually they settle on a “blended” service, which just lives in the tension. At best it’s a temporary solution, but it won’t last long.

### Veneer

We live in a world where the label often doesn’t match the substance. I don’t have to use sugar, I can use a sweetener. We can buy a sporty car . . . with a four-cylinder engine. I cannot afford glassware, so plastic can do. Getting engaged . . . diamonds are expensive . . . get cubic zirconium – fake diamonds. We can wear vinyl for leather. Rather than hardwood . . . just get plywood covered with veneer.

In fact, the greatest commercial the auto industry ever produced featured Ricardo Montalban. He played Khan in “Star Trek 2,” was on “Fantasy Island,” or you may know him as the Grandfather in “SpyKids 3.” With a manly Latin American accent, he promoted a new line of affordable Chrysler luxury vehicles with “Rich Corinthian Leather.” What is “Corinthian Leather”? High grade vinyl! It just sounds so much better than saying vinyl. I’ve seen churches who are more or less like sails, but who use Christian language, vocabulary, and labels to make everything appear Christian on the surface. But they’re little more than a social club, an enculturated Christianity.

## Virus/Incarnation

In light of recent history, I hesitate to give this next example—especially since just three weeks ago I buried my cousin—but as C.S. Lewis suggested, the church should probably be more like a virus. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote, “He [Jesus] came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has—by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.”<sup>35</sup>

A church can simultaneously navigate between Scripture and culture by affirming *both*; rejecting neither and affirming the value of culture in light of Scripture. It is the incarnational model, wherein we position ourselves to transform culture, not by rejecting it or erasing it, but by using it to advance the gospel of God’s Kingdom. We engage culture through the lens of a Christian worldview and rearticulate it in a contemporary fashion.

When God revealed himself to humanity, he did not select an area on the planet to eradicate culture, remove all the pre-existing elements of culture, and then speak in some unknown tongue, via some unfamiliar means, with quasi-alien methods with an indiscernible message relevant only to a few. Rather, God revealed himself to humanity; yes, selecting a people, but not exclusively. He revealed himself by utilizing pre-existing cultural elements, such as music in the book of Psalms, written forms (like Paul’s letters and Luke’s history), drama, literature, even language. That’s why we have to learn Hebrew and Greek. Scripture is incarnated in the culture so as to transform the culture, converting it to Christ! The message could be understood and even spread from culture to culture.

An incarnational church isn’t against culture, but engages constructively with culture. It poses constructive Christian replies to the issues and questions of the culture. I know of a church group

35. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 1952), 172.

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that restricts their members from going to ANY movie, regardless of rating or subject matter. Their book of discipline requires them to reject the cinema. But I also know of a church that has a sermon series each fall titled “See you at the movies.” They use familiar, popular cultural figures from movies to communicate the gospel, connect with unbelievers on their level, and build a bridge, a connection, an interface between the gospel and the culture.

Prior to Covid-19, many churches did not condone virtual worship services and digital Bible studies, considering them to be a form of compromise. Others embraced this as an opportunity to expand the influence and impact of their ministry. Those who embraced it early fared far better than previous rejecters who suddenly scrambled to learn about Facebook, Youtube, and streaming video.

### POINTS OF REFERENCE

Let me press pause . . . theory is important, it informs our decisions and actions, but on the ground level and in the trenches, this is played out between the specific generations that comprise the church and their local communities in the twenty-first century. We’ve spoken in generalities. What about specifics? How does the church maintain its own Scriptural affirmations when it is comprised of five distinct generations: Builders, Boomers, Xers, Millennials and Gen Z? *How do we gain our bearings when navigating the passage between Scripture and culture, between timeless tradition and the times in which we now live?* Here I suggest eight points of reference that may help the church navigate faithfully through the turbulent waters of this world.

### Embrace Our Theological Core

It is from Scripture that our identity as God’s people, the body of Christ, the family of God originates; but we must never stop revisiting the text, reframing its teachings, and developing fresh

expressions of Scripture's message. The Restoration Movement must never stop moving, never stop restoring!

Like it or not, we are still laden with sixteenth century theological language, even in our translations—words like propitiation, polity, and perspicuity. Most recently I read through Richard Mouw's *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*.<sup>36</sup> What better place to assert original sin and total depravity? But it was just that, a reassertion of Calvinism without its sixteenth century trappings. As we express the old, old story, let us use new ways not only to share but to express it.

### Exegete Our Context

We frequently encourage careful exegesis of the text; we must equally exegete the community. While serving at a church recently we were confronted by a hard fact. In an effort to be relevant, we designed a worship service and ministry for millennials and Gen Z with great intensity. Only later did we find out we were ministering in the sixth largest retirement community in the United States. The number of Millennials and Gen Z within a ten-mile radius was 80% *below* the national average and people my age were the median age. If we are going to be relevant to this generation, to this culture, we must know to whom we are ministering. We must not assume everyone is like us or fits the demographic we are most excited or comfortable serving. Explore the context to learn the natural avenues to convey the gospel with less resistance.

### Apply Godly Wisdom to the Needs and Issues of Our Church and Community

Karl Barth was famous for saying, "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." If he were alive today, he would probably be on social me-

36. Richard J. Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport: Making Connections in Today's World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

dia, engaging on Facebook and Instagram, combating fake news with biblical truth and clever memes with meaningful dialog.

What we can provide from our ancient text is long tested wisdom—viewing a subject from God’s perspective, providing new orientations, and examining matters holistically with well-constructed responses to today’s concerns that demonstrate the Bible’s relevance to our daily lives. An example of this may be Russell Moore’s *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel*.<sup>37</sup> He applies Scripture to larger, basic matters of interest, such as human dignity and social justice.

### Avoid Identifying with Only One Generation

William Ralph Inge (1860–1954) was an Anglican priest, professor of divinity at Cambridge University, and Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral. He cautioned, “A church that marries the spirit of the age will be widowed in the next.” While this caution is over 100 years old, it is indeed still relevant. In fact, the most common navigational error made by most churches is becoming satisfied with serving its current generation and growing old with it, only to find itself irrelevant to the next generation. Usually, it’s too late to make the necessary course corrections.

One of the ministries at which I serve is “e2: effective elders.” It helps churches revitalize. What’s the number one reason churches finally approach us? An elder says, “My grandchildren don’t go to church anymore.” The church was not meant to be rooted in one generation or the current generation, not my generation, or Dr. Nugent’s, or yours. It is meant to be rooted in the intergenerational experience described in Scripture. Without theological correctness, we fail to *be* what the church should and must *be*.

37. Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2015).

## Focus on People, Relationships, and Families

Our focus can be on the most common element in every generation: one another. In John 13:34–35, Jesus says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” All the “one another” passages in Scripture echo this new command. Generations can come together when we commit our church, ministry, and self to a radical, inclusive love beyond what the world can offer.

## Elevate Our Identity in Christ, Not Culture

I do not want to open any wounds or seem to minimize matters of social concern or social justice. However, as members of any generation, we seem to identify ourselves with a variety of labels—labels that are contingent on society, culture, or even the moment. Race (black-white-brown), geography (north-south), economics (rich-poor), gender (male-female), production studios (Marvel-DC), even identifying ourselves by our generation creates a label. When these labels are elevated to the level of our core *identity*, division is all that can occur. Over time, when one’s identity is identified by a single label, it becomes almost inseparable from our identity.

But Scripture offers a different label. Paul wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:26–29). Likewise, “since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:9–11).

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Yes, these labels are still relevant, but they must not define, limit, or divide us. Our ultimate, immutable identity is in Christ. We are made in the image of God and now restored through being *in Christ*; he is our identity. Just look around the world in which you live. If you want to find differences—temporal, tangible differences—you *will find them*.

- You sound funny, you speak with an accent
- Too many of your kind around here anyway
- You're from the “wrong side of town” or the wrong side of the world
- You're not politically like me; you voted for who?!
- You don't like the Cubs? Cardinals? Tigers!
- You dress too formal, casual, way too casual
- You are darker or more pale than me
- Your music is too fast, slow, loud, soft . . . different
- You have long hair, facial hair, or no hair
- You have a tattoo! Tattoos!
- You dress differently
- You don't like coffee . . . well, we must draw a line somewhere 😊

But, in Christ, we have someone more in common than any of these differences. When we identify ourselves first and foremost in Christ and by our relationship with him, the differences are still there, but they are placed in perspective. They are treated as secondary, tertiary, or more distant. Place a primacy on HIM! Identify yourself in Christ FIRST!

## Change, Don't Compromise

There is an important difference between change and compromise. Too many times we see the two as synonymous. Compromise is a dualist response, like the rubber band. You know what is required but you choose to do differently because of fatigue, expediency, political correctness, people-pleasing, or conflict avoidance . . . anything *but* because its right. You know you are working against the grain of Scripture. Change, at least biblical change, means I am not working *against* the grain of Scripture, but *with* it. I can reassess the situation, exegete the changing culture, study my ministry context, and make an intentional decision to change how I do ministry with scriptural support and encouragement.

In Acts 6:1–7, Luke provides an account of change, *intentional purposeful* change that was essential or necessary to fulfill the mission of the church. The organizational chart of the church in Jerusalem once had Apostles in every box. The church grew and reached its organizational limits. Ministry was failing and Grecian widows were complaining about unequal food distribution. Something had to change! Failure to change would potentially thwart the ministry of the Apostles and the advancement of God's Kingdom. Change is *not* necessarily compromise, but it is often *just* necessary!

## Recognize that “Worship” Cannot Do It All

For a long time, the church has been talking about “worship wars,” but the real catalyst for them is the generational tension underlying the preferences, likes, and dislikes. The familiarity of what you were raised to expect clashes with the advent of more modern styles of worship. Maybe it's because we are trying to make the worship service meet all the needs of the congregation: serving as an evangelistic outreach, rallying the faithful to action, providing pastoral care, addressing social issues, and at some point *actually* worshipping our Creator and Lord. Worship is not a pastoral catch-

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all. Let your ministry address the generations, but keep worship an intergenerational experience by focusing on God.

The Restoration Movement desperately needs *leaders*. Men and women who will shoulder the burden of navigating the essentials of biblical truth and cultural relevance. Leaders who will act with intentionality as we move into the middle of the twenty-first century. May God give us more, and may our churches and colleges raise them up to lead well!