

**“Remembering the Past: The Apostle Paul and Barton Stone”**  
**The Third in the Series “Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future”**  
**Acts 9:1-9, 17-20**

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer  
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Children were lined up for lunch in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school. At the beginning of the serving line was a large pile of apples. After watching the children for a while, the supervising nun wrote a sign and posted it on the apple tray: “Take only ONE. God is watching!”

At the other end of the serving line was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. One of the children looked at the cookies and wrote a sign that read: “Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

Some people think of God as a Policeman in the Sky or as Santa Clause who knows who’s been naughty and who’s been nice. Preachers of the hellfire-and-damnation variety particularly manifest this understanding of God; they are determined to literally “put the fear of God” into people.

In my career as a minister, professor, and student of religion and human nature, it is clear to me that there are—and have always been—two kinds of religion. One is the religion of love, and the other is the religion of fear. Sadly, the form of religion that dominates our culture—especially the media—is the religion of fear, whether it be Christian or Muslim or Jewish. Fundamentalism is based on fear, no matter the flavor. Some fundamentalisms just provoke more violence than others do. And that brings us to today’s scripture lesson.

One of the most dramatic biblical call visions occurred to Saul of Tarsus, or as he is better known, Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles. Saul was an extremely devout young man, but sadly, he had an appallingly warped understanding of God’s character and how one should serve God. To Saul, God was the terrifyingly stern Judge of the Universe, who eagerly punished anyone who failed to follow a huge list of burdensome rules and regulations. For Saul, then, religion was born out of fear—fear of divine punishment—and such a religion naturally manifested itself in terms of hatred towards everyone who did not understand God and the religious life the same way he did.

Let me paint the backdrop for today’s scripture lesson. Saul, who was living in Jerusalem at the time, had taken upon himself the role of Chief Persecutor of Christians. Not content to limit his scope to Jerusalem and the surrounding area, he sought and acquired orders from the high priest to travel to Damascus in order to extend his reign of terror there.

While traveling to Damascus, a light from heaven shown around him, blinding him. Terror-stricken, he fell to the ground. Then he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Totally astonished, he asked, “Who are you, Lord?” for clearly the light had a

heavenly origin. The voice replied: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

One can only imagine Saul's bewilderment. In his religious zeal, he had devoted himself to persecuting followers of the renegade rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified as a Messianic pretender—yet now that very Jesus was speaking to him from heaven! What was he to make of this?

The men traveling with him were speechless, for they had heard a voice but had seen nothing. Following Saul's orders, they took him into Damascus where he remained in isolation for three days, eating and drinking nothing. No doubt, he was rethinking everything he ever believed about God and the nature of the devout religious life.

While the blinded Saul was engaged in this personal spiritual retreat, the Lord spoke to a Christian named Ananias, telling him to go to Saul and pray for him. Ananias was understandably hesitant, for Saul's bloodthirsty reputation had preceded him. But the Lord told Ananias that he had great plans for Saul. Saul was to become the instrument for taking the good news of God's love to the Gentiles.

Ananias bravely did as he was instructed, and when he laid hands on Saul, the blind man recovered his sight. Thus began the ministry of Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul, a transformed man with a new understanding of God's character and what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. He now realized that God is to be understood in terms of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, that is: God is love.

Another man who underwent a major transformation—albeit not as dramatic as that of Saul—was Barton Stone. Stone was born on Christmas Eve, 1772, in Port Tobacco, Maryland, into a prominent family of lawyers and politicians. A century earlier, one of his ancestors had been Governor of the Colony of Maryland. An older cousin signed the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and helped write the Articles of Confederation in 1777; and yet another relative served as Governor of the State of Maryland in the 1790s. Not surprisingly, Barton grew up with the intention of becoming a lawyer and holding political office.

Stone's family were Episcopalians, but after his father died, the family moved to Virginia where his mother became a Methodist. Barton was not drawn to religion as a boy. He found the competing claims of the various Protestant denominations to be confusing and off-putting. He was more interested in politics.

When it came time for him to attend college and study the Latin and Greek classics and law, he chose the respected Guilford Academy in North Carolina whose headmaster, David Caldwell, happened also to be a Presbyterian minister. Attending this school brought him into contact with two Presbyterian evangelists—James McGready and William Hodge. Both men were interested in promoting spiritual revival, but they were as different in their approaches and messages as night and day. McGready was a loud, fire-and-brimstone preacher who

focused on God's judgment of sinners; Hodge, on the other hand, was calm and consoling in his delivery and focused on a very different message: "God is love." McGready's judgmental preaching pushed the young Barton even further away from making any religious commitment; Hodge's preaching, however, brought about Stone's commitment to Christ. From that time onward, Stone found peace and purpose in the loving embrace of God.

Sensing God calling him to become a minister, Stone put aside his plans to become a lawyer and studied theology. His first appointment, in 1796, was to serve two small Presbyterian churches on the American frontier—Cane Ridge and Concord, Kentucky.

Kentucky was the wild and unruly edge of the Southern American frontier at this time, and it was there that a distinctive phenomenon of the Second Great Awakening occurred. During the summer of 1800 a spiritual revival began to occur in the churches under James McGready's leadership. This spiritual awakening swept through Kentucky and Tennessee like wildfire. People began traveling great distances to hear evangelists like McGready, Hodge, and others preach in large open-air meetings. Because attendees would camp out during these revival meetings, they became known as "camp meetings." In October of 1800, 5,000 people attended a camp meeting in Tennessee led by Hodge.

Barton Stone joined with McGready and Hodge, and these Presbyterians were soon joined by Methodists ministers John McGee, Francis Asbury, and Peter Cartwright. In August 1801, a camp meeting was held at Cane Ridge, where Stone was the minister, that drew 20,000 people—the largest of the camp meetings. Even Baptists, who at first were cautious about the movement because of its emotionalism, soon began participating in camp meetings. As a result, numerous churches of all denominations began to be planted on the American frontier.

Soon after the period of the camp meetings, Stone and a few other Presbyterian ministers broke with the Presbyterian church. Chief among the reasons was Stone's opposition to the stanch Calvinist theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith, especially the problematic notions of total depravity and predestination.

For the remainder of his life Stone preached and founded churches in Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri.

Stone met Alexander Campbell for the first time in 1824, and the two reformers found that they had much in common. They both called on people to reject divisive denominational creeds and confessions of faith, and focus instead on the New Testament, convinced that this would lead to Christian unity. There were, of course, differences between the two men as well. One of the differences was that Campbell, who greatly valued rational thought, was a little wary of the emotionalism associated with Stone's movement, especially some of the camp meeting excesses. Another difference concerned how to refer to members of the Restorationist Movement: Stone's wing preferred to be called Christians, whereas Campbell's wing preferred the name Disciples. In 1831 the two groups officially merged, and this union eventually gave rise to the current denominational name: The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

In 1834, Stone moved to Jacksonville, Illinois, largely due to his opposition to slavery, which dominated life in Kentucky, but he also felt that a home base in Illinois would allow him to evangelize “the West.”

Let me conclude my survey of Barton Stone’s influential life with a couple of historical details I think you’ll find interesting. First, one of Stone’s sons, Dr. William Stone, was an elder of the First Christian Church of Fulton, Missouri. And second, Barton Stone preached his last sermon a mere five miles from Oakland Christian Church, at Bear Creek Christian Church, which was located on what is now the southwest edge of Albert-Oakland Park! He died 19 days later in Hannibal, Missouri, at the home of his daughter, Amanda.<sup>1</sup>

The call of the Apostle Paul and the call of Barton Stone were separated by nearly 1800 years, but they share an important element: a profound change in how God is understood, as well as a corresponding change in how one lives a life devoted to God. Both men began their adult lives picturing God as a stern Judge, who eagerly punishes anyone who fails to follow a huge list of burdensome rules and regulations. For them, religion quite naturally was born out of fear—fear of divine punishment. And a fearful religion naturally manifests itself in terms of suspicion of and even hatred towards everyone who does not understand God the same way.

But in their call experiences, both men came to understand God quite differently—in terms of love. “For God so loved the world . . .” And when people understand God in terms of *unconditional* and *unending love*, it changes how people live. They seek to live lives of love, loving others as God loves them.

During this season of Epiphany, we celebrate the fact that God’s *unconditional* and *unending love* was made manifest in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Truly, this understanding of God has the power to transform lives.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This summary of the life of Barton Stone is based on: C. C. Ware, *Barton Warren Stone: Pathfinder Of Christian Union*, 1932 (web); William Garrett West, *Barton Warren Stone: Early American Advocate of Christian Liberty*, (web); “The Search for the Ancient Order” (web); articles from the *Christian Standard*; and *The Biography of Elder Barton Warren Stone*, written by himself, with Additions and Reflections by John Rogers (web).