

CANE RIDGE MEETING HOUSE
Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN
Religion: 25 June 2004: Page 9

Belief in the Bible over men's creeds led to creation of three denominations in Kentucky.
By Murray Evans: Associated Press Writer: Paris Kentucky

PARIS, KY (AP) - - Frontier preacher Barton W. Stone believed the Bible, and not human creeds, should be the basis of the religion practiced by those who would call themselves Christians.

His belief in a document signed 200 years ago led to the development of three religious groups that today claim about 3.5 million followers: Churches of Christ, independent Christian churches, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Stone's movement, known as the "restoration" to its followers, "is a priceless part of the American religious story that needs to be known," said Peter Morgan, president of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, based in Nashville, TN.

This weekend, members of the three groups will meet in the church building where Stone once preached to mark two centuries of history and celebrate the completion of the first reference book on the movement – edited by one man from each of the three groups.

On June 28, 1804, six men, five of them Presbyterian ministers, met at Stone's church at Cane Ridge, northeast of Paris. They signed a document, The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, that declared them free from church creeds and traditions and stated their will to "sink into union with the Body of Christ at large."

Ron Bever, a retired professor of speech at Oklahoma Christian University – a Church of Christ-affiliated school in Oklahoma City – said the document was broadly circulated in religious publications of that era.

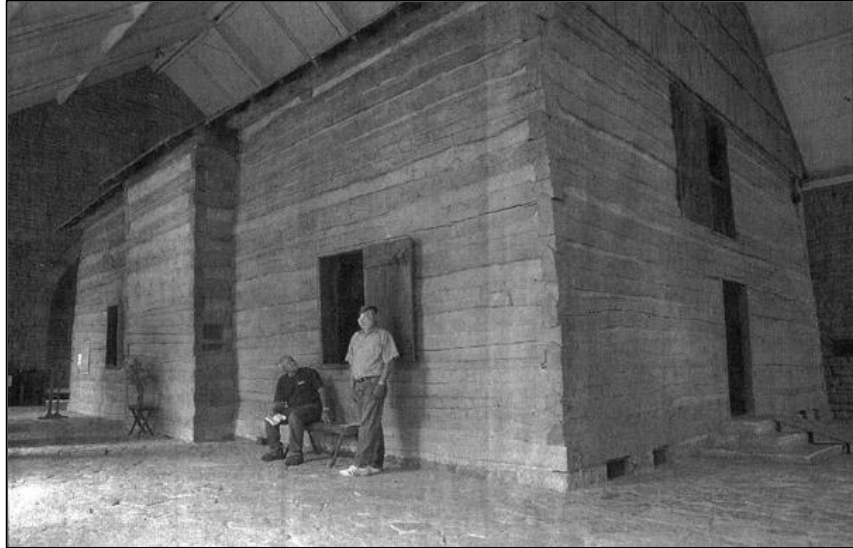
"It helped a lot of religious people to realize that they could take the Bible only, without the creeds of men, and could independently become Christians only, members of the body of Christ that they read about in the New Testament," Bever said.

Stone arrived in Kentucky in 1798. Three years later, he presided over an influential revival at Cane Ridge that drew an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 people to the grounds around the one-room church building. That revival caused tension in the Presbyterian church, as some conservative ministers thought doctrinal boundaries had been breached.

Stone thought that to be a good thing, and in late 1803, he and five other ministers withdrew from the church's Kentucky synod and formed the Springfield Presbytery, which disbanded nine months later.

In its Last Will and Testament, it denounced names of distinction such as “reverend” and said that “the Church of Christ” had the right to self-governance and to choose its preachers. The signers declared that “the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven” and that other books “that stand in competition with it” should be disregarded.

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Cane Ridge Meeting House

Franklin Turner, left, and his brother Hick pause while touring the Cane Ridge Meeting House and Shrine near Paris, KY. Built in 1791, the log church still stands, albeit inside another building constructed in the 1950's to keep the meeting house from deteriorating. Three religious groups trace their heritage to a document signed by frontier preacher Barton W. Stone who preached at the church.