

THE CHRISTOLOGIES OF BARTON STONE AND ALEXANDER CAMPBELL AND THEIR DISAGREEMENT CONCERNING THE PREEXISTENCE OF CHRIST A VISION BEYOND THE CREEDS

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I've long been fascinated by the study of Christology, probably because of the rare Christology of the Church of God General Conference. Historians in our movement have for the last 20 years focused on the Socinians and others of the Radical Reformation as our historical forebears. Those groups developed similar Christologies to that of the Church of God but I could see no continual connection or direct influence. Instead, what I normally heard were commonsense arguments against the Trinity and especially the fact that the doctrine is not specifically stated in Scripture.

I find those elements in the writings of Stone and Campbell. Along with the Christian Connexion, they were prominent in presenting a Christ-centered gospel based upon the atoning work of Christ, while questioning the creeds of orthodoxy.

In this article I will present some core writings of Stone and Campbell in regards to the Trinity and Christology and will add my comments in footnotes.

On the Trinity

The doctrine of Trinity has long been a subject of endless controversy among theologians. I have thought the contest a war of words, while the combatants believed the same thing; seeing they all maintain the divine unity. On this doctrine many things are said, which are dark, unintelligible, unscriptural, and too mysterious for comprehension. Many of these expressions we have rejected; and for this reason *we are charged with denying the doctrine itself*. I shall state the doctrine, as generally stated and defended by our brethren who oppose us, and give my reasons why I cannot receive it.¹

¹ Barton W. Stone, *An Address to the Christian Churches in Kentucky, Tennessee & Ohio on Several Important Doctrines of Religion*, second ed., Lexington, KY: I.T. Cavins & Co, 1821, 7. All quotations have been taken from the Restoration Movement site

Others, with whom bigotry outweighs a thousand good arguments, may be deterred from receiving this view of Trinity by being told that it savors of Arianism, Socinianism, or some other reputed heresy. These and such like names have driven many into opposite extremes, and kept them from that happy medium where truth commonly lies. I know not what the real sentiments of Arius were, having never seen his writings; nor have I seen his sentiments but through the coloring of his enemies. They who will put themselves to the trouble of reading this address will clearly see whose doctrines, mine or those of my brethren who oppose us, most savor of those just mentioned.²

On the Son of God

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; and in the fullness of time was united with a body prepared for him; and in whom dwelt all the fullness of Godhead bodily. This last opinion I profess to be mine.

In order to avoid obscurity in the investigation of this important subject, I will briefly notice the two former opinions, before I particularly state my own.³

I am confident that mystery will be urged as the great argument to refute and cover these difficulties. But shall we cover ourselves in the mantle of mystery, woven by our own hands? Shall we cling to a mystery which strikes at the very existence of the Son of God — a mystery which destroys the efficacy of his blood, the commendation of God's love to sinners, and involves so many absurdities and contradictions? Mystery is one of the names of the whore of Babylon, written in large letters on her

which Hans Rollman maintains at <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/>. Notice that Stone doesn't say that he rejects the idea of a Trinity but does reject the many unscriptural elements of the doctrine.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11. Stone rejects any "ism" and says he is not familiar with the writings of Arius.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Stone goes on to state the doctrine of the Trinity and refute the idea of an eternally begotten Son and the idea that one God could actually be three Persons.

forehead. Her daughters have the same mark (Rev. 17). Charity would hold my pen from writing this; yet truth convinces her it is expedient.⁴

My brethren who maintain that the Son was eternally begotten may think I misrepresent their opinions. If I have, it is without design. When they so unequivocally express “That there is but one only living and true God without parts,” I thence conclude that they do not believe that another real and eternal God was begotten from eternity, and sent down from heaven into the world. If they do, there is a pointed contradiction. If that which was begotten from eternity, and sent into the world, be not a real, intelligent being, then call it by what name you please, it does not alter the matter, it is still not a real being. If so, the two opinions are one, which is that the Son of God had no proper or real existence till born of the Virgin Mary 1820 years ago. This doctrine I shall endeavor to refute, by stating and proving my own. Thus Trinitarians and Socinians, though always contending, are in my view, the same on this doctrine.⁵

My own views of the Son of God are that he did not begin to exist 1820 years ago; nor did he exist from eternity; but was the first begotten of the Father before time or creation began — that he was sent by the Father 1820 years ago into the world, and united with a body, prepared for him; and that in him dwelt all the fullness of Godhead bodily. These propositions I will endeavor to establish by arguments drawn from the oracles of truth...⁶

Our brethren think they sufficiently confute us when they prove the divinity of the Son of God by the divine names, titles, attributes, and worship ascribed to him. In this they are egregiously mistaken. For these we ascribe to him as well as they. The difference is this. They ascribe these attributes and names to the Son, as in him from eternity. But we ascribe them to him because the Father dwells in him. For our authority, we have already produced the Scriptures. Let our brethren prove that the Son was eternal and independent; then we will acknowledge that he was eternally divine. The divinity in him we acknowledge was eternal,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18. Thus Stone pronounces his judgment on the doctrine of the Trinity and goes on to tackle Socinianism.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18. I’ve been fascinated by this paragraph ever since I read it about four years ago. While Stone says it in disparagement, he predicted a current trend in biblical theology of making a greater distinction between the preexistent Christ and the incarnate Son of God. While systematic theologians have moved toward a “social Trinitarianism,” biblical theologians have raised the question, “How can God the Father be incarnated if the Son preexisted?” The Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown would be one who has strongly argued this position. Colin Brown also expressed this thought.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18. Stone follows with extensive scriptural support for the idea of the personal preexistence of Christ.

because all the fullness of Godhead was in him. But we cannot acknowledge two eternal, distinct beings, possessed of infinite power, wisdom, etc. Nor can they without contradicting the first article of their faith.⁷

I shall close this section with a few remarks in order to rectify a mistake in some, respecting my candor and veracity. I had casually observed in my former address “that for nearly twenty years past, my mind had not wavered respecting its truth,” meaning that the soul of the *man Jesus Christ* existed before all worlds. This doctrine I received when a student of divinity. This doctrine I preached soon after I came to this state, as the following certificates will shew — certificates of men whose piety and high respectability in society are undoubted. Some of them are ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church.

We, the subscribers, certify that we have heard *Barton W. Stone*, at least twenty years ago, preach the preexistence of the human soul of Jesus Christ; or that the human soul of Jesus existed before the foundation of the world. Witness our hands, this 20th day of Dec., 1818.

*John Hopkins; Thomas Nesbil; Moses Hall; James Foster; Robert Caldwell; David Knox; John Edward; Samuel M. Waugh.*⁸

Stone and Campbell Discuss Unitarianism

The following is taken from an exchange between Stone and Campbell. I couldn't find Campbell's original writing which occasioned this discussion but I do include later a more detailed discourse on why he rejected Unitarianism.

This dialogue actually focuses on Stone's view of the Atonement. First Stone writes:

The reasons given by you for rejecting the name *Christian*, because you were anticipated by a people in the East and in some parts of our country, who are Unitarians, and who do not baptize for the remission of sins, nor break the loaf every first day, are the things so objectionable, and objected to by all, whom I have heard speak on the subject. They think you have rejected virtually all such from any claim of being disciples of Christ. Myself and thousands of others have been called Unitarians by our enemies, though I ever denied the name. How cordially did I agree with you in the Apostles' Creed. Were I to adopt any other besides the Bible, it would certainly be this *ex-animo*. Have you altered your views? Do inform me. If you really design to purge out all Unitarians from the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31-32. Above Stone emphasizes the subordination of Jesus to God. He then closes with a signed affidavit that he has always taught the preexistence of Christ.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32. Note the prominence of the Platonic view of the soul in his understanding.

Disciples, as is thought by some, do inform me your definition of a Unitarian.⁹

Campbell responds:

When in your kind epistle of November 11th you asked me for my definition of a *Unitarian*, and assured me that you denied the name, though often applied to yourself, and urged me to say whether I “designed to co-operate with Trinitarians against Unitarians,” I felt it my duty to make the proposition alluded to in your letter of March 30th. I have done so in the full persuasion that the contemplated discussion is not only expedient, but necessary, and that it can be so managed as to disabuse the public mind of injurious prejudices both against you and myself. You have long disavowed Unitarianism, and **I have also disavowed Trinitarianism** and every other sectarianism in the land; and therefore that morbid state of feeling elicited by these partizan wars about the polemical abstrusities of metaphysical abstractions, which, in its excessive irritability, forbids the scriptural investigation of the great points which have been so often distorted and mangled on the racks and wheels of party discord and proscription, should have no abiding in our minds, much less prohibit a scriptural examination of the facts, and precepts, and promises, on which these unhallowed theories have been reared.¹⁰

Campbell on Unitarianism¹¹

What is a *Unitarian*? Etymologically it means one that believes in unity — in simple unity, without regard to person, place, or thing. Technically it denotes one that is opposed to trinity or tri-unity in the godhead or deity. All Christians say that “there is but one God, and one Mediator between God and men — the man Christ Jesus.” But he is more than a man, more than an inspired man, more than an angelic man, more than

⁹ *The Millennial Harbinger*, new series, Bethany, VA., January, 1840, vol. IV, no. 1. Stone is concerned that Campbell is including him when he distances himself from Unitarians.

¹⁰ *The Millennial Harbinger*, vol. IV, no. VI, emphasis added. Note that Campbell disavows Trinitarianism. Earlier (as quoted below) Campbell had more fully defined his objections to Unitarianism. His sympathies lie with the Trinitarians in that they preserved the doctrine of the Atonement, while the Unitarians were often totally humanistic. It’s my opinion that this is why the very Christ-centered Restoration Movement moved toward the Trinitarian position, even though it isn’t always articulated as such.

¹¹ *The Millennial Harbinger*, Vol. IV, No. II, pp. 80-81. In an article entitled “Definitions and Answers to Questions — No. I” Campbell makes a strong distinction between humanists and those who reject Trinitarianism for scriptural reasons.

any created thing. These theories have different names — such as Humanitarian, Socinian, Arian, Semi-Arian, etc. But we enter not into the merits of these shadow of shades of metaphysical abstractions.

I use the term *Unitarian* in its *obnoxious* sense, as indicating one who regards the death of Christ as not for sins, nor for sinners; but for a proof of his sincerity and benevolence. With the real Unitarian no real sin-offering, no real atonement was needed; and therefore Christ died as a martyr. This, with me, is *practically* no better than theism. Indeed, such a person says he does not believe “that Jesus died *for* our sins”; or “that he, the Just One, suffered for the unjust.”

Many theists believe that Jesus Christ lived and died in Judea, at the time affirmed, and that he was a great reformer, a pious and excellent man, liberally inspired, as other sages were, and that he was slain by the hands of wicked Jews and Romans. Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine both believed all this; but they laughed to scorn the idea of his dying for sin as an atoning sacrifice.

Many persons have been called Unitarians, and some have so called themselves, who believe in the death of Christ as a sin-offering, who reject Trinitarianism because of its unscriptural, unintelligible, and barbarous phraseology; regarding it as a system of polytheism; who, nevertheless, know not what to say or think of the preexistent or antehuman state of the author of Christianity; some repudiating the phrases “eternal son,” “second person,” “consubstantial,” “co-equal,” “very God of very God,” “Supreme Deity,” etc. They reject these terms because to them barbarous and incomprehensible; but have no distinct idea or name for the antecedent state, relation, or character of him that was made flesh. These differ, in my judgment, very materially from the Unitarian, who has no other use for Jesus than as a prophet, a king, or a martyr; therefore virtually rejecting everything that concerns his high priesthood. The phrase “Supreme Deity” is, to my mind, perfectly Pagan. What! Have we got one supreme Jove with his retinue of inferior gods and demi-gods! I was once asked by a very conceited and self-confident preacher whether I believed that Jesus was the *Supreme* God? Had it not been in a worshipping assembly, I would have asked him how many *inferior* gods he acknowledged? I neither believe in one supreme god, or more. The term *Jehovah* is itself indicative of the supreme. What would any sensible person say to him that asked him, “Sir, do you believe that Jesus Christ was a *human* man — a *supreme* man?” Would he not reply, “Sir, with me, *man is man*. I know nothing of supreme humanity, nor of supreme divinity. If any being be human, he is human; if he be divine, he is divine, possessed of a nature which has no positive, comparative, or superlative degrees in it. Indeed, what nature has in it degrees of

comparison! It is not the divine, the angelic, the human.” I have long taught that the Trinitarian, Arian, and Sabellian theories are wholly a corrupt speech — irrational and unscriptural speculations.

But there is this difference: All Trinitarians believe in the divine nature of Jesus Christ, and in his death as a real sacrifice for sin — an expiatory offering, without which there could be no remission. I believe this most sincerely, but without any fellowship for their humanisms, their barbarous diction, and unscriptural modes of reasoning on the subject. Therefore that Unitarianism which I repudiate denies both the *divine nature* of my Redeemer, and the necessity of his death as a *sin-offering in order to remission*. It is long since we proposed to abandon all this style, and to call Bible things by Bible names. Our brethren have generally agreed to do so; but in their definition of certain Bible names, I have sometimes seen a sense imposed upon them wholly modern, and which would ultimate in a doctrine as certainly unapostolic as either Arianism or Trinitarianism.¹²

¹² While Campbell appreciates Trinitarian emphasis on the Atonement, he objects strongly to the non-biblical language of Nicea and Chalcedon. In an article entitled “Foundation of Christian Union” in *The Christian System*, 2nd ed., 1839, 130, Campbell lists the Trinity first among non-biblical creedal elements:

“Religious philosophers on the Bible have excogitated the following doctrines and philosophical distinctions:

‘The Holy Trinity,’ ‘Three persons of one substance, power, and eternity,’ ‘Co-essential, co-substantial, co-equal,’ ‘The Son eternally begotten of the Father,’ ‘An eternal Son,’ ‘Humanity and divinity of Christ,’ ‘The Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son,’ ‘God’s eternal decrees,’ ‘Conditional and unconditional election and reprobation,’ ‘God out of Christ,’ ‘Free will,’ ‘Liberty and necessity,’ ‘Original sin,’ ‘Total depravity,’ ‘Covenant of grace,’ ‘Effectual calling,’ ‘Free grace,’ ‘Sovereign grace,’ ‘General and particular atonement,’ ‘Satisfy divine justice,’ ‘Common and special operations of the Holy Ghost,’ ‘Imputed righteousness,’ ‘Inherent righteousness,’ ‘Progressive sanctification,’ ‘Justifying and saving faith,’ ‘Historic and temporary faith,’ ‘The direct and reflex acts of faith,’ ‘The faith of assurance, and the assurance of faith,’ ‘Legal repentance,’ ‘Evangelical repentance,’ ‘Perseverance of the saints,’ and ‘Falling from grace,’ ‘Visible and invisible church,’ ‘Infant membership,’ ‘Sacraments,’ ‘Eucharist,’ ‘Consubstantiation,’ ‘Church government,’ ‘The power of the keys,’ etc. Concerning these and all such doctrines, and all the speculations and phraseology to which they have given rise, we have the privilege neither to affirm nor deny — neither to believe nor doubt; because God has not proposed them to us in His word, and there is no command to believe them. If they are deduced from the Scriptures, we have them in the facts and declarations of God’s Spirit; if they are not deduced from the Bible, we are free from all the difficulties and strifes which they have engendered and created.

Campbell and Stone Discuss the Preexistence of Christ

Campbell and Stone differed on the personal preexistence of Jesus as the Son of God, with Campbell strongly stating that Jesus as the Son of God did not begin until he was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus.

In writing about John 1, which he elaborated upon with great trepidation, Campbell suggested that there is some kind of preexistence which is beyond human comprehension. Stone seized upon that to argue for his view of the preexistence of Christ.

Campbell writes:

The Trinitarian System.

To Timothy.

Dear Sir, You will recollect that when I was interrogated on that subject, I gave sundry reasons why I felt reluctant to speculate on the incomprehensible Jehovah. It was also stated that there was no topic in common estimation so awfully sacred as that of the doctrine of “the Trinity,” and if a man did not speak in a very fixed and set phrase on this subject, he endangered his whole Christian reputation and his own usefulness. At the same time I remarked that I was very far from being afraid either to think upon this subject or to express my thoughts, although it was deemed so unpardonable to depart even in one monosyllable from the orthodox views. I moreover stated that I disliked any thing like speculation upon this topic in particular, because if I differed in the least from the orthodox, I introduced something like a new theory, or something that would be treated as such, and either approved or rejected on theoretic grounds. If, however, you will neither make a new theory out of my expositions, nor contend for any speculations on the subject, nor carry the views farther than where I leave off, I will gratify you and other friends with my views of the first sentence in John’s preface to his testimony: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.”

1. In the first place I object to the Calvinistic doctrine of the Trinity for the same reasons they object to the Arians and Socinians. They object to these because their views derogate in their judgment from the eternal glory of the Founder of the Christian religion. They will not allow the Saviour to have been a creature, however exalted, because they conceive this character is unbecoming him, and contrary to the scriptural

“We choose to speak of Bible things by Bible words, because we are always suspicious that if the word is not in the Bible, the idea which it represents is not there; and always confident that the things taught by God are better taught in the words and under the names which the Holy Spirit has chosen and appropriated, than in the words which man’s wisdom teaches.”

statements concerning him. They wish to give him more glory than they think the Arians are willing to do. Now I object to their making him and calling him an "Eternal Son" because I think that if he were only the Son of God from all eternity, he is entitled to very little, if any more glory, than what the Arians give him. I wish to give him more glory than the Calvinists give him. They are as far below his real glory, in my judgment, as the Arians are in their judgment.

2. But in the second place, I have an insuperable objection to the Arian and Calvinistic phraseology on the doctrine of the first relation existing between the Father and the Saviour of men, because it confounds things human and divine, and gives new ideas to Bible terms unthought of by the inspired writers. The names Jesus, Christ, or Messiah, only begotten Son, Son of God belong to the Founder of the Christian religion, and to none else. They express not a relation existing before the Christian era, but relations which commenced at that time. To understand the relation betwixt the Saviour and his Father, which existed before time, and that relation which began in time, is impossible on either of these theories. There was no Jesus, no Messiah, no Christ, no Son of God, no only begotten before the reign of Augustus Cesar. The relation that was before the Christian era was not that of a son and a father, terms which always imply disparity; but it was that expressed by John in the sentence under consideration. The relation was that of God and the "word of God." This phraseology unfolds a relation quite different from that of a father and a son — a relation perfectly intimate, equal, and glorious. This naturally leads me to the first sentence of John. And here I must state a few *postulata*.

1. No relation amongst human beings can perfectly exhibit the relation which the Saviour held to the God and Father of all anterior to his birth. The reason is that relation is not homogenous, or of the same kind with relations originating from creation. All relations we know anything of are created, such as that of father and son. Now I object as much to a created relation as I do to a creature in reference to the original relation of God and the word of God. This relation is an untreated and unoriginated relation.

2. When in the fullness of time it became necessary in the wisdom of God to exhibit a Saviour, it became expedient to give some view of the original and eternal dignity of this wonderful visitant of the human race. And as this view must be given in human language, inadequate as it was, the whole vocabulary of human speech must be examined for suitable terms.

3. Of these terms expressive of relations, the most suitable must be, and most unquestionably was, selected. And as the relation was spiritual

and not carnal, such terms only were eligible which had respect to mental or spiritual relations. Of this sort there is but one in all the archives of human knowledge, and that is the one selected.

4. The Holy Spirit selected the name Word, and therefore we may safely assert that this is the best, if not the only term, in the whole vocabulary of human speech at all adapted to express that relation which existed “in the beginning” or before time, between our Saviour and his God.

These *postulata* being stated, I proceed to inquire what sort of a relation does this term represent? And here everything is plain and easy of comprehension. I shall state numerically a few things universally admitted by the reflecting part of mankind:

1st. A word is a sign or representative of a thought or an idea, and is the idea in an audible or visible form. It is the exact image of that invisible thought which is a perfect secret to all the world until it is expressed.

2d. All men think or form ideas by means of words or images; so that no man can think without words or symbols of some sort.

3d. Hence it follows that the word and the idea which it represents are co-etaneous, or of the same age or antiquity. It is true the word may not be uttered or born for years or ages after the idea exists, but still the word is just as old as the idea.

4th. The idea and the word are nevertheless distinct from each other, though the relation between them is the nearest known on earth. An idea cannot exist without a word, nor a word without an idea.

5th. He that is acquainted with the word is acquainted with the idea, for the idea is wholly in the word.

Now let it be most attentively observed and remembered that these remarks are solely intended to exhibit the relation which exists between a word and an idea, and that this relation is of a mental nature, and more akin to the spiritual system than any relation created of which we know anything. It is a relation of the most sublime order; and no doubt the reason why the name Word is adopted by the apostle in this sentence was because of its superior ability to represent to us the divine relation existing between God and the Saviour prior to his becoming the Son of God. By putting together the above remarks on the term word, we have a full view of what John intended to communicate. As a word is an exact image of an idea, so is “The Word” an exact image of the invisible God. As a word cannot exist without an idea, nor an idea without a word, so God never was without “The Word,” nor “The Word” without God; or as a word is of equal age, or co-etaneous with its idea, so “The Word” and

God are co-eternal. And as an idea does not create its word, nor a word its idea; so God did not create "The Word," nor the "Word" God.

Such a view does the language used by John suggest. And to this do all the Scriptures agree. For "The Word" was made flesh, and in consequence of becoming incarnate, he is styled the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father. As from eternity God was manifest in and by "The Word," so now God is manifest in the flesh. As God was always with "The Word," so when "The Word" becomes flesh, he is Emanuel, God with us. As God was never manifest but by "The Word," so the heavens and the earth and all things were created by "The Word." And as "The Word" ever was the effulgence or representation of the invisible God, so he will ever be known and adored as "The Word of God." So much for the divine and eternal relation between the Saviour and God. You will easily perceive that I carry these views no farther than to explain the nature of that relation untreated and unoriginated which the inspired language inculcates.

These views place us on a lofty eminence whence we look down upon the Calvinistic ideas of "eternal filiation," "eternal generation," "eternal Son" as midway betwixt us and Arianism. From this sublime and lofty eminence we see the Socinian moving upon a hillock; the Arian upon a hill; and the Calvinist upon a mountain; all of which lose their disproportion to each other because of the immense height above them to which this view elevates us. The first sentence of John I paraphrase thus: From eternity was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was, I say, from eternity with God. By him all things were made, and he became flesh and dwelt among us. He became a child born and a son of man. As such he is called Emanuel, Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, only begotten of the Father.

I can give the above views upon no other authority than my own reasonings. I learned them from nobody — I found them in no book. **It is true, indeed, I have held the idea for sixteen years that Jesus is called the Son of God, not because of an "eternal generation" (which I conceive to be nonsense), but because he was born as the angel described to Mary.** This is now pretty generally received by a great many Christians. Nor would I dispute or contend for this as a theory or speculation with anybody. I could, indeed, amplify considerably, and perhaps obviate some difficulties by following up farther the hints submitted; but such are my views of the import of the beginning of John's testimony. You will remember that I make no systems, and although there are some abstract reasonings upon terms (as indeed much of our reasonings about language are) in the preceding, it is only for the purpose of getting into the sacred import of a style from which we have

been proscribed by a speculating philosophy. I have acceded to your request with more ease than I could have done, had it not been for a few prating bodies who are always striving to undo my influence by the cry of Unitarianism, or Socinianism, or some other obnoxious *ism*. From all *isms* may the Lord save us!¹³

Stone responds:

Brother Campbell, Your talents and learning we have highly respected; your course we have generally approved; your religious views, in many points, accord with our own; and to one point we have hoped we both were directing our efforts, which point is to unite the flock of Christ, scattered in the dark and cloudy day. We have seen you, with the arm of a Samson, and the courage of a David, tearing away the long established foundations of partyism, human authoritative creeds and confessions; we have seen you successfully attacking many false notions and speculations in religion; and against every substitute for the Bible and its simplicity, we have seen you exerting all your mighty powers. Human edifices begin to totter, and their builders to tremble. Every means is tried to prevent their ruin, and to crush the man who dares attempt it. We confess our fears that in some of your well intended aims at error you have unintentionally wounded the truth. Not as unconcerned spectators have we looked on the mighty war between you and your opposers; a war in which many of us had been engaged for many years before you entered the field. You have made a diversion in our favor, and to you is turned the attention of creed makers and party spirits, and on you is hurled their ghostly thunder. We enjoy a temporary peace and respite from war where you are known.

From you we have learned more fully the evil of speculating on religion, and have made considerable proficiency in correcting ourselves. But, dear sir, how surprised and sorry were we to see in your 10th number, volume 4, a great aberration from your professed principles. You there have speculated and theorized on the most important point in theology, and in a manner more mysterious and metaphysical than your predecessors. We refer to your exposition of John 1:1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Please, sir, attend to a few friendly remarks designed to correct in time what may hereafter become of more serious injury than any system before invented by the wisdom of man.

You have assumed very high grounds, from which you look down upon all the Christian world, and see them at an immeasurable distance

¹³ *The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 4, No. 10, May 7, 1827, 330-338, emphasis added.

below you — the Calvinist midway between you and the Arian — the Calvinist on a mountain, the Arian on a hill, and the Socinian on a hillock. From this eminence you see a vast difference between the Calvinist and Arian; but on a page or two before, you could discover very little, if any, difference between their views of the Son of God. The ground you occupy is too high for common minds to tread. I should be afraid to venture, lest giddiness should be the consequence. I would advise my dear brother not to soar too high on fancy's wings above the humble grounds of the gospel, lest others adventuring may be precipitated to ruin. Not that I should advise you to settle on Calvin's mount, on the hill of Arius, or on the hillock of Socinus (these are all far too low), but on the holy mount of God, revealed in His word. This, though high as the heavens, is safe for all to tread.

You object to the Calvinistic views of Trinity, and of calling Jesus the *eternal Son of God*, for reasons which have long since induced us to reject them. Yet, my dear sir, we confess we can see no material difference between your views and those of the Calvinists. What you call the WORD, they call the *eternal Son of God*; yet you both believe the Word of God and the Son of God to be the one, self-existent, and eternal God himself. We are led to conclude this of you, because frequently you apply the term *eternal* to the *Word* — as “his eternal glory,” “his eternal dignity,” “co-eternal with God,” “the eternal relation between the Saviour and God.” We believe that whatever is eternal is also self-existent and independent, and therefore God supreme. We cannot think that you believe in two eternal Gods, though some of your readers may draw this inference from some of your expressions. You speak of “the relation which the Saviour held to the God and Father of all, *anterior to his birth*,” “the relation existing between God and the Saviour, *prior to his becoming the Son of God*,” “the *eternal relation* between the Saviour and God.” We have always thought that a relation implied more than one; and that if God from eternity had existed alone, there could have been no relation between Him and non-entity. We view these expressions of yours as unguarded, and not designed by you to communicate what the language imports, as when you say, “God from eternity was manifest in and by the *Word*.” It might be asked, To whom was He manifest from eternity, if He alone existed from eternity? Again, that you and Calvinists differ only in phraseology on this subject, while you believe the same things, appears in another particular. What they call the human nature of Christ, or the man Christ Jesus, you call the Son of God, Jesus, Christ, Messiah, only begotten. They believe that the human nature of Christ existed not till born of Mary; you believe and declare that “there was no Jesus, no Messiah, no Christ, no Son of God, no only

begotten, before the reign of Augustus Cesar.” Neither Calvinists nor Socinians should impeach your orthodoxy on this point. The Calvinists maintain that the eternal Son of God, who was the very and eternal God himself, became man by taking to himself a reasonable soul and true body, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in *the womb of the Virgin Mary*, of her substance, *and born of her*. Confession of Faith, Lar. Cat. Ques. 37 and 47, etc! You say, the *Word*, by whom all things were made, “became flesh and dwelt among us. He became a *child born* and a son of man.”

You may deny that you ever affirmed the *Word* to be the only true God. Then we would humbly ask you, What was it? Was it an intelligent being or a mere name or relation? We think the query important. If it was an intelligent being, and “co-eternal with God,” as you say, then it must be the eternal God himself, or another eternal, distinct God. If it be neither of these, then it must have been an eternal, unintelligent name or relation; or, in your own language, it was *the sign or image of an idea*, which idea is God. Shall we think that the *Word*, which was God, and by which all things were made, and which was made flesh, was nothing but an unintelligent name, relation, or sign of the only true God? Can this be the Saviour of sinners? We dare not impute this absurdity to you, but we fear your unguarded speculations may cause the less informed to err.

Permit us, dear brother, to propose a few queries for your consideration, and we hope for our profit:

1. When it is so frequently asserted of the Son of God that he came down from heaven; that he ascended up to heaven, where he was before; does not this language naturally convey the idea that he was there prior to his coming down, and consequently before the reign of Augustus Cesar?

2. What can be the meaning of John 6:38? Jesus says to them, “I came down from heaven not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me.” Was this Jesus who spake the only true God? How could the only true God say, “I came *not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me*”? No Christian can apply this to the only true God. Was this Jesus the person that never existed till the “reign of Augustus Cesar”? How, then, could he in truth say, I came down from heaven, where he was before? The text cannot apply to him. If he was not the only true God, nor the person that never was till Cesar’s reign, it must be *the Word* whom we call the Son of the living God, God’s *own* Son, his only begotten, his first begotten, brought forth before the world was; yet we agree with you, and the generality of all sects in the present day, that he was not eternally begotten, or eternal Son. We plainly suggest these objections to your scheme to elicit information.

3. How can John 17:5 be reconciled with your views? “Father, glorify you me with your own self, with the glory I had with you before the world was.” This person could not, we think, be the only true God; for if he was, he prayed to himself (v. 3.) Will Christians say that the only true God prayed to himself to be with himself, to be glorified with himself, and to restore to himself the glory he once had with himself, but which he had not now (therefore changeable)? Should we not consider a man deranged who should thus fervently pray to himself to be with himself? We dare not impute this to the only true God, nor can we apply the text to the person who began his existence under Cesar’s reign, for this person that prayed had a glory with the Father before the world was, and therefore must have then existed. If it cannot apply to the only true God, nor to the person who had no existence till Cesar’s reign, to whom can it apply? Surely not to a mere name, or unintelligent effulgence, or relation.

4. Again, who was the person spoken of in 2 Corinthians 8:9? “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich he became poor, that you through his poverty might be rich.” It could not be the only true God, for he is unchangeable; nor could it be the Jesus or Christ, who existed not till Cesar’s day, for he was never rich in any sense, and became poor! We ask, Who was he?

5. Who was the person mentioned in Philippians 2:6, 10? The whole passage plainly shows it was not the only true God, nor the person who never existed before the Christian era.

6. Who was the person that said, “A body have you prepared me, O God” — the person that *took* flesh and blood? (Heb. 2:14; 10:5).

7. Is it anywhere said that the Word created or made anything (*hup’ autou*) by himself as the original cause? Is it not always said that all things were made (*di’ autou*) by him as the instrumental cause? Ephesians 3:9: God created all things (*dia*) by Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 8:6: “But to us there is but one God, the Father (*ex*) of whom are all things; and one Lord Jesus Christ, (*di’ hou*) by whom are all things.” Hebrews 1:2: “God in these last days has spoken to us by his Son (*di’ hou*) by whom he also made the worlds,” the material worlds (Heb. 11:3). Colossians 1:16: “All things were created (*di’ autou*) by him and for him.” It is true in the beginning of this verse *en autou* is used, but in the same sense.

The Greek fathers of the second and third centuries, commenting on those texts above quoted, say that *hupo* means the original, or first cause, and that *dia* signifies the second, or instrumental cause. Thus Philo, Origen, Eusebius, and Cyril, who certainly better understood their language than we do (Clarke on Trin. p. 91, 92). Doctor Clarke also remarks that this was the constant and unanimous sense of the primitive

church. If these observations be true, will it not follow undeniably that the *Word (di'hou) by whom* all things were made was not the only true God, but a person that existed with the only true God before creation began; not from eternity, else he must be the only true God; but long before the reign of Augustus Cesar?

We are not sticklers for names; we can grant to you, without any relinquishment of principle, that this person, the Word, never bore the name of Jesus, Christ, Messiah, or Son of God, till the reign of Augustus. But we cannot say with you that these names solely belong to him; for Joshua was called Jesus, Cyrus was called Messiah, or Christ, or Anointed (for the Hebrew is the same), and Adam was called the Son of God (Heb. 4:8; Isa. 45; Luke 3:38). But the person of Joshua existed long before he was called Jesus, or Saviour, and the person of Cyrus existed before he was called Messiah or Christ. This name he never bore till he was anointed and appointed by God to restore captive Israel. So we believe the intelligent person, the Word, or the Son of God, existed long before he was called Jesus, Christ, or Messiah.

Dear brother, we submit these thoughts to you and the public from the purest motives, which we have already stated. We did design to make a few remarks on your speculations on the relation of a word and idea. We think the application of this to God and the Word is foreign from the truth and meaning of the spirit. But the short limits of our work forbid us to write more. With sentiments of high respect and brotherly love we bid you adieu. *B.W. Stone, editor*¹⁴

Campbell responds:¹⁵

To the Christian Messenger.

Brother Stone, I will call you *brother* because you once told me that you could conscientiously and devoutly pray to the Lord Jesus Christ as though there was no other God in the universe than he. I then asked you of what import and consequence was all the long controversy you had waged with the Calvinists on the Trinitarian questions. They did

¹⁴ *The Christian Baptist*, Vol. 5, No. 3, October 1, 1827, emphasis added. Again I find it interesting that he can see no difference between the preexistence of Christ in the Calvinist view and that of Campbell. Stone believes very strongly both that Jesus personally preexisted but that he is not co-eternal with the Father. He does say that he doesn't insist on calling the preexistent Christ by the name Jesus.

¹⁵ In his rebuttal (emphasis added), Campbell insists that Stone is engaging in excessive speculation in arguing the personal preexistence of Christ. He says that most arguments for or against the Trinity are based in human reasoning and are therefore to be rejected.

practically no more than pray to Jesus; and you could consistently and conscientiously do no less. Theoretically you differed, but practically you agreed. I think you told me that you were forced into this controversy, and that you regretted it. Some weak heads amongst my Baptist brethren have been scandalized at me because I called you *brother Stone*. What! say they, call an "*Arian, heretic*" a *brother!!* I know nothing of his Arianism, said I, nor of his Calvinism. I never seriously read one entire pamphlet of the whole controversy, and I fraternize with him as I do with the Calvinists. Neither of their theories are worth one hour; and they who tell me that they supremely venerate and unequivocally worship the King my Lord and Master, and are willing to obey him in all things, I call my brethren. But more than this, brother Stone, I have to say to you. Your enemies, and they are not a few, have, to a man, as far as I have heard them speak, said your Christian character, your moral deportment, was unblemished. Would to Heaven that this could have been said of all who opposed you! I do not think it strange that, in running post haste out of Babylon, you should have, in some angles of your course, run past Jerusalem. Nay, verily, I have been astonished that you should have made so few aberrations in so many efforts.

But, brother Stone, I exceedingly regret that you have said and written so much on *two* topics, neither of which you, nor myself, nor any man living, can fully understand. One of these is the burthen of your late letter to me. **You do not like my comment on John 1:1 — well then, just say so, and let it alone. I said in presenting it I was not about to contend for it, nor to maintain any theory upon the subject.** My words are, "Nor would I dispute or contend for this as a theory or speculation with anybody." Why, then, call me into the field? I have received many letters on the subject of that essay, not one of which confines itself to the things I have said, nor to the grand object I had in view, viz. to examine into the ideas attached to the *term* employed by the Holy Spirit to designate the relation existing between him that "*was made flesh,*" and sent into the world, and him who sent him.

I have uniformly found that all writers for the Trinity and against it have much to say upon the *rationale* of the doctrine. Reason is either proscribed or enthroned. Those that one while proscribe her, at another appeal to her; and those who make her sovereign will not always do her homage. So that the controversy is from reason to revelation and from revelation to reason, as the parties are pressed. I will take the liberty of laying down a few positions on this subject, not for the sake of demonstrating them, but for the sake of deciding on a proper course of conduct.

1. The pretensions of the Bible to a divine authority or origin are to be examined by our reason alone. Its evidences are addressed to our reason, and by our reasoning powers the question is to be answered, "Is the Bible of divine or human origin?" So soon as reason has decided this question, then

2. The truths of the Bible are to be received as first principles, not to be tried by our reason, one by one, but to be received as new principles, from which we are to reason as from intuitive principles in any human science.

3. The terms found in the Bible are to be interpreted and understood in the common acceptation, as reason or use suggests their meaning; but the things taught are to be received not because we have proved them by our reason to be truths, but because God has taught them to us.

4. The strongest objections urged against the Trinitarians by their opponents are derived from what is called the unreasonableness or the absurdity of three persons being but one God, and that each of these three is the Supreme God. Now as you know I am not at all disposed either to adopt the style nor to contend for the views of the Trinitarians, any more than I am the views of the Socinians or Unitarians of any grade: you will bear with me when I tell you that no man as a philosopher, or as a reasoner, can object to the Trinitarian hypothesis, even should it say that the Father, the Word, and the Spirit are three distinct beings, and yet but one God. There is nothing unreasonable in it. I will, indeed, in one sense say that it is unreasonable there can be a God at all, or an *Eternal First Cause*; because in all the dominions of reason there is nothing could suggest the idea: and because it is contrary to all the facts before us in the whole world that any cause can be the cause of itself, or not the effect of some other cause. No man, from analogy, can reason farther than every cause is the effect of another, *ad infinitum*. Here reason shuts the door. Here analogy puts up her rule, and shuts her case of instruments. Now in this sense, the Unitarian and the Trinitarian are alike unphilosophical, alike unreasonable. But here is the sophism: the Bible originates or still keeps up the idea of a God — both the name and the idea. We see it is proved by everything within and without us. The Bible teaches us something concerning three beings, (I shall call them) the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit. It teaches us that there is but one God. From what the Bible teaches A supposes that these three beings are each and together one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. B says it is inconsistent — it is absurd. How can three persons or beings be one? How can one of these three be the Deity, and yet the three be no more than the Deity? C says, This is not more unreasonable than that there should have been from all eternity one First Cause uncaused; and

adds, Your error is this: you know nothing of the existence of spirits at all. All bodies you know anything of occupy both time and place; consequently, it would be absurd to suppose that three beings whose modes of existence are such as to be governed by time and space could be one being. But inasmuch as we do know nothing about the mode of existence of spirits, we cannot say that it would be incompatible with their nature, or modes of existence, that three might be one, and that one being might exist in three beings. Now, as no man can rationally oppose the Calvinistic hypothesis on principles of reason, so neither can he prove it to be correct by any analogy, or principle of reason whatsoever. Why, then, wage this warfare? We may disprove a theory by what the Bible declares, but not by our reasoning on such topics. Why not, then, abide in the use of Bible terms alone? There is as much reason on the side of the Trinitarian as on the side of the Unitarian; and neither of them can, without a gross dereliction of their grand positions, accuse the other of being unreasonable in their reasoning or conclusions.

But I adopt neither system, and will fight for none. I believe that God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son; that Jesus was the Son of God, in the true, full, and proper import of these words; that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, which was sent by the concurrence of the Father and the Son to attest and establish the truth, and remain a comforter, an advocate on earth, when Jesus entered the heavens. If any man's faith in this matter is stronger or greater than mine, I have no objection. I only request him not to despise my weakness, and I will not condemn his strength.

I am truly sorry to find that certain opinions, called Arian or Unitarian, or something else, are about becoming the sectarian badge of a people who have assumed the sacred name Christian; and that some peculiar views of atonement or reconciliation are likely to become characteristic of a people who have claimed the high character and dignified relation of "the Church of Christ." I do not say that such is yet the fact; but things are, in my opinion, looking that way; and if not suppressed in the bud, the name Christian will be as much a sectarian name as Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian.

Were I to contend for any of the speculative views found in the piece under consideration, I do not know but we might soon be found in the graveyards attached to the schools, digging up the bones of obsolete systems; or perhaps we might be trying our hands at the potter's wheel, making a new vessel; and rather than hazard this, I will decline for the present anything more particular upon the subject, simply adding that your conclusion of the whole matter is admitted by me in a latitude as

full as can be suggested by you, viz. “We believe the intelligent person, the Word, existed long before he was called Jesus Christ or Messiah.”

Wishing you favor, mercy, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and that you may never set up a new sect I am yours in the Lord.

Final Thoughts

Campbell and Stone were able to cooperate because above all they were both Christ-centered in their theology and practice. In Campbell especially I find a framework for theological discussion that shows brilliance in avoiding polarization.