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# Metropolis: A Stone-Campbell Mosaic

JARED LOONEY

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I've often thought of the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement as a largely rural and a mostly southern tradition. In general I've assumed that its influence outside of that particular cultural boundary is fairly minimal. To some extent, history reveals that these assumptions are true. However, Christians of the Stone-Campbell heritage have also been preachers and teachers of the gospel on city streets and in tenements around the world, in hard-to-reach villages, and in some of the globe's most challenging urban centers.

Times Square in New York City has been called the crossroads of the world. With over 170 languages and dialects spoken on its city streets, the vast cultural diversity of New York's five boroughs—Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island—is dizzying. In reality the urban landscape of New York's metro area extends out into three states, into suburbs, and through edge cities—such as Stamford, Connecticut; White Plains, New York; and Jersey City, New Jersey—that on their own would rival many cities across the country in economic power, population and cultural influence. Because of New York's diversity and size, it will be impossible in this article to even highlight the whole range of issues that impact the church and its mission in the city, or to include every aspect of Restoration Movement churches.

In a movement that can be characterized by its strong rural roots, it might be surprising to discover that the presence of the Stone-Campbell tradition in New York City is nearly as old as the tradition itself. In 1810 a group of people broke away from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Manhattan and established what they called "the Church of Christ at New York." This congregation began just a little more than a year after Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address* and Alexander Campbell's arrival in the United States, and it was visited by the evangelist Walter Scott, as well as Alexander Campbell. Following the separation with Disciples of Christ in the early 1900s, the history of this early Stone-Campbell congregation split into two congregations and became what are known today as the Manhattan Church of Christ and the Park Avenue Christian Church.<sup>1</sup> Today these two congregations—very different from one another in a number of ways—cooperate in a food program serving the homeless in Manhattan's affluent Upper East Side, where both congregations are located.

A contemporary history of Churches of Christ in the last half of the twentieth century tells a number of dynamic stories. For instance, Long Island, New York, captured national attention at the beginning of the Exodus Movement when large collections of families from Churches of Christ in the southern United States relocated to suburban communities in the Northeast. Many Churches of Christ surrounding New York City in Long Island, lower Connecticut and New Jersey can trace their history back to this movement.

During the 1950s Camp Shiloh was established and began by reaching out in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Originally serving the children of Eastern European immigrants, by the 1970s it was considered one of the most prolific urban ministries in the history of Churches of Christ. From New Jersey's urban

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1. For a more extended account, see [http://www.manhattanchurch.org/about\\_history.asp](http://www.manhattanchurch.org/about_history.asp) (accessed August 26, 2009).

neighborhoods to New York's five boroughs to struggling communities on Long Island, staff members and volunteers served under the banner of Camp Shiloh. They partnered with local churches, and when no partnering congregations were nearby they worshipped together in apartments across the metropolitan area as grassroots expressions of faith emerged among urban youth and Shiloh staff and volunteers. Despite some difficult years near the conclusion of the twentieth century, Camp Shiloh has experienced resurgence and continues to serve children and youth in and around New York City, touching lives in the Bronx, Bridgeport, Connecticut, and other New York area neighborhoods.

As church planting has become a major emphasis for churches from a number of Christian traditions, the Orchard Group (established as Go Ye Chapel in 1948) from the Independent Christian Church has been a catalyst for establishing new congregations in the New York metro area and across the northeastern United States, and Manhattan Church of Christ has served as a resource, partner and launch pad for new church planting efforts among Churches of Christ. Such efforts have helped the Stone-Campbell Movement continue to offer a missionary presence to New York's diverse populations. In addition, New York's religious diversity is a recipient of Stone-Campbell missionary work overseas. Immigrants come to New York City from around the world, and many make New York their home after having been converted by Stone-Campbell missionaries in their country of origin. Migration from around the globe has resulted in both new congregations and diverse membership among existing churches.

Today, churches from the Restoration tradition are a reflection of the history, diversity and dynamism of the city. Stone-Campbell churches range from Disciples of Christ to the *a cappella* tradition, and the deep impact of the International Church of Christ, also known as the Boston Movement, has been felt by thousands across the metropolitan region. Searching out Churches of Christ in New York, one can discover congregations organized along ethnic lines and those that champion multiculturalism. Large predominantly black churches, small Spanish-speaking storefront churches, and diverse congregations in suburbs such as Stamford or Patchogue all add to the rich diversity of New York. There are congregations that are gender inclusive in every aspect of ministry, and there are congregations that are extremely restrictive about women's involvement in practically any ministry of the church. Congregations speaking a variety of languages and dialects meet in apartments, storefronts and dedicated buildings. The spectrum of Restoration churches in both doctrine and practice in the Big Apple is as vast and as varied as the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement itself.

At the roots of the Stone-Campbell Movement were values of congregationalism, simplicity, the priesthood of all believers, and scripture as the guiding authority for Christian practice, as well as doctrinal distinctions such as immersion baptism and a regular practice of the Lord's Supper. As revivals took root from Ohio farmhouses to cottages of Kentucky and even involved the city dwellers in Lower Manhattan, believers lifted the rallying cry, "Christians only," and started churches that reflected this new movement. Protestant revivalism in the American frontier gave birth to a post-denominational movement during the climactic rise of denominationalism.

Perhaps it shouldn't be surprising that the sectarian climate of the period eventually overtook the call to be "Christians only." Unfortunately many Restoration churches became known more for separation and schisms than it seems the original call for unity intended. However, moving into the twenty-first century, many Restoration churches are changing their perspective. Currently there are positive trends towards greater cooperation with other believers, and many congregations are making a number of changes in order to reach out to their communities. We are again experiencing a climate of change.

Frankly, I do hope that the changes currently taking place in Restoration churches are not simply a quest for institutional survival. In reality, Churches of Christ have been experiencing numerical decline for decades. As churches close their doors and once crowded pews become empty, change becomes more urgent, and church growth discussions are flavored by concerns over the status and continuing existence of Churches

of Christ. I'm strangely reminded of what Jesus said, "If you want to save your life, you must lose it." What if by trying to save Churches of Christ as a tradition, we actually lose the founding principles?

Here's what I mean. The early Stone-Campbell Movement sought to be "Christians only" and held the New Testament scriptures as their authority for faith and practice. People were attracted to the idea of simply being Christians and relying on the Bible alone for matters of doctrine, and many churches sprang up almost spontaneously. As it became a movement, leaders and churches that shared common values and ideas about the Christian faith naturally gravitated to one another, and momentum carried the movement forward. This central concern for Jesus only, to simply become his follower, feeds the hunger of the soul of so many today. Our journey forward must emerge from prayer, theological reflection, community discernment and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. When religious labels no longer have the same sticking power and many are longing for an authentic spirituality, to be simply Christian seems to once again have real potential.

Today, many church planters in the United States are encountering American culture as a pluralistic environment and a powerful secularizing force. This has always been New York's story. While Pennsylvania was colonized by Quakers and Massachusetts by Puritans, New York was bought and paid for by the Dutch East Indies Trading Company. The city's origin was fueled by economics rather than the Puritan utopia we imagine every Thanksgiving. Despite the pressures of secularization, American society is an increasingly pluralistic culture. However, to a large degree such diversity has always been true in New York. Today, the cultural spectrum is simply widening as more and more worldviews mix and mingle from around the globe. As evangelists in one of the most distinctly urban places in North America, we are forced to grapple with scripture and come to terms with new realities unimagined by the early founders of the Stone-Campbell tradition. By being confronted with the complexity and challenges of the city, urban missionaries are rediscovering Restoration impulses.

Now, urban church planters from Churches of Christ are finding strategic and theological value in these earliest Stone-Campbell tenets. A few years ago I was in a meeting with some potential leaders in our Bronx ministry. One of them, who had come from a different church background, asked, "What do we say to people if they ask what denomination we're with?" I began to briefly explain our background with the Churches of Christ. After a few minutes, one of the new believers whom I had baptized about a year earlier spoke up. He said, "Someone at work saw me reading something from the church, and they asked me what denomination it was. You know what I said? I said, 'You know what? I don't know. And you know what else? I don't care. That man came to my house and brought me Jesus.'"

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new wave of church planting among Restoration Movement churches has taken place, and new churches are assembled as a result of new outreach efforts in New York City. These churches—whether consciously or unconsciously—have embraced many of the original values or characteristics of the early Stone-Campbell Movement. They organize church assemblies that practice simplicity. They are congregational and demonstrate their value for the priesthood of all believers. Most of these churches stay intentionally small. Rather than grow a single congregation, they hope to multiply small Christian communities that work within the mosaic of New York's diverse culture. These new churches may meet in a variety of settings, but most meet in homes (mostly in cramped city apartments). Most can be described as organic or simple churches where Bible teaching takes place in a discussion setting and worship invites involvement from everyone present. Some churches have been planted that do follow a presentation approach with preaching and a worship leader and have intentionally involved the local believers in the process. From Brooklyn to the Bronx and from Bayonne, New Jersey, to Queens, all of these churches are echoing the call, "Christians only."

As a missionary, I realized early in the process that contemporary missions in New York City might present some real contrasts with the churches of my youth. I grew up in both Independent Christian Churches and a *cappella* Churches of Christ, graduated from Abilene Christian University, and am a fourth generation member of the Stone-Campbell tradition. I felt genuine concern over the connection between my spiritual

heritage and the missionary enterprise. I knew that faithfulness to the gospel and to the missionary call would mean that new church planting should reflect the host culture.

During the twentieth century many missionaries began to move beyond a Western colonial mentality that imposed a foreign culture upon the host peoples in order for them to become Christian. Reflecting on the controversies of the New Testament period, modern Western culture became like circumcision in the first century. In order to become a Christian, one had to embrace European or American culture. As Christian workers reflected on missionary practices, they began to emulate the apostle Paul, planting churches that embody the gospel within the host culture.

Every summer, I work with a group of college interns in the city, and some of these students have commented that they experienced more culture shock in the Bronx than during their previous travel overseas. The cultural landscape of New York City bears a great deal of contrast to the cultures of the southern or southwestern states where the Restoration tradition has a large presence. When planting new churches in northeastern cities, it is important that we teach the gospel so that it can be embodied in northeastern and urban cultures.

In addition, how do we plant churches that reach unreached people? Church planting and evangelism that is likely to embody the gospel for unreached people may even be in contrast to the existing churches within the host culture. In a pluralistic society, many different types of churches reach a diverse population. When all churches reflect the same culture, they are essentially competing for the same population groups. However, when churches are planted that create a bridge to unreached populations, it gives birth to new expressions within the body of Christ.

The restoration call to be “Christians only” reflects a missionary heartbeat. The gospel transcends cultural barriers, and the gospel is also expressed through culture. Facing the missionary task in the city, I knew I would need to adapt to new circumstances. Reaching out to the unreached in a multicultural community, we are empowered by the call to simply be Christian.

Not long ago I read a research paper by Tyler Priest, an Abilene Christian University graduate student at the time. He had written using the primary sources of Barton W. Stone and interviews with leaders of new church plants. Tyler argues persuasively that many new church planting efforts, such as these faith communities in New York, share the restoration and missional impulses of Barton Stone. Ironically, church planting in difficult urban environments is stimulating ministry that embodies many early Stone-Campbell values.

In what is now considered to be a post-denominational era, the original Stone-Campbell Movement may be coming of age. We are “Christians only.” We are not without a history. We come from the Restoration tradition and, reflecting the values of this movement, we are followers of Jesus with the scriptures as our guiding authority. Following the post-denominational ideals of Stone and Campbell, many of these new church plants across Metro New York are finding ways to partner with others for the sake of Christ. While maintaining doctrinal practices such as immersion baptism or regular practice of the Lord’s Supper, Stone-Campbell churches partner with other believers to feed the hungry, pray for their neighborhoods, or coordinate ministry training events.

While Stone-Campbell churches are one voice among so many in a global city like New York, their presence has made a difference in the lives of city dwellers and has represented Christ in the city. Community of Hope, led by an associate minister at Manhattan Church of Christ, provides food, clothing, a shower, movie, Bible study and especially a safe space for dozens of Manhattan’s homeless. Orchard Group plants new churches in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and across the Northeast. Organic/simple church planting—whether in suburban Bergen County or among Spanish-speakers in Queens—is bringing the gospel into living rooms and public places. Hundreds of children and youth have experienced Christian camp and many have benefitted from ongoing mentoring relationships because of the tenacity of leaders of Camp Shiloh.

Manhattan Church of Christ and Park Avenue Christian Church have provided a 200-year-old legacy of Stone-Campbell traditions at the crossroads of the world.

A unique moment in history gave rise to a Restoration Movement taking off like a fire in North America's rugged frontier and reaching the streets of Manhattan. Today, much of the historical, cultural and theological diversity of this movement can be found in and around New York City. The narrative of Stone-Campbell churches in the crossroads of the world is a story that continues to be written.

**JARED LOONEY** WAS RAISED IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY AND GREW UP IN THE STONE-CAMPBELL HERITAGE. HE GRADUATED FROM ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY WITH A DEGREE IN MISSIONS IN 1996. JARED WORKED IN YOUTH OUTREACH AT IMPACT HOUSTON CHURCH OF CHRIST FOR THREE YEARS, AND WHILE LIVING IN DOWNTOWN HOUSTON COMPLETED AN MA FROM HOUSTON GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY. JARED SERVED AS A CHURCH PLANTER IN RESIDENCE WITH MISSION CHURCH IN ABILENE FOR A YEAR BEFORE MOVING TO NEW YORK IN 2001. ALONG WITH THE MEMBERS OF A SMALL MISSION TEAM, HE PLANTED BRONX FELLOWSHIP OF CHRIST, AN ORGANIC CHURCH NETWORK IN NEW YORK CITY. JARED HAS WORKED WITH A VARIETY OF CHURCH MODELS, INCLUDING TRADITIONAL, CELL-BASED, "INNER-CITY" AND ORGANIC CHURCHES. HE FOCUSES ON MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS IN THE CITY AND SEEKS TO DEVELOP KINGDOM PARTNERSHIPS TO FURTHER THAT GOAL. HE IS COMPLETING A DOCTOR OF MISSIOLOGY WITH A COHORT IN FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, AND HE HAS SPECIAL INTEREST IN TOPICS SUCH AS MISSIONS AND GLOBALIZATION, THE MISSIONAL CHURCH, AND THE POTENTIAL FOR CHURCH PLANTING MOVEMENTS IN WESTERN CITIES. JARED LIVES WITH HIS WIFE, HYLMA, AND THEIR DAUGHTER, ADALIA, IN PELHAM PARKWAY IN THE BRONX.

