

The Shaping Of Stone

Bible teacher Perry Stone's Ministry continues to expand around the world while hitting a public nerve with insight  into biblical prophecy.

Perry Stone is a study in contrasts. He has limited formal education for someone sought after as a Bible expert, yet he's written more than 40 books. A Southerner, he's popular in the Northeast. He bases his ministry in a small Tennessee town, yet he impacts the world through television. He is a fourth-generation Pentecostal preacher whose largest group of followers are Baptists—and Roman Catholics are in the top four.

Best known as a teacher of end-times Bible prophecy, his biggest pleasure is poring over the Scriptures—he claims to have put in 60,000 hours of study. Before he retires, he wants to finish a copious study Bible (he was working on it before our interview began). But he also has a vision to build a youth camp that would look like a city in Old Testament Israel.

Stone also defies nearly every stereotype leveled at Pentecostals. Affiliated with the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), he can preach like a Pentecostal but usually teaches in a more academic style. He's on thousands of TV stations, yet he never asks for money—he says God told him not to. Instead the Lord instructed him: "Trust Me."

Rather than asking for donations he sells products on his program. He sold hundreds of thousands of books through his ministry for several decades, but never through bookstores. Yet in March his latest book, *Purging Your House, Pruning Your Family Tree*, was the best-selling inspirational book in Walmart.

As one of America's foremost experts on biblical prophecy, Stone often is invited as the keynote speaker at internationally attended prophecy conferences. But don't expect him to agree with those who dub his prophetic teaching "end-times theology."

"I just call it New Testament theology," he says. "It's basically three main points. No. 1: There comes a time of end; not the end of time, but a time of the end. Our basic theology is to understand there is a time of the end and an end generation. No. 2: There are specific signs [in the Bible] indicating when that generation is come. No. 3 is to preach those signs to encourage people to come to know Jesus Christ. Those are the three simple ways that I look at what I do."

Stone has also produced more than 100 videos and DVDs, hundreds of audio teaching series, and films a weekly television program, *Manna-Fest*, that's seen nationally and internationally via cable and satellite on TBN, Daystar, INSP, LeSea and other networks.

So how has a self-made Bible scholar been able to build one of the biggest ministries of its type in the world? "Prayer," he says.



It was while in prayer at age 18 that Stone says God gave him the name of his ministry, Voice of Evangelism, and his television program. His vision was considered a joke at the time because he wasn't the voice of anything back then; he had no ministry. When he told friends about his dream, they made fun of him.

About the same time, again in prayer, God revealed several thrusts his ministry would have: a magazine, radio and TV, crusades and camp meetings, and world-missions outreaches. All have come to pass.

"When we write a book, title a message, prepare a conference

message, it always comes through a lot of prayer, a lot of praying in the Spirit,” says Stone, now 52. “The Spirit of God will quicken your spirit and your intellect to truths that have always been there but maybe are not commonly taught because the Bible even says that ‘the anointing that abides teaches you all things.’”

His friend Marcus Lamb, who founded Daystar Television Network and has known Stone since they were both “teen preachers” in the Church of God, says he could see in Stone even as a teenager the seeds of what has since made his ministry skyrocket.

“Perry was very sincere; he was committed even as a teen to fasting and prayer,” Lamb says. “He was eager to learn, and compared to his peers he had a big vision. He also believed in the power of the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders.”

It’s the emphasis on prayer, Stone stresses, that has led to the ministry’s growth. He prays about everything. And he gets answers—for titles of books, for what projects to undertake, for how to expand. Many times he simply prays in the Holy Spirit to get the answer he needs.

✖ “I believe strongly in education,” he adds. “But I also believe it has to be mixed with an intent praying in the Spirit in intensive prayer to really receive the revelation God would have a person to speak or preach.”

He picked up the prayer habit from his father, Fred Stone, who greatly influenced his life and died earlier this year at age 78.

“My father was the greatest praying man I ever met,” Stone says. “He taught me the significance of understanding the mysteries of God is to pray in the Spirit and get the mind of the Spirit.”

Fred Stone is buried in a small private cemetery dating back

to Civil War days, only a few hundred yards from Stone's 70,000-square-foot ministry headquarters. The modern facilities are on the edge of picturesque Cleveland, Tenn.—a town of roughly 40,000 that is headquarters for the Church of God.

Cleveland is also home to the Church of Prophecy (and several other small denominations), as well as Lee University, which, with more than 4,000 full-time students, is the largest Pentecostal university in North America. Stone likes being rooted in Cleveland, he says, because there have been prophecies that it would have a place in the end-times revival.

Because he bases his ministry in a remote location he maintains a ministry plane—a necessity, rather than a luxury, of travelling constantly. Yet he drives a secondhand car—bought at a good price, he adds, using money from a book advance—and his ministry salary, while confidential, isn't the income of a CEO but more like that of his ministry department heads.

All of this is not show; it's just how he lives. For example, before he and his wife, Pam, married, they had only one date—at Western Sizzlin Steakhouse in Birmingham, Ala. Instead, they courted by phone. After he got a phone bill for \$500 one month, Stone told Pam it would be cheaper to marry her than to spend so much on telephone calls! That was 28 years ago. Today the couple has a son, Jonathan, 21, and daughter, Amanda, 9.

Stone credits much of his model for ministry to T.L. Lowery, an “apostolic statesman” within the Church of God who has served in a variety of offices for the denomination and pastored some of its largest churches. Lowery, 82, has mentored Stone more than 20 years and calls him one of his “spiritual sons.”

In fact, when I asked him if Stone had ever had any past scandals, Lowery's quick reply was a telling endorsement: "Never. He's lily, lily white—and then bleached out."

Their relationship was forged during a camp meeting in Alabama years ago where Lowery was the featured preacher. While Stone watched and listened from the edge of the stage, Lowery prayed for a dignified, well-dressed woman to be delivered of a demon. The demon visibly manifested when it "shot out of the woman's mouth like a comet to the back of the tabernacle" before fleeing, Lowery says. When people saw that, revival broke out in the service as they ran to the altar to repent while the freed woman praised God onstage.

As they left the service, Lowery and Stone picked up each other's suit coats, which they had shed during the intense ministry. Stone has joked for years since that he should never have given back Lowery's coat because he wanted the mantle of that powerful anointing. 

It's this type of Pentecostal fervor for which Stone is respected in the Church of God but also viewed as controversial by others. "Perry has always been a guy who follows his own path," says Cameron Fisher, communications coordinator for the Church of God. "He fits into the Judy Jacobs and Jentezen Franklin category. They have their own well-known ministries that appeal to audiences within and outside the Church of God, but they maintain their Church of God connection for accountability."

Not everyone shares this opinion, however. Like in many other upwardly mobile Pentecostal denominations, there are those in the Church of God who want to shed the image of Pentecostals as uneducated folk who enjoy emotional services—and they view Stone that way. Yet, in the same way other Pentecostal stereotypes don't apply to Stone, the uneducated, "backwoods" image doesn't stick to him either.

“I don’t say this boasting, by any means, but I have about 60,000 hours of Bible study and over 20,000 books in my library,” he says. “I study every possible theological theory to ensure that what I believe can be proven; that I can prove what I’m teaching people. I’m not the kind of person who only studies what I believe to enforce what I believe. If you’re going to defend your faith, you have to know what others believe.”

Stone’s dedication to ministry is one reason Lowery sees something unique in the spiritual son he has mentored for 20-plus years. “He’s the most informed prophecy preacher out there,” he says. “He’s going to the next level—a supra-dimensional level. “And he says the future looks bright.”

Steve Strang is the founder and publisher of *Charisma*. For the first cover story he’s written in more than 10 years, Steve traveled to Cleveland, Tenn., and interviewed Perry Stone at his ministry headquarters and his favorite restaurant, Cracker Barrel.

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