INTRODUCTION

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Without question the essays in this volume are landmarks in the historiography and self-understanding of the Stone-Campbell Movement, especially Churches of Christ. Written by two insiders and one outsider, each reflects significant development in Stone-Campbell studies in the last forty years. All three pieces were written originally for consumption by professional historians and together form a solid collection for use in university and seminary courses in Stone-Campbell and American religious history. Yet the authors are all wonderful storytellers who articulate their material clearly and engagingly, making the material suitable for audiences in many settings, including church classes and small group discussions.

Nathan Hatch’s work is one of the most important pieces of intellectual history ever written on the movement. Though not the only “outsider” to take note of this religious reform effort¹, the fact such a careful and discerning historian of American religion portrayed it as representative of major trends in American religion provided impetus for other studies concerning the movement’s relationship to the larger American culture.² Hatch shows the Stone and Campbell movements to be prime examples of what in his 1989 book he would label the “democratization” of American Christianity.³ This populist emphasis on the absolute freedom (and ability) of individuals to understand the Bible for themselves without benefit of clergy was certainly not a new idea.⁴ Hatch tied these sentiments of the movement to the larger cultural upheavals in American society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, showing the movement’s major role in the development of popular religion in the United States.

David Edwin Harrell, Jr., a life-long member of Churches of Christ, provided in his 1964 essay the first scholarly explanation of the largely southern origins and character of Churches of Christ. The essay along with Harrell’s other early work on the movement sparked the imagination of a generation of scholars in Churches of Christ at a time of great upheaval in that body’s perceptions of itself. Though remaining a theological conservative and loyal member of that religious heritage, Harrell carefully demonstrated that “we” had developed out of specific historic circumstances. His work challenged a long-held taboo in Churches of Christ—admitting that our beliefs and practices had indeed been shaped in many ways by the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of our American context. Its publication in the respected *Journal of Southern History* served to enhance its credibility and impact.

An interesting secondary indication of the development of Stone-Campbell studies in the late twentieth century is evident in Harrell’s consistent use of “Disciples” as the name of the movement. In the nineteenth century that was one of the most commonly used designations for the entire movement. During the first part of the twentieth century most histories of the movement were written by scholars from the segment known most often as Disciples, in distinction from Churches of Christ. The label was used almost exclusively in scholarly writing, though “Restoration Movement” was still more common in the popular press. Since the publication of the first edition of Leroy Garrett’s history *The Stone-Campbell Movement* in 1981, the label “Disciples” as well as “Restoration Movement” are gradually being replaced by the term “Stone-Campbell Movement” in scholarly publications.

Richard Hughes, like Harrell, a lifetime member of Churches of Christ, has provided in his essay the seeds for what some would label the first truly critical history of Churches of Christ. In this article Hughes tests the thesis he would develop more completely in the book: first that Churches of Christ were the legitimate heirs of what he designates “Stonite apocalypticism.” This was characterized by a strong sense of the sovereignty of God and the tenuous and temporary nature of earthly existence. Second, however, Hughes posits that the group lost this worldview in stages during the twentieth century, accommodating itself to “modernistic” views focusing on human reason and ability.

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Hughes has been a major interpreter of Stone-Campbell history for both internal and external audiences for over two decades. Much of his work has focused on the movement’s primitivism, often comparing it to other manifestations of religious primitivism and restorationism. In this essay he continues that trajectory but in a much more detailed and nuanced manner. Here he delineates two kinds of primitivism that he labels rationalistic postmillennial primitivism and apocalyptic premillennial primitivism, epitomized respectively by Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone. Hughes explains that although some readers have confused the stances of the two leaders (whose views sometimes overlap in specifics), the two ideas came apart in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Churches of Christ then adopted a “modernist” stance in the sense that they increasingly bought into an optimistic, modern worldview and rejected the pessimistic, apocalyptic worldview of Stone and his successors, including David Lipscomb.

These three articles form a fascinating sequence. Hatch’s article takes historical precedence as he examines the origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement in the early national period of US history. Harrell and Hughes, on the other hand, seek to define the emergence of Churches of Christ as a separate body at the end of the nineteenth century. The three essays complement each other chronologically, stretching from the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth.

The contributions of these authors to the movement’s growing self-understanding have been immense. This book will make their material more readily available to students and others interested in the development of this significant American religious movement. Furthermore, it will aid those who are part of the movement to reflect again on the factors that have shaped us and perhaps better understand why we are who we are and how we are being shaped presently, to the end of making informed and historically-conscious choices about our future. Read, learn, and enjoy!

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