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Engaging Tradition as an Imperative for the Stone-Campbell Churches: A Response to Leonard Allen's "The Future of the Restoration Movement"

PAUL M. BLOWERS

With an elegance and a constructively critical élan that characterizes his writing as a whole, Leonard Allen's essay on "The Future of the Restoration Movement" has once again called all of us, the Movement's heirs, to an agonizing but redemptive reappraisal of our place and our mission in the unfolding drama of Christian history. Such reappraisal, energized by the acknowledgment of a dramatic shift of Western philosophy and culture from modernity to postmodernity,¹ had already been underway in Stone-Campbell studies as the new millennium approached.² Indeed, the broad recognition that the Enlightenment meta-narrative has effectively collapsed, that we are living in a brave new world where Christians must be acutely aware of the *traditioned* character of their faith, yet also of the inevitable impact of cultural location and particularized perspectives on their ongoing interpretation of that faith, has been a wake-up call. Denial is not an option. The only viable alternative is to seize the moment and see it as the threshold of new opportunities for the Stone-Campbell churches in their American and global contexts.

The shift to postmodernity is, of course, an upheaval for all Western churches in their respective ways. But for a Movement whose founders believed so strongly in the possibility of taking a bold step outside tradition, exercising "autonomous" (albeit sanctified) reason, transcending parochial cultures ecclesiastical and otherwise, and establishing a common mind or rational consensus on the "self-evident" truths of revelation, it presents an especially bold challenge. In so much of the thinking, rhetoric, and scholarship of the Stone-Campbell churches in the twentieth century, "tradition" was a bad word with inflammatory connotations. For liberals it evoked the millstone of accumulated church dogma threatening to stifle the progress of "social Christianity." For conservatives it signaled the church's lapse from the original genius of primitive,

1. See Leonard Allen and Danny Gray Swick, *Participating in God's Life: Two Crossroads for Churches of Christ* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2001), 86-93.

2. See, e.g., the papers of the Forrest Kirkpatrick Seminar at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in the mid-1990s: Clark Williamson, "Confusions in Disciples Talk and Practice: Theology in the Life of the Church," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 3-13; Brenda Brasher, "The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Into the Third Millennium," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 81-94; Daisy Machado, "From Anglo-American Traditions to a Multicultural World," *Discipliana* 57 (1997): 47-60; G. Richard Phillips, "From Modern Theology to a Post-Modern World: Christian Churches and Churches of Christ," *Discipliana* 54 (1994): 83-95; Byron Lambert, "From Rural Churches to an Urban World: Shifting Frontiers and the Invisible Hand," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 67-80; Rondal Smith, "The Independent Christian Churches Face a Multicultural Twenty-First Century," *Discipliana* 57 (1997): 35-46; Kathy Pulley, "The Churches of Christ: Accommodation to Modernity and the Challenges of Post-Modernity," *Discipliana* 54 (1994): 109-19; Gary Holloway and Michael Weed, "The Gospel in Earthen Vessels: Churches of Christ Face the Twenty-First Century," *Discipliana* 55 (1995): 109-21; Dewayne Winrow, "Multiculturalism in Churches of Christ," *Discipliana* 57 (1997): 67-79. See also Ronald Osborn, "The Irony of the Twentieth-Century Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): Making It to the Mainline Just at the Time of Its Disestablishment," *Mid-Stream* 28 (1989): 293-312; C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1990); D. Newell Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Douglas Foster, *Will the Cycle Be Unbroken? Churches of Christ Face the 21st Century* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1994); Anthony Dunnavant, Richard Hughes, and Paul Blowers, *Founding Vocation and Future Vision: The Self-Understanding of Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999); Jeff Childers, Douglas Foster, and Jack Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1992).

scriptural Christianity, its subversion by bishops, creeds, and theologians' hubris.

For reasons that I hope to explain, I thoroughly share Leonard Allen's conviction that one of the greatest challenges of the Stone-Campbell Movement for the near future will be to reconnect with the "Great Tradition" of historic Christianity that was so often held suspect by Protestant free churches. Some concerned theologians of late have taken up the auspicious French term: *ressourcement*. I also like Allen's chosen phrase: "critical engagement" with the Christian past.³ Such involves intelligent, sympathetic, discreet conversation with those historic sources of Christian thought and practice that have much to teach us about worship, the interpretation of scripture, the integrity of the church, evangelistic witness, and virtuous living. The "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12.1) does more than cheer us on in the good fight of faith. They (saints and martyrs, bishops, church fathers and theologians, reformers, missionaries, et al.) have historically mediated the transmission of the "apostolic tradition." They have imitated the suffering servanthood of the apostles, organized and adapted roles of ministry, made decisions about canonical Christian scripture, identified a coherent Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*), negotiated conflict within the church, covenanted again and again with Jesus Christ in eucharistic worship, exemplified missionary witness in contextualizing the gospel in their native cultures, and much more. Simply put, it is not just the New Testament itself that has set forth the ground rules of its appropriation; the churches that have already received, standardized, and interpreted the text for centuries also have a crucial voice in that appropriation.

To many in Stone-Campbell churches, of course, reconnecting with the Great Tradition hardly appears like a healthy or timely, let alone necessary initiative. For some it will even seem like an outright betrayal of the spirit of the Stone-Campbell Movement. As Allen himself has shown in admonishing Churches of Christ, much of the work is helping the faithful to understand the inevitability of the shaping effects of tradition. The challenge is to encourage churches corporately and Christians individually to see the liberation that comes in accepting that shaping role. A true breakthrough in this regard was achieved in the work of the hermeneutical philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (d. 2002) and the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Gadamer exploded the Enlightenment's myth of attaining "unprejudiced" truth and helped the denizens of crumbling modernity to see that truth is always "traditioned." Sacred or "classic" texts like the Bible have an afterlife in interpretive traditions. The authors' intended meaning is not simply frozen or pre-digested and then transmitted without gloss or commentary, immune to the conditions of history. The text also "means" what it comes to mean in its ongoing appropriation, where it is free to speak afresh to those reading it in ever new circumstances. Such is not an open door to individual abuse or "eisegesis," merely reading into the Bible our own perspectives, since we are constrained by the authority of a tradition that places disciplines on the interpretive process.⁴ "Understanding," writes Gadamer, "is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself [we could add: one's church] within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused."⁵ In the meantime, our own fresh exegetical analysis is not stifled, since we are always engaging with the text, with interpretive authorities, and with our own hermeneutical horizon; but there is a healthy (as well as inevitable) role of "traditioned" insight that undergirds this conversation and interaction. Tradition, therefore, is not a monolithic but a dynamic reality.⁶

Alasdair MacIntyre's contribution⁷ has been felt more in ethics than in hermeneutics, but there is a definite parallel with Gadamer in his redemption of the principle of tradition. Paralleling the interpreter of a text, a moral agent is not simply making independent rational choices about the good but is already

3. See Allen's *The Cruciform Church*, 9-15.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), esp. 245-274.

5. *Ibid.*, 258.

6. Two favorable assessments of Gadamer's positive contribution to Christian hermeneutics are Anthony L. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 293-326; and Jeffrey C. K. Goh, *Christian Tradition Today: A Postliberal Vision of Church and World* (Louvain: Peters Press; and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 20-39.

7. Leonard Allen has himself briefly acknowledged MacIntyre's importance in *The Cruciform Church*, 3.

implicated and embedded within a “narrative sequence,” and can develop and perform virtues only within concrete social settings that already and inevitably have a “history” integrating many other moral agents.⁸ One can question the particularity in the definition of the good in the tradition(s) one has come out of, but always there is a beginning point in an antecedent community (family, neighborhood, school, tribe, church, etc.). There has been (and is now) for each moral agent a “living tradition,” or as MacIntyre describes it, “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute the tradition.”⁹ Moral reasoning cannot elude—and should not want to elude—the claims of such a tradition, but works within its bounds, whether by conserving, questioning, or stretching it (or in radical instances leaving it to join a different tradition or form a new one).

Leonard Allen and other scholars have effectively highlighted the operative traditions that helped shape the worldview and hermeneutics of the Stone-Campbell churches. The intellectual idiom of Baconian science and Common Sense philosophy was a powerful lens through which to read the Bible as a book of facts in whose narratives were the “evidences” of foundational truth. And as Allen rightly suggests, the Campbellian “tradition” engendered numerous sub-traditions, each with its own rationale and agenda. Alasdair MacIntyre might well say that this happened because some communities, rooted in the original tradition, saw that the consensus on truth that it promised had foundered, and moved in turn either to fortify the tradition or drastically to reinvent it. In fact the current configuration of Stone-Campbell churches is by no means a tidy division of three ecclesial traditions (Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Churches of Christ) sprung from the same root. It is much more complex when we factor in the intersection of these churches with the larger “traditions” of mainline Protestantism and of American Evangelicalism in its various forms. Indeed the picture is even more complex if we look globally at the traditions that have shaped the growth of Stone-Campbell churches in the non-Western world.

Reengaging and rehabilitating tradition seems *prima facie* like a strange way to remedy the fragmentation of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Again, some will ask: Is this not inviting the proliferation of even more traditions, more division, more confusion? Yet Leonard Allen recommends precisely that...

Our task is not a vain avoidance of tradition but rather to identify ourselves with healthy and vibrant traditions. And more than that, to identify ourselves with what is called the Great Tradition—historic orthodoxy marked out by the ecumenical creeds of the early church and the Reformation era.

I could not agree more. Consciously and often unconsciously, the Stone-Campbell churches, negotiating their way into the uncertainties of postmodernity, have already sought to find their bearings and to sharpen their identity in relation to one or more traditions. As Allen and others have observed, even those who deny tradition altogether are invariably carrying on a tradition of strict Protestant restorationism that antedates the Churches of Christ and even the Stone-Campbell Movement itself.

Meanwhile a significant segment of congregations among the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and the Churches of Christ has gravitated toward more consistent identification with what Allen calls “the large pool of generic Evangelicalism.” This phenomenon, however, needs to be nuanced. In his recent book *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, D. G. Hart has made a cogent, if provocative, case that the formal title “Evangelical” in America has become fairly useless, since the groups to which it is attached are too diverse or “feudal” confessionally, ecclesiologically, sacramentally, and otherwise to be seen as a coherent movement. Scholars have simply perpetuated “Evangelicalism” to describe loose coalitions of conservative Protestants motivated by experiential piety and organization for moral crusades. Even a banner

8. See MacIntyre’s *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. 204-25.

9. *Ibid.*

theme like biblical inerrancy has not successfully provided the doctrinal solidarity to hold “Evangelicals” together because too many “neo-evangelicals” dissented. We are left with lowest common denominators such as “conservative politics” or “admiration for Billy Graham or Rick Warren,” which have little descriptive precision.¹⁰ Hart has certainly had his critics. There remain many self-titled Evangelicals who insist that there are coherent historical roots and a theological core that fund the mainstream tradition of American Evangelicalism.¹¹ Despite the fact that there are Wesleyan (Arminian) and Reformed (Calvinist) Evangelicals alike, many analysts have seen Calvinism as the dominant or classic shaper of an Evangelical tradition in the United States.

We need not and cannot settle the issue here. Important for our purposes is the fact that numerous Christian Churches/Churches of Christ and Churches of Christ have happily placed themselves under the broad canopy of “Evangelicalism” to the extent that they perceive under that canopy worthy models of church growth, commitment to biblical authority, emphasis on missions, resistance to mainline liberal Protestantism (“what Disciples do”), attractive forms of worship and singing, and strong opposition to secular humanism in society and education.¹² This pattern is especially clear with megachurches that have aspired to emulate large Evangelical congregations such as the Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois or Saddleback Church in California.¹³ Churches usually do not openly acknowledge, however, the fact that this pattern inevitably may entail more than superficial imitation. After all, neither Willow Creek, Saddleback, nor other widely influential churches emerged *ex nihilo* without a theological or ecclesiological lineage. Their history and practices have been informed by antecedent principles and commitments, be it the Trinity, the nature of grace and sin, church eldership, or whatever. Their worship projects convictions concerning the transcendence or immanence of God. The choruses they sing convey select images and theological overtones, as did the old gospel songs and hymns of an earlier generation. They have made certain choices about the sacramental and/or symbolic character of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The list goes on.

Stone-Campbell churches that identify with these large and attractive Evangelical congregations often do so with little awareness of possible inconsistencies with their own native heritage. Whether out of embarrassment about their own roots or earnest belief that the Stone-Campbell Movement is best served by bonding with Evangelicalism as they understand it, they inevitably identify themselves with its traditions, which are sufficiently organic to be accommodating.¹⁴ In so doing they help to perpetuate and perhaps also to stretch those Evangelical traditions. Either way they have found new moorings. The downside is that at least some of these congregations have intentionally downplayed their identity as bearers of the Stone-Campbell legacy in order to enhance their Evangelical credential.

10. D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). Cf. also Donald Dayton, “Some Doubts about the Usefulness of the Category ‘Evangelical,’” in Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston, eds., *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 245-51.

11. E.g., Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

12. For the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, an early example was set by James DeForest Murch (1892-1973), who participated in the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1941 and served a term as editor of its journal, *United Evangelical Action*. Though Murch doubtless disagreed with some of the theological convictions of his peers in the NAE, he saw sufficient common ground and supported the timeliness of a coalition of conservative Protestants opposed to mainline liberalism.

13. See Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, 165-72 (with respect here especially to worship styles and contemporary Christian music).

14. Positively assessing the connections between Stone-Campbell and “Evangelical” identity, see William R. Baker, “Christian Churches (Independent): Are We Evangelical?” in William R. Baker, ed., *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 29-49; Edward P. Meyers, “Churches of Christ (A Cappella): Are We Evangelical?” *ibid.*, pp. 50-67; also William R. Baker, “Why Can’t We be Comfortable as Evangelicals?” *Christian Standard* 138 (16 March 2003): 196, 200-01. For a dissenting view, see Robert F. Hull, Jr., “Why Can’t We Be Just Christians?” *Christian Standard* 138 (16 March 2003): 197-99; also Hull’s review of William R. Baker, ed., *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5 (2002): 259-62. On the complexity of the relationship, see Richard Hughes, “Are Restorationists Evangelicals?” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, 109-34.

As is well-documented in numerous histories and specialized studies,¹⁵ congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) actively pursued alliances within mainline Protestantism, and over the course of the twentieth century identified with its traditions of “progressive” theology, higher-critical biblical scholarship, ecumenism, and social justice activism. While there were certainly some who were willing to jettison altogether the “restoration” principle as definitive of the Stone-Campbell Movement (thus opening themselves to their conservative opponents’ charge of defecting from the Movement), many champions of alignment with the Protestant mainline were committed to reinventing the Movement’s “plea” precisely as a way to perpetuate the Movement for the future. J. H. Garrison (1842-1931) and other Disciples leaders after him even projected the Stone-Campbell plea as the indispensable leavening force in the emerging Ecumenical Movement. By the late twentieth century, with the consummation of denominational restructure, Disciples leaders were looking back at a whole process whereby, through ecumenical alliance and theological maturation, Disciples had ceased to be a loose confederation or “brotherhood” of autonomous congregations and had become an identifiable “church.”¹⁶

To return to my original point, the alignment with traditions of diverse lineage has already been going on among the Stone-Campbell churches as they have transitioned through modern into postmodern religious culture. Whether by theological conviction or pragmatic considerations or both, they have looked for places to hang their hats. The cynic might surmise that they have sought for a comfort zone amid the perils of postmodernity. A more charitable assessment would be that some of them at least have consciously desired to accept the impact of tradition and to own responsibility for the ongoing “traditioning” of their faith, practice, and ecclesial life.

Leonard Allen, however, has summoned the Stone-Campbell churches to reconnect with the Great Tradition, the legacy of the early church. This is something of a new note with him. To read one of his earlier works, like his co-authored work with Richard Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots* (1988),¹⁷ which traces the ancestral tradition of Churches of Christ only as far back as the Protestant Reformation, patristic and medieval Christianity is completely passed over. But Allen has clearly come to appreciate the ancient church’s example to the postmodern church in its pursuit of ecclesial integrity, spiritual vitality, and missionary fidelity. The Great Tradition, in my judgment, consists in a well-tested consensus grounded in the ecumenical creeds and councils, the “orthodoxy” honed in the refiner’s fire of broad-based theological debate, the treasury of patristic literature, and the rich legacies of early Christian worship and sacramental practice. Conjoined with this Tradition, however, was Holy Scripture, which the early Christians viewed as itself a kind of “sacrament” of the Lord’s presence, the life-giving Word whose fullness continued to be disclosed in the process of interpreting, communicating, and performing the gospel.

D. H. Williams has provided a helpful definition:

...Tradition [capital “T”] denotes the acceptance and the handing over of God’s Word, Jesus Christ (*tradere Christum*), and how this took concrete forms in the apostles’ preaching (*ker-ygma*), in the Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament, in the celebration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and in the doxological, doctrinal, hymnological and creedal forms by which the declaration of the mystery of God Incarnate was revealed for our salvation. In both act and substance, the Tradition represents a living history which, throughout the earliest centuries, was constituted by the church and also constituted what was the true church.¹⁸

15. See esp. Williams, ed., *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples’ Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*.

16. See, e.g., Robert Friedly and Duane Cummins, *The Search for Identity: Disciples of Christ—The Restructure Years* (St. Louis: CBP Press, 1987).

17. Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes, *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988).

18. D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36.

It is, as Williams further observes, “longer, larger, and richer than any of our separate and divided histories.”¹⁹ And many of those who deny Tradition’s role are already “Nicene” in their view of God or “Chalcedonian” in the Christology, without openly knowing or stating it.

What would it really mean, then, for Stone-Campbell churches to reconnect with that Great Tradition? There will be some, after all, who will call this antiquarian or even irrelevant. First, it must be said that such reconnecting is not absolutely unprecedented in the Stone-Campbell Movement itself. Despite Alexander Campbell’s occasional accusations of Catholicism’s “apostasy” in the long age between the apostles and the Protestant Reformation—a classic piece of Protestant invective that he deployed to dramatic effect in his debate with Cincinnati’s Bishop John Purcell in 1837—Campbell adopted the pattern (seen in many earlier Protestant reformers) of selectively appealing to patristic authorities to make a point. He recurred, for example, to Justin Martyr, Tertullian, the Council of Antioch of 341, and the early Greek Orthodox tradition in arguing for weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, and to Tertullian and Origen to bolster his case against infant baptism. But he also offered this disclaimer: “We lay no stress upon what is no better than the traditions of the church or upon the testimony of those called the *primitive* fathers, in settling any part of christian worship or christian obedience...[and] we advocate the principle and the practice on apostolic grounds alone.”²⁰ Campbell’s strong insistence on the primal authority of the New Testament is understandable, and yet he (and some of his peers) did concede a certain relative wisdom in the collective witness of the Fathers and councils. Fairly early he even enthusiastically affirmed the Apostles’ Creed as a narrative of the “gospel facts,”²¹ especially when compared with more recent Protestant confessions. Likewise he shared to some degree his father Thomas’s view that the creeds have genuine didactic value as long as they were not made into tests of fellowship.²²

To be sure, these things hardly amount to a principled embrace of the Great Tradition as a guide in matters of faith and practice. And Campbell’s successors in the leadership of the Stone-Campbell Movement largely followed his lead in denying any intrinsic authority to that Tradition. But there were some emerging voices in the twentieth century that rethought this issue. William Robinson (1888-1963), the eminent theologian of the British Churches of Christ, and a key free church representative in the emerging Faith and Order movement, repudiated pure restorationism, devoid of a sense of the guiding role (and authority) of the church and the ecumenical Christian tradition of the early centuries. And though he upheld Peter’s Good Confession as the only legitimate test of fellowship in the church, he recommended the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds as time-tested witnesses to the faith of the historic church, which might be used liturgically and instructionally. “The Nicene Creed is not the confession of the individual,” he wrote, “but of the Church—it is something into which the individual will grow if it is the result of the Church’s experience and the summing up of its historical foundation.”²³ Robinson also aptly criticized the myopia of Protestantism and cast doubt on the ability of the Protestant churches to prevent further fragmentation and denominational proliferation. Likewise he encouraged the Stone-Campbell churches toward a richer and

19. Ibid.

20. “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” no. IX, “On the Breaking of Bread”—no. IV, *Christian Baptist* 3 (1825): 195. See also William Tabbernee, “Alexander Campbell and the Apostolic Tradition,” in D. H. Williams, ed., *The Free Church and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 163-80; and my own short article “Appeal to the Fathers of the Church,” in Douglas Foster, Paul Blowers, D. Newell Williams, and Anthony Dunnavant, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 332-33.

21. “Reply to Barnabas,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1832): 602.

22. Tabbernee, “Alexander Campbell and the Apostolic Tradition,” 164-68.

23. William Robinson, *Essays on Christian Unity* (London: James Clarke, 1923), 95-97.

deeper understanding of the apostolicity and catholicity of the church.²⁴

Engaging the Great Tradition in the churches of the Stone-Campbell heritage should not be seen as a “trend” or even simply as a strategy of renewal. It does not mean anachronistically “mimicking” practices of the patristic and medieval era, nor nostalgic infatuation with its literature and spirituality. More than once I have admonished my own students in this regard. Many of them share my enthusiasm for the ancient church, for the ecumenical confessional traditions, for monastic culture, for the early liturgies and the celebrations of the Christian Year. My most popular and heavily attended elective course is on Eastern Orthodoxy, with its rich theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, iconography, and spiritual literature. Many students have taken up the daily office of prayer and pursued a richer and more historically-informed worship experience and devotion to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. But I hasten to warn them that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is bigger than all these things, and that, whatever they learn from the Great Tradition, they do so as rooted in the Stone-Campbell heritage. They do not serve the churches by haphazardly reintroducing ancient traditions that are still foreign to many. Their work is much more one of teaching ecclesial humility, of expanding people’s vision of historical and global Christianity, of encouraging people’s faith in the direction of greater doctrinal understanding and spiritual depth. Recalling Gadamer, reconnecting with the Great Tradition will entail keeping a lively conversation going between present and past, and being habitually self-conscious about our (restricted) place in the history of the church.

Engaging the Great Tradition, in a word, has much more to do with shaping identity, broadly speaking, than finding methods or practices to “fix” the current fragmented state of the churches. On the other hand, identity-shaping will definitely impact practice. If, as Leonard Allen has rightly claimed, Stone-Campbell churches have always had creeds, even if they are unwritten ones, it will require genuine discipline to recognize those creeds and measure them against the well-tested ecumenical confessions. Engaging the Great Tradition will challenge the way we read scripture in the church and help us to avoid “atomistic” or privatized interpretation and the tendency to create our own “canons within the canon.” It will focus us on a centering rule of faith (*regula fidei*) that can help us to a more holistic and heuristic reading of the Bible.²⁵ It will press us beyond the purview solely of the local congregation, and hold us true to the historic and global *consensus fidelium* of the church militant. And it will bring us into the cherished company of a wide “communion of saints” past, present, and future, East and West, North and South, pilgrimaging toward the church triumphant. As ecumenist Ola Tjørhom emphasized in an excellent recent book, “the Great Tradition must always be directed toward the Church’s mission in the world and the ultimate eschatological fulfilment of Christ’s work.”²⁶

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24. See Robinson’s *The Biblical Doctrine of the Church*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1955), esp. pp. 161-220. And for a more recent appeal in this direction from out of the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, see Frederick Norris, *The Apostolic Faith: Protestants and Roman Catholics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); and from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), H. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), 419-50.

25. On this point, see my essay “Keeping the ‘Current Reformation’ Current,” in *Founding Vocation and Future Vision*, 75-101. Cf. also Ephraim Radner and George Sumner, “Introduction” to *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1998), vii-xxii.

26. Ola Tjørhom, *Visible Church—Visible Unity: Ecumenical Ecclesiology and “The Great Tradition of the Church”* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 35.