

1-1-1999

## Reading Resource Guide

Henry E. Webb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Webb, Henry E. (1999) "Reading Resource Guide," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss4/13>

This Resource Guide is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# READING RESOURCE GUIDE

BY HENRY E. WEBB

Historical events proceed in uninterrupted sequence from generation to generation, century to century, and so on, much as a stream cuts its way through a landscape. It is the task of the historian not only to describe the flow but to explain, so far as he/she is able, the course it takes on the way to its destiny. Precisely how this flow is seen depends to a great extent on where the viewer stands—on which bank of the stream, or perchance in the water itself. Thus two historians may view the same sequence of events from very different perspectives and come forth with widely different descriptions. No historian has pan-elliptic vision that would permit a comprehensive view of all the divergent factors involved in any specific development. Some historians have been sensitized by experience and training to see elements of historical development

that others may discount or miss entirely. Thus it is quite natural that significant variation may be found in historical accounts of the same phenomenon.

The history of the Stone-Campbell movement, from its beginnings early in the last century to its development in three bodies of quite differing emphases, has been well researched and documented. The movement has a rich historiography that quite naturally reflects the contemporary historiographical perspective of the particular author.

A survey of the many histories of the movement suggests that one of four major themes generally can be seen to occupy a central, guiding role in the perspective of each historian. However, it should be understood that while it is possible to see one of these themes predominate in a given historian's work, the others, while subordi-

nate, are by no means entirely absent. This variety of perspectives, which in some cases was intended to buttress a controversial position, may more properly be viewed as a witness to the wide diversity found in the Stone-Campbell heritage.

Herman Norton, late professor of church history at Vanderbilt Divinity School, pointed out that "history, as the telling of what happened in the past, changes all the time. It changes in response to the differing questions, concerns, and commitments that drive historians to investigate and tell the past."<sup>1</sup> A brief review of the various historiographical themes mentioned above, with a few examples of each, follows.

## **The Great Leader Theme**

Most religious bodies trace their origin to some leader whose insights won support from contem-

poraries in sufficient numbers to create a notable following (denomination). Accounts of almost every denomination begin with a great leader and hence are largely biographical. The earliest historical accounts of our movement are likewise largely biographical. One thinks of Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell* (Philadelphia: Lippincott) and John Rogers, *The Biography of Elder Barton W. Stone* (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James) or John T. Brown, *Churches of Christ* (Louisville: J. P. Morton), which, despite its title, is primarily a string of biographies. In more recent times, Earl West, *Search for the Ancient Order* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate) and Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press) are heavily biographical in their presentation of the history of the movement. This is the case as well with Robert Hooper, *A Distinct People: Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century* (West Monroe, La.: Howard).

### **The Institutional/Organization Theme**

With the passing of the frontier and the growth of the movement, it was inevitable that the movement's energies would assert themselves in the creation of a number of organizations and institutions. With the frontier gone, American society yielded to more regularized and organized patterns. This was especially the case following the Civil War, as was clearly evident in the growth of towns and the emergence of large corporations—

first in railroads, and soon in steel, banking, and manufacturing. In this environment it was inevitable that organizations would be created to implement the work of the church. Some Disciples historians have seen the development of organized activities as the primary evidence of the dynamic of the movement and, indeed, as the main index to the identity of the fellowship. The history of the development of organized activity among Disciples is traced in W. E. Garrison and A. T. DeGroot, *The Disciples: A History* (St. Louis: Bethany) and, more recently, in William E. Tucker and Lester G. McAllister, *Journey in Faith* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication).

### **The Ideological Theme**

The Stone-Campbell movement is, at its heart, a plea. It sets forth an appeal for Christian unity on a biblical platform. This was given distinct articulation in the seminal document, *Declaration and Address*, written by Thomas Campbell in 1809. Theological development within the movement has been carefully reviewed by A. T. DeGroot in *Disciple Thought: A History* (Fort Worth: TCU). Mark Toulouse details the development of some of the distinctive concepts of Disciples in *Joined in Discipleship* (St. Louis: Chalice).

Doctrinal issues have often given rise to furious controversies within the movement. The story of controversies involving the significance of the plea, especially as it is understood to relate to contemporary theological developments, is

recounted in J. D. Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati: Standard). Doctrinal conflicts are also given prominent treatment in James North, *Unity in Truth* (Cincinnati: Standard).

### **The Sociological Theme**

Until recently, little attention has been given to the impact on the Stone-Campbell movement of sociocultural factors in the larger environment within which the movement developed. The major exception was W. E. Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication), in which Garrison saw the movement in terms of the Frederick Jackson Turner frontier thesis. Not surprisingly, when this work was published in 1931 it met with widespread criticism. In recent years historians of the movement have become increasingly aware of the influence of the social, cultural, economic, and political environment on the leaders of the movement. Historians of this genre recognize the manner in which sociocultural differences predispose both leadership and membership to react to a given issue in very different ways, thereby generating opposing attitudes and policies that result in conflict and even schism. This issue of *Leaven* explores how several important sociocultural forces extraneous to the movement itself have exerted powerful influences. David Edwin Harrell, a contemporary social historian, carefully details these influences in his two volumes that cover the first century of the movement: *Quest*

*for a Christian America* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society) and *The Social Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865–1900* (Atlanta: Publishing Systems). Sociological factors are also given an important role by Richard Hughes in *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). My *In Search of Christian Unity* (Cincinnati: Standard) also takes sociocultural factors into consideration as significant influences on the

development of the movement. This genre of historiography, which understands our story as part of a wider social complex, will likely become more prominent in forthcoming works.

The above represents but a small fraction of the many histories that have attempted to tell the story of the Stone-Campbell movement. No doubt other historians would cite other examples of these genres and, perhaps, offer other categories. It is hoped that

these initial suggestions will tempt the reader to investigate further the history of this unique and significant American religious movement.

**HENRY E. WEBB** serves as guest editor of this issue on Restoration Themes.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in *Discipliana* 56, no. 4 (1996): 97.