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Reading Resource Guide

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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 subordinate, 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.” 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 (de-
nomination). 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 Advo-
cate) and Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-
Campbell Movement* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press) are heavily bio-
graphical 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 Twenti-
eth 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 develop-
ment 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 Publica-
tion).

**The Ideological Theme**

The Stone-Campbell move-
ment 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 Disciple-
ship* (St. Louis: Chalice).

Doctrinal issues have often
given rise to furious controversies
within the movement. The story of
controversies involving the signifi-
cance of the plea, especially as it is
understood to relate to contempo-
rary theological developments, is
counted in J. D. Murch, *Chris-
tians Only* (Cincinnati: Standard).
Doctrinal conflicts are also given
prominent treatment in James

**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 Publica-
tion), 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 increas-
ingly aware of the influence of the
social, cultural, economic, and
political environment on the
leaders of the movement. Histori-
ans 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
1 Quoted in Discipliana 56, no. 4 (1996): 97.