

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, “Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable.” That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational superstructure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety—exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

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# A Church for Ordinary People

*The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*

A Review Essay

Allan J. McNicol

The decision by the editors of *Christian Studies* to give special attention in this issue to the heritage and witness of Churches of Christ provides an opportunity to discuss an important new history of our heritage. It covers a period from the origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement on the American frontier in the early nineteenth century into its current manifestation as a communion that has a worldwide presence. I refer to the fairly recent publication of what I will abbreviate throughout this essay as *A Global History*.<sup>1</sup>

As with an earlier publication involving some of the same editors who guided *A Global History*, editorial direction was drawn from what today is reckoned to be the three major streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement.<sup>2</sup> Historical works featuring significant figures or developments among particular groups within the Movement continue to appear with some regularity; but, as far as I know, nothing approximates both the span and depth of the total story of the Stone-Campbell Movement as is found in this volume.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> I refer to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Churches of Christ. The earlier publication is Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, Anthony A. Dunnivant, and D. Newell Williams, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans 2004).

I write as one who has served as a participant in several multi-authored works. As a result, I have only admiration for the devoted work of the editors of *A Global History*. Although they were assisted by a large team of contributors, unless one has actually participated in a similar project, he or she has no idea about the amount of work that is needed to bring something like this to fruition. This is truly a monumental effort and I am deeply grateful for the labors of all those involved.

A work that has demanded so much labor under the direction of a talented group of people deserves to be taken seriously. Given the balance of representation of both editors and contributors one can assume this volume is indicative of mainstream views about our history. Consequently, it will probably function as one of the authoritative works on the Stone-Campbell Movement and be utilized as such by the next generation in schools and other places of research. Because I believe it will be recognized as an important work, I intend to engage some of the directions that it takes.

Procedurally, this engagement will fall into three parts. First I will provide a synopsis of the contents of *A Global History*. Also, in this section I will be concerned to determine what sort of narrative has emerged in the pages of the book. I will conclude the synopsis by raising several questions in connection with what I understand to be the basic purpose and direction of *A Global History*. In the second part, I plan to set forth an alternative narrative for telling the story of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Finally, I will give special attention to the concluding two short chapters of *A Global History* that address current and future directions. Since this volume of *Christian Studies* is especially focused on this last issue, I will assess these conclusions based on the alternative narrative I have set forth earlier.

### **The Narrative of *A Global History***

An introduction is important for any good book of this kind. Although the introduction is short, it does not disappoint. It is titled “A New History of the Stone-Campbell Movement.”<sup>3</sup> The “New History” is juxtaposed over against an earlier history produced to celebrate one hundred years since Thomas Campbell’s famous *Declaration and Address* of 1909. That book, W. T. Moore’s *A Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ*, was produced under the

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<sup>3</sup> *A Global History*, 1-8.

auspices of the Disciples of Christ.<sup>4</sup> It reflected mainly a celebratory time for this stream of the Movement coming after several decades of major growth. Although in the more conservative segments of Stone-Campbell circles Moore had a reputation for being “progressive,” it is significant that amid all the talk of “our plea for the union of all Christians” the theme of “Restoring Primitive Christianity” was still in the title.<sup>5</sup> Now, quite reasonably, after one hundred years the editors indicate it is time for a “New History.”

As the Introduction proceeds the reader is given an insightful overview of the various currents affecting Stone-Campbell historiography throughout the second century of the Movement’s history. In some ways I was reminded of the old cliché that basically goes, “You can tell whether a movement is in trouble by the number of histories that are written about it.” Whether true or not, when I came to the end of the Introduction it became clear that this was not going to be another conventional production taking a designated place in the long line of Stone-Campbell histories. Rather, it would include a massive set of descriptions of what has taken place on the global scene, drawn from all three major streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement over the last two hundred years. Its trademark is comprehensiveness. But after reading the Introduction I still was left with a question: “Is there a narrative here?”

Assuming the significance of the W. T. Moore volume, what has happened since 1909? One wonders whether the divisions of the early twentieth century were so traumatic that the only narrative that historians can supply is to chronicle “what happened” during this past eventful century. In any case, this seems to be the conclusion.

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<sup>4</sup> W. T. Moore, *A Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ, Being an Account of a Century’s Effort to Restore Primitive Christianity in Its Faith, Doctrine and Life* (London/Edinburgh: Fleming Revell, 1909).

<sup>5</sup> One of the curious features of *A Global History* is that the term “Restoration Movement” does not appear in the index. Corresponding terminology is also in short supply, although I noticed that the theme of “restoration” did get discussed in several places. I am part of several generations of family from various streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement in two continents and, although most of them would vaguely know of Campbell, and even less of Stone, they would all be very familiar with Restorationism. One wonders what the editorial basis was for this lack of attention to terminology that has played such a significant part in our history.

Consequently, the bulk of the rest of the book unfolds primarily in a descriptive way. The opening chapter is a concise and readable account of the events surrounding the work of the Campbells and others on the American frontier in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Well-known figures are discussed. The chapter appropriately ends with a winsome account of the circumstances surrounding the unification between Alexander Campbell's "Reformers" and Barton Stone's "Christians" in 1832. It is intimated that both groups had theological roots in the magisterial Reformed tradition, but this is not developed. The exact contribution of Barton Stone's "Christians" to the union may still be a lively subject, but it is clear that they added considerable numbers and geographical coverage to the work of Campbell's "Reformers" through expansion into the southern states.

Chapters two through five relate the history through the first one hundred years. Chapter five concentrates on the division between the Disciples and the Churches of Christ that takes place approximately one hundred years after Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*. Thus an ironic note is struck. There is a major cleavage in a movement to promote unity. Between the bookends of chapters two and five, however, a more welcome picture emerges. The editors have provided two fascinating chapters (with many pictures) which highlight accounts about African-American leaders and the contribution of women in the years up until 1920. I have already recommended these chapters as good source material for student papers. No doubt, in coming decades, they will function as some of the most useful resources in the book.

With chapters six, seven, and thirteen, the volume moves toward fulfilling its claim of being *A Global History*. Chapters six and thirteen narrate what happened in the United Kingdom and its dominions, while the important chapter seven, titled "The Expansion of World Missions, 1874–1929," depicts the movement into the global scene. These were the days when the British Empire was at its zenith. It should be pointed out that, rather than the American brethren, it was the British, Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian churches that were strategically involved in and responsible for most of the expansion of the Movement in India, Asia, the Pacific, and Southern Africa. The chapter does a credible job in documenting this story.

Having provided this groundwork, chapters eight through twelve detail what took place in North America during the period that the editors label “The New Century.” As one would expect, considerable time and attention are given over to the factors that precipitated tensions and the ultimate division of the Stone-Campbell Movement into three major streams.

Finally, chapters fourteen through seventeen concentrate on telling the story of mission expansion on a global scale during the past century. It is an exciting story that continues. Mission efforts were established throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. The archival value of these chapters is incalculable. Those interested need to be made aware that repeated readings of these chapters are necessary to appreciate the significance of these mission efforts. Within Churches of Christ it is often stated that there are more members overseas than within North America. Given present trends the ratio may expand in multiples.<sup>6</sup> *A Global History* comes to an end with chapter eighteen functioning as a summary of the project.

Although the arrangement of the chapters at times proved to be challenging, in general, I found the work to be extremely informative. Nevertheless, I wish to return to an earlier point that I noted. What is the narrative of this book? What argument does it seek to make? I am disappointed that the editors appear to have settled on selectively chronicling “what happened” during the roughly two centuries of this Movement under review. Important theological issues, such as whether there is a coherent, identifiable Stone-Campbell theological tradition, are not even broached.<sup>7</sup> In many ways this

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<sup>6</sup> One other feature of this history is worthy of note. Since this is *A Global History* of the entire Stone-Campbell Movement it is interesting to note the present state of many of the missionary works of Disciples of Christ. In account after account, major missions such as what took place in areas as diverse as the Caribbean and the Congo have transitioned or are moving into some form of ecumenical alliance. In these instances these alliances seem to be the fruit of a prominent feature of the Disciples’ theological vision.

<sup>7</sup> Due to limitations of space in this article, I am unable to expand on this further here. In the past I have noted that traditions such as the Reformed, Lutheran, even the Mennonites, have developed a particular trajectory toward approaching theological questions. See Allan J. McNicol, “Is the Stone-Campbell Movement an Identifiable Theological Tradition?” *Restoration Quarterly* 41/2 (1999): 65–70; “Churches of Christ Meet the Evangelicals: A Review Essay,” *Christian Studies* 19 (2003): 71–78; “My Theological Journey: A Retrospective,” *Christian Studies* 24 (2010): 79–85. A

book leaves the impression that it is a lengthy encyclopedia article. Indeed, as with Winston Churchill's famous pudding, I am afraid that "this work has no theme." Have we come, if not to a dead-end, then to an imposing roadblock in attempting to explain how a small, marginalized theological movement became a global theological tradition? I would hope not.

### **Re-Visioning the Stone-Campbell Movement**

I am reminded of a point that Morna Hooker would occasionally make when addressing tricky historical issues. She wrote, "When obvious questions ... raise so many problems, it is necessary to approach them in a different way."<sup>8</sup> My point is this: For as long as I can remember, people within the Stone-Campbell Movement have been arguing about issues like "What was 'the Plea' of its founders and who are the ones that are loyal to their intentions?" In other words, what is our narrative? Perhaps it is time to take Hooker's advice and be open to examining our heritage in a different way. I propose that we do that.

Instead of viewing the Stone-Campbell Movement as a body based on certain pivotal events and theological axioms emerging in the early nineteenth-century American frontier, I wish to cast a much wider net. I suggest that the Stone-Campbell Movement was only one dynamic expression of a much wider series of historical and religious upheavals in the English-speaking world going back at least to the entire eighteenth century and probably well before that. Consequently, the narrative of our Movement must take into consideration the religious ethos of a considerable group of Christian dissenters who were prominent within the British realms in that era. In the title of my essay I call them "ordinary people." I wish to argue that these were the people who constituted not only the Stone-Campbell Movement of the American frontier but also provided the foot soldiers for similar "Back to the Bible" movements centering on the restoration of New Testament Christianity throughout Britain and its burgeoning empire. I simply wish to sug-

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massive work like this cannot include everything. But I was disappointed that it did not venture into this arena.

<sup>8</sup> Morna D. Hooker, "Christ the 'End' of the Cult," in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 192.

gest that the unfolding story of these people as they settled across the world, and their impact which has persisted over the past two hundred years, provides the basis that gives structure to a narrative. Movements like that of Stone-Campbell and allied “Restoration Movements” across the globe have coalesced around a common characteristic. They seek to practice a simple and unadorned way to worship God like the earliest Christians of the New Testament era. At the center of their church life is the practice of believers’ baptism for the forgiveness of sins and weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper. This collective global religious activity of these people is in fact the movement’s narrative.

This is an observation that has not gone without comment in the book. Notice this word in *A Global History*:

Often understood as uniquely American the Stone-Campbell Movement also had beginnings in Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century.... The fact that North America became the most popular destination for British emigrants in the nineteenth century has tended to make trans-Atlantic influences seem natural. In fact, there was nothing natural or inevitable about the influence of Alexander Campbell’s writings in the British Isles.<sup>9</sup>

This is an intriguing statement that should be nuanced. Campbell did have influence in nineteenth-century Britain, but only because there were people there who embraced and approved his theological positions. I refer to a body of people in the United Kingdom—many of the Scots-Irish and Border and Midlands people in England—who had suffered centuries of deprivation because they were dissenters of and could not claim the societal privileges given to members of the Anglican Church. These were the people who were open to what the Campbells had to say.

It would be inappropriate in this essay to move into the details of British history of the eighteenth and nineteenth century where, I believe, the real origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement can be found. But, by way of a brief synopsis, several key points need to be made. Life was difficult for the Scots-Irish and Border people of this era. Religiously speaking, most of the

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<sup>9</sup> *A Global History*, 94. Also cf. 104.

opportunities for advancement were closed to non-conformists.<sup>10</sup> Even when Ulster (Northern Ireland) was opened up for settlement, loyalty to the Church of England was demanded for any significant status in society. It was under these circumstances that, when opportunities allowed, large-scale emigration out of the United Kingdom began to take place. It is from these beginnings that the narrative of the Stone-Campbell Movement begins to emerge.

With respect to America, wide-scale Scots-Irish emigration developed throughout the eighteenth century. After the American Revolution many, fed up with the problems in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, emigrated to America. Some of these came to the eastern seaboard of Canada and founded a number of fellowships seeking to follow the apostolic practice of the ancient church. However, most of the Scots-Irish and northern English immigrants began to settle on the southern section of the American frontier. It was here that the Campbells resided. This belt, stretching roughly from Virginia westward, is still overwhelmingly the center of the Stone-Campbell Movement in numbers and influence in the United States.

Of course, most of this history is well known and has often been rehearsed in histories of the Movement. A point that *A Global History* in its reconstruction of past events reveals, however, is now only coming into focus. Through the emigration of similar people from the United Kingdom to dominions and colonies of the British Empire throughout the nineteenth century, a correspondent narrative of ordinary people seeking to plant simple, unadorned New Testament Christianity took place.<sup>11</sup> No doubt connections were made between what was happening in America and throughout the British Empire. I wish the editors would have explored these connections more thoroughly.

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that Thomas Campbell's father became an Anglican. Of course, his sons were linked with various dissenting versions of Scottish Presbyterianism.

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, not everyone emigrated from the United Kingdom. From the early nineteenth century Churches of Christ began to be established and develop their own identity. In England, in particular, they struggled to gain traction, often in competition with other dissenting fellowships such as the Baptists, Methodists, and the Plymouth Brethren. Nevertheless, still mainly in Scotland and northern England, as *A Global History* points out, growth persisted well into the twentieth century.

Although I have argued that the story of the Stone-Campbell Movement was closely connected with the history of the Protestant Scots-Irish people, I do not wish to claim that, in any way, this was an ethnic church. The same characteristics of simple living, emphasis on moral rectitude, and demand that all religious claims be grounded in clear and rational interpretation of the Scriptures does reflect the ethos of many other emigrants. Germans and Scandinavians, in particular, also knowing the power of oppressive regimes, have also found common ground with these principles. Indeed, given their reputation for contentious argumentation, not all elements of the Scots-Irish culture can be reckoned to be admirable.<sup>12</sup> But for better or for worse this history and ethos as expressed religiously in movements like Stone-Campbell have produced a particular religious identity and a history that is now global. If this is not our narrative few could deny it is a major contributing factor to facilitate understanding of who we are.

### **A Consideration for Future Directions**

The final chapter (eighteen) and the brief Conclusion of *A Global History* are significant because they touch on key issues that address both the *raison d'être* of the Stone-Campbell Movement and prospects for maintaining some sense of identity for the future. Do the various “streams” have enough in common to warrant calling ourselves an identifiable movement?

Chapter eighteen, “The Quest for Unity,” is a description of the many attempts by concerned leaders to arrest our constant splintering into various parties and groups. Sometimes one gets the impression that this work resembles the labors of Sisyphus. Considering the number of attempts that have been put in place to orchestrate unity between different groups among us or, on a wider scale, to attempt “sinking into union with the Body of Christ at large,”<sup>13</sup> the results remain paltry. Speaking about an attempt by the Disciples to unite with the American Baptists sometime in the 1940s, the authors state, “Though the two churches continued to have theological differences ... conversations seem to have ended primarily over anxieties about the con-

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<sup>12</sup> If one would contest this position I would invite him or her to attempt to count the number of divisions within Presbyterianism in America.

<sup>13</sup> The quote is attributed to *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. See *A Global History*, 367.

tinued existence of each group's denominational institutions."<sup>14</sup> This counsel of despair is an appropriate epitaph to most past union efforts.

In thinking about this, I wonder whether part of the problem may be that the editors have misunderstood what most of the membership of the churches that connect with the Stone-Campbell Movement think is the heart and soul of their witness. It may be true that the desire for unity among Christians was "the polar star" of the Movement at a certain formative time.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, most people who unite with one of our voluntary communities (a local church) today, I believe, have a more restrictive understanding of what their membership entails. To put it in terms of John 15:1–17:26, they simply wish to be put to work in a place wherein they can facilitate their union with Christ.<sup>16</sup> Life is complicated. Being a faithful Christian in the maelstrom of modern life is about as far as most people think they can manage. Consequently, there is little energy or funding available to enable leaders to pursue unity discussions in local or wider ecumenical settings. Most believers remain relatively sanguine with the status quo of the local church. If not, they move to another congregation or fellowship.

Furthermore, one other point needs to be made on this issue of unity. In my judgment the level of force of some of these early leaders' calls for unity demands further exploration. Was this their plea? Barton Stone was a case in point. He is one of those mercurial figures whom later historians love to consider as the precursor of important later trends.<sup>17</sup> But was he such a champion of unity as some of the time-honored quotes from him may imply? Histor-

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<sup>14</sup> *A Global History*, 373.

<sup>15</sup> The reference to "polar star" is attributed to Barton Stone. See *A Global History*, 380.

<sup>16</sup> Here, of course, this is a limited reading of the real power of the Johannine message. Indeed, despite all the preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement on John 17, I have long thought that a serious critical study of what this text is saying in its historical context is long overdue. Rightly understood, John 17:20-22 is part of a lengthy discussion that involves the destiny of Israel. Only true Israel (the community of Jesus) can come to understand God's glory reflected in the incarnation of Christ.

<sup>17</sup> Note the treatment of Stone in Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 92–116. For example, Stone's pessimism about the culture of that time was construed by Hughes to be an important factor in the formation of an "Apocalyptic Vision" that influenced later major sectors of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

ically, many advocates of this supposed movement for Christian unity did not join Stone in his amalgamation with the Campbell “reformers” in 1832. Instead they went off to be part of the Christian Connection. This was another unity movement that, after various transmutations, later became part of another fellowship.<sup>18</sup> I suggest that the degree to which this movement was primarily a unity movement is still an open question.

This brings us to some final comments on the Conclusion of *A Global History*. Clearly the twentieth century was a time of upheaval in the Stone-Campbell Movement. While it did become global, it should also be noted that, in America, it fragmented into at least three distinct streams. Meanwhile, in England, many of the historic Churches of Christ that struggled to survive after World War II eventually were incorporated into a Reformed fellowship. Given this recent history, the editors of *A Global History* were prudent not to speculate about the future but to address corresponding issues under the rubric of identity. Even though we have a common heritage, and perhaps history, do we have a common identity?<sup>19</sup>

The editors posit “four values” that they believe have abided throughout the history of the Movement and stand out as key marks of our common identity. In the order of presentation, these are: unity, evangelism, restoration, and peace and justice. As a member of Churches of Christ I am for peace and justice, but in no way would I list it as a characteristic of our fellowship. On the other hand, the belief that there is “one body” and all Christians should be unified in it so that the world may believe could be listed. Restoration of New Testament Christianity (although it is presented with some equivocation) is another one. However, rather than quibble about these points I would prefer to restate how the common points of our identity appear from the perspective of the narrative that I have proposed.

What is it that constitutes the most visible body of similarities between most of the people in the three streams of the Movement today? Is it not the maintenance of similar values and ways of looking at the world that carried

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<sup>18</sup> Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 115.

<sup>19</sup> In a somewhat curious way the issue is stated emphatically in *A Global History*, 380. “In light of this complex global history, it is possible to speak of a common Stone-Campbell identity that transcends the differences regarding doctrine, practice, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality that have divided the movement.”

the Scots-Irish dissenters of earlier generations to the end of the earth? They had the following features: A concern for moral rectitude, deep respect for the Scriptures, and an unequivocal passion to find authority for worship following the practices of the early church, linked with a disdain of carrying out ritual for its own sake. That is who we are.

Although there are many points on which we disagree, and sometimes we are too contentious about them, this, too, is part of our narrative. What is without dispute is that we are a church of ordinary folk. They have felt comfortable within this Movement. Others seeking more status, prestige, or some supposed historical or credal connections go elsewhere. This is our identity. Walk into any Midwest or Midsouth American church in one of the three major streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement and regular folk are the people you will find.

In the end the future is not in our hands. We now are moving into a more global environment where even “ordinary people” intersect with vastly different cultures and communities. Because of our ethos and understanding of the gospel, I sincerely believe that as we head in these directions this global environment will not hinder our growth. The gospel is for all! We know well the word of Matthew 28:18–20.

However, I wonder about the future in this sense. Newell Williams, Doug Foster, and Paul Blowers cared enough about our heritage to remind us that there is something valuable here that should be remembered. I am concerned whether a generation later there will be a similar group of editors and contributors to care enough to continue this project. When I consider this future possibility, I clearly see the abiding value of this book.

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