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The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History--Reviews and Comments


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Review of D. Newell WILLIAMS, Douglas A. FOSTER and Paul M. BLOWERS, eds. *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013. 476pp.

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The global and diverse nature of the Stone-Campbell Movement calls for a new history for a post-modern time. The *Global History* attempts first to revisit the standard narrative of the Movement's North American frontier origins by paying particularly close attention to "sectionalism, war, race and gender" (p.7). Out of a cluster of similar movements emerged a Stone-Campbell Movement which in turn divided by the dawn of the twentieth century. This division is recounted in its social and theological dimensions. Since this story is told in numerous places (the Introduction surveys the literature) the *Global History* chooses to devote the majority of space to developments outside the United States while surveying each North American stream alongside the other two.

Not only in terms of content but in approach the *Global History* breaks new ground. While earlier histories focused primarily on a single stream, or a geographical area, or a particular theme or issue, this attempt brings all of the above into a single volume. The price paid in the process is a lack of depth in many areas and only one or two examples illustrate very broad themes. However, that the endnotes refer to primary and critical secondary sources, serious inquirers will be able to pursue the discussion. At least in the chapters I review below, though archival sources were cited along with occasional correspondence with the general editors, most sources are widely available periodicals, monographs and websites. The chapters below argue from primary sources and interact with the standard histories of the movement. Further, that there is new and current (in many cases up to the time of publication) information

ensures this volume will become a starting point for further research into emerging areas of scholarly and popular interest.

Chapters 8-12 attend to the three streams in North America, particularly their emergence, distinctiveness and internal developments. Chapter 8 traces the inner dynamics of three competing theological visions among Churches of Christ. More or less aligned with dominant editorial voices and publishing houses, and increasingly in tandem with particular schools and colleges, the leading voices and the issues they pursued receive ample summary treatment. The issues at play among these schools of thought are providence, grace, rebaptism, millennialism, the activity of Holy Spirit and how Christians ought to relate to governing authority. While common convictions about the nature of the Bible and a basically unified hermeneutic (that assumed the necessity of justifying doctrine and practice by establishing Biblical authority) prevailed among Churches of Christ, significant theological differences emerged. Unified in their opposition to the use of instrumental worship and missionary societies, Churches of Christ developed a striking diversity of practice which the chapter notes by surveying Non-Sunday School, One-Cup, Mutual Edification and Non-Institutional discussions. The chapter explores how persons with common convictions about the Bible came to such bitter division over the results of its study. These divisions, by the 1960s on the part of some (particularly academics), called into question the validity of the shared hermeneutical presuppositions. Furthermore, as divisive as the implementation of this hermeneutic proved to be, the racial divide among Churches of Christ illustrates the degree to which Anglo and African-American races operated in fundamental isolation to each other regardless of any shared assumptions about the process of Biblical study. Where contact was made, the results are illustrated through the life-stories of George Philip Bowser and Marshall Keeble. The chapter shows how the evangelistic and

education efforts of Bowser, Keeble and those they mentored were responsible for the growth of black Churches of Christ.

If hermeneutical and theological debate characterized the emergence and internal variety of Churches of Christ, then institutional development characterized Disciples of Christ, as chapter 9 details. This lens provides a point of entry to account for the establishment of the United Christian Missionary Society out of a several mission boards, the rise of an institutional consciousness among African-Americans (*vis-à-vis* a racist white majority), and the struggle for the inclusion of women in positions of leadership. The impact of ecumenism and critical methodologies in Biblical scholarship upon Disciple seminaries and missions, and their eventual acceptance and endorsement by institutional leadership, moves the narrative into the later 20th century. Throughout the chapter the life-experience of several women and minorities punctuate a story the culmination of which is the emergence of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Though Disciples came to conceive of themselves as church in three manifestations (congregational, regional and general ministries), the broadest level receives the most attention in this chapter.

As the Disciples developed an institutional ethos with particular theological, social and political inclinations, tensions arose resulting, eventually, in a separate identity for Christian Churches/Churches of Christ (chapter 10). The chapter acknowledges no clear breaking point for the division; instead it unfolds several dimensions to the fracture, the center of which was UCMS and the International Convention. Rooted in tension between restoration and unity, overlaid with controversy surrounding theological liberalism and the emergence of a centralized denominational ethos, this division parallels the establishment of new seminaries and Bible colleges and the rise of the North American Christian Convention as a rallying point. Further,

the chapter suggests rural/urban sociological factors contributed to this division. Finally it explores three broad diversities within the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

Chapters 8-10 set the stage for the focused attention in chapter 11 to race, war, ethnic diversity, gender equality, sexuality and religious pluralism. Here the *Global History* breaks new ground by surveying even in a basic way how three very different groups with a common theological and historical identity engaged the most volatile issues of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Surely this chapter will be the entry-point for many a research query by future historians. What common reservoir, if any, from the Stone-Campbell heritage did those within these three streams draw from to sustain their commitments about these social issues? How did the Stone-Campbell heritage shape the larger discussion? If the *Global History* does not answer these questions, at least it sets the stage for further work. Similarly, chapter 12 picks up earlier threads to describe the broad contours of the Movement's North American landscape. The discussion advances beyond earlier histories in that it brings the discussion forward by several years. More significantly, though, it sets each stream alongside the other two. As each stream is contextualized by the other two, the chapter becomes greater than the sum of its parts. No doubt much more could have been included, and in greater detail, but the chapter reflects a commitment to tell the stories together.

Herein lies what I suspect will be the enduring contribution of the *Global History*: not only that it included new information (though it does in these chapters and elsewhere) and thereby advances the historiography, but that it tells such varying micro-histories *together*. Surely the *Global History* will generate fresh exploration in as-yet uncharted territory, particularly outside North America. Beyond that, not only demonstrating that such exploration

could be conceived as a joint effort across long-standing divisions, it shows how it might be pursued as witness to a unity transcending division.