

**What Are Our Roots? Churches of Christ and the Christian Tradition**  
**Stone-Campbell Study Group**  
**Stone-Campbell Journal Conference 2025**  
**John Mark Hicks**

In what I regard as a seminal article written almost forty years ago, Richard L. Harrison, Jr., raised the question “Who, indeed, are the Disciples?” as the new denomination sought to define itself in relation to other Christian traditions.<sup>1</sup> Though he focused on early Disciple sacramental theology, his analysis provides significant markers for the whole movement. He concluded that Disciple sacramental theology is indebted to Catholic, Reformed, and Free Church traditions. The place and function of the sacraments were Catholic “in nature,” their meaning was “generally Reformed” (following Calvin rather than Zwingli), and their liturgical celebration was “decidedly” Free Church.<sup>2</sup> The result is a “distinctive” mixture that is not identified with any of the three traditions.<sup>3</sup> Harrison saw this a valuable part of Disciples identity; it contributes to their *raison d’existence*. Though their sacramental theology might be categorized as generally Reformed because none of these elements are in “fundamental conflict with the broad picture of the Reformed tradition,” through their distinctive sacramental theology the Disciples “proclaim by their very nature the unity and diversity of God’s church.”<sup>4</sup> However, some might regard it as an eclectic and piece-meal stitching together of a nonsensical *tertium quid*.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Harrison, Jr., “Early Disciples Sacramental Theology: Catholic, Reformed, and Free,” *Mid-Stream* 24, no. 3 (July 1985): 255. Reprinted in *Classic Themes of Disciples Theology: Rethinking the Traditional Affirmations of the Christian Church* (Disciples of Christ), ed. Kenneth Lawrence (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1986), 49-100.

<sup>2</sup> Harisson, “Early Disciples,” 285.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, “Early Disciples,” 286.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison, “Early Disciples,” 290.

In this essay, I extend Harrison's insight to the theology and practice of Churches of Christ as an expression of the American Restoration Movement, and I expand the picture he offers. Specifically, I propose a five-fold typology that seeks a more comprehensive picture of how Churches of Christ are situated in the history of the Christian tradition. I do not mean to say that these elements are not also applicable to the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement or that they are not applicable to the two other major streams of the movement. There is, no doubt, overlap and even a core belongs to all the streams. However, my interest is particularly Churches of Christ given both my assignment and my social location. Even more specifically, I will identify the DNA of Churches of Christ as what emerged from 1889-1939 where their identity was formed and solidified in distinction from the Disciples of Christ.

With Harrison, I affirm the Catholic and Reformed indebtedness, and I adjust the language of "Free church" to "Anabaptist" as I think we are more indebted to Anabaptists than we are New England Congregationalists (though they did, of course, have a strong impact). To Harrison's analysis, I add two other categories. We might call both "evangelical," but this is where confusion arises, especially when we consider there is a third category that we might also call "Evangelical." This confusion is distracting and disruptive. So, it is necessary to offer some explanation.

Above, I associated the term "evangelical" with three different groups, though these groups may overlap. First, evangelical refers to the narration of the gospel story as in something akin to the Apostles' Creed or the second and third century versions of the Rule of Faith. These are, as Campbell called them, the "gospel facts." It is an evangelical core; it is the story of God creating the world, sending the Son, and rescuing us by the Spirit for the

sake of reconciliation and communion in a new heaven and new earth. Matthew Bates' recent book, *Beyond the Salvation Wars*, has argued that all Christians traditions, particularly the ones that affirm the Nicene Creed, are evangelical in this sense. "The genuine gospel," he writes, "has never been entirely absent during the last two thousand years of Christian history."<sup>5</sup> They all proclaim and sing the gospel story.

Second, evangelical refers to those who, based on a strong biblicism, place crucicentrism and conversion at the heart of their faith. They are evangelistic and revivalistic. They affirm the importance of a personal conversion narrative (much like among Churches of Christ we tell our baptismal stories). These are the evangelicals Jamey Gorman describes in his book, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement*.<sup>6</sup> The Stone-Campbell Movement arose out of this evangelical mixture in the wake of the First and Second Great Awakenings, and its roots reach back to missionary and evangelical projects in the British Isles. This group of evangelicals would embrace the evangelicalism of the first group, but not everyone in that first group would identify with the revivalism of this second group (e.g., Roman Catholic).

Third, Evangelical (notice the capitalization) as a late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century movement refers to a group whose activism is thoroughly political. It seeks institutional and political power to reverse the moral failings of the nation in a way akin to some form of Christian Nationalism (a current version of which is the Apostolic Reformation movement in the US). Whether we begin with theonomic perspectives, dominion theology, or Falwell's

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *Beyond the Salvation Wars: Why Protestants and Catholics Must Reimagine How We Are Saved* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2025), 18.

<sup>6</sup> James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Abilene, TX: Abilene University Press, 2017), 17-18.

Moral Majority in the 1970s, this mix of Fundamentalism and social activism has come to dominant or, at least, hold significant sway over much of the conservative landscape of the American church.<sup>7</sup> This group may include people from the first and second groups (e.g., there are MAGA Catholics) while people in the first and second groups are not necessarily Evangelical in this third sense. In contrast, historically, Churches of Christ have embraced a cultural separatism of sorts that promoted an alternative community in contrast to institutional and cultural powers.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, I offer this five-fold typology for locating the Churches of Christ within the Christian Tradition.

- Evangelical Gospel
- Catholic Tradition (East and West)
- Reformed Tradition
- Anabaptist Tradition
- Evangelical Revivalism

What is missing from this typology is contemporary Evangelicalism which is characterized by a desire for political power. This is not part of the DNA of Churches of Christ who are more indebted to the kingdom politics of David Lipscomb than to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. To whatever extent Churches of Christ buy into MAGA politics and Christian Nationalism, it is out of step with the historical trajectory of its mothers and fathers. To whatever degree Churches of Christ embrace this cultural agenda they are no longer faithful to their own roots and represent a radical break from that tradition. Many congregations and individuals within Churches of Christ, however, are moving in that direction.

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<sup>7</sup> See Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (San Francisco: Harper, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> See John Mark Hicks, ed., *Resisting Babel: Allegiance to God and the Problem of Government* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2020).

As I explain this typology, it is important to remember that while Churches of Christ may trace their family of origins through this lens and the best of Churches of Christ are seen through it, dysfunction is also part of our history. In other words, whatever good we may see in our roots and their faithful expression, our history is complicated by dysfunction through misinterpretation, misguided emphases, and ideological agendas. In other words, Churches of Christ are not perfect.

1. *Evangelical Gospel*. Early Disciples and Churches of Christ shared the common faith of the historic church. While they did not embrace creedal formulations, they affirmed the faith narrated, for example, in the Apostles' Creed. As Campbell put it, that creed, unlike "modern creeds" which are a "synopsis of opinions," is "a brief narrative of facts, of all the great gospel facts."<sup>9</sup> Campbell believed that "[e]very society in Christendom admits the same faith or builds on all the same grand evangelical facts."<sup>10</sup> These gospel facts are the basis for a "common Christianity," an evangelical core that everyone within the Christian tradition confesses.<sup>11</sup> This lies at the root of what Robert Richardson called a "SIMPLE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY."<sup>12</sup> This is the language we find in the 1809 *Declaration and Address*. The Christian Association of Washington was created "for the sole purpose of promoting simple evangelical Christianity, free from all mixture of human opinions and inventions of men."<sup>13</sup> Alexander Campbell pleaded for all Christians to unite upon this

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Campbell, "Reply to Barnabas," *Millennial Harbinger* 3, no. 12 (December 1832): 602.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Campbell, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice on the Action, Subject, Design and Administrator of Christian Baptism: also, on the Character of Spiritual Influence in Conversion and Sanctification, and on the Expediency and Tendency of Ecclesiastic Creeds, as Terms of Union and Communion* (Lexington, KY: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), 835.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Campbell, "Education," *Millennial Harbinger* 1.6 (2nd series; June 1837): 258.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Richardson, *The Principles and Objects of the Religious Reformation, Urged by A. Campbell and Others, Briefly Stated and Explained*. 2d ed. (Bethany, VA: A. Campbell, 1853), 6–7.

<sup>13</sup> *Declaration and Address*, p. 4.

simple evangelical Christianity and to make their “*the rule of union*” that whatever in *faith*, in *piety*, and *morality* is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union.”<sup>14</sup> Dysfunction arose when the gospel was identified more with the commands than the facts of God’s redemptive work or even with the New Testament as a whole rather than its basic message. These miscues are not uncommon in the history of Churches of Christ.

2. *Catholic Tradition (East and West)*. Brad East’s recent article in *Restoration Quarterly* argues that catholicity—in the sense of both East and West—is part of the DNA of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Essentially, “catholic” refers to a high ecclesiology in which the church is central to soteriology and God’s mission, baptismal sacramentalism, and the assembled liturgical community (including its mystical importance [where we meet God] and weekly communion with the risen Christ).<sup>15</sup> This is similar to Campbell’s three positive ordinances of Christianity: Baptism, Lord’s Day, and Lord’s Supper,<sup>16</sup> which Harrison also noted.<sup>17</sup> Further it looks to the “early church” as a “paradigm of moral, spiritual and sacramental faithfulness.” As East asserts, “the church simply *is* Christianity as God instituted on earth.”<sup>18</sup> I think this is essentially correct, and in this sense Churches of Christ are deeply embedded within a world of sacramental imagination, though we would never call it that. Dysfunction arose when the sacramental imagination was limited to baptism, and even more so when baptism was regarded as primarily a test of loyalty rather than a divine work. A further dysfunction arose when we began to regard “our” congregations as co-extensive with the body of Christ.

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Union of Christians—No. I.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3.5 (2nd series; May 1839) 212.

<sup>15</sup> Brad East, “Churches of Christ: Once Catholic, Now Evangelical,” *Restoration Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2024): 135-136.

<sup>16</sup> See my “Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology,” *Restoration Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2008) 35-48.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison, “Early Disciples,” 258.

<sup>18</sup> Brad East, “Churches of Christ,” 136.

3. *Reformed Tradition*. According to Harrison, the Reformed tradition was probably the most dominant influence upon the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement. This is not too surprising since both Stone and the Campbells were trained and lived in Presbyterian congregations. Those roots are deep, and we may observe its impact from several different angles. First, the Campbells employed a Reformed hermeneutic (seen in Zwingli, Calvin, and the Puritans) called the regulative principle by which, according to the Westminster Confession, God prescribed “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God” which God “instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men . . . or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture” (XXI.1). The Reformed hermeneutic assumed an ecclesial pattern in the New Testament and discerned it by using explicit statements or deducing others from Scripture by “good and necessary consequence” (I.6). Alexander Campbell began his series on “order” within the restoration of the ancient order with two presuppositions: (1) “there is a divine authorized order of Christian worship in Christian assemblies” and (2) “the christian worship in Christian assemblies is uniformly the same.”<sup>19</sup> The apostles provided the “constitution and law of the primitive church,” and so “shall [it] be the constitution and law of the restored church.”<sup>20</sup> The Churches of Christ embraced a pattern hermeneutic that used command, example, and inference as its method of discernment. Dysfunction arose when patternism became a rigid exclusivism such that it turned into ecclesial perfectionism.

Another dimension of Reformed influence is seen in the polity and liturgy of the early Disciples. Harrison recognizes the liturgical elements, but we can expand beyond sacramental

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. V. Order of Worship,” *Christian Baptist* 2, no. 12 (July 4, 1825): 164.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. IV.,” *Christian Baptist* 2, no. 11 (June 6, 1825): 158.

administration. The sobering atmosphere of the assembly and the practices of singing, exhorting, teaching, and communing essentially reproduced what one would find in early American Presbyterianism or Puritan dissenter congregations (with the explicit addition of weekly communion). More importantly, the organization of congregations under the leadership of elders and deacons was typical of the Reformed tradition. Dysfunction arose when leadership became authoritarian, and the order of worship became specifically prescribed and rigidly exclusive.

4. *Anabaptist Tradition.* While the “free church” influence of New England congregationalism is present (especially in Stone), the Anabaptist tradition appears more influential (especially upon Churches of Christ). I see this, most evidently, in four ways. First, Anabaptist communities are congregational in character, though they vary in how radical this is. Typically, as in New England congregationalism, there were also often extra-congregational organizations and structures. At the heart of the Anabaptist vision, however, is the voluntary nature of the congregation, that is, a regenerated community that gathered for mutual discipline and worship. Second, as voluntary communities, they emphasized discipleship through the imitation of Jesus and obedience to the Lordship of Christ. Church discipline was practiced with a seriousness among early Disciples and early Churches of Christ that mirrored the “ban” in Anabaptist communities. Third, believer’s baptism, as among the Anabaptists (and Baptists of early 19<sup>th</sup> century America), was standard practice among early Disciples. However, the meaning of the sacrament was more Reformed or even Catholic than among the Anabaptists. Fourth, the sense of cultural isolation and association with the poor was shared with the Anabaptist tradition (though this was not universal among Disciples, especially Alexander Campbell himself). However, it was predominantly true in the South, especially post-Civil War, and thus it is a key element of the formation of

the identity of Churches of Christ. Dysfunction arose with the loss of cultural separatism (e.g., the embrace of Christian Nationalism) and with a radical congregationalism that hindered cooperation among congregations.

5. *Evangelical Revivalism*. The Stone-Campbell Movement was birthed in the fires of evangelical revivalism. Cane Ridge and the Washington Association were soaked in it. Cane Ridge was an expression of the Second Great Awakening which saw unity in revivalistic preaching and the work of the Spirit. *The Declaration and Address* was an American expression of British evangelical zeal that sought unity for the sake of mission. Both Stone and Campbell intended to lay aside denominationalism by uniting upon the New Testament alone so that the church might unite in mission for the sake of the world. While Stone's fiery and spirited revivalism ultimately gave way to Campbell's rational version—the mourner's bench was replaced by believer's baptism, this revivalism produced a conversion narrative recognized by the community of believers. That narrative was personal and necessary for incorporation into the body. Dysfunction arose when the tradition became more concerned about revivalism than discipleship.

A significant byproduct of this sort of evangelicalism (along with Anabaptist tendencies) within the Stone-Campbell Movement, especially Churches of Christ, has been the practice of the priesthood of all believers. This invites every disciple to participate in the mission of God and use their gifts in service to God. This entailed a non-sacerdotalism, that is, no disciple had special or unique priestly or clerical privileges in the community. Every believer (only male, at least in its origin) may baptize and lead the congregation in worship through prayer, reading, exhortation, singing, and communion. Everyone is fully invested with priestly privileges though they may not all share the same gifts.

These five historic Christian traditions are particularly important for shaping and identifying the distinctive nature of the Stone-Campbell tradition, particularly Churches of Christ.

So, who are we? That was the original question Harrison raised. We are a community that confesses the evangelical (gospel) message under the guidance of Scripture. We affirm the soteriological and missional significance of the church, and we affirm not only the prominence of its sacraments but their efficacy by the Spirit of God. We read Scripture closely and attend to its details (though the nature of the patternism envisioned may vary considerably among congregations), and we organize our independent congregations under the lay leadership of elders and deacons. These communities are voluntary, regenerated, and committed to communal life together as the primary means by which God addresses the world and its powers. The church is itself a missionary community as it seeks to proclaim the gospel of Christ and invite people to participate in God's life through the community. We are a community of disciples shaped by sacramental means of grace, guided by Scripture, dedicated to transformation and discipleship, and committed to mission. Unfortunately, the Churches of Christ, due in part to their rationalistic embrace of a patternistic hermeneutic, became exclusivist and separated themselves from the rest of the Christian tradition itself.

Are we, that is, Churches of Christ, evangelicals? I pose the question considering our DNA, whether from the early Disciples or from the Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons in 1922-1923. Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that we confess the gospel facts. Yes, in the sense that we embrace a missional, even revivalistic, agenda. But, no, in the sense that we participate in the current cultural movement toward Christian nationalism and political power. However,

many congregations of Churches of Christ are now embracing some of this nationalism and thirst for political power. To that extent, they represent a divergence from the historic identity of Churches of Christ.