

## Appendix

# Churches of Christ in America and Australia

### Introduction

Many historians of religion trace the origins of the Christian fellowship called Churches of Christ to the Stone-Campbell Movement in early 19<sup>th</sup> century America.<sup>1</sup> This is the period known as the Second Great Awakening, when a spiritual revival swept frontier America, seeding several religious movements.

In that period of foment, several men stood out to play a significant role among Churches of Christ. Barton Stone in Kentucky and the father and son team of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in Pennsylvania came from different strands of Presbyterianism.<sup>2</sup> These men felt increasingly frustrated with the sectarianism of their day and sought a return to the apostolic Christian faith. In 1809 Thomas Campbell penned the *Declaration & Address*, a landmark document calling for restoration of a visibly united church based on the New Testament.

Their call attracted many religious people from various denominations active on the frontier. By the 1830s, they were known for their emphasis on restoring non-denominational Christianity. Their numbers grew quickly in America. A similar, more modest version of this movement has its own roots in Great Britain. The latter is significant for subsequent developments in various parts of the British Empire, including Australia.

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1 See generally: Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Eerdmans, 1996).

2 Over time, the younger Campbell became more prominent than his father. For a critical biography of Alexander Campbell, see: Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Eerdmans, 2020). On Stone, see: Thomas H. Olbricht, "Stone, Barton W." in T. Larsen, *et.al.*, (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (InterVarsity Press, 2003).

To varying degrees, leaders of the American and British movements were influenced by the rational thinking which characterised the Enlightenment. They also adopted aspects of Puritan holiness and devotion, the Reformation call to go back to the Bible, and the Anabaptist penchant for restoring key practices of the primitive church.

Over the two centuries since Stone, the Campbells, and others called for a restoration of apostolic faith, the Stone-Campbell Movement – like many other renewal movements – has had its fair share of ups and downs.<sup>3</sup> At times, when a mission-oriented focus prevailed, the movement spread like wildfire. One result is that churches connected with the movement can be found today in virtually every nation. Globally, several million people today identify with this stream of restorationism. At other times, parts of the movement have argued, split, or atrophied. Other parts accommodated the secularising tendencies of their surrounding cultures.

### **Declaration and Address of the Christian Society of Washington (1809)**

1. THAT the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else as none else can be truly and properly called christians.
2. That although the church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies, locally separate one from another; yet there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them...

Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address Centennial Edition* (Record Publishing Company, 1908) 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> See: Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: The Story of the American Restoration Movement*, rev. ed. (College Press, 2002); and Douglas A. Foster et. al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement: Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, Churches of Christ* (Eerdmans, 2004). American luminaries with backgrounds within the movement include three presidents of the United States: James A. Garfield (March-September 1881), Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989); Foster et. al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 178.

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many within the Stone-Campbell Movement had coalesced around two broad wings. While both wings maintained a call for visible church unity, there were different views as to how unity should be achieved. One wing, associated with what later came to be known as the Disciples of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, leaned towards a more expansive view of unity and was more accepting of general Evangelical notions.<sup>4</sup>

A second wing comprised those with stronger restorationist views. Their distinctive plea was to be simply “Christians”. They understood this plea as a call for the restoration of the faith and practices of the earliest Christians and the concurrent abandonment of denominationalism. This plea helped galvanise unity among their churches, typically called “Churches of Christ” (based on Romans 16:16).

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the uneasy accommodation between Disciples of Christ and the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ experienced more serious fractures. Within this wing, the Disciples were steadily drifting towards acceptance of denominationalism and key elements of theological liberalism. Eventually, they took their place in the roster of significant liberal Protestant denominations, albeit undergoing a major erosion of membership in the process. At the same time, a sizable number among the Christian Churches were gravitating towards broad Evangelicalism, embracing a more traditional understanding of biblical faith while devoted to pursuing outreach and the *missio dei*.

Meanwhile, Churches of Christ – which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a relatively minor segment of the Stone-Campbell Movement – grew at a brisk pace as their plea for non-denominational Christianity resonated with many. They emphasise the faith and

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4 Defining who is “Evangelical” is challenging. One definition by a British historian suggests four key beliefs: *biblicism*, the centrality of the Bible as God’s authoritative guide for life; *crucicentrism*, faith in the Good News of Jesus’ crucifixion and its saving effects; *conversionism*, the belief that Gospel-affected lives are changed lives; and *activism*, the important mission of sharing the Gospel with others: David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Routledge, 1989) 2-3.

practices of the earliest Christians, adopting them as norms for the contemporary church. This conviction forms the basis on which Churches of Christ practise believer's baptism, viewing it as the culminating act in the conversion process in the New Testament and early Christianity. A similar conviction undergirds the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, as well as other practices such as congregational governance by a plurality of spiritually mature male elders and *a cappella* singing in congregational worship.<sup>5</sup> The last practice, a feature of early Christian worship, at times attracts attention among churches in the West.

Overall, it's possible to see the two wings of the Stone-Campbell Movement as reflecting, to varying extents, two distinct impulses. One is an *ecumenical impulse* that seeks to do away with denominationalism in favour of visible church unity. The other is a *restorationist impulse* that seeks to re-establish the faith and practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church.

In principle, both impulses should work in unison: it's through restoring the New Testament church that visible unity is achieved. In practice, however, these impulses are often in tension. The desire for unity clashes with the desire to follow rigorously the 1<sup>st</sup> century practices as revealed in Scripture. Adding to these tensions are differing emphases on spirituality, piety, rationality, social justice, and evangelical mission. Attempts to juggle these priorities led to the emergence of different branches and sub-branches within the movement which continue to this day.<sup>6</sup>

### The Stone-Campbell Movement in Australia

What about the Stone-Campbell Movement in Australia? Early traces of the movement can be found in the colonies of South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Various pioneers in the Australian movement

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<sup>5</sup> For an exposition of the biblical, theological, and historical underpinnings of these practices, see: Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> For a recent attempt to forge a fresh theological path for Churches of Christ, especially in America, see: Mark E. Powell *et.al.*, *Discipleship in Community: A Theological Vision for the Future* (Abilene Christian University Press, 2020).

were immigrants from Britain. They included individuals like Thomas Magarey, originally from Northern Ireland, who landed in Adelaide in 1845 after spending some years in New Zealand.<sup>7</sup> Magarey initially associated himself with a group of Scotch Baptists. Spurred by teachings from publications like the *British Millennial Harbinger* (a journal of Churches of Christ in Britain) and the writings of Alexander Campbell in America, he and others from that group later reconstituted a church which met in Franklin Street. Several of the Adelaide disciples later achieved public prominence. Magarey became a wealthy businessman and was a director of the Bank of Adelaide. Magarey and fellow disciples Philip Santo and William Burford were also members of the South Australian parliament at various times.

In Sydney, during the early 1850s some Wesleyan Methodists became attracted to the restoration plea and soon formed a local Church of Christ. In the Melbourne suburb of Prahran, a group started to meet as a church in 1855; it mainly consisted of members from British Churches of Christ who had migrated to Victoria, drawn by the gold rush. In this way, many of the early Australian church pioneers were strongly influenced by individuals in Britain who had similar views to the Campbells. Other restorationist ideas were imported directly from the Campbells and their compatriots in America.

Interestingly, however, the early restorationist pioneers in Australia subsequently developed a trajectory different from their peers in Britain and America. The British churches laid a stronger emphasis on restoring 1<sup>st</sup> century practices as revealed in the New Testament. In contrast, the churches in the young Australian colonies tended to be more ecumenical and inclusive. There was also greater cooperation among them.

In Australia, this later contributed to the formation of centralised organisations such as state and federal conferences, government-

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<sup>7</sup> The historical information in this and the next paragraph is drawn from Graeme Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism: A History of Churches of Christ in Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vital Publications, 1989) 12-19.

endorsed church property holding corporations, conference-linked Bible colleges, and denominational overstructures such as mission agencies. Although some of these became controversial issues for the Stone-Campbell Movement in America and Britain, they were less so among the Australian churches. Instead, Australian church leaders generally broadened their theological views to accommodate these developments.

In this way, what can be described as the “conference” or “mainline” Churches of Christ in Australia largely remained united under a broad umbrella.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the 20<sup>th</sup> century divisions in America which saw the departure of the Churches of Christ and then the Evangelical-leaning Christian Churches from the Disciples of Christ, no such wholesale division occurred in Australia.

Nonetheless, there were instances of local congregations opting to leave mainline Churches of Christ in Australia. One example was the Lygon Street Church of Christ in Carlton, an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. With roots dating back to the 1850s, during the 1860s American-trained preachers like H.S. Earl played a key role in the growth of the Lygon Street church.<sup>9</sup> While the congregation became part of mainline Churches of Christ in Australia, it later withdrew from the Victorian conference. Today, it operates as an independent, Bible-centred, evangelical ministry called Lygon Street Christian Chapel ([www.lsc.org.au](http://www.lsc.org.au)).

There were other dissenting voices. Several individuals – such as Stephen Cheek, J.W. McGregor, A.G. Chaffer, and Colin Smith – expressed opposition against one or more developments, including the creation of denominational overstructures (e.g. state and federal conferences, centralised church property holdings, and

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<sup>8</sup> For a history of these churches, see: Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*; and Graeme Chapman, *No Other Foundation: A Documentary History of Churches of Christ in Australia, 1846-1990*, 3 vols (Author, 1993). In the early 2000s, it’s estimated there were around 450 congregations and 37,000 members affiliated with mainline Churches of Christ in Australia: Foster *et. al.* (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, 62-63.

denomination-wide mission agencies) as well as specific departures from apostolic practices.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, some dissenters developed relationships with Churches of Christ in the United States. After the Second World War, those relationships helped generate first a trickle and then a moderate influx of missionaries into Australia from Churches of Christ in America.

During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely through the efforts of these American missionaries, local Christians who were disaffected with mainline Churches of Christ in Australia, as well as new converts, dozens of self-governing yet loosely networked congregations were established around the country. By 2020 very few American missionaries remained and the large bulk of these congregations were led by local leaders.<sup>11</sup> These groups range from small house churches to medium-sized congregations of 100+ members with established church buildings. Many retain the name “Church of Christ”. In order to reduce confusion with mainline Churches of Christ, some add the self-description “non-denominational”.<sup>12</sup>

Today, it’s probably fair to describe mainline Churches of Christ in Australia as generally adopting theological stances which

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10 See: David Roper, *Voices Crying in the Wilderness: A History of the Lord’s Church with Special Emphasis on Australia* (Restoration Publications, 1979) Chapters 14, 16, 18, and 19.

11 For a list of these congregations, see the directory of churches maintained by Klesis Institute ([www.klesis.com.au](http://www.klesis.com.au)). In 2019, these churches (sometimes referred to by mainline Churches of Christ as the “non-instrumental” or “*a cappella*” Churches of Christ) numbered 81 congregations with approximately 2,000 members: Peter Gray & Klesis Institute, *2019 Survey of Non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia*, Parts One & Two (Klesis Institute, 2020) Part One, 4. In comparison, Churches of Christ in America in mid-2020 numbered around 11,900 congregations and 1.1 million members: Carl H. Royster, *Churches of Christ in the United States: Statistical Summary by State/Territory* (21st Century Christian, 2020) 2.

12 For an account of non-denominational Churches of Christ in Australia, see: Roper, *Voices Crying in the Wilderness*.

fall within broad Evangelicalism.<sup>13</sup> As such, compared to the three main branches of the Stone-Campbell Movement in America, they appear to be closer in practice to the Christian Churches (or the Disciples of Christ) rather than the Churches of Christ. However, recently, they also appear to be finding some alignment with more progressive segments of Churches of Christ in the United States, particularly among those who place less emphasis on restorationist concerns around denominationalism, instrumental music in public worship, and church governance and leadership.

### Conclusion

Overall, glancing back over the history of Churches of Christ in America and Australia, as well as the broader Stone-Campbell Movement, one may surmise that it's largely a story with rather unpretentious features. Much of the tale is about ordinary men and women of imperfect faith who, weary of religious sectarianism, sought spiritual renewal through restoring the faith and practices of the first Christians.

Yet, that unassuming story is punctuated at times by remarkable accounts of individual and collective faith, courage, and conviction. Missionaries who spread the Gospel in more than one hundred nations. Ordinary folks who undertake humanitarian, welfare, and social justice initiatives. Visionaries who establish and fund Christian colleges, preacher training schools, and other programs. Scholars of international renown who make significant contributions to biblical and theological studies. Disciples congregating in megachurches of 1,000+ members. Disciples meeting in tiny house churches.

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13 This raises the question as to how Evangelicals and restorationists view the normativeness of certain biblical practices. For example, how important is baptism in the conversion process? Evangelicals and restorationists tend to offer significantly diverging answers. See: William R. Baker (ed.), *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* (InterVarsity Press, 2002); and William R. Baker (ed.), *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement: Volume 2 – Engaging Basic Christian Doctrine* (ACU Press, 2006).

In all this, as is the case with other church tribes, human behaviour doesn't always correspond to high biblical ideals. Yet, it's hard to deny the sincerity and seriousness with which many among Churches of Christ have pursued the goal of restoring the habits and ethos of the earliest disciples. Among reformist and restorationist movements during the two millennia of church history, various segments of the Stone-Campbell Movement – and Churches of Christ, in particular – haven't been shy in demonstrating an enduring commitment to restoration ideals. Despite human foibles, these efforts have resulted in many experiencing spiritual growth and renewal.

Perhaps this brief recounting of history can encourage us to remember a central truth: we're ultimately dealing with the church *of Christ*. It's the Lord's church, not our church. We're only here for a short while. During this time, we're given the privilege of being part of the people of God in continuity with all who seek to know Him as He truly is. May we be found worthy as we enjoy that privilege.

