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Richard T. Hughes

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Richard T. Hughes
Paper for Christian Scholars Conference
Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee
June 5, 2014

***How Can We Account for the Extraordinary Culture
Of Biblical and Religious Scholarship in Churches of Christ?***

While I cannot prove that Churches of Christ have produced more biblical scholars per capita than any other Christian tradition in the United States, I am willing to bet I am right.

But even if I lose that wager, it is still the case—undeniably the case—that this relatively small Christian tradition has spawned an extraordinary culture of biblical and religious scholarship over the past fifty or sixty years.

The question for this paper is therefore both simple and clear: How can we account for that rather stunning fact?

But this simple question becomes an intriguing puzzle when we consider all the reasons why this development seems so unlikely.

Reason #1: Until the middle of the twentieth century, members of Churches of Christ were largely both rural and relatively poor, living especially in small towns and farming communities from Tennessee to Texas, and, for the most part, the scholars the church produced reflect that very same background. Jack and LeMoine Lewis, for example, grew up in Midlothian, Texas, a farming community of some 2,000 people some 30 miles south of Dallas/Fort Worth. Others had similar roots. Tom Olbricht grew up in Thayer, Missouri; Everett Ferguson in El Campo, Texas; David Balch in Pampa, Texas; Bill Martin in Devine, Texas; Jimmy Roberts in Winters, Texas; Carl Holladay in Huntingdon, Tennessee; Jack Scott in Sweetwater, Texas, and the list goes on and on.

Reason #2: Until the middle of the twentieth century, few members of Churches of Christ in towns like those just mentioned had much formal education at all. Everett Ferguson's father, for example, had only an eighth-grade education.¹ Jack and LeMoine Lewis's father had one year in college, and their mother had "the equivalent of a high school education." And Jack recalled, "I don't remember anybody in my town that really had done very much in the way of education."²

Reason #3: For much of the twentieth century, Churches of Christ had isolated themselves both culturally and religiously and fought among each other over issues that few in the larger public would have thought important or even understood. They fought, for example, over how many cups should be used in the communion service; over the legitimacy of congregations pooling resources to support orphan homes; over the millennium—would it be pre-, post-, or neither? and over the meaning of the Greek word, *eis*, in Acts 2:38.

¹ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

² Interview with Jack Lewis, Lewis home, Memphis, Tennessee, February 10, 2014.

We get a sense of how foreign these arguments were to the larger public—even the larger Christian public—when, for example, we hear the noted historian of religion in the South, Samuel S. Hill, recall attending a gathering of Church of Christ people in Muscle Shoals, Alabama a number of years ago. “I could understand their words,” he said. “They spoke English. But I had not the slightest idea what they were talking about.”³

With a narrative like this, who would ever have predicted that this church would produce biblical and religious scholars—some of them world class—in numbers far out of proportion to its size?

And yet, Don Meredith, Director of the Graves Memorial Library at the Harding School of Theology in Memphis, and Ken Cukrowski, dean of ACU’s College of Biblical Studies, have confirmed that fact. Meredith has compiled a list of 528 scholars from Churches of Christ who have earned the Ph.D. or a comparable degree in biblical and religious studies, or who worked in other fields but wrote dissertations on topics that bear directly on biblical or religious issues, mainly since 1960.⁴ And Cukrowski has identified 165 ACU graduates who have earned doctorates in a theological field.⁵

And so, we return to our question: How can we account for the extraordinary culture of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ?

Shortly after David Fleeer and Carl Holladay commissioned this paper, it occurred to me that if I hoped to answer that question with any real precision, I needed to interview the scholars, themselves. Since January of this year, I have interviewed 58 scholars, mainly biblical scholars, from New England to Los Angeles, from Florida to Seattle, and points in between, and the question I have put to these scholars has been this: “How have the Churches of Christ, from your earliest experience in that tradition, shaped your vocation of biblical and religious scholarship?”

What I learned from those interviews is nothing less than stunning. Yet, I must also tell you that the paper I present today is preliminary in two respects. First, I have a significant list of other scholars I still hope to interview, and second, the constraints of time have allowed me to transcribe only a small number of the 58 interviews I conducted. Early on, therefore, I decided to build this paper, for the most part, around a group of older scholars, most of whom are now in their 70s and 80s, and who earned their degrees from, or taught at, either Harvard or Yale or both.

Accounting for scholarship in Churches of Christ—a Macro Theory

But before I share with you the results of those interviews, I want to offer a broad, theoretical explanation for the culture of scholarship that has abounded in Churches of Christ for so many years and, simply put, it is this—that Churches of Christ are deeply rooted in two great intellectual traditions.

³ Interview with Samuel S. Hill, Jr., Hampton Inn, DeBary, Florida, January 8, 2014.

⁴ Don Meredith, “Theological Doctoral Studies by Members of the Churches of Christ, 1904-2004” in Warren Lewis, ed., *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twenty-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement in Honor of Don Haymes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), pp. _____. While the list in this text goes through 2004, Meredith regularly updates this list and has provided this author with a list that goes through 2011.

⁵ Ken Cukrowski, “A Century of Scholarship,” February 15, 2014, typescript list in possession of author.

First, if we were to look for the roots of Churches of Christ in the earliest years of the Protestant Reformation, we would find ourselves not in Wittenberg with Luther and Melancthon, but in Zurich with Zwingli and Geneva with Calvin. Zwingli, in particular, committed himself and the church he served to the recovery—the restoration, if you will—of the ancient Christian faith and practice. That is precisely why Zwingli pulled the organ out of the Great Minster in Zurich and chopped it into firewood. And that is why Zwingli forbade even audible singing in the worship of that church. The Bible, Zwingli routinely affirmed, simply instructs us to “sing and make melody in your heart.”

But Zwingli and Calvin were indebted to another grand intellectual tradition—that great school of Christian Humanists that flourished in northern Europe in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Of Erasmus, the acknowledged Prince of the Christian Humanists, Lewis Spitz has written,

Once the idea of applying his humanistic scholarship to biblical studies and to the revival of Christian antiquity had been planted in Erasmus’ mind, . . . it grew—slowly at first, but with an irresistible power through the years until it became his all-consuming passion. As a thirty-year-old man he took up the intensive study of Greek in order to possess the key instrument for his studies, above all for an understanding of the epistles of Paul. . . . Erasmus’ major triumph as a textual scholar was the publication of the [Greek] New Testament in 1516, a pioneer work based upon Greek manuscripts. . . . In the *Paraclesis*, Erasmus penned what may well be his most famous lines: “I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle. . . . I wish that the traveler would expel the weariness of his journey with this pastime. And, to be brief, I wish that all communication of the Christian would be of the Scriptures.”⁶

Erasmus’ love for Scripture and Christian antiquity was the very same love that drove the vocational aspirations of scholars in Churches of Christ—people like Jack and LeMoine Lewis, for example, or Abraham Malherbe, Everett Ferguson, Tom Olbricht, and a host of others. And the similarity is not accidental, for one can trace the lines of influence that run from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century—lines that run from Erasmus and the Humanists to Zwingli and Calvin in Switzerland, from Zwingli and Calvin to the English Puritans, from the English Puritans to the New England Puritans, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians in America, and from all those sources Churches of Christ have drawn their love for Scripture and Christian antiquity.

But upon those ecclesial sources, Churches of Christ overlaid another great intellectual tradition—the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century as the Enlightenment expressed itself in thinkers like Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, the leading proponents of Scottish Common Sense Realism, and John Locke, the great English philosopher of supernatural rationalism.

From those influences, Churches of Christ learned to value the biblical text as a document addressed preeminently to the human mind, a document that could—and should—be understood through the light of human reason, a document that one should study through

⁶ Lewis W. Spitz, “Desiderius Erasmus” in B. A. Garish, ed., *Reformers in Profile* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), pp. 63, 72, and 79

the lens of the scientific method, and a document to which one should bring all the best historical, grammatical, and linguistic tools at one's disposal.

LeMoine G. Lewis, in many ways the father of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ, made this point about as clearly as anyone I have read. "Our God is a God of reason," LeMoine said in a lecture at Oklahoma Christian College in 1970.

We get some idea of the power of his reason in the book of nature But God's other book also presents him as reasoning, planning, teaching. . . . Ours is a taught religion. We can sum up our religion as "God's truth." His heralds go out to proclaim his truth, to battle ignorance, superstition, to turn men from the darkness of error to the light of truth. And so truth belongs to our God. All error is opposed to him. The lie cannot abide in his presence. This means that if our doctrine is not true it is no honor to God. We can only serve God with truth.⁷

Tom Olbricht captured the genius of our tradition in this regard when he said,

I've thought of this off and on—that people who have some dedication to [the] text and want to get it precisely right as, for example, the rabbis did in studying Rabbinics, have some special interest in a certain kind of education that is in-depth. . . . And I think that is the context out of which we have commitments to the text . . . and in getting it precisely right.⁸

Indeed, our question was not the American evangelical question, "Is your heart right with God?" but rather the question that Phillip asked the Ethiopian eunuch: "Dost thou understand what thou readest?" And that is the question that now has driven several generations of biblical and religious scholars from the Churches of Christ.

And so, my first answer to the question, "How can we account for the extraordinary culture of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ?" is this—that in spite of their rural poverty, in spite of their relative lack of formal education until recent years, and in spite of their cultural and religious isolation, an unflinching commitment to the cognitive truths found in the biblical text, more than any other single factor, has shaped and defined this movement from its inception in the early nineteenth century. That commitment has been so strong that Christians in this tradition have unfailingly passed it from one generation to another, in spite of the odds that might have dampened or undermined that impulse. For many years, young people raised in this tradition understood that the rational grasp of biblical truth was the pearl of great price, and many of those young people were so committed to that proposition that they made the task of biblical and religious scholarship the driving force of their lives.

The centrality of Biblical truth

The scholars I interviewed bore this out. One of the younger scholars, Jeff Peterson, spoke in many respects for all the rest when he recalled his youthful ambition to rationally grasp the complete and total meaning of the biblical text. "I headed off to ACU," Peterson wrote, "with the goal of learning Greek and Hebrew well enough to parse the mind of God, which I understood to be revealed without remainder in the text of Scripture." In time, he

⁷ LeMoine G. Lewis, "Sound Doctrine in the Seventies," lecture at Oklahoma Christian College lectureship, 1970, typescript, p. 2. Typescript housed in Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University.

⁸ Interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

confessed, he began to realize “that knowing the mind of God involves a bit more than learning the rules of grammar or exegesis.”⁹

My interviews revealed that Peterson’s ambition “to parse the mind of God” was common among those young people in Churches of Christ who would eventually become biblical and religious scholars of substantial note. Greg Sterling was a case in point. The son of a preacher in the non-institutional tradition of Churches of Christ, Sterling grew up in California, earned his Ph.D. at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and currently serves as dean of Yale Divinity School. When asked to connect his childhood in Churches of Christ with his vocation of biblical scholarship, Sterling said this:

I think that for many of us growing up in Churches of Christ, and certainly for me, there was a deep appreciation—and I’ll even say [a] love—of Scripture. At first you’re only taught the stories. You don’t understand them critically, but [Scripture] flows in your veins.

Sterling felt so compelled to understand the biblical message fully and precisely that, while still in high school, he began to look up key words in the Greek New Testament. Indeed, Sterling reports that in college, he and his brother “read Greek texts to one another, and then the other would have to name where [in the New Testament that text] was [located]. We used to write one another in Greek. It was just part of who we were.”

Of the rational grid that governed his reading of the text, Sterling observed, “We grew up in a tradition that liked to argue and debate What I didn’t know . . . was [that this debating tradition] was heavily influenced by [John] Locke [and] Common Sense [Realism]. . . . Later, when I got to know Locke . . . , it was immediately obvious. . . . So I think . . . you can say that those of us who became biblical scholars and accepted critical approaches to the text . . . were simply being consistent with the intellectual framework that we inherited.”¹⁰

Carl Holladay grew up in the small farming community of Huntingdon Tennessee, earned his Ph.D. in New Testament at Cambridge, and now holds the Charles Howard Candler Chair in New Testament Studies at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. Holladay recalled that as a kid growing up, “the Bible [was] central, especially the New Testament. . . .” And if Sterling had claimed that Scripture “flows in your veins,” Holladay used a comparable metaphor. Scripture, he said, “was part of the water we drank and the air we breathed.”

Like Sterling, Holladay also recalled the rational debating tradition of Churches of Christ. In fact, Holladay said, religious debates were “part of the culture in West Tennessee. . . . I remember attending those debates, and they were not only theatre—they were a form of entertainment—but they also were biblically based. Many of the arguments in those debates were based upon the interpretation of the New Testament. Was baptism essential? Was it sprinkling or pouring, or was it immersion? So the Bible—and especially the New Testament—was the authoritative document in those debates. Out of that emerged a sense of the importance of the Bible, the importance of the New Testament.”

As an undergraduate student at Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tennessee, Holladay witnessed that debating tradition at its most finely-tuned best. “Debating was very important to the ethos at Freed Hardeman,” Holladay said, and the school “turned out a lot of

⁹⁹ Letter from Jeff Peterson to Richard Hughes, February 25, 2014.

¹⁰ Interview with Greg Sterling, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, January 14, 2014.

religious debaters.” Every year he heard one of the best debaters in Churches of Christ, Guy N. Woods, take down those unwitting advocates of religious error. Soon enough, Holladay took courses in speech, logic, Greek, and ancient rhetoric, and joined the debate team, himself.¹¹

Jim Roberts grew up on a farm outside another farming community, Winters, Texas, halfway between Abilene and San Angelo which is my home town. He earned his Ph.D. at Harvard, specializing in Assyriology and Old Testament Studies and served for many years as the William Henry Green Professor of Old Testament Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary. When asked to connect his early years in Churches of Christ with his vocation of biblical scholarship, Jim recalled that in his home church in Winters,

There was so much emphasis on the plan of salvation that, as a kid who was interested in the logic of the sermons presented, I learned all the appropriate proof texts for proving the kind of view that was presented in church. . . . And that was true of most of the main themes of traditional Church of Christ preaching. I could quote the texts with the preacher. By the time I was a teenager, I had them all memorized, knew where they were, could find them, and could argue about them. I mean, there was a sort of . . . basic Church of Christ theological library in my head.

He also recalled the logical approach to the text that dominated the preaching he heard as a young man growing up in the Winters congregation. There was “not a lot of emotion,” he said, “[but] a lot of logic based on the authority of Scripture.”

So serious was Roberts about the biblical text that he read McGarvey’s commentaries on the New Testament when he was in junior high school and perhaps, he says, when he was younger even than that. And during those junior high years, he recalls, “My dad got irritated with me because I’d take the Bible with me to the cotton field and read in between hoeing a row of cotton. That did not please [my dad] at all!”¹²

Tom Olbricht, Distinguished Professor of Religion Emeritus at Pepperdine, grew up in the tiny community of Thayer, Missouri, located near the Missouri/Arkansas border. He first earned his Ph.D. in rhetoric from the University of Iowa, then earned the S.T.B. at Harvard. Of his home church in Thayer, Tom recalls that “the preaching was quite biblically centered, and that’s where I developed this sense of the Bible being fundamental in whatever we do religiously. That’s what all the preachers kept telling us—that those people out there may not be so concerned about the Bible, but that’s where *we’re* coming from, and we have to keep going back to the text.” Even the general public, Tom recalled, knew how central the Bible was for Churches of Christ. That’s why it was commonly said that in a given court of law, “if they couldn’t find a Bible in the court room, they could always swear on the head of a Campbellite.”¹³

Jack Scott is the product of another West Texas farming community—in this case, Sweetwater, about forty miles due west of Abilene. He earned his M.Div. from Yale and a Ph.D. in American history with a focus on American religious history from the Claremont Graduate School in Claremont, California. He then served as provost of Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, president of Cypress College and president of Pasadena City College. He was later

¹¹ Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

¹² Interview with J. J. M. Roberts, Roberts home, Grand Haven, Michigan, March 18, 2014.

¹³ Interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

elected to the Senate of the State of California and closed his formal career as the Chancellor of the California Community College System, the largest system of higher education in the world.

While still in high school, Scott determined to become a preacher. “I just thought,” he said, “there wasn’t anything as important as being a preacher, because [preachers proclaimed] the truth.” And early on, he said, I argued “the cause of the Church of Christ with . . . my friends at school who were Baptists or Methodists or whatever.” At Abilene Christian, he recalled, “we had such courses as ‘Denominational Doctrines.’ . . . We even staged debates in which one person took ‘the wrong side’ and one person took ‘the right side.’”

Bill Martin grew up in the farming community of Devine, Texas, some 25 miles south of San Antonio, and became a boy wonder preacher at age 14. He went to Harvard to study New Testament, got diverted into Harvard’s “Religion and Society” program and, after earning his Ph.D., occupied the Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair of Religion and Public Policy at Rice University in Houston. The preacher for the Devine, Texas Church of Christ encouraged young Martin “to argue with the different denominations. We read books like, *What is Wrong, Why I Left*, and that sort of thing, so my youthful efforts at evangelism were not so much [due to] a passion for souls as a conviction that I needed to prove to these people that they were wrong and I was right. So I would argue with my Baptist friends and my Catholic friends that they needed to get straight, and [with] the Methodists that they were baptizing in the wrong way because the Greek word, βαπτίζω, meant to dip, to plunge, or to immerse.”¹⁴

David Balch grew up on a farm outside Pampa in in far, far west Texas. “We had probably twelve inches of rain a year,” he recalls, “[and] we prayed hard for rain. My dad raised maize and cane which we would chop up and feed to the dairy cows.” In time, Balch would earn his Ph.D. from Yale in New Testament studies and currently teaches at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley.

With considerable pathos, Balch described what it meant to grow up in a Church of Christ world dominated by a hyper-rational approach to the biblical text. “I don’t remember my parents asking me how I *felt* about anything. [Life] really was oriented toward how we *thought*—about the Bible. I wouldn’t abstract truth independently from the Bible. . . . So I would describe [my world] as a context where we talked *about* the Bible, went to classes *about* the Bible, and thought *about* [the Bible].”¹⁵ And while Balch now sees the obvious downsides to that experience, it was precisely that regimen of thinking about the Bible that helped define his vocation as a biblical scholar.

Bob Randolph grew up in Burbank, California, and thereby broke the mold of the farm-bred scholar from Churches of Christ. After earning his B.A. from Abilene Christian and his M.Div. from Yale Divinity School, he did an A.B.D. at Brandeis in American history, then a Ph.D. at Andover-Newton Theological School, focusing his dissertation on the creation of interfaith communities in the university context—an appropriate topic for the man who would become the first Chaplain to the Institute at M.I.T. Bob’s grandfather was a prince in the Church of

¹⁴ Interview with William C. Martin, Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 3, 2014.

¹⁵ Interview with David Balch, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California, March 28, 2014.

Christ—the noted preacher and educator, E. W. McMillan—so the Bible was his native air. While still in high school he read commentaries on the Bible and studied how to preach.¹⁶

And here’s a scholar who most in this audience may not know. Robin Meyers is the son of Robert Meyers, a beloved English professor at Harding College in the 1950s who was fired in 1959 when he stood with Harding students on behalf of racial integration at the college. With a Ph.D. in rhetoric from the University of Oklahoma, Robin has served since 1985 as senior minister of the Mayflower United Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, and since 1991 as Distinguished Professor of Social Justice in the Philosophy Department at Oklahoma City University. He has appeared on “Dateline NBC,” as a commentator on National Public Radio, and delivered the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale in November of 2013.

When I read Meyers’ book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, I was struck by his utter fidelity to the biblical text, and I thought at the time, “This man, while no longer a part of our tradition, is profoundly a child of the Churches of Christ.” In my interview with Robin, I asked him about that connection, and here’s some of what he said:

I think so many of the seeds of my spirituality were sown in the Church of Christ. And I happen to agree with your . . . operative thesis that what all of us heard growing up in the Church of Christ was serious engagement with the text . . . This is our authority. You know, “Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent.”
Sola Scriptura!

When I asked Meyers if he remembers hearing that message, he replied, “Yes! Yes, I do! And, you know, the Church of Christ was otherwise so bare, so stripped down. . . . But what we were wrestling with was the Word. We were constantly looking in the Bible—whether it was Sunday morning, Sunday night, or Wednesday night—for the Word that we were to hear now. And I think that had a great effect on me.”¹⁷

John Fitzgerald grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, earned his Ph.D. in New Testament at Yale, and after 31 years at the University of Miami in Florida, now holds a joint appointment as Professor of Biblical Studies at Notre Dame and Professor Extraordinary at North-West University School for Biblical Studies and Bible Languages at Potchefstroom, South Africa. His tribute to the Bible-centered quality of Churches of Christ, and his frank acknowledgment of the debt he owes that tradition, beautifully summarizes what I heard from scores of other scholars just like him. “The motivating factor—and this is what I owe to Churches of Christ,” Fitzgerald said, “is a love for the text. That was ingrained. . . . [In my graduate studies and career,] I was going on to learn more about the text that the tradition had taught me to respect.”¹⁸

The Search for Biblical truth

But neither the centrality of the biblical text nor a rational engagement with the text is sufficient to produce a biblical scholar. Even those Church of Christ preachers who opposed the work of the scholars in those early years prioritized the text and engaged it with their minds. But that did not make them scholars.

¹⁶ Interview with Bob Randolph, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 15, 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with Robin Meyers, Mayflower United Church of Christ, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, March 9, 2014.

¹⁸ Interview with John Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald home, Granger, Indiana, April 30, 2014.

What set the scholars apart from their critics was their embrace of the cardinal principle of the American Enlightenment and the new American nation, given classic expression by Thomas Jefferson in his “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom.” There Jefferson affirmed “that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition [she is] disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate.”¹⁹

Affirmed by virtually all our leaders in the early nineteenth century, the principle “that truth will prevail if left to herself” stands at the heart of what Churches of Christ have always claimed to embody. The Kentucky preacher John Rogers, for example, wrote in 1830 that “we have no reason to conclude, we know all the truth. . . . We have nothing to lose in this inquiry after truth. We have no system to bind us to human opinion.”²⁰

And that is the perspective that all our scholars embraced.

Dudley Lynch edited *The Optimist*, the student newspaper at Abilene Christian, in the mid-1960s. In the course of my interview with him, he wondered out loud what gave our scholars permission to do the kind of work they did, especially in the 1960s, when Foy Wallace and his comrades had so thoroughly repressed the freedom to wonder, to inquire, and to question among Churches of Christ in the 1940s and 1950s. Part of the answer to Lynch’s question is surely the cultural ethos that dominated vast segments of the American public in the 1960s—an ethos that valued and encouraged the most radical sort of intellectual freedom.²¹

But even more important was the commitment to intellectual freedom that had stood at the heart of Churches of Christ for so many years. Even in the midst of the intellectual repression that Wallace and his comrades promoted in the 1940s and 1950s, the commitment to intellectual freedom continued to root, grow, and flower in congregations of Churches of Christ in out-of-the-way places like Sweetwater, Winters, and Midlothian, Texas. The scholars who came from those churches stand as witness to that fact.

In the interest of time, I will mention in this context only three of those scholars—Greg Sterling, Jim Roberts, and Bob Randolph. Sterling recalled that “I heard my father say again and again and again [when I was] growing up . . . that truth has nothing to fear from investigation . . . Ministers used to say this all the time. Well, some of us actually believed that . . . [and] it was [the] rational framework that . . . led us to scholarship.”

Jim Roberts recalled that in his church in Winters, “Scripture was the authority. If you could prove something from Scripture, then you could go against tradition, whatever the tradition was, which made a lasting impact on me.” When he entered Abilene Christian, he said, “I was able to raise questions about . . . things . . . taught as . . . truth which I could see didn’t square with the texts as I read them.” And that allowed him to say, “Wait a minute! The tradition is wrong. It doesn’t follow its own rules!”²²

¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson, “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” in Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 549.

²⁰ John Rogers, “The Church of Christ at Concord, to the Elders and Brethren Assembled in Conference at Caneridge, Sendeth Christian Salutation,” *Christian Messenger* 4 (October 1830): 258.

²¹ Interview with Dudley Lynch, Lynch home, Gainesville, Florida, January 7, 2014.

²² Interview with J. J. M. Roberts, Roberts home, Grand Haven, Michigan, March 18, 2014.

In Randolph's case, the pluralism he experienced in the Los Angeles area underpinned his rational background in Churches of Christ, prompting him to ask critical questions about the text from an early age. "I grew up," he said, "[actually] believing that mantra that we repeated—'come, let us reason together'."²³

***Factors that permitted a culture of scholarship in Churches of Christ:
Race, Class, and Gender***

I want now to return to the question that drives this inquiry: "How might we account for the extraordinary culture of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ?" So far I have argued, first, that Churches of Christ are heir to two great intellectual traditions—Christian Humanism and the Enlightenment—and second, that Churches of Christ, with their emphasis on the biblical text, a rational reading of the text, and the freedom to raise honest questions about that text—have offered a fertile ground for a tradition of scholarship to take root and flower.

But the answer is much more complex than that, especially if we frame our question in terms of permission instead of causality. In other words, what forces came together to *permit* this grand flowering of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ.

We would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the important role that race, class, and gender played in *permitting* this development. All one must do to grasp this point is simply to look at the scholars who earned Ph.D.'s at Harvard, Yale, Cambridge and other leading institutions of higher learning in the 1960s and 1970s. Every one of them was white, middle class, and male. That was no accident.

We gain perspective on white privilege, in particular, if we compare the success these scholars achieved with the success a leading black preacher and scholar in the early twentieth-century Churches of Christ *failed* to achieve, chiefly because he was black. His name was G. P. Bowser. Of Bowser, Douglas Foster reports the following:

G. P. Bowser received an education at Walden University, a school for blacks operated by Methodists [in Nashville, Tennessee]. There he studied scripture and literature, learned Greek and Hebrew as well as Latin, German, and French, and quickly rose in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1897 he left the AME Church and was immersed in the Gay Street Christian Church.²⁴

In 1907, three years after Hal Calhoun graduated from Harvard with a Ph.D. in biblical studies, Bowser helped establish in Nashville the first school for African American members of Churches of Christ. In 1910, he moved this school to Silver Point, Tennessee, some 60 miles east of Nashville, and there he shared with his students what he had learned at Walden University, namely, the tools for doing good biblical scholarship including the biblical languages. After years of financial struggle, the Silver Point School closed in 1920.

²³ Interview with Robert Randolph, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 15, 2014.

²⁴ Douglas Foster, "Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ: A Historical View" in Gary Holloway and John York, eds., *Unfinished Reconciliation: Justice, Racism, and Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2002 and 2013), p. 120.

In that year, A. M. Burton invited Bowser to return to Nashville and serve a new school for black Christians, the Southern Practical Institute. A white man named C. E. Dorris served as the school's superintendent. But when Dorris insisted that Bowser, along with all the other blacks—faculty and students alike—enter the school through the back door, Bowser resigned in protest and moved to Kentucky. Over the years that followed, Bowser established schools in Louisville, Kentucky; in Fort Smith, Arkansas; and finally in Detroit.²⁵

Hubert Locke, an African American who grew up in Detroit, told me in my interview with him that “when Bowser came to Detroit, he tried to establish his school . . . at the old Joseph Campau church where I grew up,” and he confirmed that “Bowser wanted all his students to learn Greek.” But his school never achieved its potential since “the white Churches of Christ [in Detroit] never gave [Bowser] the support they gave Keeble. He [Bowser] didn't play the game.” One can only wonder what this learned man might have achieved in the world of biblical scholarship had he enjoyed the same opportunities available to whites.

Indeed, Locke's own journey offers a reflection on white privilege from a somewhat different angle. By any measure his achievements are stellar. After earning a B.A. at Wayne State in Detroit and an M.Div. at the University of Chicago Divinity School, he enjoyed a distinguished career as director of the Office of Religious Affairs at Wayne State University, dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska, and dean of the Evans School of Public Policy at the University of Washington. Yet he was forced to channel his life outside the educational structures of Churches of Christ. As an African American who went to college in the late 1950s, he never even applied to attend any of the colleges related to that tradition since he knew in advance that all but one (Pepperdine in California) would reject him.²⁶

There is yet another way to discern the role of white privilege in permitting the success of white biblical scholars from Churches of Christ, and that is to note the post-War economic development that improved the lives of many whites but left many blacks behind in the 1940s and 1950s. Here we find in bold relief the striking connection between race and class.

John Fitzgerald, for example, noted that after the war, “long-delayed projects” were undertaken by the federal government, creating a rising level of affluence that allowed many American families—including many white families in Churches of Christ—to send their children to college. “I'm an example of that,” Fitzgerald noted. “Without that context, I never would have gone on to college, much less have entered the field [of biblical scholarship]. And I think that would be true for many of my generation.”²⁷

Carl Holladay confirmed that judgment. “My mother and father,” he said, “[only] had high school educations. But they sent all their children to college, to Church of Christ colleges, and that was their way—they were post-World War II people—of insuring our entry into the middle class.”²⁸

But compare the reality that Fitzgerald and Holladay and scores of other white young people in Churches of Christ enjoyed with the reality for blacks in the very same period. In their

²⁵ For the Bowser story, see Wes Crawford, *Shattering the Illusion: How African American Churches of Christ Moved from Segregation to Independence* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2013), pp. 68 and 87-93.

²⁶ Interview with Hubert Locke, Locke home, Seattle, Washington, August 19, 2013.

²⁷ Interview with John Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald home, Granger, Indiana, April 30, 2014.

²⁸ Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

new book, *Black against Empire*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo Martin Jr. describe that reality in the starkest of terms. “The wartime jobs that drew the black migration [to northern and western cities] had ended,” they write. “Much remaining industry fled to the suburbs along with white residents, and many blacks lived isolated in poor urban ghettos with little access to decent employment or higher education and with minimal political influence. . . . Most [northern and western blacks] remained ghettoized, impoverished, and politically subordinate, with few channels for redress.”²⁹

***Factors that drove a culture of scholarship in Churches of Christ:
“A deep sense of inferiority”***

So what conclusions might we draw at this point? We can safely say that the Churches of Christ themselves helped to create this abundance of biblical and religious scholarship, thanks, first, to their inheritance of reason from the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries; second, to their inheritance of freedom from the new American nation and the emphasis they placed on the freedom of each believer to think, wonder, and inquire without the constraints of religious tradition; and third, to the advantages of race, class, and gender that permitted this development.

And now I want to offer the fourth major argument of this paper—that biblical and religious scholarship might never have flowered in Churches of Christ had it not been for two factors that *drove* this development. The first was a deep sense of inferiority on the part of the church and its scholars alike—a sense of foreboding that set in with our division from the Disciples of Christ in 1906, the very same year that Abilene Christian was born. That division left Churches of Christ with few buildings of their own, with an impoverished membership, and with a social and cultural standing that most of their betters would have associated with “the wrong side of the tracks.” David Edwin Harrell described the post-division Churches of Christ as “the religious rednecks of the post-bellum South”—an apt description, indeed.

This is precisely the judgment of Bill Martin, one of the leading sociologists of religion in the nation. When I asked Bill, “Why has the Church of Christ produced so many biblical scholars?” Bill responded without blinking, our “sense of inferiority.” Indeed, Bill recalled how at Harvard he had often thought,

“These people know things I have no idea about.” And in the discussion sessions, I felt like I’m probably the dumbest person here. There were names I didn’t know about. There were ideas I didn’t know about. People were thinking better. So I was working with a fairly deep sense of inferiority. And the way you make up for that is, you just work your tail off. And that does produce a lot of success.³⁰

Everett Ferguson suggested the very same thing. Reflecting on the division of 1906, Ferguson suggested that “there may have been a certain inferiority complex . . . [and] an effort

²⁹ Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 11-12.

³⁰ Interview with Bill Martin, Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 3, 2014.

to prove ourselves . . . encouraged some effort at validation through [learning and scholarship].³¹

But the sense of inferiority that bedeviled scholars in Churches of Christ grew from factors far more important than the division of 1906. ACC was not Harvard, Abilene was not New Haven, and in the 1960s, the academic legacy of Churches of Christ could hardly compare with the academic legacy of some other Christian traditions—Presbyterians, Unitarians, or Roman Catholics, for example.

As a result, many scholars from Churches of Christ—especially those who taught at Church of Christ-related schools—had to live with that sense of inferiority throughout their careers. They had to live with it because their colleagues from other schools, other parts of the country, and other Christian traditions would not let them forget it. A story Ferguson tells is a case in point.

When Albert Outler and William Farmer from SMU founded the Second Century Seminar in the 1960s, they worked hard to recruit Catholic scholars into that project. One of those Catholic scholars was David Balás, a member of a Cistercian order that had been transferred from their home in Hungary to a monastery in Dallas. “They thought they were being exiled,” Ferguson recalled, “to the barren wastelands, worse than Siberia.”

It turns out that Balás had written his dissertation in Rome on Gregory of Nyssa, and “thought that nobody out here would ever have heard of Gregory of Nyssa. . . . Well,” Ferguson mused, “Abe and I did a translation—the first English translation—of one of Gregory of Nyssa’s works, *The Life of Moses*. . . .³² David Balás was just astonished that here [in the wilds of West Texas] was someone who not only knew Gregory but had translated him!”

A similar story surrounds the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* that Everett edited. “From what I was told,” Everett recalled, “I was at least the third choice” to edit that work. I don’t know but what I may have been further down.” When the editor at Garland Press finally called, Everett said,

I distinctly had the impression that, although I’d been recommended, he wanted to reassure himself about what he was getting into if he asked me to edit it. . . . He had never heard of me. He had never heard of Abilene Christian College out in this small town in West Texas. He would have every reason to be hesitant. I didn’t take offense at . . . all, but it occurred to me that, you know, he’s just not sure he wants to give me the business.³³

***Factors that drove a culture of scholarship in Churches of Christ:
Abilene Christian College, LeMoine Lewis, and Abe Malherbe***

But when we assess the factors that *drove* the culture of scholarship in Churches of Christ, that “deep sense of inferiority” that Ferguson and Martin describe pale in comparison with the second factor that, for fifty years and more, has loomed larger than life for scholars

³¹ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

³² Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses (Classics of Western Spirituality)* (Paulist Press, 1978).

³³ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

from Churches of Christ. That factor boils down to a school named Abilene Christian College and two professors who taught there: LeMoine G. Lewis and Abraham J. Malherbe.

LeMoine G. Lewis

LeMoine Lewis was not the only person to promote scholarship in Churches of Christ. George S. Benson and W. B. West, for example, had the vision for graduate education in Bible and religion at Harding College in the 1950s—a vision that resulted in the creation of the Harding Graduate School of Religion (now the Harding School of Theology) in Memphis in 1958. From that base, LeMoine’s brother, Jack, sent numerous students for doctoral work at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. But the history of scholarship in Churches of Christ over the past sixty years will show that when it comes to creating a culture of scholarship in that tradition, no one compares with LeMoine G. Lewis.

Born in 1916, Lewis grew up on the family farm near Midlothian, Texas and graduated from high school there in 1932 as valedictorian of his class. Four years later, in 1936, he graduated *summa cum laude* from Abilene Christian College, and in 1941, entered Harvard Divinity School where he earned his S. T. B. in 1944. According to his biographer, “his was the only degree bestowed with honors.”³⁴ He then embarked on a doctoral program at Harvard, focusing on Christian history, and after completing course work for that degree in 1949, he accepted a teaching position at Abilene Christian College. He completed his dissertation, and Harvard awarded Lewis the Ph.D. in Christian history in 1959. After a fruitful career, he retired from Abilene Christian in 1986, the year before his death.

Those are the facts of his life, but what those facts don’t reveal is what this man meant to biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ. From 1949 to 1986—the years he taught at Abilene Christian—Lewis identified scores of young people with the potential to make significant contributions to the world of biblical and religious scholarship. He first inspired them with his extraordinary classroom lectures, then sent them back East for further study. As Bill Martin tells the story, “We asked him, ‘What must we do to be saved?’ And he said, ‘Go to Harvard.’”³⁵ Today, each of the students LeMoine sent to Harvard proudly claims the mantle, “one of LeMoine’s boys.”

And the tributes from his students are legion. Martin, for example, recalled, I was . . . captivated by him. And about six weeks into the semester, I said, “I want to do what you do when I get big!” . . . So I decided at [age] 16 that I wanted to be a college professor . . . and he said, “Well, you need to go to Harvard Divinity School. . . .” I said, “Harvard? I’ve heard of it.” I knew it was a major school back . . . East, but I don’t think I could have told you what state it was in. And he never let up. The second year, I was his grader. I was making good grades. He saw that, and when he went off to Harvard the third year, he sent me a Harvard green book bag to let me know, “You’re still going to do this!” So I decided I would be a professor.³⁶

³⁴ Chris Waters Dunn, “The Life and Work of LeMoine Lewis” in Everett Ferguson, ed., *Christian Teaching: Studies in Honor of LeMoine G. Lewis* (Abilene: ACU Book Store, 1981), p. 14.

³⁵ Interview with Bill Martin, Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 3, 2014.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

John Fitzgerald recalled the sheer magic of LeMoine's teaching, how LeMoine offered his students "that living water that refreshes our souls and makes us want to dive into those same waters. That was the effect that LeMoine had on me." Fitzgerald was one of "LeMoine's boys" and, like so many others, made the trek from Abilene Christian to Yale. But even there, he said, "LeMoine continued to have an interest [in me] . . . I still remember [that] LeMoine came up to Yale, and Mike White and I and maybe a couple of others were there in Abe's living room, where LeMoine was, continuing to follow his children . . ." ³⁷

Jack Scott was another of "LeMoine's boys" who, thanks to LeMoine, earned his M.Div. from Yale and his Ph.D. in American history from Claremont Graduate School. ³⁸ And so was Derwood Smith who earned his Ph.D. in New Testament from Yale and spent a career teaching New Testament studies at Cleveland State University. "It was there [at ACC]," Smith recalled, "that I met LeMoine Lewis. I was so influenced by LeMoine [that] . . . we came close to worshipping him." ³⁹

Everett Ferguson, too, was one of "LeMoine's boys." LeMoine told Everett, "You ought to apply to several schools for the seminary degree." So Everett applied to Chicago, Princeton, Yale, and Harvard and was accepted at all four. "But Harvard offered a scholarship," Everett recalls, "so that sort of sealed that I would follow in LeMoine's steps and go to Harvard." ⁴⁰

Even Jack Lewis, LeMoine's own brother, was "one of LeMoine's boys." When I asked Jack, "Why did you go to Harvard?" he responded in the blink of an eye: "Why, my brother LeMoine persuaded me."

Jim Roberts claims he was not one of "LeMoine's boys." Yet, LeMoine exerted a sizable influence over the course of his career. The preaching students at ACC in those days had men's meetings on Wednesday nights, "and one of the speakers was LeMoine Lewis" who "spoke on 'What Every Preacher Needs to Know.'" Jim was astounded to learn that preachers needed to learn "Greek and Hebrew and . . . other things that made me realize how deficient I was . . . So that made me start thinking about the kind of intellectual preparation I needed for the task . . . It also made me start thinking about graduate education."

When the time came, Neil Lightfoot, a Bible professor at ACC, encouraged Jim to apply to Claremont, while Lewis pointed him toward Harvard. In the end, it was one of Jim's aunts in Winters, Texas who helped Jim make the decision. "I was accepted at both places," Jim recalled. "I was trying to decide which one to go to when my aunt suggested that she had heard of Harvard [but] had never heard of Claremont. And she would lend me money to help me to go if I went to Harvard. . . . So I decided to go to Harvard." ⁴¹

Bob Randolph was among the last of LeMoine's boys. "LeMoine pointed me to Yale," and there, he said, "my world began to expand." Bob's relation to LeMoine was unique. Because his grandfather, E. W. McMillan, had taught LeMoine during the 1930s at ACC, and

³⁷ John Fitzgerald, "Tribute to Tony Ash, LeMoine Lewis, and J. W. Roberts," speech presented at annual Christian Scholars Foundation luncheon, AAR/SBL, 2003.

³⁸ Interview with Jack Scott, Scott home, Pasadena, California, March 27, 2014.

³⁹ Interview with Derwood Smith, Smith home, Cleveland, Ohio, March 19, 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

⁴¹ Interview with Jim Roberts, Roberts home, Grand Haven, Michigan, March 18, 2014.

LeMoine subsequently taught Bob, the Lewis family asked Bob to preach LeMoine's funeral in the Church of Christ in Midlothian, Texas in 1987.⁴²

In light of the fact that LeMoine sent so many of his students to Harvard and Yale, it is surprising to discover that when LeMoine first entered Harvard in 1941, he found himself repulsed by much he was learning. In 1942, after he had completed one year at Harvard, he wrote a letter to Charles Roberson, chair of the Bible Department at ACC, and complained, "A year in Harvard is a strange experience for a boy taught as I was at home and in College. It is almost like being in another nation or world. . . . The work was so repulsive at first that I could not force myself to study."

He especially complained about the faculty. "There is not much faith among the faculty," he wrote. "Dean [Willard] Sperry thinks Jesus was only a man Dr. Auer scoffs at the idea of God and is not even bothered about Jesus. He thinks Paul and Peter perverted whatever good Jesus did teach. . . . The Old Testament Professor was Robert Pfeiffer . . . [who] makes Jehovah the *baal* or *el* of a volcanic mountain. . . . He admits that Moses was historical, but is covered over with legend." His Hebrew professor "has become a Unitarian. He preaches but does not believe in God. . . . Everything in Harvard is based on Darwin's theory of evolution. . . . There is no such thing as truth or permanent values. . . . Everything is caught in the whirlpool of relativism."⁴³

Yet, as he grew older, LeMoine came to realize how Harvard had expanded his world. He even claimed that some of his Harvard teachers, including Robert Pfeiffer and Willard Sperry, had changed his life.⁴⁴ And when members of Churches of Christ suggested that Harvard might cause Christian students to lose their faith, LeMoine suggested it was not the university but critics in the church who were ultimately responsible for undermining the faith of those students.

Now someone may say if our boys go to school and read these thinkers who do not belong to the church won't we lose a lot of them? Yes, I expect we will lose some—I call them battle casualties. . . . [But] there is another thing to consider: in case after case I have known the breaking point did not come from anything the university did to them. The thing that destroyed their faith was the unwise, unfair, unchristian treatment at the hands of their own brethren⁴⁵

Abraham J. Malherbe and colleagues

In 1964, Carl Holladay was completing his three-year Bible degree at Freed-Hardeman College and was looking toward the future. He asked William Woodson, one of his professors, where he could get the very best training for a career in preaching and ministry. Woodson told him he should look very seriously at Abilene Christian College. "There's a man there," Woodson said, "named Malherbe, and he's very smart."

⁴² Interview with Bob Randolph, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 15, 2014.

⁴³ LeMoine Lewis letter to Charles Roberson, Springfield, Vermont, July 16, 1942, pp. 1-2, 6-7. Original letter house in Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas.

⁴⁴ Dunn, "Life and Work" in Ferguson, ed., *Christian Teaching*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ LeMoine G. Lewis, "Sound Doctrine in the Seventies," lecture at Oklahoma Christian College lectureship, 1970, typescript, p. 14d. Typescript housed in Center for Restoration Studies, Abilene Christian University.

Carl took Woodson’s advice, enrolled at ACU in 1964 and, as he put it, “our whole world opened up,” for there he encountered not only Malherbe, but two other Harvard-trained scholars, Everett Ferguson and Tom Olbricht. In the years to come, Tom, Abe, and Everett would join LeMoine Lewis in the task of inspiring bright young scholars, identifying their talent, and sending them on for doctoral work in their chosen fields. In his autobiography, for example, Tom lists over 100 of his students at Abilene Christian who went on to teaching careers in biblical and religious studies.⁴⁶ Everett’s list would be equally extensive, as would Abe’s.

But beyond that, Tom, Abe, and Everett—this Harvard-trained triumvirate—revolutionized the graduate program in Bible and theology at ACC. Holladay recalled that “when Abe and Everett and Tom, later, came back [to ACC], they wanted to build, and so they started the S.T.B., and they basically replicated Harvard’s S.T.B.”⁴⁷ That fact, by itself, is simply stunning—that a small school in the wilds of West Texas would replicate a graduate program in theology at one of the great educational institutions of the world.

But the story gets better. Everett recalled that “when we were planning the three-year program here [the S.T.B.], the dean at that time of Harvard Divinity School—Douglas Horton—came down here [to Abilene] and met with the faculty and advised us on setting up the program.”⁴⁸

And oh, what a program it was! Carl recalled, It was a ninety-hour degree. Ninety hours! Six semesters! Fifteen hours a semester! It required Greek, Hebrew, and at the end, at the sixth semester, there was a week of daily eight-hour written exams! So one day there was an eight-hour exam in Bible. And the second day it was church history. And the third day it was theology. And the fourth day it was practical theology. I mean, it was brutal!⁴⁹

In one way, at least, the ACC program was superior to Harvard’s. Tom Olbricht recalled that ACC required Greek as part of its S.T.B. requirements while Harvard did not.⁵⁰ And loathe to rest on its laurels, ACC even created a master’s degree in biblical and patristic Greek in which students read the New Testament, the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and other ancient documents in their original languages!⁵¹

Carl Holladay recalled the intellectual atmosphere at ACC in those years as simply “stunning”—an atmosphere that prompted J. D. Thomas, the director of ACC’s annual Bible Lectureship, to create in the late 1960s what the graduate students called “the *intellectual* ACC lectureship,” featuring lectures by many of the brightest lights in the Bible Department at that time. “It signaled,” Carl recalled, “that a new intellectual climate existed at Abilene. And I still remember hearing Tom Olbricht lecture. He gave a lecture on revelation and inspiration . . . and I was just entranced. I had never heard anybody this learned give this kind of lecture.”⁵²

⁴⁶ Thomas H. Olbricht, *Reflections on My Life in the Kingdom and the Academy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), pp. 178-181.

⁴⁷ Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

⁴⁸ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

⁴⁹ Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

⁵⁰ Interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

⁵¹ Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

⁵² Interview with Carl Holladay, Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, Georgia, February 4, 2014.

Little wonder that when ACC students went to the Ivies, they excelled. Even in the early years, that was true. Everett recalls that “at Harvard, the practice was that the top student in the graduating class for the S.T.B. degree gave the oration in Greek at the graduation exercises. In three out of four years, an ACC graduate gave that Greek oration. I did. The next year Abe did. We missed a year, and then the next year Roy Bowen Ward [did]. . . .”⁵³ Clearly, Abilene Christian sent Harvard some of its very best students, and that is a tribute, of course, to ACC Bible professors in the 1950s—people like LeMoine Lewis, Frank Pack, J. D. Thomas, Neil Lightfoot, and J. W. Roberts.

But the ACC tradition of excellence continued well past those early years. At Yale, for example, Professor Nils Dahl wrote on an evaluation for John Fitzgerald, “The student arrived at YDS better prepared in Bible than most of our students are when they leave here.”⁵⁴ Mike White recalled that when Yale sought to replace Wayne Meeks who had retired from his chair in New Testament studies, all three finalists were from ACC—Mike White, Stan Stowers, and Dale Martin who finally got the job. The plain and simple truth is this—that there is no way we can adequately account for the culture of scholarship that emerged and flowered in Churches of Christ apart from the influence Tom Olbricht, Everett Ferguson, and Abraham Malherbe exerted on their students at ACC and on the institution itself.

But now I want to focus especially on Abe since he is the one whose memory we honor at this Christian Scholars Conference. Even though Abe taught at ACC for only five years,⁵⁵ his influence there was both far-reaching and exponential, for he taught and inspired many students who have, in turn, taught and inspired other students, and the legacy continues.

John Fitzgerald is a case in point. John was one of the few students who studied under Abe as an undergraduate at Abilene Christian, in his M.Div. program at Yale, and again in his doctoral program at Yale. True, he had only one course under Abe at ACC—Abe’s signature course in Thessalonians. But that was enough to change his life. And the tribute he paid to Abe in his conversation with me deserves to be quoted in full. “Abe changed everything,” John said.

[Studying under Abe] was like going from the Little League to the major leagues. I had never been so inspired and intimidated by one person in my entire life as [I was under] Abe. He was a force! And [his teaching] opened up a way of understanding the New Testament that was completely new to me and showed me that . . . being a good minister—and at this point I was still thinking in terms of being a minister—meant more than memorizing Bible verses and knowing what our doctrines were and how to defend them and explain them. It was just . . . it was unbelievable! This was also the semester that I began to date the woman who became my wife. . . . How many times in college did you go to the library on a Friday night? I had never darkened the door of the library on a Friday night, [but] we did lots of our dates that first semester on a Friday night—in the library, because the guy scared me to death. And I wanted to be prepared. So that was my one course with Abe. And then he left at the end of my junior year.

⁵³ Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014

⁵⁴ Interview with John Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald home, Granger, Indiana, April 30, 2014.

⁵⁵ Malherbe taught at ACU from 1963 to 1969, less one year on leave when he returned to pursue his work in New England.

John, of course, would study again with Abe at Yale, but his graduation from Yale by no means meant the end of their relationship. “I had no idea what would happen once I finished,” John recalled, “but Abe was the *doctorvater par excellence*. . . . He was fully invested in my career, and when my own father died, he functionally became the father figure in my life.”⁵⁶ And based on what I heard in the interviews I conducted with scholars around the country, scores of Abe’s students share John’s love, admiration, and respect for this master teacher.

The Scholars and the Church

In our effort to account for the culture of biblical and religious scholarship in Churches of Christ, there is one more factor we must add to the mix—the scholars’ love for the church. John Fitzgerald, for example, said that when he went to Yale, his motivation was “scholarship in the service of the church.”⁵⁷ Jim Roberts began his doctoral program at Harvard specifically to prepare to become a really good, well-informed preacher.⁵⁸ Tom Olbricht undertook his work in higher learning not only to become a better preacher but to train others to become better preachers.⁵⁹ Jack Scott enrolled in the Yale Divinity School to pursue work on his M.Div., but his chief interest even then was strengthening the church in New Haven.⁶⁰ When Bill Martin found that his course work at Harvard challenged his faith, he asked himself, “Let’s see how what I’m learning here can enrich my preaching” rather than, “How do I fight this off?”⁶¹ And Everett Ferguson told me this rather remarkable story.

Back to our time at Harvard—all of us were interested in putting the things we were learning at the service of the church. And so we started a somewhat informal program called “The Boston Institute for Theological Studies.” Abe and Pat Harrell and Roy Ward and, I think, Don McGaughey, maybe, were involved in that. We meet once a week at the building of the Brookline Church of Christ and invited church members to come in, and we offered courses in Greek and Hebrew, an introduction to the New Testament, and I taught church history.⁶²

Not only that, but these students also preached. Everett Ferguson preached at Melrose, Massachusetts; Bill Martin at Leominster, Falmouth, and Brookline, Massachusetts; Jack Lewis at Providence, Rhode Island; and Tom Olbricht, Pat Harrell, Jim Roberts, and Derwood Smith at Natick, Massachusetts. Others, out of their church context, addressed racism and poverty in the late 1960s. Bill Martin and Harold Vanderpool founded the House of the Carpenter in Boston, a summer camp for inner city children, where Bob Randolph also worked following his graduation from Yale.

But during his days as a graduate student at Harvard, no one devoted himself more to the church than Abe Malherbe. In fact, after his second year at Harvard, Abe and Phyllis returned to Abe’s native South Africa, hoping to start a Bible school that would combine biblical and theological scholarship with mission work, only to meet opposition from—of all people—

⁵⁶ Interview with John Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald home, Granger, Indiana, April 30, 2014.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Interview with Jim Roberts, Roberts home, Grand Haven, Michigan, March 18, 2014.

⁵⁹ Interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

⁶⁰ Interview with Jack Scott, Scott home, Pasadena, California, March 27, 2014.

⁶¹ Interview with Bill Martin, Rice University, Houston, Texas, March 3, 2014.

⁶² Interview with Everett Ferguson, Ferguson home, Abilene, Texas, March 7, 2014.

the missionaries!⁶³ And for much of their time in Boston, Abe taught a class at the Brookline Church of Christ before he and Phyllis drove to Roxbury where Abe preached, and then they drove to Bedford where Abe preached for a congregation made up chiefly of Air Force personnel. Abe's wife, Phyllis, summarized all this church activity with one short sentence: "[Our] life was embedded in church work."⁶⁴

For many, their preaching continued into their professorial careers. Derwood Smith, for example, has now preached for 31 years at the Forest Hill Church of Christ in Cleveland, Ohio, even while serving as professor of New Testament at Cleveland State.⁶⁵ Jim Roberts told me, "When I was at Princeton, when I was at Dartmouth, when I was at Johns-Hopkins, I saw myself as much a preacher as a professor." And through his work as preacher and guiding light for the Brookline Church of Christ in Cambridge over the past thirty years and more, Bob Randolph has nurtured literally hundreds of young scholars from Churches of Christ who have studied at Harvard, MIT, and Boston University.

And yet, in spite of their commitment to the church, the scholars in the 1960s and 1970s discovered that many in the church were suspicious of the work they did and where they had chosen to do it. Some in the church viewed the mere act of taking graduate training at a major northern university as, at best, the first step toward apostasy and, at worst, an act of betrayal. When Jim Roberts went to Harvard, for example, the elders at the Burkett, Texas Church of Christ flatly told him, "'Don't learn anything at Harvard,' because," Jim said, "they were afraid it would corrupt me."⁶⁶ John Willis, a student colleague of Ferguson and Malherbe at ACC in the 1950s but who went to Vanderbilt, not Harvard or Yale, for his Ph.D. in Old Testament, recalls that church people in Nashville advised him to "get your Ph.D. but stay where you are intellectually." And Phyllis Malherbe recalled that for "many years after Abe graduated [from Harvard] in '63, people thought that we had left the church."⁶⁷

Partly for that reason, many on the faculty at ACC greeted Abe's arrival in 1963 and Tom's arrival in 1967 with considerable coolness,⁶⁸ and Tom encountered "quite a lot of opposition on the board."⁶⁹

But at least they kept their jobs. Many others were either fired or left under pressure. Both James Zink (Ph.D., Old Testament, Duke) and Richard Batey (Ph.D., New Testament, Vanderbilt) were fired from the Harding Graduate School of Religion, for example, while John McRay (Ph.D., New Testament, Chicago), George Howard (Ph.D., Old Testament, Hebrew Union College), and John Willis (Ph.D., Old Testament, Vanderbilt) saw the handwriting on the wall at Lipscomb and left before they could be terminated.

John McRay's story, in particular, symbolizes the climate of suspicion that surrounded the work of these scholars. When McRay completed his Ph.D. in New Testament at the University of Chicago and returned to his teaching post at Harding College in 1964,"some began

⁶³ Interview with Phyllis Malherbe, Malherbe home, Charlotte, North Carolina, February 4, 2014.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Interview with Derwood Smith, Smith home, Cleveland, Ohio, March 19, 2014.

⁶⁶ Interview with Jim Roberts, Roberts home, Grand Haven, Michigan, March 18, 2014.

⁶⁷ Interview with Phyllis Malherbe, Malherbe home, Charlotte, North Carolina, February 4, 2014.

⁶⁸ Interview with Phyllis Malherbe, Malherbe home, Charlotte, North Carolina, February 4, 2014; and interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

⁶⁹ Interview with Tom Olbricht, Olbricht home, Exeter, New Hampshire, January 16, 2014.

to question his ‘soundness.’” One woman, for example, remarked within earshot of John’s wife, Annette, “You have to watch him.” He’s a liberal. He went to the University of Chicago.”⁷⁰ In May of 1965, one preacher attacked McRay in print for suggesting that Churches of Christ can learn from contemporary theological scholars.⁷¹

In the fall of 1966, McRay took up a teaching position at Lipscomb University and a preaching position at one of the leading Nashville Churches of Christ. In that church, he encountered strong opposition to a sermon urging a charitable spirit toward those with whom we may differ. Others attacked him for what they viewed as his misreading of the biblical text.

But according to John Willis, who served in the Lipscomb Bible faculty alongside McRay, “The pushback was [chiefly] about . . . [racial] integration.”⁷² Both McRay and Willis spoke publicly about this issue, McRay from the pulpit of the Otter Creek Church of Christ and Willis on the Lipscomb Lectureship. In fact, a report on McRay’s sermon appeared in the *Nashville Tennessean* under the headline, “White Church Called Guilty.”⁷³ No wonder that attacks against John increased in both number and intensity over the coming years, culminating in what his wife, Annette, described as “constant write-ups” in 1970-71.⁷⁴

Even though most of those attacks came from churches, not from the college, John saw the handwriting on the wall and resigned from Lipscomb in 1971. He then took up teaching positions, first, at Middle Tennessee State University and then at Wheaton College where he served as Professor of New Testament and Archaeology from 1980 to 2002.

Stories like these were almost legion in the 1960s and 1970s and proved profoundly discouraging to some potential biblical scholars. Bob Randolph, for example, chose church history because, as he put it, “there was obviously no future in [biblical studies] in the Churches of Christ, because anybody who deviated from the story was not going to stay.”

But against the critics of the scholars, LeMoine Lewis came out swinging. “I see a host of young people determined to equip themselves to be good workers in the kingdom. . . . They want to go deep and share in the great riches of God’s truth. . . . Now over against this . . . some . . . cast aspersions and question the integrity and motives of those who have tried to get education to give better service to the Lord.”

And then Lewis offered words that in many ways summarize the heart and soul of Churches of Christ, the heart and soul of biblical and religious scholarship, and the heart and soul of this paper:

Just consider the alternative: ignorance, opinions, superstition. Scholarship is self-corrective. If it errs, better scholarship will expose it and point to a truer course.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Annette McRay, “John McRay History to 1980,” typescript in possession of author, p. 7.

⁷¹ Eldred Stevens, “Fifty Years Behind?” *Firm Foundation*, May 11, 1965, p. 291.

⁷² Interview with John Willis, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas, March 5, 2014.

⁷³ Frank Ritter, “White Church Called Guilty,” *Nashville Tennessean*.

⁷⁴ Annette McRay, “John McRay History to 1980,” typescript in possession of author, pp. 8, 9-11.

⁷⁵ LeMoine Lewis, “Sound Doctrine in the Seventies,” lecture at Oklahoma Christian College lectureship, 1970, typescript in possession of author, p. 12