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Rethinking the History of Churches of Christ: Responses to Richard Hughes

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RETHINKING THE HISTORY OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST: RESPONSES TO RICHARD HUGHES


Review Essay by Douglas A. Foster
Abilene Christian University

For this quarter's issue we have asked two eminent historians of American religion to review Richard Hughes's long awaited history of Churches of Christ. David Edwin Harrell Jr., distinguished professor of history at Auburn University and lifelong member of Churches of Christ, has been a leading spokesperson for the noninstitutional part of our communion and an incisive commentator on our history and theology. In his groundbreaking two-volume Social History of the Disciples of Christ (1966, 1973), Harrell demonstrated how profoundly the Stone–Campbell Movement had been shaped by nineteenth-century social forces. He has written extensively on Southern Christianity and the charismatic movement, with major biographies of Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson to his credit.

Samuel S. Hill, professor emeritus of religion at the University of Florida, is another of the nation's foremost scholars of Southern religion. Hill's familiarity with Churches of Christ began early. His father, a Baptist minister, was president of Georgetown College (Kentucky) in the middle of a region laden with historical importance for the Stone–Campbell Movement. Hill's numerous scholarly contributions include editing the Encyclopedia of Religion in the South (1984) and the latest editions of the Handbook of Denominations in the United States (1985, 1990). His Southern Churches in Crisis (1967) was an incisive history and powerful call for renewal in the midst of a tension-filled era.
Reviving the Ancient Faith is the product of over a decade of intense work by Richard Hughes. Originally intended as a volume in the new Greenwood Press Denominations in America series, the book grew to be much more than the consensus description that Greenwood wanted. Talks with Eerdmans resulted in a contract for this book, with a shorter, less interpretive volume to be published by Greenwood next year. Only someone with the training, experience, historical acumen, intimate knowledge of and love for Churches of Christ could have written this book. There is no doubt that it represents a major event in our historiography. When the study is placed in its larger context, it becomes even more evident what a milestone it is.

As Hughes himself points out in the introductory chapter, Stone–Campbell historiography was for much of the century dominated by Disciples scholars. Not that we had no one writing. The materials we produced, however, were mostly in-house apologies that had little impact on the larger scholarly understanding of Churches of Christ or the movement. With some notable exceptions mentioned below, anecdotal and hagiographical approaches were most common.

In the standard Disciples histories of the movement, Garrison and DeGroot, The Disciples of Christ, A History (1948, revised 1958) and McAllister and Tucker, Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ, 1975) Churches of Christ largely appear as recalcitrant conservatives who forsook the movement’s authentic mainstream, i.e., the part that became the Disciples of Christ.

Of course we knew who really broke away from whom. The difference in our triumphalism and that of the Disciples was that they were telling the story, at least to the larger audience. The minimization of the significance of Churches of Christ was largely adopted by historians of American religion because they saw no creditable sources to the contrary. Few if any outsiders had the time, energy, and desire necessary to challenge the dominant portrayals. One exception is the study done by Roman Catholic scholar Richard Tristano, The Origins of the Restoration Movement: An Intellectual History (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1988). Tristano, commissioned to help Roman Catholics deal with members of Churches of Christ, became enthralled with the intellectual backgrounds of the Stone–Campbell Movement, producing valuable insights into its theological and philosophical foundations.

In any event, scholars of American Christianity now have a creditable source that challenges those older interpretations. Of course, Reviving the Ancient Faith is not the first material to bring Churches of Christ to the attention of the larger community of historians and scholars.
Hughes’s *Illusions of Innocence* (1988, with Leonard Allen) and *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (1988) alerted many to the importance of primitivism/restorationism in American thought. These studies showed that Churches of Christ, rather than being an aberration, fit squarely into a larger context of important ideas. But *Reviving the Ancient Faith* goes well beyond that. It shows as never before that the story of Churches of Christ is a significant, fascinating, at times gripping part of the whole story of American Christianity. No longer can any serious student of American Christianity ignore or relegate Churches of Christ to insignificance. Regardless of what insiders may think of Hughes’s schema of interpretation or how many details with which one may take issue, this is a fact.

Conservative Christian Churches that became independent of the Disciples also developed their version of the story. Led by James DeForest Murch in *Christians Only: A History of the Restoration Movement* (1962), these histories have tended to portray a spectrum in which Churches of Christ form the far right, Disciples the far left, and independents in the faithful center. Murch may have been more accurate in 1962 about the center and right positions than he is now, though I doubt it. The independent Christian Churches are overall more “fundamentalist” than Churches of Christ today, and I suspect they always were in significant ways. Henry Webb’s *In Search of Christian Unity* (1990) and James B. North’s *Union in Truth: An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (1994) attempt to go beyond Murch’s “simplistic” characterization but seem still to end up with a similar model.

The triumphalism of all branches of the movement portrayed it after its initial creation as moving through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries fending off insurgent threats to preserve the authentic heritage relatively unscathed. Scholars from Churches of Christ have almost universally represented the authentic Churches of Christ as essentially formed around “the restoration of the ancient gospel” and “ancient order.” Earl I. West’s encyclopedic four-volume history (*The Search for the Ancient Order*) embodies that model. West’s work is a rich source of information on the movement, particularly the last two volumes that focus on Churches of Christ in the twentieth century. Bill Humble’s deceptively small *The Story of the Restoration* (1969) is also packed with useful data. Humble’s contributions also include insightful videotapes on Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone (*Light from Above*, 1988; *Like Fire in Dry Stubble*, 1992). J. M. Powell’s *The Cause We Plead: A Story of the Restoration Movement* (1987), and David Roper’s, *Voices Crying in the
Wilderess: A History of the Lord’s Church with Special Emphasis on Australia (1979) deserve mention as containing worthwhile information. Leroy Garrett’s The Stone–Campbell Movement (1981, repr. 1994), an engaging anecdotal account, moves the unity impulse onto center stage and makes it at least as important as legalistic restorationism. [The phrase “Stone–Campbell Movement,” coined by Garrett, is rapidly becoming the standard designation, replacing both “Disciples Movement” and “Restoration Movement.” One evidence is the choice of title for the Encyclopedia of the Stone–Campbell Movement to be published by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society and Center for Restoration Studies in 1999.]

With the exception of Garrett, all our histories see a particular kind of legalistic restorationism as the defining motif for Churches of Christ. There is, of course, no doubt about the central role of restorationism in our history. Problems arise when restorationism is made unique to Churches of Christ—a difficult position to defend in light of studies like Nathan Hatch’s The Democratization of American Christianity (1989), and Allen and Hughes’s Illusions of Innocence (1988) and Discovering Our Roots (1988)—and other essential parts of the mind of the movement (unity, evangelism, millennialism, etc.) are minimized or ignored.

The only other study that attempts, like Hughes, to give a comprehensive interpretation specifically and exclusively of Churches of Christ is Robert E. Hooper’s A Distinct People: A History of the Churches of Christ in the 20th Century (1993). While he again asserts that it is our restorationism that made us distinct, significantly Hooper sees restoration as a never-ending process and calls for more freedom in the effort.

No discussion of the historiography of Churches of Christ can fail to mention the contributions of Discovering Our Roots (Leonard Allen and Richard Hughes, 1988) and Distant Voices: Discovering a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church (Leonard Allen, 1993). Each has a narrow aim: the first to show how Churches of Christ fit into a larger heritage of reformatory efforts, the second to move us toward the understanding that the loudest voices were never the only (or even the most healthy) ones. These works prepared the way for Reviving the Ancient Faith in important ways.

As Hughes states from the beginning, this is not intended to be an encyclopedic reference work. It is a sweeping interpretation, an attempt to make sense out of Churches of Christ in a way not done before. Previous treatments often explained Churches of Christ by saying that of the two original impulses, the Disciples chose unity and the Churches of Christ chose restoration. As mentioned, our historians have generally gone along with that evaluation and have therefore felt compelled to justify the restorationist agenda as it was conceived and carried out by certain
Hughes and Churches of Christ

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twentieth-century leaders. If he does nothing else, Hughes shows that interpretation to be hopelessly simplistic.

Hughes proves himself a masterful storyteller in this book, beginning the story of Churches of Christ by carefully constructing an interpretive framework in the first six chapters. His basic thesis had already been laid out in an enthralling article published in the *Journal of Religion and American Culture* 2 (Summer 1992)181–214, titled “The Apocalyptic Origins of Churches of Christ and the Triumph of Modernism.” Drawing on the rationalistic sectarianism of Alexander Campbell and, perhaps more importantly, the apocalyptic sectarianism of Barton W. Stone, he contends that Churches of Christ were formed relatively early in the nineteenth century. They represented an apocalyptic primitivism that was certainly at the core of the movement’s nineteenth-century identity.

Hughes then proceeds in a kind of triumphalism in reverse. The “authentic” sectarian apocalyptic Christianity that defined Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century was lost piece by piece in the controversies of the twentieth—the premillennialism conflict, the anti-institutional fights, and the crisis of the 1960s.

No historian has the final word on any subject, particularly one that is still very much in process. Opportunities for access to materials on Churches of Christ in formats not previously available will create increasingly more channels for discussing our history in light of the material in this book. Among those opportunities, the Center for Restoration Studies at Abilene Christian University, in cooperation with repositories across the country, is planning World Wide Web sites for the Center and a new organization to be called the Restoration Archives Consortium. But for all of that, the fact is there is simply nothing else like Richard Hughes’s *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, nor is there likely to be anything like it for many years to come.

Review by David Edwin Harrell Jr.
Auburn University

After many years of convening conferences, writing articles, and editing books exploring the history of Churches of Christ in America, Richard Hughes has written an extremely important book on the subject. Hughes’s study is broadly interpretative rather than definitive, but it is exceedingly insightful. Generally, he traces a few key intellectual threads, but he often offers nuanced readings on various themes in the church’s history. Surely not many people will agree with all of Hughes’s interpretations and characterizations, but he has presented both historians and practitioners a provocative story.
One must first recognize that this is pretty unmixed intellectual history. Hughes proposes to ferret out the core ideas that defined Churches of Christ in the nineteenth century, a cluster of beliefs that he defines as “a profoundly sectarian vision, informed both by the early Campbell and by Stone.” After identifying the central components of this vision, Hughes traces them through a sequence of leaders and finds the ideal most purely captured in the mind of David Lipscomb.

Of course we know, and Richard Hughes knows, that history is not so neat. The ideas that Hughes traces do not move in straight lines, and few leaders, including Campbell, Stone, and Lipscomb, had tidy and consistent minds. It is difficult to construct intellectual genealogies because ideas pop up in so many places and in such varied forms. But Hughes has labored to map out the family tree of Churches of Christ—from Stone and the “early Campbell,” through Tolbert Fanning, on to the consummate model, David Lipscomb. Even if you do not esteem genealogists, this is a stunning and intriguing piece of family history.

Hughes has written two books; the first has a somewhat simpler agenda than the second. In the first six chapters Hughes revises restoration history by pushing the origins of the Churches of Christ deep into the antebellum period. True, we have long known that early restoration leaders spoke with contradictory voices, but Hughes sorts them out, defines them, gives them substance, and shows convincingly that the intellectual gulf between the Churches of Christ and Christian Church did not suddenly appear in 1906 or, indeed, in the years after the Civil War, but had been visible many years earlier. With a wee touch of family pride, Hughes quite rightly claims that members of the Churches of Christ are as truly children of the nineteenth-century Restoration Movement as are the more cosmopolitan departed brethren of the Christian Church.

Hughes’s identification of the intellectual threads that define the mentality of the Churches of Christ is his most important contribution. If the whole story is not as neat as Hughes’s narrative, he has established boundaries that will endure for a long time. Hughes explores the Restoration Movement in a loosely defined sect-to-denomination context and defines the intellectual assumptions that chart the movement from one of these sociological outposts to the other. The “later Campbell’s” embrace of Protestantism, his postmillennial confidence in America, and his acceptance of denominational status provided the intellectual backdrop for the emergence of the Disciples of Christ in the nineteenth century.

Two broad sets of assumptions undergird the sectarian heritage of Churches of Christ—a legalistic, rationalist, Baconian patternism inherited from the early Campbell, and, surely the central theme of this book from
the author’s point of view, an apocalyptic mind-set bequeathed by Barton Stone. The first of these notions is pretty familiar; the second, even though a bit fuzzy, is powerfully imaginative and has great explanatory value.

In earlier articles Hughes saw millennialism as the critical intellectual contribution of Barton Stone, but here he selects the term apocalyptic to describe a nexus of ideas that were essentially separatist and countercultural. An apocalyptic mind-set included all or some of the following—premillennialism, pacifism, opposition to participation in civil government, an identification with the kingdom of God, and a general sense of alienation. Hughes repeatedly, though not systematically, links the presence or absence of the apocalyptic mind-set with cultural forces such as poverty and upward mobility, urban-rural tensions, and the impact of the Civil War and the two twentieth-century World Wars, adding substance to his intellectual outline.

The Devil, of course, is in the details. Most members of Churches of Christ in the twentieth century were apocalyptic in some of these ways; few fit the totality of Hughes’s various definitions. I am not certain how much we gain by giving a common name to this diverse set of ideas. On the other hand, by doing so, Richard Hughes has put his finger squarely on a theme as central as legalistic patternism to the history of Churches of Christ, which I would probably call a sense of social alienation. Look for it here under the rubric apocalyptic.

The second Hughes book, comprising the final eight chapters, explores what went wrong with the “mainstream” Churches of Christ tradition after David Lipscomb, the last great proponent of both sectarian legalism and the apocalyptic vision. Hughes insists that he did not set out to criticize the “mainstream Churches of Christ.” He nonetheless does a pretty good job. The final eight chapters are a critique of the mainstream through the eyes of the movement’s major dissenters in the twentieth century. From controversy to controversy, the mainstream moves inexorably away from the sectarian heritage toward denominationalism.

Hughes tells his story through four dissenting groups that criticized and sometimes left (or were forced out of) the mainstream: premillennialists, opponents of modernism who attacked church institutions, black Christians, and countercultural progressives in the 1960s. It is difficult to see how Hughes’s section on the black churches adds much to his general interpretive framework, but in the other three controversies he sees the mainstream losing a piece of its historic identity in each battle.

Hughes believes that the Churches of Christ abandoned the apocalyptic vision during the premillennial purge of the 1930s. I have more specific criticism of this section of the book than this review can
encompass, but I acknowledge that Hughes throws light on the ways in which the millennial division squelched diversity, and, to some degree, he successfully argues that the purge weakened the sense of cultural alienation within the Churches of Christ. But the premillennial struggle of the 1930s was a period piece; it bore little resemblance to millennial musings of earlier years, and it was shaped by the powerful personalities of Foy Wallace and R. H. Boll. Furthermore, millennialism is only a part of Hughes’s broader apocalyptic mentality, and some of the other notions he collapses into the term—antigovernment sentiments, cultural alienation, general feelings of separation—were clearer in other compartments of the Churches of Christ.

Hughes interprets the anti-institutional movement as a protest against modernization and the denominational tendencies in the post-World War II Churches of Christ. Most people know that I would concur. Hughes presents the anti-institutional critique pretty much from the vantage point of Roy Cogdill and Yater Tant, highlighting their conviction that the mainstream had abandoned its commitment to legalistic sectarianism. Had Hughes focused on my anti-institutional writings, or those of Robert Turner or Sewell Hall, he would have discovered that the basic issue at stake was a desire to retain an apocalyptic vision. Like the Churches of Christ in general, the noninstitutional movement was driven by sectarian legalism and by cultural separatism or, more often, by people who accepted some mix of both assumptions.

Those associated with premillennial and noninstitutional Churches of Christ will surely find this book refreshing (if not entirely correct) because it takes them and their arguments seriously and, indeed, places them at the intellectual center of the movement. What remains to be said of the mainstream Churches of Christ, bereft by the 1960s of a usable sectarian theology and having abandoned the earlier apocalyptic vision to become 100 percent Americans? At this point, Hughes himself becomes an actor, and it is pretty easy to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys in the narrative.

I would have found only two groups in the liberal-conservative rift in the mainstream Churches of Christ that began in the 1960s, but Hughes quite perceptively sees three. There are die-hard conservatives intent on defending a denomination with a ritualized legalistic hermeneutic on the one extreme and, on the other, a group of progressives (a more palatable word than liberals in both Southern Baptist and Churches of Christ circles). The progressive phalanx was an educated, probing, countercultural younger generation that called on the denomination to rethink its most basic self-understandings. The prize was control of the third group, the mainstream of Churches of Christ.
Did either of these factions have a vision that would continue the genuine tradition of Churches of Christ? The conservatives offered little, Hughes believes. They took the worst of the tradition’s belief in controversy and diatribe, allied those attributes with an outmoded legalism completely at odds with modern thought, and defended an ugly denomination that was at ease in its American Zion, racism and social injustice included.

What about the progressives? This book is testimony that many progressives (certainly Richard Hughes) were always intent on saving the Churches of Christ rather than slandering the denomination out of existence. They offered a new biblical restorationism through theologians like Tom Olbricht and a new sense of social responsibility that marched in cadence with the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and the multicultural sensibilities of the 1980s. Was this a revised sectarianism and a new apocalypticism? Or was it a final abandonment of the Churches of Christ tradition? Was the progressive movement, in fact, the most conspicuous cultural collapse in the history of the Churches of Christ—a total capitulation to the intellectual and social climate of the late twentieth century? Hughes raises that question, as LaGard Smith has, but the book dwindles to a close with a somewhat discursive discussion of gender, and it remains unclear precisely how the progressives relate to the historic tradition. Or, at least, the stretch is wide enough that Hughes needed to give me more guidance.

In most important ways, this is an insider’s book. The absence of institutional history, the lack of a consistent social and economic context, the highly selective biographical approach, the intentional neglect of overt doctrinal argument, all of these blur the traditional story line in the church’s history. I wonder if an outsider might not go away from this book with an oversimplified and idealized version of what actually occurred in the church’s century-and-a-half of existence. Many people did different things thinking overtly or covertly that they were following the principles that Hughes has outlined as the authentic vision of Churches of Christ.

But surely those of us in the Churches of Christ will be able to recognize ourselves. Richard Hughes has single-mindedly sought to tell us who we really were and are and why we have behaved as we have. Here is a baring of our inner soul.

This is a brilliant book, written by a contemplative, resolute historian and a spiritually minded man. The central arguments one finds here I have believed for many years, both as a historian and as a Christian, but Hughes has given them substance and form. He has drilled through the politics, rhetoric, and posturing that fill the history of all denominations to discover the core assumptions that drove the sectarian Churches of
Christ in the nineteenth century and to chronicle the troubled history of those ideas in the twentieth century. All future historians will begin with his models.

I still marvel that Richard could be so wrong about so many details. But, more to my consternation, his book makes me wonder how I could have been so wrong about so many details. That observation may trigger a final alarm reminding us not to rely entirely on our own intellectual profiles to explain our behavior.

Review by Samuel S. Hill
University of Florida

You can know a great deal about American religious history, never having heard of Moses Lard, Benjamin Franklin (the other one), E. H. Ijams, F. D. Srygley, Foy Wallace, and Batsell Barrett Baxter. Stalwarts of the Churches of Christ they all have been. Similarly, The Heretic Detector, the Lectureships, and dozens of additional proper nouns about which we hear in Richard Hughes’s new book.

Comparable descriptions of every other religious group in America can be made, of course. But there is something intriguing about the roster of events, issues, and personalities in Churches of Christ history—including the absence of the definite article before its (really their) name. Intrigue thickens when we note that many insiders prefer a lower case “c” in the first word of its/their name, the title a nondenominational denomination somewhat reluctantly gives itself.

This reviewer cannot recall ever having been more fascinated by a denominational history, a notoriously trap-pocked landscape, either in its facticity or a reporting of it. The restorationist submovement Hughes instructively calls the Stone–Lipscomb tradition is not only very different from what casual readers about it suppose or, for that matter, how astute observers see it; it is very different, period.

Richard Hughes characterizes himself as a “lifelong member of Churches of Christ” (sic); also as an “historian of American religion.” Neither self-designation impedes his march toward a fine quality historiography; indeed both are essential. The former prompts a labor of love. The latter provides methods, perspectives, and context without descending to a culpably at-arms-length mode of scholarship.

The author who took on this assignment faced many challenges. Locating and mastering the primary materials were only the most obvious. Far more daunting was developing a suitable perspective on and framework for composing the history of a movement that had been variously
(a) written about hagiographically, (b) treated piecemeal, (c) explained by reference to demography, (d) viewed worthy of being taken at its own word as “having no theology.”

Hughes set out to build on previous work, correcting where necessary, then proceeding to implement the axiom that religious movements must and always do have a theological basis. *Reviving the Ancient Faith* is not tidily intellectual history, but the theological outlook of the Stone–Campbell Restoration Movement affords the book its interpretive animation. I believe it is accurate to observe that this is the first study that has concentrated on the belief-system and attendant doctrinal, ethical, and ecclesial convictions—all three—that inform and differentiate this fellowship. Hughes is convincing that the Stoneite apocalyptic worldview is more constitutive of the Churches of Christ thought than is its storied opposition to instrumental music and organized mission societies.

At the very least, one can say that Hughes pioneers in acute delineation of the divergences between Alexander Campbell’s ideological angles of vision and those of Barton W. Stone. His finest contribution in this area is mapping out the implications of Stone’s positions for the self-understanding of the Churches of Christ. It has been tempting to attribute that communion’s sectarian spirit mostly to the views put forward by the early Campbell, in the process understating Stone’s genuine radicality. We owe Hughes a real debt for affording us information and clarification concerning the theological apocalypticism and the ethical radicalism of the Stoneite program.

One is inclined to assume from the book’s organization that Hughes’s most explicit purpose is highlighting the passage of Churches of Christ over time from the role of sect to the role of denomination in American culture—largely in the South and the Southwest. He achieves his goal, thereby portraying the countercultural stances of nineteenth-century southern Stoneites, from several rather rustic figures to the statesmanship of David Lipscomb. Much of the twentieth century history of the Churches of Christ is transparent to their accommodation to the prevailing general culture. The book presents numerous instances of acculturation: construction of large and fine church buildings, direct political involvement, advanced education for pastors (many of them stationed and salaried), expanded support for colleges, a proliferation of periodicals, and much more.

In my reading, however, the sect-to-denomination theme is mostly a carrier of Hughes’s recounting of this people’s story; that is not what most deeply informs and distinguishes *Reviving the Ancient Faith*. I stress
again the huge contribution made here to divining the ideological heartbeat of the countercultural, apocalyptic theology and ethics flowing from Barton W. Stone. It is that corpus and responses to it that, derivatively, produce the sect, denomination, and sect-to-denomination issues. The early appearance of a proto-Churches of Christ tradition is the final Hughes fresh claim that this brief review can mention. He makes the case for its taking shape well before the Civil War. John R. Howard listed his “original marks” of the “true church” in 1856, two decades after Arthur Crihfield had begun detecting heresy in nearly all who were “not of his own tribe.” They and others had narrowed and hardened some views of the Campbell of the Christian Baptist period and adapted formulaic evangelistic measures devised by Walter Scott in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Thus neither social class nor sectionalism and the Civil War provided the stimuli that upset a putatively unified restorationist ecclesial heritage. Comparably, 1906 is not the watershed year for the formation of the Churches of Christ; although of course that is the year in which the Bureau of the Census began listing the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ as separate denominations.

I began by remarking on how scantily known is the history of this 1.7 million-member communion to those who stand outside its constituency. Richard Hughes hopes to rectify that condition. He also badly wants his sisters and brothers to know their own heritage. The reader easily discerns his yearning for them to grasp Barton Stone’s convictions and teachings, the complexity of Alexander Campbell’s rendering of the faith—into the twin concerns with Restoration and Christian unity—and the gripping story of personalities, struggles, renewed emphases, and innovations in the nearly two centuries of their history. And the beat goes on. Honestly, there is “something singularly intriguing” about the whole story of the Churches of Christ. The author did not have to fashion that alluring drama, but his fashioning a superb accounting of it puts his achievement on an award-winning plateau.

Permit a closing part-confessional, part-hortatory word. In our profoundly troubled era, the witness of radical Christian teaching and living is as desperately needed. The heritage recounted in Reviving the Ancient Faith affords one resource for such a vision. To my astonishment, a recent probing of my own veins shows traces of some Stoneite blood.