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Review of Leonard Allen, *In the Great Stream*
James L. Gorman

Leonard Allen, Dean of Lipscomb University's College of Bible and Ministry, has been helping Churches of Christ engage their history and theology for four decades. This book constitutes Allen's boldest attempt to reveal the pitfalls of the anti-tradition posture of many Churches of Christ and, conversely, the riches of embracing the Great Tradition as an ally in the challenging twenty-first century context. Allen urges Churches of Christ to rediscover and reclaim early Christian Tradition, following the examples of Robert Webber, J. I. Packer, D. H. Williams, and others. Allen lays out a clear proposal for communal formation that deliberately utilizes the best of Churches of Christ tradition and classical Christian orthodoxy (defined by and rooted in the rule of faith, Apostles Creed, and Nicene Creed), arguing that such rediscovery and rootedness is essential for any group who wishes to survive and thrive amid current challenges.

Allen begins (Chapter 1) by exploring both the burden and blessing of tradition. Allen relies throughout the book on Alasdair MacIntyre's conclusions: "Tradition is always the necessary frame in which inquiry proceeds and truth is discerned. Indeed, our communities are 'tradition-constituted'" (23). In other words, as Jaroslav Pelikan said, either we are "conscious participants or unconscious victims" of human traditions that inevitably shape us (15). Allen locates Churches of Christ mostly within the Free church or Believers church tradition (i.e., the church should be free from the empire or state), who have been wary of or antagonistic toward tradition. Indeed, Alexander Campbell and many Churches of Christ leaders claim to have "no creed but Christ" and seek to read the Bible as if no one had read it before. But it is impossible to shake the ways our traditions shape us. Therefore, Churches of Christ should recognize the blessing of tradition, which not only opens up rich conversations with past wisdom but also provides a check on modern individualistic interpretation. Allen uses the work of Everett Ferguson in particular to argue that Churches of Christ should be in conversation with early orthodoxy because ancient thinkers (1) confirm and elucidate New Testament teachings and (2) wrote in close proximity to and shared a cultural setting with New Testament writers. Allen says, "a healthy tradition involves critical awareness of the tradition and an intentional continuity with it while at the same time having the capacity to adjust creatively and missionally to one's new and

challenging circumstances” (19). We do not embrace everything tradition hands us, but we must engage it.

Chapter 2 locates Churches of Christ within both the Believers church and denominational traditions. Allen describes the Believers church as a third option distinct from Catholic and magisterial Protestant traditions. A fourth option arose amid the new American republic called denominationalism, which evangelicalism deeply shaped. Allen depicts the denominational model as a hybrid between Protestant and Believers views of the church in which voluntary churches sought an unofficial establishment in their crusades for a “Christian America.” Allen argues that Campbell had some Believers church impulses early but adopted the denominational vision from the 1840s. Allen sees Stone’s and Lipscomb’s apocalyptic elements rooted in the Free church tradition. Following the conclusions of Richard Hughes, Allen argues that Churches of Christ eventually cast off the apocalypticism of Stone, Lipscomb, and Harding; they “clung to Campbell’s early biblical patternism and took it in a separatist direction, all the while becoming—ironically—more at home in and accommodated to American culture” (45).¹

Although the second chapter is very helpful, at least three issues deserve mention. First, much more could be said about the evangelical milieu that deeply shaped the early Stone-Campbell Movement (SCM) and what that means for consequent engagement of the SCM tradition, especially at the “DNA” level.² Second, Kristen Kobez De Mez defines evangelicalism not simply as theological tenets believed (i.e., the “Bebbington Quadrilateral”) but as cultural products (books, film, music, clothing, merchandise, etc.) consumed: “It is more useful to think in terms of the degree to which individuals participate in this evangelical culture of consumption.”³ Du Mez’s definition has much to offer analysis of evangelical influence among Churches of Christ in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Third, Allen’s analysis of “Christian America” would benefit from engagement with recent scholarship on Christian nationalism. Although “Christian America” in its nineteenth and early twentieth century version is waning, Christian nationalism seems more

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

² See James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2017).

³ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 8.

alive than ever, according to the work of Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and others.⁴ Works like Whitehead and Perry will be crucial for future analysis of the influence of Christian nationalism within Churches of Christ, as Christian nationalism seems to be the most compelling new opposition to the Believers church vision. Lee Camp's *Scandalous Witness* sheds much light on these issues for Churches of Christ and evangelicals.⁵

Chapters 3 through 6 each take up a foundational Churches of Christ belief, examining it in Churches of Christ history and in the Great Stream in order to propose ways forward. Chapter 3 argues that the Bible cannot practically be a group's only creed. Informal creeds always develop (as Churches of Christ websites and literature evince). Allen distills a dozen points that constitute the informal creed of Churches of Christ. "So the claim to have 'no creed but the Bible' is disingenuous because it seeks to keep one's theological framework and interpretive judgments invisible," Allen argues. "It says, I am not going to acknowledge the interpretive tradition in which I stand and which informs my reading of Scripture" (65). Instead, Allen proposes that Churches of Christ recognize their own tradition and culture as well as the early centuries of theological reflection summarized in the rule of faith. The latter provides an ancient perspective and a check against more recent interpretations beholden to particular contextual needs. In sum, "to imagine themselves in the Great Stream of the faith, Churches of Christ will need to come to terms both with their own modern tradition as well as with the ancient Great Tradition—and with the creed-making process that came with both. Churches of Christ have been participants in that ongoing process throughout their modern history" (70).

Chapter 4 analyzes Thomas Campbell's commitment to Christian unity and numerous Stone-Campbell interpreters of Campbell's *Declaration and Address*. I wish Allen engaged the evangelical vision of unity that shaped Campbell—unity upon the ancient gospel in order to cooperate in interdenominational voluntary societies for missions and other endeavors.⁶ Allen writes, the *Declaration and Address*' "vision for Christian unity, we have to conclude, faded and failed. Churches of Christ essentially rejected Thomas and Alexander Campbell's founding vision for unity" (84). Allen goes further to argue that it was bound to fail, "for that agenda was based on

⁴ Kevin Michael Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ Lee C. Camp, *Scandalous Witness: A Little Political Manifesto for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁶ See Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals*.

several erroneous assumptions: that one can stand free of tradition, that context and community do not matter, and that the only solid path to truth is the free individual weighing the factual evidence and exercising his or her rational powers” (84-85).

Allen proposes Churches of Christ join the “new ecumenism” in which Christians across denominations are rediscovering together a foundation for unity upon the ancient Christian Tradition. Thomas Oden says it starkly: “We cannot rightly confess the unity of the church without regrounding that unity in the apostolic teaching that was hammered out on the anvil of martyrdom and defined by the early conciliar process...when heresies were rejected and the ancient consensus defined” (91). “Without some orientation to the ‘common mind’ of the Great Tradition,” Allen asserts, “one becomes a kind of captive to one’s own interpretive tradition, especially if that tradition is an anti-tradition tradition.... One easily falls prey to the temptation to treat one’s own idiosyncratic conclusions as binding truth” (93). Allen does not discuss how the early episcopacy should relate here, despite the Great Tradition’s theological conception of unity upon apostolic succession in the episcopacy. Indeed, the authority of the early councils, their creeds, and their decisions about heresy were justified in large part on a united episcopacy.

Chapter 5 traces the restoration impulse in Christian history as expressed among the Puritans, Waldensians, Anabaptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and in Campbell, noting that the Great Stream includes an enduring appeal to restore a simple, undiluted practice of the way of Jesus. Nonetheless, he also highlights some of the deep problems of the restoring posture, most notably the idea that the church immediately fell into apostasy after the New Testament era. Allen uses the work of Ferguson again to remind readers that the early church remained committed to New Testament traditions amenable to Churches of Christ (117). Allen proposes Churches of Christ maintain the restoring impulse but change the aim from replication of an ostensible New Testament pattern to restoration of the gospel of reconciliation rooted in the Free church tradition: “The foundation is the confession that Jesus is Lord. Calling Jesus Lord means becoming a disciple of the one who died to reconcile people to God and to reconcile deeply estranged people to one another. The way of this reconciliation is through patient, suffering servanthood, not worldly force—both for Jesus himself and for those who call him their Lord” (120).

Chapter 6 explores the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In Churches of Christ, Alexander Campbell’s and Tolbert Fanning’s “Bible deism” won the day. That is, they argued that the Holy Spirit operates only through the Bible. Although influential leaders such as James A. Harding and

J. D. Thomas rejected this theology of the Spirit, the influential Texas tradition in Churches of Christ led by R. L. Whiteside and Foy Wallace Jr. brought the “Word-only” view to victory among most Churches of Christ. Here and in other places Allen’s treatment would benefit from diverse voices whose inclusion is essential for engaging the whole of Churches of Christ tradition (e.g., how did black Churches of Christ leaders speak to these competing theologies?). Since the 1960s, more Churches of Christ voices have called for a cautious and limited view of the Spirit’s activity beyond the pages of Scripture. Indeed, when measured against the Great Tradition, the Word-only view is newfangled and problematic. For Allen, the orthodox baseline is the Trinitarian understanding of the Spirit as articulated in the second ecumenical council in 381: “The Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets” (136). Allen urges Churches of Christ to embrace an orthodox view of the Spirit and find in the Bible a rich revelation of God’s Spirit at work.

In Chapter 7, Allen argues that the rule of faith and canon emerged directly out of the apostolic tradition. Allen highlights the importance of tradition to writers of the New Testament, quoting D. H. Williams: “There is no question that the Christian Tradition, expressed in the kerygmatic, ethical, and worshipful life of the churches, preceded the Christian writings, and functioned as completely authoritative before the advent of the New Testament” (144). If this is the case, then early summaries of the faith that later appeared in the New Testament and the rule of faith are central for guiding Christian belief. Therefore, at the heart of Allen’s Great Stream is the rule of faith. He finds three major challenges (converting pagans, persecution, internal disagreements) that fostered the emergence of the rule. Scholars disagree on the extent of consensus about the basic proclamation of Christianity in the first couple centuries, but Allen has no sympathy for modern scholars who suggest that the distinctions between heresy and orthodoxy were due “simply...to the eventual political triumph in which the winners got to define ‘orthodoxy’” (148). Allen sides with Ferguson, who argued that a shared consensus existed from very early. And the rule of faith expressed this consensus, with its most famous formulations in the writings of Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. The rule of faith serves an excellent foundation because it keeps the whole story before us in a concise form—it keeps the center of the story at the center.

Allen also looks at the process of canonization in Chapter 7, leaning on D. H. Williams to describe canonization as “the gradual and hard-to-chronicle process of agreement among the churches about those texts which conformed to the principles of canonicity, as reckoned according to the canon or rule of faith” (155). Allen does not note how “agreement among the churches” took place, which was largely a conversation among bishops and their conciliar decisions. He affirms canonization as a “Spirit-sanctified process,” but does not explore what that means for our understanding of the ancient episcopacy’s place in that Spirit-led process. Regardless, Allen’s conclusion is correct: by cutting themselves off from the post-apostolic era, Churches of Christ also separated themselves from the era when Scripture and the rule of faith took shape.

After noting five types of objections to creeds, Allen reveals what seems to worry him most about the present-day context and new reasons for rejecting creeds—what Charles Taylor calls “Secular 3” or the “age of authenticity.” “In this environment, what is true and authentic is one’s own personal experience. To find truth means finding what is authentic to oneself, a truth not based on some outside authority. Creeds are not authentic expressions of what is true and real but rather impersonal authorities, outside the self” (161). The obvious effect is a current reticence to affirm “the whole package” of a creed, even if one finds parts of it personally meaningful. In response, Allen delineates five proper uses of creedal formulas for Churches of Christ: (1) They foster the church’s confession that the gospel stands at the center of its life. (2) They center believers on the Trinity and delineate proper boundaries of belief (Allen does not address creeds as tests of fellowship). (3) They provide outlines of Scripture, not replacements. (4) They enlarge the capacity to hear Scripture because they focus the center. (5) They set the church in opposition to the spirit of an age.

Chapters 8 to 11, which have overlapping coverage, analyze the current contextual challenges and propose ways for Churches of Christ to appropriate the best of their own and the Great Stream’s heritages. On the current contextual challenges, Taylor says the modern world has “proceeded by way of ‘subtraction stories’ that have had the effect of rationalizing and disenchanting the world” (167). In the same way, Christian subtraction stories thin down basic beliefs to suit modern ears. Allen calls our time a “time of lightness,” of thinning down, when “truth itself has become untethered, floating here and there like a balloon” (172). He proposes a plan for how the church can live as resident aliens in this “post-Christian world,” grounded by the Great Stream (Chapter 10). Allen locates the theological beginnings of “lightness” in theological

liberalism. He briefly explores the ideas of Schleiermacher, Troelsch, and Bultmann to delineate theological liberalism's chief tenets of lightness and subtraction. Allen notes that Disciples of Christ are heirs of theological liberalism and have been subject to mainline decline (losing 48% of members from 1974 to 2005) even as their cultural influence remains substantial (170). Allen warns, "it will be difficult for any particular Christian tradition to make its way through these rising post-Christian times unless it goes deep into tradition" (215).

In the end, Allen urges Churches of Christ to embrace tradition because "in a time of lightness, tradition is a strong and weighty ally. So I am calling us to align ourselves more intentionally and forthrightly with the foundational tradition of the faith, that is, to identify ourselves with the Great Tradition—classic orthodoxy marked out by the early 'rule of faith' and the universal creeds of the early church" (172). Allen provides seven ways for Churches of Christ to tradition themselves deliberately (Chapters 8-9): (1) confess the faith together (if early creeds are too much, start with New Testament creeds); (2) embrace a Trinitarian faith; (3) adopt a deep theology of the incarnation of Jesus and consequent theological significance of Christ's life and death; (4) renew commitment to Scripture and its unified overarching story; (5) acknowledge both the Christian Tradition and Churches of Christ tradition in order to thoughtfully engage both; (6) engage practices that foster a communal way of living as resident aliens; and (7) create intentional practices of teaching and training new believers. Doing these things will help Churches of Christ develop a "restoration imaginary," a way of construing the world as communicated in stories, rituals, images, and beliefs (223).

One theological and methodological oversight throughout is Allen's lack of acknowledgment of the ancient episcopacy or ancient ecclesiology. Allen seems to assume that Free church or Believers church ecclesiology is a right and good starting point for appropriating ancient theology, even though the ancient church that circumscribed the canon and agreed upon the rule of faith and creeds did so through the bishops and their councils. In fact, episcopal ecclesiology formed the theological foundation and the practical network that allowed for a broad consensus to arise on the canon and creeds—moniscopacy was inextricably related to the ancient wisdom Allen wants to appropriate. And Allen argues in multiple places that these traditioning processes were Spirit-led.

Therefore, Allen's case would become more compelling if he explored this issue. For example, why appropriate the canon and the creeds that the early bishops in their writings and in

the episcopal synods agreed upon, but reject the ecclesiological foundation and practical means of that agreement? Many early Christian historians note that moniscopacy was just as crucial as canon and creed for the orthodox response to early challenges. In fact, many early Christians were professing belief in the episcopacy when they confessed to believe in the “one holy catholic church.” This was the case for nearly all by the fourth century Nicene Creed and would have been the case for many even in the second and third centuries. What do Free churches do with this ancient wisdom? Do they critically reject central tenets of the Great Stream, changing or clarifying meanings of some phrases in the creed along the way? If so, how does this deliberation process work for Free churches?

This theological oversight relates to a couple historical problems I find. First, when Allen discusses the theology of the Great Stream, the ideas seem to float detached from their historical situatedness until we get to Constantine. When discussing Constantine to today, Allen more readily takes stock of the social and political realities influencing Christianity. But before Constantine, one gets the sense that the ideas are mostly disconnected from historical contexts of bishop, council, patriarchy, and hierarchy. When we place the ideas of the first four centuries of the church in their complex historical contexts, appropriation of the Great Stream gets much more complicated. The modern Christianity Allen rightly critiques throughout the book actually did offer up some useful critiques of the Great Stream (e.g., patriarchy) that go unacknowledged in Allen’s treatment. None of this negates Allen’s proposals, but his argument would be more compelling if he acknowledged these realities and helped readers think through the challenges and prospective process of critical appropriation.

Second, Allen’s treatment at times does not acknowledge enough complexity in the historical record. For example, Allen’s accounts of theological liberalism, mainline decline, and the fall of “Christian America” would be strengthened by more complex narratives. After reading the book, one would be very surprised to find in existence vibrant and flourishing mainline churches whose spirituality is much more in tune with apostolic Christianity than many forms of evangelical Christian nationalism so popular today. Exploring such complexity would aid in critical appropriation of Christian tradition in the distant and more recent past.

Despite these issues with ecclesiology and complexity, Allen has succeeded in his main goal of urging Churches of Christ to imagine themselves within the Christian Tradition. He has offered thoughtful leaders a way to resist the individualism of Secular 3 and, instead, be formed

by the unified story of God and God's people as found throughout Scripture and summarized in early Christian Tradition. Some of the proposals here should be welcomed by all Churches of Christ, such as recommitting to the unified story of the Bible. Other more provocative proposals such as reciting the early creeds in worship will be theologically appalling to some Churches of Christ. But all Churches of Christ leaders will find important food for thought here. Indeed, a transformational encounter with both Churches of Christ tradition and the Great Stream awaits those with the courage to follow Allen's advice.