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Review of Richard T. Hughes and James L. Gorman, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2024)

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REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS A. FOSTER¹

With skill and insight James Gorman has brought Richard Hughes's 1996 classic history of the character of Churches of Christ to the present (2022), incorporating new scholarship since the 1980s, adding original material, and streamlining the narrative. In the first edition Hughes developed his interpretive premises in detail with extensive examples in two sections containing fourteen chapters ("The Making of a Sect" and "The Making of a Denomination"). Gorman has crafted a third section ("The Fragmentation of a Denomination") from material taken from Hughes's section two, adding an entirely new chapter on the twenty-first century, and reducing the book's total number of chapters from fourteen to nine. Despite the significant reduction in overall wordcount, Gorman maintains the fullness of the story and the coherent narrative that made the original edition so engaging and fascinating.

The six chapters of Hughes's section one Gorman has streamlined into two—one each on the Campbellian restorationist and Stoneite apocalyptic roots, with an account of the nineteenth-century union of these two movements.

Gorman's new chapter one retains Hughes's characterization of Campbell's evolving restorationism that pitted his early rigidly rationalistic primitivism against his progressive millennial vision of Christian unity, producing, in Hughes's words, a "more irenic primitivism." Gorman's new chapter two highlights Stone's formation in the revivals which shaped his non- (or anti-) denominational vision that would be reached through a restoration of primitive Christianity as he understood it. The union of many churches of the two movements resulted in a synthesis of Campbell's legalistic sectarianism and

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Stone's apocalyptic primitivism. The synthesis as realized by Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb produced a via media that guarded against either extreme having dominance and producing the sect of Churches of Christ by the end of the nineteenth century.

In section two Gorman shapes four chapters from the original eight, moving material from the 1960s through the 1990s to his new section three. In my opinion, Gorman's most significant contributions to the existing narrative are seen especially in chapters five through eight in sections two and three. Retaining the chief themes of the first edition, chapters five and six treat modernization and Black Churches of Christ, with chapters seven and eight dealing with the left-right fragmentation of the 1960s and 1970s, and attempted reforms and resistance from the 1970s through the 1990s. Gorman's comprehensive knowledge and understanding of SCM literature over the last three decades is remarkably inclusive.

Gorman succinctly recounts how US Churches of Christ in the 1940s and 1950s took on the identity of a modern "middle class establishment," reflected in the embrace of extra-congregational cooperative organizations. The institutional controversy focused on church support of colleges and universities and the "sponsoring church" structure for cooperative missions. Leaders like Roy Cogdill and Cled Wallace strongly opposed such practices as outside the scriptural mandate for the church, reflecting a radicalized understanding of Campbell's democratic and legal biases. By 1954, *Gospel Advocate* editor B.C. Goodpasture issued a "quarantine" calling for the excommunication of the "antis," resulting in the formation the non-institutional Churches of Christ.

Like Hughes, Gorman identifies the controversy over the national *Herald of Truth* radio program as part of the modernization process, helping create a new class of "Electronic Bishops" who wielded power and influence and served as a marker for further division. The widely heard broadcast also helped shift mainstream Church of Christ preaching away from the old sectarian themes to a more family and American morality focus. The post-WWII building boom of church buildings and rapid expansion of Church of Christ colleges also symbolized the body's embrace of the modern world with all it offered in glamor, power and prestige.

Gorman's careful reworking of the material on Black Churches of Christ in chapter six is excellent. The chapter first lays out the racial ideas of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell. While both reflected the inescapable ideology of white superiority, Stone's journey led him finally to advocate abolition of slavery as a moral imperative, while Campbell's never did. Campbell's social ideas dominated the movement, and by the 1920s, racism was as entrenched in white Churches of Christ as it was in white US society at large.

Leaders in Black Churches of Christ in the twentieth century most often felt that accommodating to the racial structure of the United States was their only option. Black

evangelist Marshall Keeble was perhaps the most widely known accommodationist, often used by white leaders as the example for other more vocally anti-racist Black leaders like G. P. Bowser, S. R. Cassius, and R. N. Hogan who wrote and spoke openly against the segregationist position of their white sisters and brothers. On practically every other theological and social matter, however, the Black churches were as conservative and exclusivist as white Churches of Christ.

Many Black Christians saw the closing of Nashville Christian Institute and transferring the assets to formerly segregationist David Lipscomb College as a massive betrayal and one more example of exploitation by white leaders. This act led to a more pronounced alienation from white Churches of Christ that was further aggravated by the uniform opposition by white churches to the Civil Rights movement. While Black churches mirrored white opposition to communism and the social gospel, a significant number of Black leaders became activists against US segregation, including Fred Gray, Rosa Parks' lawyer. Many Black members supported John F. Kennedy in stark contrast to sermons against Kennedy preached in white churches. The opposition by many whites to desegregating Church of Christ colleges also contributed to Black alienation.

Significant gatherings designed to heal race relations between Black and white Churches of Christ took place in 1968 in Nashville and Atlanta, as well as a series on Herald of Truth radio that included race as a major Christian concern. A special issue of *20th Century Christian* magazine titled "Christ and Race Relations" attacked the evil of racism in the country and the church. White backlash that involved decreased support for Herald of Truth and a significant loss of subscribers to *20th Century Christian*, along with the lack of action by white leaders, moved most Black to leaders to declare their independence from the white churches by the end of the 1960s.

Chapter seven, the first of the chapters in Gorman's section three, "Fragmentation of a Denomination," details the chief events and characters of the left-right splintering of the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter characterizes this "battle over liberalism" as the fourth division of Churches of Christ in the 20th century after racial segregation, premillennialism, and institutionalism. The chapter identifies three traditions resulting from this battle: a moderate mainstream, a group of progressives challenging the vision of the 1950s, and a group of conservative reactionaries who absolutized the traditional sectarian and doctrinal positions of Churches of Christ.

The progressive tradition challenged the exclusivist mindset of Churches of Christ and began a new emphasis on grace. Larger trends, especially the acquisition of graduate theological education by a growing number of teachers and scholars, opened new understandings of scripture that moved beyond traditional restorationist notions. This growing body of scholars began populating college faculties, and began new publications like *Restoration Quarterly* and *Mission* to explore and teach the new understandings.

The conservatives viewed these developments as evidence of apostacy (as did many in the mainstream) and took aggressive measures to stop these dangerous leaders. They too founded new journals and schools—especially preacher training schools—as alternatives to the now-unfaithful colleges and universities. A major controversy arose when leaders and public figures like Dwain Evans and Pat Boone challenged the traditional view of the Holy Spirit as working only through the words of scripture. The establishment of Campus Evangelism after the model of Campus Crusade for Christ also reflected charismatic ideas and practices. Extreme opposition by conservatives pushed many of the best minds of a generation of progressives out of the body in the 1970s. The left-right polarization was theological, cultural, educational and demographic, and began the process of a complete dismantling of the old power structure of editor bishops.

The 1970s to the 1990s saw the nineteenth-century Church of Christ theological structure all but disappear. Each of the century's battles had weakened the apocalypticism and primitivism which had always been in tension with one another. The book identifies three responses to renew the body, including an alignment by some with conservative American politics as a legitimate platform for the church's work. A second "evangelistic" option involved the rise of dozens of soul-winning workshops and the creation of other means of evangelism—like a nationwide comic book. One segment of Churches of Christ focused on intense evangelism and discipleship that eventually formed the International Churches of Christ, which took on certain cultic characteristics.

Finally, a theological response challenged pattern theology and legalism through a rediscovery of the doctrine of grace, and a reexamination of traditional hermeneutical understandings of the nature of scripture. This led to new publications like *Image* and *Wineskins* on the progressive end, and the acquisition by conservatives of older journals like *Firm Foundation*. The role of women in leadership became a focus for both conservatives and progressives. All of these moves served to pull Churches of Christ apart in the 1970s through the 1990s.

In Gorman's entirely original final chapter he gives an amazingly comprehensive account of the major trends in Churches of Christ in the twenty-first century that furthered the identity crisis and led to decline. He identifies seven major influences on the fragmentation of Churches of Christ from 2000 to 2022. The strong push by conservatives of traditional Church of Christ theology continued to hold sway among many segments in the body. The new emphasis on grace opened others to fellowship with other Christian bodies, and as a result, Evangelicalism became an attractive model for worship, preaching, and theology in parts of Churches of Christ. Christian nationalism also influenced many in conservative and mainline churches, reflecting trends among white Evangelicals.

At the other end of the spectrum was a small group Gorman labels “neo-apocalyptic,” who in the stream of Lipscomb and Harding advocated total allegiance to the kingdom of God rather than any earthly government. Postmodernism was a sixth influence that challenged the assumption that everyone could arrive at the same conclusions if using correct methods of biblical interpretation. Finally, he identifies the emphasis on social justice and equity deeply rooted in progressive theology, including the concern for racial justice.

Gorman spends the rest of the chapter fleshing out these influences, masterfully weaving them together with extensive examples and documentation. His sections on “racial reckoning” and “gender and sexuality” are particularly powerful, bringing together the stories of the people and events of the past two decades that have made these central issues for increasing numbers of Churches of Christ.

He closes by recounting recent proposals for how Churches of Christ might be revitalized. Similar in many ways to earlier ideas for “recovering” the lost cohesion and stability of Churches of Christ, the propositions reflect very different perceptions of what needs to be recovered. Among them are new church plants and a recovery of historic theology—from the larger Christian tradition as well as the Stone-Campbell movement. In the end, Gorman says, we will have to wait and see who listens to whom as Churches of Christ move through these turbulent times of identity crisis and decline.

Gorman’s new edition of *Reviving the Ancient Faith* is essential reading for anyone interested in a deep understanding of the Stone-Campbell movement and the state and trajectories of Churches of Christ today and through the past century. It is an important case study for historians of American Christianity, reflecting societal, cultural, and political trends that have affected all religious bodies in the United States. And it is simply a delight to read, retaining Hughes’s rich deep narrative style that produces “ah-ha” moments in every chapter.