

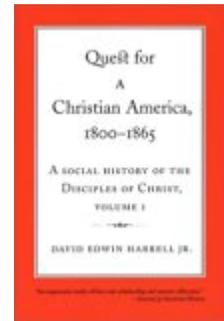
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Edwin Harrell, Jr. *A Social History of the Disciples of Christ, vol. 1: Quest for a Christian America, 1800-1865*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. xx + 256 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5074-1.

David Edwin Harrell, Jr. *A Social History of the Disciples of Christ, vol. 2: Sources of Division in the Disciples of Christ, 1865-1900*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. xviii + 458 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5075-8.

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Not So Different after All

When David Edwin Harrell's two volumes of social history of the Disciples of Christ first appeared in 1966 and 1973 respectively, they marked an important shift in the internal historiography of this American religious movement. These two volumes, based on Harrell's 1958 MA thesis and 1962 Ph.D. dissertation at Vanderbilt University, demonstrated, for the first time, how the movement reflected its American sociological context in an overwhelmingly convincing way.

The descendents of this religious reform today encompass three church bodies: the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Churches of Christ, and the independent Christian Churches/Churches of Christ. In the twentieth century the term "Disciples" came to be associated most closely with the first of the three. In the aggregate the groups have been increasingly designated, in historical circles, as the "Stone-Campbell Movement" (see for example the 2004 Eerdmans publication *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*) after founding leaders Barton W. Stone, and Thomas and Alexander Campbell. For many members of those bodies, when Harrell's books first appeared they provided a new and convincing perspective that challenged previous apologetic and triumphalistic treatments of the Movement's history.

The two studies provided overwhelming evidence that the positions taken by the opposing sides in the division between Disciples and Churches of Christ were more than simple adherence to biblical truth or the original impulses of the founders as claimed by all sides. The largely southern and rural context of Churches of Christ, and the increasingly urban and Midwestern setting of the Disciples played a massively significant role in shaping the attitudes, theological positions and practices of each emerging body. Though not the first to suggest it, Harrell demonstrated conclusively just how deeply the movement had been shaped by American sectionalism both before and after the Civil War. A mainstay of Stone-Campbell historiography since the late-nineteenth century had been that the Disciples were not divided by the Civil War. In Harrell's first volume he showed that Disciples, while lacking the kind of national structures of denominations like the Presbyterians and Methodists, were as sectionalized as any American church body, and that sectional and race-related issues were important factors in the separation of the Disciples and Churches of Christ.

While Harrell's point concerning the continuing influence of the Civil War on the identity of the larger Movement was perhaps his most revealing, at least to many, his studies are by no means confined to those issues. His trenchant examinations range from millen-

nial ideas, pacifism, and economic attitudes to organized labor, the social gospel, and prohibition. Furthermore, Harrell's descriptions of social liberals and conservatives in the separating movement are, to reflect a review of the original volumes, clear, vivid, and eloquent. Harrell's prose is rarely matched for enjoyable reading.

One effect of Harrell's work was, in some sense, to legitimize for scholars within the Stone-Campbell Movement historical inquiry that refused to acquiesce to triumphalistic approaches by sectarian apologists in all parts of the Movement. Each of the streams (by 1968 a second division had solidified between the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] and the independent Christian Churches) saw itself as the authentic embodiment of the Movement's genius, an attitude inherent in all previous histories of the Movement whether written by liberal or conservative. Harrell's study was part of a move that produced a burst of creative scholarship in the Movement that ended that hegemony.

Yet Harrell is himself a life-long member of non-institutional Churches of Christ, one of the most conservative sub-groups within that stream. He makes a disclaimer in the original preface of the first volume that the books were not theological propaganda. Unquestioningly the books are models of the most rigorous and careful scholarship. His very choice of topics, however, fo-

cus on the sociological sectarianism that formed the roots of his own religious tradition, surely indicate where his passions lay.

While important first for their impact on internal Stone-Campbell understandings, Harrell's impeccable scholarship made and makes these volumes a model of social history in American Christianity. In contrast to Disciple W. E. Garrison's 1931 history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, *Religion Follows the Frontier*, which adhered to Frederick Jackson Turner and William Warren Sweet in explaining Stone-Campbell history in relation to its frontier context, Harrell was the first to pursue the ideas of H. Richard Niebuhr's 1929 classic study *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* as they related to the Movement.

These reprints are exact reproductions of the originals except for the front matter. In his new preface Harrell rightly observes that most of the previous history of the Movement had been written in a social vacuum. The solid contribution of these books to studies in American Christianity and the Stone-Campbell Movement is as important now as it was when the volumes first appeared. The University of Alabama Press has done a great service to current scholars and students in making them available again.

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