

2021

Review of "At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge" by Jack Reese

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Bob (2021) "Review of "At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge" by Jack Reese," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 74 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol74/iss1/12>

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At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge, Jack Reese

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021

Jack Reese's newest book, *At the Blue Hole: Elegy for a Church on the Edge*, joins his two earlier publications in trying to map a future for Churches of Christ, *The Body Broken: Embracing the Peace of Christ in a Fragmented Church* (Leafwood, 2005) and *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of Churches of Christ* (ACU Press, 2000). Reese is best-known in Churches of Christ for his career at Abilene Christian University. He currently serves as Executive Minister at the Northside Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas.

The book's title comes from a spring in San Antonio that formerly was a gushing fountain that pre-Europeans called Yanaguana (Spirit Waters), which connects to a massive subterranean aquifer. He compares the current church to a person who tends to the Blue Hole but fails to attend to the actual mysterious source of the water that lies hundreds of feet below.

The book's unique layout features five major chapters that are interrupted by sixteen personal reflections. Those stylized asides function like deep-dives in the middle of the academic prose. The book is a mix of history, interpretive history, and personal memoir. Reese tells the story in a way that is neither linear, thematic, nor chronological. This should not be heard as a negative; his storytelling gift helps the narrative move in a compelling way. Reese describes his role as "an ethnographer, one who tries to understand the culture of a people from the inside out, through their own stories and experiences" (12). Further, more than merely recording the history, he tries to understand the patterns of belief and meaning embedded within the movement's stories.

The early chapters make the case that Churches of Christ are in severe decline. The middle section tells the history of the movement in such a way as to understand how the movement fell into such a place, while also supplying stories and resources that will resurface in the third part of the book, where Reese offers some suggestions for the future. Reese selects a few key players/events and uses them to interpret the larger story: the 19th century unity meetings in Lexington, Kentucky that united the Campbell movement and the Stone movement; the Santa Ana, California, funeral of peacemaker T.B. Larimore that featured an unlikely pallbearer, Foy E. Wallace, Jr.; and the Memphis Meeting of 1973 that put Lynn Anderson, Batsell Barrett Baxter, Harold Hazelip, and Landon Saunders on trial.

This book features many instances where paths cross, such as the joint gospel meetings held by Alexander Campbell and future U.S. President James A. Garfield in Alliance, Ohio (158) and Walter Scott's intersection with Robert Richardson, Alexander Campbell, and Sidney Rigdon (and then Joseph Smith). This is where Reese's storytelling gift shines; he is excellent at weaving the history together.

Reese's dominant message is that Churches of Christ need to die. He doesn't say they need to go out of existence, but instead to die, like to die to oneself (repent). To get there, he proposes six themes that the church will need for the future:

- *Unity as the Wellspring of Grace* explores the need for peacemaking, including repentance by White Christians for the exclusion of Black Christians as well as repentance for the way that Churches of Christ walked away from instrumental churches in the early 20th century.
- *Restoration and Life* speaks to how the restoration focus of Campbell and others attended to external forms, but fell short in speaking to the whole of the Christian life. Reese appeals to Paul Hiebert's *bounded* and *centered* sets to make the case for a faith that is centered on the essentials and not bound by the particulars.
- *Reasoned Inquiry* emphasizes the role of reading, thinking, and disagreement within the tradition, and suggests they will be necessities going forward.
- *An Ear for Harmony* claims that the tradition of singing a cappella should equip Churches of Christ to be better listeners, and to let the musical appreciation of harmony shape a congregational appreciation of harmony.
- *Living Generously* argues that a focus on the poor (like David Lipscomb's) must shape the future.
- *Apocalypse Now* reaffirms the apocalyptic worldview of Barton Stone and the counter-cultural communities that such an outlook can create. Through a lowered view of humanity (and of modernistic assumptions) and an elevated view of the Holy Spirit, the church can place less emphasis on running the current world and instead participating in the values of the next one (208).

In the end, Reese acknowledges that he doesn't know the future of Churches of Christ (219). Rather than predicting, he calls churches to repentance--to die to themselves.

This narrative's lyrical, poetic style makes it distinctive among histories of Churches of Christ. It is deeply personal, rooted not only in Reese's family story (11) but also in his own travels and personal experiences with major players. Like Reese, I remember the first time I picked up the transcript of the Memphis Meeting. I was in the stacks of the Harding School of Theology library, just a few blocks from where it happened. I felt a sense of horror, but also felt for the first time that I might be standing in the middle of history.

I appreciate Reese's emphasis on the way the Civil War divided the Stone-Campbell Movement not simply through politics and instrumental music, but through the way the American Christian Missionary Society took a stand against the South. This increased the hostility between northern and southern churches, not simply against the Union, but also against the idea of church cooperation--- a misguided blame that plagued Churches of Christ for the next century.

The reflection sections are helpful, such as the one on Walter Scott's five-finger exercise, which provided a shared vocabulary (148) for the movement. Later Churches of Christ amended Scott's original exercise (faith, repentance, baptism, remission of sins, gift of the Holy Spirit) to "steps of salvation," which emphasized the human response (hear, believe, repent, confess, be baptized for the remission of sins).

The book would benefit from visuals that help the reader understand the larger project, which can occasionally become fuzzy. In some ways this is like a church history version of Don McLean's "American Pie," where dozens of images keep popping up-- a quartet practices in the park and a jester performs for the queen in a borrowed coat from James Dean--- and we all think we understand the allusions, but they are also confusing. When telling the story of 1929 and the church at Broadway and Walnut in Santa Ana, the story jumps in the next line to the birth of a boy named Micahel in the Deep South (43). That baby (presumably Martin Luther King, Jr.) is used to pivot to a conversation about African Americans in Churches of Christ (like Samuel Cassius) which then transitions to the story in *All Quiet on the Western Front* and one of its most consequential viewers in New York City: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The small section then ends back in Santa Ana at the funeral of T.B. Larimore. In short: there's a lot going on. Maybe too much.

The book also feels dated at points. When speaking to the legacy of Barton Stone, Reese expresses hope that Stone's "voice is not lost" (101). He possibly assumes that Stone has been neglected, which was surely the case at one point. But since I entered college at Harding University in 2000, my entire education in the Stone-Campbell movement has been framed by this sentiment about the underrepresented Stone (see Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 1996). While Campbell's influence might still reign supreme, is there any question at all that Stone more than makes up the ground among Stone-Campbell historians right now? Stone's voice will not be marginalized anytime soon.

Further, Reese's claim that Churches of Christ should reconcile with Christian Churches also feels dated. Arguably the two most recognized preachers of the largest Church of Christ (Rick Atchley) and Christian Church (Bob Russell) co-published a book on this very theme 15 years ago (*Together Again: Restoring Unity in Christ after a Century of Separation*). Most of the largest Churches of Christ in the U.S. feature instrumental services. And many of those have muted "Church of Christ" in their branding, which makes them appear more like a Christian Church or other Evangelical church. I'm not sure there are many hard feelings among prominent Church of Christ ministers. In fact, I know many who wish they were Christian Church preachers right now.

Finally, the inside of the book features 25 endorsements. Not a single one comes from a woman. Elaine Heath's endorsement on the back cover is the only voice of a woman. This seems problematic for a movement whose number one issue among younger people is the exclusion of women's voices. That omission is unfortunate.

But on the whole, Jack Reese's book is a welcome contribution to Stone-Campbell historical studies. I would recommend it more for its historical value than for its prescription for a way

forward. Its lack of specificity about ways churches can truly affect the future is a real weakness. I can imagine this book being a great resource for a student who wants to learn more about Churches of Christ or a person on the edge of leaving Churches of Christ who needs to find a raw, authentic story that might inspire them to give it one last chance.

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