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Review of John Young, Visions of Restoration: The History of Churches of Christ

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John Young, *Visions of Restoration: The History of Churches of Christ*. Florence, AL. Cypress Publications, 2019. 128pp. \$12.99 US.

John Young wrote this book as a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Alabama. He is now an associate professor at the Turner School of Theology at Ambridge University in Montgomery, Alabama, and the Director of Adult Education at North Tuscaloosa Church of Christ. Hence, the academic study of history and congregational education come together in this work primarily designed for education in the church. The book divides into thirteen chapters to accommodate a quarterly Sunday school curriculum; to that end each chapter offers discussion questions. His intended audience is specifically acapella Churches of Christ in the United States (xii, 51).

Young's first chapter holds in tension that Churches of Christ are theologically a continuation of the church founded on Pentecost (Acts 2) and a nineteenth-century reformation movement (pp. 3–9). Picking up the latter historical task, the chapters following move chronologically through the high points of the Stone-Campbell Movement (SCM), and after 1906, specifically the Churches of Christ (51). Young acquaints readers with the founding fathers of the movement (ch. 2), the union between Stone's and Campbell's groups (ch. 3), and the antebellum doctrinal challenges involving Jesse B. Ferguson and John Thomas (ch. 4). Following his presentation on how the Civil War widened fractures within the movement (ch. 5), the author jumps to the US Census Bureau's recognition of the Churches of Christ as a separate religious group (ch. 6). Next, he follows a trajectory of divisions over various issues, with specific attention to millennialism (ch. 7), institutionalism (ch. 8), and the campus movement that birthed the International Churches of Christ (ch. 10). Two chapters (9 and 11) serve as bridges to summarize other disparities—the increasing education of leaders (69–70, 84–85), the challenge of theological liberalism (70, 85–86), the contest over hermeneutics (83–85), and the more recent recognition of conservatives and progressives (85–86)—that exacerbated the fracturing of Churches of Christ. Finally, two prominent social concerns are taken up in ch. 12 (“The Black Church Experience”) and ch. 13 (“The History of Women within the Churches of Christ”). An appendix offers resources for more detailed study of the SCM (103–07). A short index of names and topics (109–11) ends the volume. Each chapter is succinct, easy to read, and engaging. The author is not vindictive toward positions that are not his own. In this way, the author strives to live in the historic tension of the SCM between unity and restoration. One can sense the author knows his field, yet he never forgets that his audience may have never heard the history of the SCM before. He has done a commendable job in abridging his historical selections.

To note weaknesses linked to brevity of any book runs the risk of critiquing a book the author did not write but the one the reviewer thinks the author should have written. I have sought to note instead only significant topics missed or minimized that are necessary to get a full-orbed understanding of the Churches of Christ today. For example, Young does not link Campbell's formation of the Christian Association of Washington (15) with its transatlantic precursors, though he is aware of that connection (see reference to James Gorman's work at 104–105). Instead, Young tells his history of the SCM as an American quest for the restoration of the church more than the unification of like-minded believers in the work of evangelism.

The rupture of the Disciples from the Baptists in the 1830s, though quite formative, gets no attention, though Campbell's connection with the Baptists in the early days is noted (15, 20). This background is a critical crucible that created many second-generation hardline leaders and a resulting combative editorial style that continues within the Churches of Christ, both traditional and progressive, to this day. Contra Young, the debating style of the movement is much older than the premillennial controversy (56) and is in place before the Civil War and grew more prominent after the war (though, see p. 37). Additionally, various views within the movement on slavery get scant notice.

The jump from Garfield's presidential support by Northern states to the recognition of the Churches of Christ as a separate religious group from the Disciples of Christ in 1906 (44) neglects a critical point in the formation of both groups when the Disciples were becoming overly bureaucratic and the Churches of Christ more sectarian. Regarding millennialism, the impact this controversy had on missionaries and that notable leaders were premillennial in orientation, such as David Lipscomb and J. N. Armstrong, is not noted, but he does indicate that the premillennial controversy continues to touch Churches of Christ's eschatology and conflict management today (48), though in what ways is left unexplored.

Absent in this volume are some of the twentieth century attempts at reunification of the movement, yet the author holds the mediating work of T. B. Larimore in high regard. Moreover, the readers will not learn of the significant meetings seeking to keep various factions in communication, nor the significant role played by Church of Christ member Gary Holloway as executive director of the World Convention of Churches of Christ, a communion of members of Disciples of Christ, independent Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ.

Speaking of the Black Churches of Christ as a movement-within-a-movement disguises that those churches have largely functioned on their own. Additionally, Young minimizes how much women's roles have expanded in Churches of Christ and which may not be as "relatively rare" as Young thinks (100).

The author stops short of more recent hot button issues, such as Churches of Christ's political involvement, including the support of former president Trump, the rise of Christian Nationalism, the impact of the LGBTQ+ community, the challenge and opportunities of immigration, and the precipitous decline of the Churches of Christ in the US.

Though Young understands that societal pressures and context played a role in the formation of the Churches of Christ (e.g., 17, 22–23, 75), he generally tells a story of the Churches of Christ as theologically driven around topics like cooperative efforts, musical instruments, and hermeneutics. In the end, Young offers us a very short introduction to the Churches of Christ from the perspective of a scholar standing within the conservative side of the Churches of Christ.

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