

2023

Review of D. Duane Cummins, "The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation, Second Edition"

D. Newell Williams

Brite Divinity School, n.williams@tcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Williams, D. Newell (2023) "Review of D. Duane Cummins, "The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation, Second Edition";" *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 76, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol76/iss1/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Disciples History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Discipliana by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Disciples History. For more information, please contact jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org.

D. DUANE CUMMINS. *THE DISCIPLES: A STRUGGLE FOR REFORMATION, SECOND EDITION*. ST. LOUIS, MO: CHALICE PRESS, 2023. 450 PAGES.

REVIEWED BY D. NEWELL WILLIAMS¹

D. Duane Cummins' *The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation, Second Edition*, is what the title suggests: a history of the Disciples of Christ's struggles for reformation.

Following two preliminary chapters, Cummins reports how Disciples have struggled for reformation from the earliest days of the movement to the present.

The first of the two preliminary chapters, titled "Roots," addresses intellectual and religious developments in Europe and America that helped to make a way for Disciples of Christ, as well as earlier Christian unity initiatives. The second of the preliminary chapters, titled "Barton Warren Stone," addresses the ministry of Barton Warren Stone, including his role in the Cane Ridge Communion and the Springfield Presbytery. (Following the lead of early histories of the Disciples of Christ, which saw Stone as joining, rather than leading the movement, Cummins does not treat Stone as a founder of the Disciples of Christ.)

Following early histories of the Disciples of Christ, Cummins states that Alexander Campbell became the leader of this movement when, after studying all the books on baptism that he could find, he decided that he should be immersed and convinced his wife, his sister, his parents, and two other persons to join him. In the following weeks, additional people who were members of the church that Alexander's father, Thomas, had established, were also immersed. This development resulted in the Campbell's relationship with Baptists and ultimately Alexander's public debates regarding baptism. Alexander further advanced his understanding of reformation through his periodical publications, the *Christian Baptist*, and later, the *Millennial Harbinger*. Cummins states that Alexander believed that the church had forgotten the meaning of the two great sacraments of unity, the two central redemptive rites—baptism and the Lord's Supper—

¹ D. Newell Williams is President Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Modern and American Church History at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University.

and that his reformation calling was to help the church relearn and recover the nature and design of those two ordinances.

In the following chapter, titled “Disciples During the Nineteenth-Century Religious Awakenings,” Cummins accounts for the phenomenal growth in Disciples membership as related to a shift in the 1830s from an intellectual movement toward a “church-progressively fashioned more by evangelical revivalism than by intellect and reason.” Between 1875 and 1900, Disciples membership nearly tripled in size, totaling 1,120,000 members, making it one of the larger religious groups in the United States. Cummins further observes that despite the division between the Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ, reported in 1906, the Disciples membership in 1915 totaled 1,142,000 members.

In the same chapter, Cummins shows that as Disciples were growing in numbers, they were also developing ways in which congregations could cooperate in addressing needs that individual congregations could not provide. He reports that as early as 1834, a Wellsburg, Virginia, gathering approved ten resolutions, including the intent to cooperate on collecting voluntary contributions and the selection of proper persons to be “Proclaimers.” Cummins shows that growth from evangelism triggered cooperation, and that the principle of cooperation would lead to a national organization in 1849, called the American Christian Missionary Society. Between 1860 and 1899, Disciples established volunteer societies resulting in the founding of thirty-three missionary societies.

Cummins also notes that Campbell frequently stated that the greatest need of the movement was a qualified ministry. He reports that in 1842, Campbell grumbled, “The honor of being a Christian minister... is one that ought to be conferred not assumed.... Many should blush who presume to speak by a divine call.... The cause of Reformation is hurt by this class of unsent, unaccomplished, uneducated advocates who plead it.” Cummins concludes this chapter with a discussion of Disciples education and literature.

In the fifth chapter, titled, “The Road to Disunion,” Cummins addresses the division between Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ. Following Churches of Christ historians, he identifies three streams as forming Churches of Christ: the Tennessee stream led by David Lipscomb, a Texas stream led by Austin McGary, and a Midwest (or Indiana) stream led by David Sommers. He notes that of the three, the Texas stream most readily embraced the development of a Southern civil religion. McGary, a Confederate veteran, ordained in 1881, became the key voice in shaping the mindset of the ultraconservative Texas stream. In 1906, Lipscomb received a letter from the director of the U.S. Census Bureau, asking if Churches of Christ should be listed separately from the Disciples of Christ. Lipscomb responded in the affirmative, stating, “There are a distinct people taking the Word of God as their only rule of faith, calling their churches ‘Churches of Christ’... distinct... from all other bodies of people.” Cummins argues that the differences that would eventually divide Churches of Christ

and Disciples of Christ had emerged before the death of Alexander Campbell.

The sixth chapter, titled, "Cooperation Through Mission, Christian Unity, and Cultural Expressions," is a catchall of significant topics each addressed at some extent. These topics include how, in 1874, Disciples women established the Christian Women's Board of Missions (CWBM), which completed a building for the first graduate-level College of Missions and sent more than one hundred graduates to overseas appointments during the decade from 1910-1920, as well as other achievements during its forty-five-year history prior to becoming part of the United Christian Missionary Society (UCMS) in 1920. Other organizations that consolidated into UCMS were the Foreign Christian Missionary Society, established in 1875, and the Disciples' first missionary society, the American Christian Missionary Society. Because the women of the CWBM held more assets than any other board, and because they feared that merger with societies led by men would remove women from leadership, the new board was required to be composed of one-half women and one-half men.

Other topics included in this chapter are the history and status of Disciples in Canada, the long and notable commitment of Disciples to Christian Unity, and in more recent years, initiatives in Interfaith Ministry. Also in this chapter, attention is given to the increasing significance of what is called "ethnic minority *expressions*" among Disciples. Included in these ethnic minorities are Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Pacific/Asian Americans, and African Americans. Cummins uses a chart to show that ethnic minority expressions among Disciples experienced notable membership growth during the decade of 2008 to 2018, while, as in other mainstream denominations, European American Disciples dropped significantly in membership.

"Division and Restructure" is the title of chapter seven. Joining these two developments together, Cummins states that despite a long history of controversy, officially a complete break of fellowship between Disciples and Christian Churches-Churches of Christ did not occur until the conclusion of Restructure in 1968. Even then, the Disciples' *Yearbook* declined to acknowledge division for three years while exerting efforts toward reconciliation. Following other historians, Cummins states that there were three subjects of disagreement: (a) the theological development of modernism, (b) the twentieth-century emergence of ecumenism, and (c) open membership—the practice of allowing Christians who had been baptized by some mode other than believer's immersion to be members of the Disciples of Christ.

At the 1925 International Convention in Oklahoma City, a resolution came to the floor, stating: "Any person... now in the employment of the United Christian Missionary Society... who has committed himself or herself to belief in, or practice of the reception of un-immersed persons into the membership... the relationship of that person to the UCMS will be severed as an employee." Following two days of discussion, the motion passed. Cummins reports that UCMS attempted to steer a middle course by declaring the resolution was "not intended to invade the right of private judgment, but only to

apply to such an open agitation as would prove divisive.” Following other historians, Cummins states that UCMS lost on both sides. The 1934 International Convention formed a “Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ,” with the appointment of leadership from both sides of the controversy. The Commission labored for fourteen years, finally bringing its report to the 1948 International Convention. By then, Cummins states, the warring parties had become indifferent, and neither side seemed interested in preserving unity, leading many to point to 1948 as the moment when separate fellowships crystallized.

Fourteen years later, in 1962, Disciples appointed one hundred and twenty-six members to the Commission on Brotherhood Restructure (the term, “Brotherhood,” carrying for Disciples the meaning of what others, and now Disciples, call a “denomination”). Cummins details how Willard Wickizer (1899-1974), chair of the UCMS Division of Home Missions who is often credited as the “father of restructure,” delivered to the Council of Agencies an address entitled, “Ideas for Brotherhood Restructure,” stating, “[Only] in very recent days, has anyone dared to suggest that what the Disciples of Christ need to do is to look at its total organizational structure and attempt a major restructuring that would result in a more effective cooperation.” Cummins states that in the beginning the primary impetus for restructure came from the practical need for coordination, but in time it was the theology of church that became the premier objective and the most telling force advancing restructure. This chapter describes at length the process of restructure and concludes with reflections of both achievements and disappointments that were later expressed by leaders of the process.

The final three chapters of this 323-page history are devoted to studies of Disciples whose leadership spanned the period from 1946 to the present. Cummins describes the background, challenges, and achievements of each of these leaders. Those studied are Gaines M. Cook, who served as the first full-time executive secretary of the International Convention, followed by each of the individuals who have served as General Minister and President since the office was established in Restructure: A. Dale Fiers, Kenneth K. Teegarden, John O. Humbert, Richard L. Hamm, Sharon Watkins, and Teresa Hord Owens.

The challenges that one or more of these leaders faced included: 1) helping persons to understand the concept of “covenant” that is the foundation of Restructure, 2) implementing *The Provisional Design* that came out of Restructure and eventually was approved as “The Design,” 3) controversy regarding the ordination of gay and lesbian Disciples, 4) the Jonestown tragedy, 5) addressing issues of social justice, 6) the passage from the *modern* to a *postmodern* world, 7) mainline Protestant decline, 8) differences between the worldviews of laity and clergy, 9) mission alignment, and 10) a new landscape for church.

Among the achievements that Cummins notes were Full Communion with the United Church of Christ and developing a Process of Discernment to move the church toward

reflection and conversation around issues for which there is little consensus.

Anyone who wishes to help lead the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) into the future would do well to purchase and absorb Duane Cummins' *The Disciples: A Struggle for Reformation, Second Edition*.