

### Ministers and Masters: Methodism, Manhood, and Honor in the Old South

Steven M. Stowe

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#### Recommended Citation

Stowe, Steven M. (2012) "Ministers and Masters: Methodism, Manhood, and Honor in the Old South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.2.20

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss2/19>

## Review

Stowe, Steven M.

Spring 2012

**Carney, Charity R.** *Ministers and Masters: Methodism, Manhood, and Honor in the Old South*. Louisiana State University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3886-1

### Shedding New Light on the Intersection of Religion and Masculinity

As the numbers of Methodists grew in the antebellum South after 1800, so did the tension between the insurgent implications of their faith and the church's stake in cultural stability. As a means for hope and personal morality, Methodism and other Protestant denominations worked their reformist ways in the lives of both free and slave southerners. Just as surely, Methodist churches helped secure southern slavery.

Charity R. Carney's first book, *Ministers and Masters: Methodism, Manhood, and Honor in the Old South*, looks at an important setting for this drama, the experience of ministers and other devout Methodists who embraced their faith as a measure of manhood. As studies by Donald Mathews, Christine Heyrman, Randy Sparks, and Cynthia Lynn Lysterly, among others, have shown in various contexts, an insistent Protestantism challenged southern white men to be more forceful leaders in their families and communities, sometimes to the point of disrupting social harmony in the name of shaking up individual complacency. At the same time, especially by the 1830s, the Methodist hierarchy and ever larger numbers of slave-owning Methodists gave up the faith's early opposition to slavery. After a schism with their northern brethren in 1844, they created a southern church committed to maintaining slavery by educating and exhorting masters and slaves to trust in God but make their worldly ties with each other. The question arose for whites and their ministers: how can devout Christians keep their edge without cutting away at slavery and white supremacy?

Carney's approach is to look closely at how Methodist preachers worked in this setting to be both worthy Methodists and worthy men. It was not an easy

task but, as good Christians, the men did not expect ease. Indeed, they were supposed to reject it by living out a manhood that was assertive, but always under God's judgment. Faith gave these men a model of manhood resting on self-control and self-effacement, in bald contrast to men who relied on a barbed sense of personal honor and the happy inclination to drink and spree with other like-minded men. More, which Carney makes her principle thesis, Methodist teachings stressed an essential equality of all people before God. It was a tenet put into practice only with great difficulty. Men had to be willing to learn from their dependents. They had to enforce discipline but never arbitrarily. As Carney's primary sources are the biographies and memoirs of ministers, along with periodical publications of Methodist groups, the story is told plainly and many times over: a man struggles to recognize others – men, women, children, and slaves – as Christians equal to himself in God's eyes, but always within a social order built from the hierarchies of bondage. Spiritual likeness among all Christians threatened, every day, to blur the means of male leadership that few men wished to put at risk.

Carney artfully and interestingly explores this tension in terms of Methodist men's cautious purchase on the "code" of honor, their concern for church discipline, marriage and family life, and their care for the standing of enslaved people in the white church. She takes her ministers seriously, and she patiently opens up the significance of the instructive stories where men were urged to walk away from violence, learn about Christ from children and slaves, and, in short, mediate with their faith the power they exercised as men. Carney sees that a man who took seriously that his earthly power was as limited as anyone's in the face of God's vast leveling, might well moderate his exercise of power in the name of his own salvation.

She also sees that the published accounts of good Methodists and failed Methodists were packaged as moral dramas and so must be read as standing somewhere between social reality and cultural ideal. Her work is on its firmest ground with regard to understanding the latter. The book does not take up family correspondence as a body of evidence closer to the pulse of family life, as Scott Stephan does in *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (2008). Nor are Carney's Methodists the social modernizers and canny proto-professionals found in Beth Barton Schweiger's *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and the Pulpit in Nineteenth-century Virginia* (2000). For the most part, Carney's Methodist men are wary strivers, seeking a Godly life that will neither impair their manly

leadership nor their manhood. In sizing up these men, Carney might have been more curious about women's role in holding up masculine ideals, and at times she seems to back away from how men's self-indulgence, or even their playfulness, gave narrative energy to their stories of challenge, provocation, and God's grace. In all, though, this is a thoughtful, persuasive, and well-written history of Methodists and masters which should engage a wide readership among historians of the South, religion, and gender.

*Steven M. Stowe is Professor Emeritus of History, Indiana University, Bloomington. He is working on a study of southern women diarists, subjectivity, and the Civil War.*