

1-1-1999

## Stone-Campbell Biography Edwin R. Errett: Martyr to a Lost Cause

Henry Webb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Webb, Henry (1999) "Stone-Campbell Biography Edwin R. Errett: Martyr to a Lost Cause," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 21.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss1/21>

This Biography is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# Stone-Campbell Biography

## EDWIN R. ERRETT: Martyr to a Lost Cause

Henry Webb

Edwin R. Errett, editor of the *Christian Standard* from 1929 until his death in 1944, is known primarily for the leadership he provided to Christian Churches/Churches of Christ during a critical period in their history. A descendent of the distinguished family of Henry Errett, he was the son of William Russell Errett, who was a cousin of Isaac Errett, one of the founders and the ultimate owner/publisher of the *Christian Standard*.

Edwin Reeder Errett was born near Carnegie, Pennsylvania, on January 7, 1891. After graduating from high school in 1907, he studied for a year at Western Pennsylvania University (now University of Pittsburgh) before transferring to Bethany College to study for ministry. Following graduation from Bethany (A.B., valedictorian) in 1911, he entered Yale University Divinity School. The next year he accepted a position at Standard Publishing (then owned by Russell Errett, a distant cousin) to become office editor of the *Christian Standard*. From 1917 until 1925 he was commentator and lesson

writer of Bible school materials, and in the latter year he was made editor-in-chief of all Bible school publications. In 1929 he was named editor of the *Christian Standard*. For the next fifteen years, despite heavy speaking agendas, every issue of the journal save one contained at least one of his editorials.

Edwin Errett maintained a prodigiously heavy speaking and travel schedule. He loved the brotherhood that had nurtured him, and he worked diligently to promote its interests. He lived in turbulent times and was grieved to see the dissension that erupted in his day. During his student days at Bethany, the great Centennial Convention met in Pittsburgh (1909), and he was very much aware of the controversy that raged over the H. L. Willett and Samuel Hardin Church speeches. He was at Standard Publishing in 1917 during the turmoil over the introduction of theological liberalism at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky. He was involved in the effort in 1923 to establish a counterinfluence in

a conservative institution for ministerial education, the Cincinnati Bible Institute. When that school was merged with McGarvey Bible Institute in 1924 to form Cincinnati Bible Seminary, Errett served as a trustee and offered his services as a teacher of classes at night.

In 1919 three missionary agencies were merged with some of the other agencies to form the United Christian Missionary Society. At the time there were serious misgivings in the brotherhood over what appeared to some observers to be too much centralization and concentration of power. Those misgivings were exacerbated by the disclosure in 1922 that some of the missionaries in China and the Philippine Islands were bringing members into the churches who had not been immersed.<sup>1</sup> The brotherhood was engulfed in bitter controversy over the matter, and the annual International Conventions were arenas of conflict. The liberal faction suffered a resounding defeat in the convention in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1925, only

to regroup and completely outmaneuver the conservatives in Memphis in 1926. Errett called Memphis “a convention of bad faith.”<sup>2</sup> Opponents of the new developments concluded that the existing organizations functioned to entrench unacceptable positions and put their proponents beyond the reach of brotherhood accountability. The following year the dissenters held the first North American Christian Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. The *Christian Standard* gave this move unqualified support and endorsement.

It is important to keep clearly in mind the motivation of those who called the first North American Conventions. The assembly was not intended to be divisive; rather, the hope was that it would be unitive. The International Conventions had been scenes of bitter conflict. The NACC was to be a convention open to all, and its focus was to be on the historic aims of the movement and on the unitive forces in the life of the brotherhood. Divisive issues were to have no place on the agenda. In retrospect that goal appears incredibly naïve, but at the time it promised welcome relief from the acrimony that had marked International Conventions for too many years. Edwin Errett and the *Christian Standard* were dedicated to the preservation of the unity of the Disciples.

Evidence of the unitive hopes of the organizers of the convention is seen clearly in the fact that almost all of the agencies of the brotherhood (except the United Christian Missionary Society [UCMS]) were invited to have representation in the display area of the convention. The Christian Board of Publication, the Pension Fund, the National Benevolent Association, and numbers of the colleges were represented at the

first and subsequent North American gatherings. That continued to be the case until 1951.<sup>3</sup> The point of contention was the mission policies of the UCMS; that issue had no impact on the other agencies that had served various needs of the churches for decades.

Edwin Errett clearly understood the Disciples to be a movement within Christendom at large that sought to unite the followers of Christ on the basis of restoring the faith and practices found in the New Testament. His interests were not confined to the Disciples movement, which he viewed against the background of Christendom at large. He believed that the Disciples had a contribution to make to the contemporary efforts toward Christian unity and that it was important to inject that insight into efforts on behalf of Christian unity. Those wider interests led him to serve as a delegate to the World Conference on Faith and Order in Denmark in 1935 and in Edinburgh in 1937. Clearly, he did not share the parochial outlook of some of his contemporaries. Late in 1943, when the Allies in World War II became aware of the plight of the Jewish people in Nazi territories, Errett was asked to serve as chairman of an Emergency Committee in Cincinnati to extend help to the Jewish people in Europe.

Edwin Errett was involved in a number of other causes. He served as a trustee of Butler University and of the Christian Foundation in Indianapolis. The latter, a fund of several millions of dollars created to underwrite educational agencies and institutions of the Disciples, was established by Gurnie L. Reeves and Will I. Irwin, close personal friends of Edwin Errett.

Errett’s commitment to the continued unity of the Disciples and his ef-

forts to avoid a second tragic rupture within the ranks<sup>4</sup> is seen in his consistent promotion of agencies reporting to the International Convention; indeed, one finds regular coverage of the convention in the *Standard*. Reports from many state conventions are also found. Why not? They were all part of the one brotherhood. It was “us.” The problem was with one agency; why should that one agency alienate brothers and sisters from the useful and valuable services of other agencies that had served the cause well for many decades? “Open membership” (the objectionable practice of receiving the unimmersed into membership) was a theological/ecclesiological issue and had nothing to do with benevolence, church loans, or pensions for retired and needy ministers.

The matter of pensions was of particular interest to the editor, who was a vigorous advocate of the moral obligation of the churches to provide for elderly ministers whose lives had been spent in the service of the church. Promotions urging congregations to enroll in the Pension Plan pointed out that thoughtful and bright young men would turn away from the ministry on discovery that there was no provision for their later years when their services were no longer in demand. Thus it was in the best long-term interest of the church to make such provision through the Pension Plan. Errett was also a vigorous advocate of “independent” missions, but in all other respects he saw himself and the churches as “brotherhood.” Under no circumstances was support of and participation in the UCMS to be a mark of “brotherhood.”

A prime example of Edwin Errett’s commitment to the unity of the Disciples is seen in his efforts on behalf

of the Commission on Restudy of the Disciples. This commission was created by the International Convention in 1934 to “restudy our whole Disciple Movement and, if possible, to recommend a future program.”<sup>5</sup> The commission followed a previous effort, the Commission on Harmony.<sup>6</sup> Both emerged from a groundswell of fear that the Disciples were moving toward another division and that it was imperative to make serious efforts to prevent such a development before it was too late. There was deep feeling, especially among older leaders, that Disciples were one people despite two forms of mission activity. Many congregations had demonstrated that it was possible to accommodate both mission programs amicably.

The commission, created by the International Convention, was to consist of twenty members representative of the various shades of thought found among Disciples. Edwin Errett was one of the original appointees and served on the commission until his death. The aims of the commission and those who participated in its activities would become centers for bitter controversy in later years. Proponents of extremist views attacked the mediating position, and Errett was caught in the middle and subjected to vicious attack from his own people.

During the previous two decades, a very different orientation had emerged. It held that not only was the missionary society corrupt but the whole apparatus of the International Convention and all of the agencies connected with it—including the Pension Fund, the Board of Church Extension (a loan agency), and the National Benevolent Association (which maintained homes for widows, orphans, etc.)—were infected with the virus of

heresy. Fidelity to the gospel mandated that they all be repudiated. The collision between this point of view and the older one, to which Errett and many older leaders subscribed, was occasioned by the work of the Commission on Restudy.

The commission met thrice annually—twice for study and once, at the International Convention, to attend to business matters. Its work was thorough and slow, but after almost a decade it was ready to “recommend a future program,” one aimed at reconciliation of the division. For a decade and a half, two conventions had been holding separate sessions. This tended toward polarization. Older ministers on both sides of the cleavage who knew each other personally were passing and being replaced by younger leaders who were strangers to each other. It was clear that time was running out. The spark that ignited action by both sides came from a recommendation by the commission in 1941 calling for a three-year experiment to hold but one convention with a program to be organized by a joint committee from both groups. The effort to implement the experiment early in 1942 met firm resistance. Opponents in both groups were alarmed and moved quickly to take preventive action. The leadership of both conventions rejected the plan, and the reaction was severe. At their 1942 convention, the Disciples elected for the first time a president who practiced open membership. His election was interpreted to be an endorsement of the controversial practice by the whole convention.<sup>7</sup> The move was an outright affront to all who were trying to heal the rupture and an embarrassment to members of the commission. Edwin Errett was convinced that the move did not represent the thinking of the ma-

majority of Disciples or its ministry. He undertook to poll the 7,443 ministers listed in the Yearbook, asking them to register their approval or disapproval of the selection of an advocate of open membership to a position of leadership in the brotherhood. Of the 3,708 ballots that were returned, 3,193 were considered efficacious; the result was a resounding “No” by a margin of more than 3.5 to 1.

But the real problem lay within the conservative ranks. The number of those who wanted nothing to do with anything associated with the International Convention was growing. A series of rallies held in the fall of 1943 in the chapel of Cincinnati Bible Seminary resulted in the formation of an ad hoc Committee on Action, chaired by Burris Butler, minister of Southside Christian Church in Kokomo, Indiana. The committee of fifty ministers issued “Call For Enlistment”<sup>8</sup> in a five-point program for a militant stand against conciliation. The program was a repudiation of the goal of healing the breach, the policy to which Errett and those who stood with him were committed.

The pivotal factor in this conflict of policies was Willard Mohorter, manager of Standard Publishing Company and secretary of the corporation. Mohorter’s enlistment in the militant goals of the committee came to light in the 4 December 1943 issue of the *Christian Standard*, which carried an announcement that the journal would henceforth give less attention to general religious matters and would instead become a “rallying center for all who believe implicitly in the authority of Christ as revealed to us in the divinely inspired New Testament Scriptures.” Significantly, the announcement was made not by Errett but by

Mohorter. Everybody who understood the dynamics of the situation realized that it was a repudiation of any effort toward brotherhood unification and an adoption of a very militant position on all issues of brotherhood policies. The real victims in the policy change were Edwin R. Errett and those associated with him.

Errett sensed that his dismissal from *Standard* was imminent, but he was not willing to give up the cause to which he had devoted so much of his life. As he appraised the aggressive change in the *Christian Standard*, he realized that the only hope of holding the brotherhood together was to begin a new journal that would be dedicated to the promotion of the unity of the brotherhood. The obstacles to that option were enormous. The year 1943 was wartime, and newsprint was rationed. But the big problem was fiscal. To launch a new journal would require enormous capital. The hope for financing the new venture rested in the Christian Foundation, of which Errett was a trustee and Will Irwin was the leading influence. That hope suffered a serious blow on December 14, 1943, when Will Irwin suffered a fatal heart attack

while at work in his Indianapolis bank. Errett still held on to hope and planned to attend a meeting of the Christian Foundation on Saturday, January 29, 1944. Several associates in editorial positions at *Standard* were apprised of Errett's plans. As he left on Friday, he paused at J. D. Murch's office to say that he thought everything would work out. The next morning he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and almost instant death. With Edwin Errett's passing, the hope for a unified, reconciled brotherhood also perished. In April 1944 Burris Butler was named editor of the *Christian Standard*, and the program to force division was fully on. Reaction to those developments was severe. The Christian Foundation saw Errett's death at fifty-three years as premature and the result of undue pressure to which he had been subjected. It immediately cut off all funding of non-organization enterprises.<sup>9</sup> The death of Edwin R. Errett left a leadership void that was never filled. In a few years, the voices of moderation fell silent and were replaced by militant programs. The plea for brotherhood unity had died.

**HENRY WEBB** is professor emeritus of church history at Milligan College in Milligan College, Tennessee.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The details are too complex to be related here. For more information, see the author's *In Search of Christian Unity* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1990), chaps. 10, 11.

<sup>2</sup>Errett, E., "A Convention of Bad Faith," *Christian Standard*, 27 November 1926, 8.

<sup>3</sup>The North American Christian Convention was not originally intended to be an annual event. It did not become an annual institution until 1951.

<sup>4</sup>The separation of the non-instrument churches is here seen as the first rupture within the ranks of the movement.

<sup>5</sup>*The Report of the Commission on Restudy of the Disciples of Christ* (Indianapolis: International Convention, 1948), 263.

<sup>6</sup>See *Christian Standard*, 24 August 1919, 795.

<sup>7</sup>See H. Minard, *Front Rank* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1942), 797.

<sup>8</sup>See *Christian Standard*, 27 November 1943, 1-3.

<sup>9</sup>The Christian Foundation had underwritten the publication of a three-volume sermon series, *New Testament Christianity*, which featured the conservative position of the movement. It also had provided generous funding of Cincinnati Bible Seminary and Lake James School of Ministry.