

## What Could We Have Done Differently?\*

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I have been asked to address the topic of “What Went Wrong?” in the events of the early decades of this century. The topic was later revised to “How We Might Have Done Things Differently”. Permit me to begin by recognizing that this is a highly subjective assignment that involves a measure of personal judgment that all would not share. I know as well as any other person here that how one assesses past events depends on the perspective from which one views the data. I can only admit to a certain sense of discomfort with this, and I assure those present who see these events from a different perspective that I stand ready to consider with respect the different conclusions which they may have reached. Also, as an historian, I am a bit uncomfortable talking about what might have happened if what did happen didn’t happen.

Forty-five years ago, while doing my doctoral dissertation, I reviewed all the material about the Memphis Convention in 1926 that I could lay hands on, and since then I have “picked the brains” of every person I could find who was present at that fateful conclave. Inasmuch as Memphis was the climax to a long series of events, it is necessary for even a superficial understanding to do a hasty review of the developments which led up to that Convention. The focal issue in a long series of controversies was the introduction of the practice of Open Membership in the Disciples’ mission in China. For decades Disciple thinking on baptism had been formulated largely by the three debates in which Alexander Campbell engaged on this subject and these convictions had been reinforced by Disciple evangelism (five

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finger exercise) and by considerable inter-denominational polemic. At the turn of the century most Disciples were unprepared for a new view of baptism which began to appear in a few, scattered congregations. This new view gave rise to heated debate over the next two decades. However; the congregational polity of Disciples prevented them from taking any kind of action against those congregations which adopted the innovation. But it was quite other-wise when this practice was discovered in the ranks of the Foreign Christian Missionary Society. In 1920 Frank Garrett, secretary of the China Mission, wrote to the Executive Committee of the newly formed UCMS asking their advice about introducing the practice, indicating that it had the approval of the missionaries on the field. When the Exec. Committee failed to forbid the innovation, Robert E Elmore, secretary of the Exec. Committee made the issue public by publishing the correspondence.<sup>1</sup> There followed years of controversy marked by resolutions adopted by Conventions and then “interpreted” in such a manner as to pre-empt their intent. This culminated in the appointment of a five member Peace Commission to which was added five persons from each persuasion. It formulated an unequivocal “Peace Resolution”<sup>2</sup> which was designed to eliminate the practice of Open Membership on all mission fields of the United Society. Following two days of heated debate at the Oklahoma City Convention in 1925, the Peace Resolution was adopted by an overwhelming majority. The opponents of the practice thought they had finally settled the issue and peace would be restored to the troubled Brotherhood. Subsequent events proved that they could not have been more mistaken. Instead, it was time for the opposition to organize for development of a strategy designed to reverse the course of events.

The Board of Managers of the United Society met in St. Louis, MO, Dec. 2-3, 1925 to “interpret” the Peace Resolution. This was followed by a strategy meeting in Columbus, OH, on Dec. 8, 1925. Eighty-three selected participants convened to develop a “plan for the future”<sup>3</sup> to deal with the crisis. The Memphis Convention of 1926 stands in stark contrast to Oklahoma City in the previous year. It was carefully orchestrated to frustrate and embarrass the opposition. Among other things, the strategy included: (1) A Commission to the Orient which brought to the Convention a report that there was no Open Membership in China (later denied by Marguerite Harmon Bro, one of the missionaries), (2) a last minute cancellation of a lease on an auditorium close to the Convention Hall to be used as gathering place to rally the opposition, (3) Inasmuch as voting was by voice and the segment that could out-shout the opposition prevailed, a Youth

Convention of several hundred young people was organized to be brought to the Convention floor at critical times to lend their voices on strategic votes,<sup>4</sup> (4) an approach to the opposition was made by one of the members of the Commission to the Orient suggesting that the Commission's report was accurate so far as it went, but some of the facts were not to be reported; and if certain questions were asked, these facts would have to be revealed. Six questions were formulated.<sup>5</sup> When the first question was raised on the floor the response was exactly opposite of what was projected at the meeting the night before and the questioner was embarrassed. No other questions were raised

I cite these items not to make indictments or to embarrass anybody but rather to account for the intense frustration experienced by the conservative delegates at Memphis and to provide background and rationale for Edwin R. Errett's description of the gathering as "A Convention of Bad Faith." In reporting on the gathering, he concluded,

many disciples of the Nazarene went away declaring it the last International Convention they would attend. ...In short, if we had to believe that this gathering at Memphis represents the Disciples of Christ in the Restoration Movement, then we must conclude that we don't belong.<sup>6</sup>

Years later, when I reviewed the reports of Memphis in the brotherhood journals, I was dismayed at the tactics employed by the partisans of both positions. It seemed to me to resemble a convention of one of the political parties more than a gathering of churchmen and I found myself in full agreement with the later report of the Commission to Restudy the Disciples which said: "We are agreed that our people have not yet found a type of convention which fully satisfies their tradition, their convictions, and their sense of obligation to give united expression to the interests of Christ's kingdom."<sup>7</sup>

I also concluded at that time that it was a bad mistake for the dissenters to abandon the Convention in 1926, even though their apparent triumph was transformed into bitter defeat. Subsequent interviews with those who were present at the Convention in Memphis forced me to alter this conclusion and have convinced me that the level of frustration was so deep that there simply was no other viable course of action.

Memphis marks an important turning point, a fork in the road for the frustrated segment of the Brotherhood. 1927 marks the point

when the opposition went their own way. After years of struggle to register their influence within the Untied Society the conclusion that was apparent to them was that organizations were power structures that were beyond the ability of the people who supported them to change and thenceforth they would not countenance any kind of organizational structure that had the potential for such autonomy. Thus they became “Independents” and subsequently developed a church polity that has become a distinctive dogma for these people.

The first North American Convention was summoned for the following year in Indianapolis and was designed to be a gathering for fellowship, inspiration, and promotion, It was to be open to all Disciples who were tired of conflict and longed for fellowship on the basis of the historic Plea. Many of the agencies now affiliated with The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were regularly represented in the display areas of this Convention, which it was naively hoped would preserve the unity of the Disciples. The Christian Board was given space equal to Standard Publishing Co., the Pension Fund, the N.B.A., and the Board of Church Extension were regular exhibitors.

What could we have been done differently? Frankly, I do not know, for 1927. Looking back, it may have been naive to think that the Disciples could sustain two national conventions. Years later the Commission on Restudy noted that two conventions are by nature schismatic.<sup>8</sup> I could discover only one serious effort toward reunification for the next fifteen years, certainly a sad reality if indeed there were genuine interest in maintaining unity. During this time a new method of doing missions was evolving and new institutions were developing beyond the scope of the International Convention. The structure for a separate existence outside the previously existing agencies facilitated division. Meanwhile the older leaders, those whose acquaintanceships transcended the growing chasm, were passing from the scene and being replaced by younger men who were strangers to those of differing views and who tended to see each other as “enemies to the cause.” In this kind of atmosphere distrust and insecurity proliferates.

Sensing the potential for a second division in the Movement, a sentiment arose among some within the International Convention to prevent that from happening. The 1934 Convention in Des Moines, IA, authorized a Commission to Restudy the Disciples.<sup>9</sup>

Although by no means balanced in its composition and including many who were part of the strategy group for Memphis, the Commission labored diligently under increasing criticism from the

extremes on both sides of the chasm. It attempted to examine areas of common faith and to define disagreements.. The Commission met thrice yearly and engaged in some serious study Ironically, its mandate to “recommend a future program” looking toward healing the rupture is what precipitated a crisis. Reaction from extremists on both sides engendered bitter conflicts, hastened division, and reduced the work of the Commission to a tragic anachronism. For the shameful series of events that followed there is more than enough guilt for all to share abundantly. I first learned personally what set this sad series of events into motion from W. A. Shullenberger. Later Dean Walker confirmed the account. With sadness I summarize the events of the next few years.

In 1942 W. A . Shullenberger was President of the International Convention and Dean Walker was President of the North American Convention. Both lived in Indianapolis and both taught on the faculty of Butler School of Religion. Both were members of the Commission to Restudy the Disciples. They were personal friends. After a decade of study, the Commission had reached the point of making recommendations to fulfill its mandate to avoid schism. It recommended:

that the president and the executive committee of the International Convention invite representatives of the North American Christian Convention to collaborate in preparing the program for a unitary convention in 1942.<sup>10</sup>

This recommendation raised a red flag in both camps. Reactions were quick and decisive. The International Convention responded by electing, for the first time in its history, an avowed proponent of Open Membership, Clarence E. Lemmon, as its president, an action interpreted by some editors on the Christian Board as proof that Open Membership was no longer a problem for the Disciples. This was an affront to the Commission and to all who were interested in closing the gap.

The reaction in the North American Convention was very harsh. Not only was the proposal defeated but the men who had served on the Commission were vilified in some quarters as “compromisers” who were basically “disloyal” to the faith. A special target of vilification was Edwin R. Errett, Editor of Christian Standard and a member of the Commission.

Errett's policy had consistently been that Disciples are one Brotherhood. His only quarrel was with the United Society; otherwise he supported all of the agencies reporting to the International Convention, whose sessions were always covered in the Standard. But a new outlook had developed among some of the leaders now generally known as "Independents." This viewpoint distrusted anything associated with Indianapolis and it genuinely feared any reconciliation. The leader of this faction was Burriss R. Butler, an Indiana pastor, who organized in 1943 an ad hoc "Committee on Action," consisting of fifty persons and dedicated to militant action against the Disciples in Indianapolis. This Committee never met, but its Executive Committee of ten persons met once in an effort to secure the ouster of Edwin Errett as Editor of the *Christian Standard*.<sup>11</sup> The meeting failed in its purpose, but it had the support of Willard Mohorter, Manager of Standard Publishing Company.

The December 4, 1943 issue of the *Christian Standard* carried an announcement by Mohorter of "a change of policy." The new policy involved a militant attitude toward the "Disciples." This was in direct opposition to the policies of Edwin R. Errett and several of his associate editors in the Company. Errett concluded that his dismissal was imminent. He and his colleagues believed that the only course was to launch a new journal dedicated to reconciliation and preservation of the Brotherhood. To this end, he looked to The Christian Foundation, of which he was a Director. Will Irwin and Marshall Reeves, who were founders of this Foundation, were Errett's close friends and they gave him encouragement. But it all unraveled when Will Irwin died suddenly in Dec. of 1943, and Edwin Errett died suddenly the next month. When word of Errett's intentions reached Standard there was an editorial blood-bath and six on the editorial staff were summarily dismissed or resigned. Reaction to these events turned the Christian Foundation away from support of any Independent enterprise whatsoever. Meanwhile, the vacancy in the editorial chair of the *Christian Standard* was filled the following April by Burriss Butler. Soon the war that was envisioned by the policy change was fully on.

Butler launched a "Call to Enlistment", followed up in 1947 with his "Stand Up and Be Counted"<sup>12</sup> program, urging congregations to take formal action to repudiate support of all agencies reporting to the International Convention. This produced conflict and division in many congregations that hitherto had accommodated both types of mission work while giving support to the benevolent homes and participating in the Pension program and the Board of Church

Extension. The result was a series of civil law suits in several states to determine which faction in a given congregation was entitled to use the church property.<sup>13</sup> A Committee of One Thousand (the names were never disclosed and no meeting was ever held), headed by an attorney in Jefferson City, MO, vigorously attacked the agencies in Indianapolis. The zenith of this policy was reached when this “Committee” purchased a full page ad in the Columbus, OH Journal of Aug. 7, 1946, on the week-end when the International Convention met in that city, denouncing the Disciples for infidelity and challenging them to public debate.

There are few of us who are not ashamed of those years. We witnessed the tragic division of congregations and, in too many cases, the rupture of family ties. Moderate leaders stood by frustrated, with no voice, medium, or leadership, reeling over the death of Errett and the demise of conciliation. It finally became apparent to Butler and associates that their policy was counter-productive, to say the least, and it was abruptly terminated. The International Convention held a “Centennial Convention” in Cincinnati in 1949, which was totally ignored by Butler and the *Christian Standard*.<sup>14</sup> But the damage was done. 1951 was the last year that the Christian Board and many of the older agencies were present at the North American Convention. Since 1951 the North American Convention has become a wholly Independent gathering of very large proportions furnishing the major cohesive factor in this fellowship of some 5,000 congregations.

Of course, an attack provokes a counter-attack and the Disciples were not entirely quiescent during these troubled years. One could point to a publication by Stephen Corey,<sup>15</sup> which was designed as a polemic and gave exposure to all of the “sins” of Standard and the Independents, or to the official Commission on Cooperative Polity and Practice authorized in 1960 as a watchdog body to identify and circumvent Independent influence. In time the hostilities died, largely because, in the words of W. E. Garrison, “we had drifted so far apart that we were no longer within the range of each other’s guns.” That seems to be where we are today.

Thankfully, a new generation of leaders is no longer as threatened by meeting with “the enemy;” in fact, we no longer find such categorization to be the least bit appropriate.

Perhaps the time has come when we, who have not personally shared in these old conflicts, can enjoy the luxury of a more dispassionate and rational perspective. (It is hard to engage in conflicts dispassionately.) We may be privileged to explore new possibilities for

rapprochement that, frankly, would have horrified our forefathers of a generation or two ago.

These considerations should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there really are deep theological and sociological differences among the heirs of the Stone/Campbell tradition and that these remain as a real challenge to be faced. Perhaps the time is coming when a serious re-study of the work of the Restudy Commission would be in order. And while we are facing the fractures in the larger heritage, we dare not become unaware of the fissures which may be found in each one of its three parts as well.

What can be learned from this regrettable series of events? A few things are very apparent. From my limited perspective, several things stand out:

1) The system by which decisions were made in the Conventions was quite flawed. While it might be “democratic” to permit every member a voice, when the process degenerates into simple shouting matches, I have trouble assigning the results to the Holy Spirit, especially when the crassest political-party methodologies are employed. There must be a better way to reach decisions, especially in a religious body often accused of being “too rational.”

(2). The situation among us that permits one or two persons to determine policy changes that can plunge hundreds of congregations into chaos has to give thoughtful persons pause. In particular, I refer to the dismissal of Edwin R. Errett and the termination of the policy of conciliation which he had espoused. Christian Churches have still not found, nor even desired to find, any means of collective consideration of larger issues which we confront as a people.

(3) We have not yet learned how to deal with extremists. Some of them are blunt and harsh; others are suave but equally persistent. All of them are dedicated, passionate, and charismatic. Too often their shrill voices have drowned out the more temperate message of the reasonable majority. I look back with sorrow at the leadership vacuum that enabled the tragic events of 1945-1951 to happen. The Via Media had no voice, no leadership.

(4) We have not yet learned how to manage conflicts other than to “let nature take its course,” which can be devastating. How to direct passion in behalf of a larger consensus and to disagree without becoming disagreeable is a quest we seemingly will be passing on to the next generation.. Perhaps we can make some initial progress here and in so doing establish a refreshing, new precedent.

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Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Garrett, Frank, "Letter to the Exec. Com. of the UCMS," reproduced in R.E. Elmore, "Does China Mission Endorse Open Membership?" *Christian Standard* 55 (Aug. 7, 1920): 1108 .

<sup>2</sup> "Report of the Peace Conference Committee" *Christian Standard* 60 (Oct 24,1925): 2235.

<sup>3</sup> The meeting was summoned by E. M. Bowman. The correspondence is on file at the Disciples Historical Society, Nashville, TN.

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with Robert Burns, President of the Youth Convention.

<sup>5</sup>See "The Commission on the Orient," *Christian Standard* 61, 33 Supplement (1926): 4 and entitled "The Commission's Report Reviewed: U.C.M.S. Committee White Washes Open Membership Missionaries and Endorses Modernist Policy of Secretaries," *Christian Standard* 61, 33 Supplement (1926): 5-7. Also see the personal papers of O. A. Trinkle in the library of Great Lakes Christian College, Lansing, MI.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin R. Errett, "A Convention of Bad Faith," *Christian Standard* 61 (Nov. 27, 1926): 636.

<sup>7</sup> *Yearbook of International Convention of Disciples of Christ, 1948* (Indianapolis: International Convention of Disciples of Christ, 1948), 120-122.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Yearbook of International Convention of Disciples of Christ, 1934* (Indianapolis: United Christian Mission Society, 1934).

<sup>10</sup> *Year Book f International Convention of Disciples of Christ, 1941* (Indianapolis: Yearbook Publication Committee, 1941), 87.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Lester Ford, Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Committee on Action.

<sup>12</sup> *Christian Standard* 81 (June 7, 1947): 401ff.

<sup>13</sup> For a resume of fourteen of these cases see James B. North, *Union in Truth, An Interpretive History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Butler characterized the Centennial International Convention as just another "denominational gathering." *Christian Standard* 83 (Nov. 12, 1949): 730.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen J. Corey, *Fifty Years of Attack and Controversy: The Consequences Among Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: The Committee on Publication of the Corey Manuscript, 1953).



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