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Isaac Errett: Unity and Expediency

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On 4 March 1866 Alexander Campbell died. He was the last of the original great leaders of the Restoration Movement. All the others—Thomas Campbell, Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott—had preceded him in death. Campbell had in many ways been the symbol of the movement. Although serious tensions had existed for more than a decade and a half over the issue of cooperation through a missionary society, and for almost as long over the use of instrumental music in worship, as long as Campbell lived he exerted a powerful force to hold the movement together.

But now Campbell was gone. Even before his death many had speculated about who might fill his shoes to lead the movement forward. Few understood that the movement had become too diverse for such a leader ever again. Yet, particularly in the North, one man was mentioned time and again as being in line to receive Campbell’s mantle. He was a relatively young Ohio editor and preacher who had been closely associated with Campbell in his later years, Isaac Errett.

Isaac Errett was born in New York City, 2 January 1820, to a family of Scotch-Irish descent. His father, Henry, had come to the United States from Ireland sometime before 1810. In Ireland Henry had been associated with an extremely strict group of Scottish Christians that followed the ideas of Robert Sandeman and the Haldane brothers. These men had been leaders in restoration movements out of the Church of Scotland in the late 1700s.

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Some in these movements adopted immersion, and Henry Errett was a leader in a New York congregation of these so-called “Scotch Baptists.” He wrote several tracts on religious subjects, including church organization and baptism. The group took an extremely literal view of the Bible which caused them to struggle with such matters as foot-washing and the “holy kiss.” Yet in most areas of doctrine and practice they were very close to the ideas then developing in Pennsylvania and Kentucky with the Campbells and Barton Stone. Like most previous restoration groups, however, these New York Scotch Baptists were very much separatists and “puritans”—they were not particularly interested in Christian unity but in doctrinal correctness.

Isaac Errett barely knew his father (Henry died in February 1825 when Isaac was only five). In 1827 Isaac’s mother remarried, and the family moved to a farm in New Jersey. But in 1832, the year that the Stone and Campbell churches began coming together all across the country, Isaac’s family got western fever and moved to Pittsburgh. There they attended an independent Scottish church similar to the one in New York. It was in Pittsburgh in the Spring of 1833 that Isaac and his brother Russell responded to the gospel and were baptized.

During the 1830s Errett remained an active member of the Pittsburgh church and frequently had the opportunity to address the group during their “mutual edification” meetings. Soon he was encouraged to prepare short talks for other services, and in April 1839 Errett was asked to be the regular minister for the Pittsburgh church. He remained there until 1844 when he accepted the ministry of the New Lisbon, Ohio, church, formerly a Baptist church in the Mahoning Association, which had come into the Restoration Movement in 1827 through the evangelistic efforts of Walter Scott. Later Errett preached for the North Bloomfield and Warren, Ohio, churches. From 1857 to 1860 Errett served as Corresponding Secretary of the American Christian Missionary Society, and in 1861 he was made coeditor with Alexander Campbell of the Millennial Harbinger as well as a fund-raising agent for Campbell’s Bethany College.

In October 1861, just after the outbreak of the Civil War, Errett was chosen to preside at the meeting of the American Christian Missionary

Baptist 3 (1 May 1826) 204; Lynn A. McMillon, Restoration Roots (Dallas: Gospel Teachers Publications, 1983) 80-84, 86-94.

5Lamar, Memoirs 1:16-19.
6Ibid., 30-40.
7Ibid., 55-60.
8West, Search 2:26.
Society in Cincinnati. Because of the war, no delegates from Southern states were able to attend. During the convention Dr. J. P. Robinson of Ohio introduced a resolution asking Christians everywhere “to do all in their power to sustain the proper and constituted authorities of the Union.” The resolution was seconded, but David S. Burnet, founder of the American Christian Bible Society, raised a point of order, insisting that the topic was not germane to the business of the convention. Errett ruled that the resolution was in order, but on appeal the group overturned his ruling. In an odd turn of events, the “official” session was recessed for ten minutes, and the group passed the resolution as a “mass meeting” of individual Christians rather than as the American Christian Missionary Society. Two years later as the War raged on, Errett was presiding again when a much stronger resolution was introduced denouncing “the attempts of armed traitors to overthrow our government.” When Errett this time declared the resolution out of order, remembering the events of 1861, he was surprised to find his action reversed again. This time the resolution was passed as an official act of the society. Members of the Southern churches and pacifists among Northern Christians never forgot Errett’s apparent approval of these so-called war resolutions.

In late 1862 Errett was asked to be the minister for the Jefferson Avenue and Beaubien Street Church in Detroit. Two incidents took place there that focussed the ire of many in the brotherhood on Errett. First, in 1863 Errett published a little work entitled “A Synopsis of the Faith and Practice of the Church of Christ,” which was designed to be a brief statement of the Restoration Movement’s beliefs and directed toward interested outsiders. It consisted of ten doctrinal articles followed by a series of bylaws illustrating how his local congregation was organized. Editors like Benjamin Franklin and Moses Lard attacked the “Synopsis” as a creed. Lard said, “It is a deep offense against the brotherhood—an offense tossed into the teeth of a people who, for forty years, have been working against the divisive and evil tendency of creeds.”

The other event concerned the gift of an engraved silver doorplate. At Christmas 1863 Errett helped plan a program for the children of his congregation’s Sunday School. Everyone received small gifts after the program; and when Errett opened his, it was a doorplate with the inscription “Rev. I. Errett.” The news spread that Errett was calling himself Reverend, and several editors denounced him as an example of shameful conformity to

10Moses E. Lard, “Remarks on the Forgoing,” *Lard’s Quarterly* 1 (September 1863) 100.
the “priestridden sects” under “clerical domination” and a drift “toward Rome and away from Jerusalem.” Errett was beginning to get the reputation with some of being a dangerous innovator.

In 1865 Errett accepted a position at the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute (later Hiram College) as principal and professor. While there the most significant event of his life occurred—the founding of the Christian Publishing Company and the Christian Standard, with Errett named as editor of the journal. The motivation for this new publishing venture included a mixture of financial, political, and religious factors. According to Errett’s biographer, J. S. Lamar, several influential leaders became convinced that the movement needed a popular-level weekly paper that would promote a more progressive spirit than the two major papers then published, the American Christian Review and the Gospel Advocate. On 22 December 1865 an organizational meeting was held at the home of oil millionaire Thomas W. Phillips. Four days later at a second meeting capital stock for the company was fixed at one hundred thousand dollars, and Isaac Errett was unanimously elected editor.

The stockholders of the company, including future president James A. Garfield, believed the venture was a sound financial investment and anticipated making a substantial profit. But there was a political motivation involved as well. Several years after Errett’s death, David Lipscomb wrote of a conversation he had with Errett in 1867 when Lipscomb was in Cleveland for medical treatment. Lipscomb explained that the editor of the American Christian Review, Benjamin Franklin, like many church leaders, had tried to remain neutral during the Civil War and had refused to allow articles in his paper that would stir up sectional hatred. Errett told Lipscomb in 1867 that the Standard had been started because Franklin would not allow the pro-Union people to publish their views on the duty of Christians to support the government in time of war. The paper began in April 1866. At first Errett conducted the paper in a way that satisfied the militant pro-Union element in the movement. Most of the stockholders of the company fit that description,


13Lamar, Memoirs 1:300-304.

14Ibid., 304.

particularly James A. Garfield.16 But the Christian Publication Company failed to make a profit for the stockholders, and in January 1868 they dissolved the association and gave the company to Errett. He was to continue publishing the *Standard* and pay off the company’s debts. After taking ownership of the company, Errett developed a much more moderate national image. He attempted to smooth over rough feelings with Southern Christians in 1867 and 1868, particularly David Lipscomb, and even advised preachers to avoid entanglements in political affairs, a position of Lipscomb and of Tolbert Fanning before him.17 Isaac Errett had reached a position of great influence in the movement. Some clearly viewed him as Alexander Campbell’s successor.

**Errett on Unity and Fellowship**

Interpretations of Isaac Errett and his work range from praising him for having saved the Restoration Movement from becoming a legalistic sect, to blaming him for leading a majority of the movement into digression from truth.18 Regardless of the good or evil attributed to him, Errett played one of the main roles in the attempt to diffuse the internal tensions threatening the movement in the late 1800s. He exercised tremendous influence as editor of the *Christian Standard*, and his views gained wide circulation and approval.

Errett accepted the ideas of the founders of the movement, particularly those of Alexander Campbell. Not surprisingly, then, many of Campbell’s ideas on unity are echoed by Errett. In his tract entitled “Our Position” Errett stated:

*The Church of Christ—not sects—is a divine institution. We do not recognize sects, with sectarian names and symbols and terms of fellowship, as branches of the Church of Christ, but as unscriptural and antisscriptural, and therefore to be abandoned for the one Church of God which the New Testament reveals. That God has a people in these sects, we believe; we call on them to come out from all party organizations, to renounce all party names and party tests, and seek only for Christian union and fellowship according to apostolic teaching... the time has*

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now fully come... to insist on the abandonment of sects and a return to the unity of the spirit and union and cooperation that marked the church of the New Testament.19

Anyone familiar with Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address can see the similarities.

Errett frequently wrote on the theme of Christian union, centering on that topic perhaps more than did any other second-generation leader. He saw the divisive issues confronting the Restoration Movement as rooted in a basic failure by most Christians, whatever side they took on the issues, to understand clearly the original unity plea of Stone, Scott, and the Campbells.

What was that original unity plea Errett saw as the basis for fellowship and union among all Christians? It began with faith in Jesus as the basis of all spiritual good.20 Errett stressed that the first leaders of the Restoration Movement had found only one article in the "creed" of the primitive Christians, i.e., faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God; and it was on that one article that they had proposed to unite all Christians.21 No matter how right or wrong one might be concerning other matters, Errett taught, if a person is right about Jesus, he or she is entitled to admission into the divine fellowship of the church.22

Errett understood the early church to have admitted all who put their confidence in Christ, without any other requirement, to equal fellowship through baptism. Faith admitted the person to baptism, and it was baptism that marked formal entrance into the fellowship.23 Subsequent loyalty to Christ through a continued faith in and obedience to his explicit ordinances and commands would cause one to be held in full fellowship.24 No one was to be brought to judgment for anything beyond what Christ had clearly revealed as a truth to be believed or a law to be obeyed. True unity, therefore,

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21Errett, The True Basis of Union, 10, 12.
24Errett, "The Bond of Fellowship," 199.
was a “unity in diversity.” Christians were “one in Christ Jesus,” but beyond the limits of Christ’s clear teaching no unity was required.25

In 1869 a correspondent identified as J. B. C. wrote Errett that he had been troubled recently by a friend’s statement that division in the movement was inevitable. Errett responded with a statement that would be his “official” position throughout the rest of his life.

If a people pleading for the union of all Christians can not maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in their own limited communion, and peaceably dispose of all such questions as are mentioned above [instrumental music in worship and a developing pastor system], and a great many more, then is this plea for union as ridiculous a farce as was ever played before the public. The Apostolic churches had much graver errors in doctrine and practice to dispose of than any that are troubling us; and many had a strong propensity to file off into parties. The lessons of Christian liberty, of tolerance and forbearance, of patience and gentleness taught by the apostles, need to be carefully attended to. No one should allow himself to indulge such fears or to utter them. As long as we are one in the faith of Christ and in acknowledging the supremacy of His authority, we will remain one people; and free and kindly discussion will bring us out of all our differences.26

Despite his optimistic words, Errett had to admit the grave problems threatening the movement. He actually saw two classes of internal enemies threatening the unity of the Restoration Movement that had to be controlled. The first he identified as those with the disposition to introduce false tests of fellowship, allowing differences of opinion and matters of inference or expediency to become points of division. While every person should be fully persuaded in his or her own mind on the debated questions, Errett believed that those questions—including the hiring of full-time paid ministers, methods of fund-raising, instrumental music, general meetings and the missionary society—were things about which there could be honest differences of opinion. No one had a right to force his or her opinion on others or to threaten disruption of the church over a matter of opinion.27

Errett became particularly upset with an article by W. B. F. Treat published in the 6 April 1880 issue of the American Christian Review, the major paper in the North. In the article Treat declared “non-fellowship” with all those advocating “customs and practices unknown in the first age of

Christianity" and signed the article himself and in behalf of "many others." Errett responded with a series of articles on what he called the "disunion movement." In an editorial printed in the 29 May issue of the Christian Standard, he pointed out that there was the “implication in all this, that a disunion movement will be justifiable if [these] questions of complaint are not settled to suit the notions of those that threaten to secede.” He asked why the Review was seeking to throw the responsibility of division on others, without one word of teaching or warning to the “embryonic seceders that they have no just reason for separation and that any movement in that direction is schismatical.”

But there was a second group, he said, more numerous and more dangerous than the other. This was the class that he characterized in February 1880 as “those who are anxious to popularize the church by conforming it as far as possible to the spirit and fashions of the world.” These were those who, in the words of Romans 16:17, “cause offenses”; and according to the apostle these were to be marked and avoided just as were those who “cause divisions,” i.e., the seceders that Errett had already identified. Through a worldly desire to introduce things not necessarily wrong in themselves and by a “reckless abuse of their Christian liberty, or by persistence in a needless course,” these people could and did become an offense and snare to others and thereby disturbed the peace and prosperity of the church. He concluded one of his 1880 articles on union by saying:

It is possible to do nothing directly to cause division, and yet to sin against the church and against Christ by causing offense. It is possible to abuse and pervert the very reasons that are urged against division in such a way as to cause those stumblings. If one class is warned against causing division, the other is warned with equal earnestness against causing offenses. Those are alike sins against the integrity of the body of Christ.

Errett believed the Restoration Movement should serve as the model for a practical Christian unity, one that could unite all “evangelical”

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30Errett, “Worldly Conformity,” 68.
32Ibid.
Christians in one great kingdom of God on earth. If Christians could only understand what the true basis of fellowship was and was not, and if they could follow the example of the early leaders of the movement who were extremely careful in the matter of causing divisions and who proposed to "bear with whatever they saw of error as long as they were at liberty to rebuke it," unity would prevail. Let diversity be tolerated within the church, he urged. But let it be the diversity of one harmonious church, not the diversity of jarring sects.

Errett on Unity and Instrumental Music in Worship

Isaac Errett was personally opposed to the introduction and use of instrumental music in worship. Although he himself wrote almost nothing in the Christian Standard about the music controversy before 1870, when he did begin to express his own views, he explained at least four reasons for his antagonism toward the instrument in worship. He started by admitting that he simply preferred a capella singing because that was what he had been accustomed to since his youth. But he went on to say that he did not believe that the use of instrumental music in worship could be fairly inferred from the scriptures, the only source of authority on matters of faith and practice. In addition, Errett was firmly persuaded that the introduction of instruments and the choirs that often accompanied them tended toward transforming corporate worship services into artistic performances. The old familiar melodies and simple airs in which everyone could participate would soon be gone where instrumental music was introduced, he feared. Eventually some churches would want larger organs and paid organists, which would "create a distinction between rich and poor churches, and largely annihilate the universality of the brotherhood and the priesthood of the church."

By far the most important reason prompting Errett to oppose instrumental music in worship was the fact that it was an offense to a large portion of those in the churches. There were too many "very worthy"

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33Ibid.
members who were conscientiously opposed to instruments in worship. If a majority in a church were to decide for the instrument, the conscientious minority would be completely shut off from that part of the worship. After all, “a majority can not sing on one plane and a minority on another.” Since the instrument in worship could not command general agreement and acceptance, Errett concluded, it should be dispensed with for the sake of peace and harmony. Rephrasing Proverbs 15:17 he said, “Better is poor singing where love is, than the grandest tones of the organ and hatred therewith.”

Since instruments were initially brought into the churches to aid the poor congregational singing, Errett insisted that the only solution, the only way to stop the further introduction of instruments, was to train the churches in vocal music. As early as 1861 he had warned that if churches, especially in cities and large towns, were interested in stopping the introduction of choirs and organs with the formalism that was likely to accompany them, they would have to employ teachers of vocal music and spend part of every year training all the members “in the knowledge of musical science and the practice of suitable tunes—so that the present partial, discordant and unedifying music of our churches may be abandoned and forgotten.”

Although Errett was opposed to the use of instrumental music in worship, his stance was much different from that of most other opponents. Leaders like Benjamin Franklin believed that the elements of worship had been prescribed inclusively and exclusively by divine command. Since instrumental music in worship was not commanded in the NT, it was necessarily excluded, and the addition of such was a denial of the authority of God and the Bible. Errett’s response to this is a familiar one:

The New Testament is just as silent about tuning forks, hymn-books and note-books, as about organs. We have no intimation about the existence of any of these things in the primitive churches, and, according

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40 Ibid.
41 Isaac Errett, “Church Music,” Millennial Harbinger 5th ser., 4 (October 1861) 559.
Errett explained his basic perception of the instrumental music issue in an 1870 article entitled "The Music Question." Using terminology from ancient and medieval philosophy and theology, he explained that it was necessary to "distinguish between that which is essential in a divine precept and that which is merely accidental or incidental or subservient." The essential thing behind the entire music question was the command to sing and make melody in the heart to the Lord. Neither hymnals, tuning forks nor organs were essential, i.e. of the essence of worship, but were accidentals, not necessarily belonging to the thing itself. The fact that there was a divine command to sing, he said, implied the use of whatever means were necessary to obey it in an orderly and edifying way, as long as those means did not violate a clear precept of God's word or the tenor and spirit of religion itself. He insisted, therefore, that the basic question was not one of violating God's pattern for worship, but whether the use of instrumental music would aid in obeying the command to sing. Since it was a matter of expediency, it was one on which there could be a wide variety of opinions, and opinions could not affect the mutual fellowship or Christian integrity of those who differed.

Errett's own opinion was that instrumental music was not necessary or usually expedient; he did not believe that its use in worship could be "fairly inferred" from the scriptures. As late as 1887, the year before he died, he still argued for congregational singing without an instrument. But he always saw this as a matter of opinion, and such questions of expediency, matters of opinion or inference, could never legitimately be made tests of fellowship. "However undesirable and mistaken a practice it may be, we have no right..."
to divide the churches on account of it." Even if an innovation were harmful and clearly unscriptural, he insisted, it did not follow that the remedy was to separate. In many cases such a remedy would be worse than the disease. Even in the epistles to the seven churches of Asia Minor plagued with evils and sins of all kinds, there was not so much as a hint that the remedy was to be found in one group seceding from the rest of a church.

On the other hand, Errett had just as much criticism for those who sought to force the use of instruments on the churches, thus offending those who had conscientious objections. Just as he believed no one had a right to make the issue a test of fellowship, neither did anyone have the right to make it an occasion of stumbling. "Any man who loves organs more than he loves the peace and harmony of Zion is on the highway to sectarianism." It was his desire to reconcile the two parties by taking a position between them. Both extremes were wrong, he said—one in making instrumental music a test of fellowship, i.e., desiring to withdraw fellowship from those who used it, the other in persisting to cause strife over the matter when the instrument could have been yielded without any sacrifice of conscience. He was convinced that the majority in the churches would take the position he advocated, opposing the use of instruments as an occasion of stumbling for many in the churches and seeking to persuade those in favor of their use to discard them; but in the meanwhile, frowning on all attempts to divide the movement on a question of opinion.

Errett wrote his last article on the matter of instrumental music in 1881. He believed that the ground had already been well covered and that his readers were weary of the topic. He had urged his fellow Christians eleven years earlier not to allow Satan to sow discord among them over a question like that of instrumental music. No such issue could be allowed to distract them from their great work of restoring the scattered people of God to

49 Errett, "Innovations," 308; see also Errett, "Opinions as Terms of Fellowship," 92.
50 Errett, "Innovations," 196; Errett, "Our Alleged Inconsistency," 204. It is interesting to note Errett's use of the word "secede" in this context. The word obviously had strong negative connotations to his Northern readers after the events surrounding the Civil War.
52 Errett, "Innovations," 196.
53 Ibid.
54 Errett, "Our Alleged Inconsistency," 204; see also Isaac Errett, "Instrumental Music," Christian Standard 5 (20 August 1870) 268.
oneness. He insisted that it was not a question of obedience to the law of Christ, at least not as that law dealt with worship. "It may prove to be a question of loyalty to Christ as it regards love and forbearance; and here the issue must be made."

Conclusion

Isaac Errett has been interpreted by historians from both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ as being very liberal in his views. The former see his liberalism as positive; the latter see it as negative. Those who in the twentieth century became members of Independent or Conservative Christian Churches interpret Errett as a conservative on things essential, but liberal and progressive on matters of expediency and opinion—the right combination in their eyes. To others, Errett's positions seem incongruous, allowing innovations like the missionary society and instrumental music, yet standing stubbornly against any compromise on the necessity of baptism—immersion—for admittance into the church, the body of the formally saved. The combination disturbed both liberals and conservatives.

His positions make sense only when seen in the context of his ideas of Christian unity. Only a clear command or precept of the NT could be made a test of fellowship for acceptance of or withdrawal from a Christian in the churches. There were clear scriptural commands to carry the gospel to the world and to sing praise to God, and there was the clear teaching that baptism was the formal point of entry into the family of God. To reject any of these things would be to reject the authority of God and God's word. Errett's life was dedicated to working for Christian unity. He attempted to convince members of the Restoration Movement of what he understood to be the true basis of union and to stop any illegitimate withdrawal from their ranks.

56Errett, "Instrumental Music," 268.