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A Reformation & Revival Journal
Interview with Earle E. Cairns



In March I interviewed Dr. Earle E. Cairns, long-time chairman of the history department at Wheaton College, and author of *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Zondervan), a widely-used general Church history textbook (250,000 plus copies in English sold). Dr. Cairns was a consulting editor for the *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, with James D. Douglas. He also wrote *An Endless Line of Splendor: Revivals and Their Leaders from the Great Awakening to the Present*. His most recent book is *A Reader's Guide to the Bible*.

—John H. Armstrong

RRJ —Tell us about your background, your childhood, your family and your Christian heritage.

EEC —I was a Canadian, brought up in Manitoba on a wheat farm. I go back to the days of kerosene lamps. The weather was very cold. I remember one cold winter when the snow was packed up to eight feet in our driveway. It was packed so hard from the storms that our horses could walk on those deep snow piles. It was sometimes forty degrees below

zero in the wintertime so I had to learn to cope with some difficult conditions.

My father farmed and my mother took care of him and our family. It was her influence that caused me to become a Christian. My father came to faith later on. He was quieter.

I went to grade school and high school in Canada. I then attended Bible School in Canada. This particular school no longer exists.

You did not know Framer Smith who did the revision work on the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, but he came to visit my wife's father, who was a pastor in Philadelphia for years. On that visit he urged me to attend Omaha Seminary in Nebraska. I went to Omaha and finished an A. B. degree and seminary degree. I then applied to the University of Nebraska and did my work in history on my Ph.D. I worked as an assistant and also served a church each Sunday in Dunbar, Nebraska.

R R J —What did you do your research on in your doctoral program?

E E C —I studied missions in South Africa for the M. A. and specialized in the work of the London Missions Society in the nineteenth century for my Ph.D. I was able to tie together missions and events in African history of generations of African leaders trained by the missionaries. It was the Africa Anglican [Episcopal] Church that took the Western Church to task for their favoring of the homosexual agenda in the larger Church body.

R R J —Was your doctoral work ever published?

E E C —It was partly published in my book, *Saints and Society*, which is now out of print.

R R J —I was a history major and studied under you at Wheaton College. You had a book at that time, in the 1960s, that we used in a class on historiography for history majors. What happened to that book?

E E C —That book sold fairly well at the time but sales did not warrant a second edition.

R R J —Were you inclined to become a pastor during your years of study or did you intend to be a teacher all along?

E E C —I taught in Bible school and then later at the university level. I was always interested in pastoral ministry and went out on the weekends and did ministry in various churches. For awhile I was a teacher with the famous Catholic teacher Father Flanagan who directed Boys Town about ten miles outside of Omaha. I taught kids there for a time and regularly took services on Sunday afternoons.

I remember one little boy who was standing by my wife at the piano. He was accused of putting a pitchfork through his stepfather for abusing his mother. Father Flanagan asked for him and got him and thus he was at Boys Town. Later I got one of my students to take over because of my heavy teaching load at Omaha Seminary.

In 1943, during World War II, Wheaton College contacted me because they needed someone to teach U.S. History in the Army Specialized Training program. I taught six classes each day. Before I finished the year the army called those boys out and sent them to the Pacific. From 1943 on, I taught at Wheaton.

I gave special lectures at Talbot Seminary in Los Angeles and at Philadelphia College of Bible, now Philadelphia Biblical University, in Pennsylvania and at Multnomah College of the Bible in Portland, Oregon. I also helped out at churches on the weekends since I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister.

R R J —So, you were ordained a Presbyterian but you never permanently served as the stated pastor of a particular Presbyterian church?

E E C —No. I served as pastor of a church in Dunbar, Nebraska, while in graduate school. This was in the 1930s and there was very little money. The church people planted an acre of

ground and used the money from the crops to pay me. The man who owned most of the place was a banker and when things got bad he took his own life. His daughter took care of everything and paid all of his debts.

R R J —You were a young man during the controversy with the famous J. Gresham Machen and the Presbyterian church. What do you remember about that era and those events?

E E C —I don't remember too much about it except what I heard from others. A lot of the ministers were liberal and I would discuss theology with them. Machen was surely an able scholar. No one has ever exceeded his great works on the virgin birth of Christ or on Paul's religion.

R R J —Did you ever personally meet Dr. Machen?

E E C —No, but I had a couple of people visiting here last week who knew him quite well.

R R J —You were at Wheaton in the 1940s when D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones lectured at the college. Most people who know about him today do not realize he actually spoke at Wheaton College. He was not so well known at the time. Do you remember that visit?

E E C —I remember being thrilled to have him speak at Wheaton.

R R J —Tell us what you know about the Wheaton revivals.

E E C —I was most acquainted with the 1950 revival. It occurred in the spring semester. We had Edwin Johnson from Seattle. He was an able man who had just experienced revival in his own church. He was earnest and very sincere. The revival started out with some students who had been to the Urbana Missionary Convention in Illinois over Christmas and who began a prayer meeting when they returned to Wheaton.

When the speaker came that year a revival began to develop with one student saying he thought it was time for the students to say something. So he asked Dr. Edman for permission to speak and he allowed him to do so. This single word sparked the beginning of the revival. Boys and girls came to the platform for about forty hours continuously. So did faculty members. All confessed sins of the past. Some of our greatest people came out of this time. A lot of these students still live in the light of these days though a good number have departed for heaven by now.

R R J —In 1970 there was another revival at Wheaton. I was in the middle of that period of time and have discussed that in my book, *True Revival*. This movement did not impact the faculty the way the 1950 meeting did if I understand it correctly.

E E C —In the 1950 meeting Dr. Edman had meetings of prayer and would invite students and faculty to come to prayer before each service. Also many came during the meeting to do business with God in prayer. This was a major difference between this revival and the ones that came later.

R R J —You began teaching in 1943 as you said earlier. When did you retire from teaching at Wheaton?

E E C —In 1979. I taught for about thirty-five years at Wheaton College.

R R J —You were chairman of the history department for how long?

E E C —About twenty-five years. I followed Dr. C. Gregg Singer as the chairman.

R R J —You came to Wheaton after J. Oliver Buswell left as president. Tell us a bit about the Buswell controversy at Wheaton.

E E C —You may recall that I wrote a biography of Dr. Edman. I did a lot of research on those years. Needless to say, he [Dr. Buswell] upheld sound doctrine against the prevailing liberalism in the Presbyterian church to which he belonged. He was put on trial in January, 1935, for charges of “disturbing the peace of the church.” His linkage with Wheaton embarrassed the trustees.

Another issue was his hiring of Fred Walker to coach football. He coached it and tried to take over basketball and baseball coaching. Buswell strongly supported him to his own detriment. When the trustees fired him and appointed V. Raymond Edman as president, Dr. Buswell stepped aside and asked Wheaton people to be loyal to Dr. Edman.

R R J —I am interested in your writing and how you have done it over the years. How did this begin?

E E C —It all started with Dr. Edman going to Grand Rapids and meeting with Bernie Zondervan. He came back and said Bernie Zondervan wanted publish a church history. I told Dr. Edman I did not think I could do it, but he had me send my outlines to them. They asked me to write it. I worked on it for three years. *Christianity Through the Centuries* was published in 1954 and two further editions and revisions came in 1981 and 1996. The third edition is the best one yet. The publisher’s art has made it very attractive in appearance.

R R J —Did you ever get to know Charles E. Fuller?

E E C —No, but I knew David Otis Fuller, a well-known minister in Grand Rapids, who also was a trustee at Wheaton College. I did listen to Dr. Charles Fuller over the radio back on the family farm in Canada.

R R J —You missed Billy Graham’s days at Wheaton by just one year. Did you get to know him and spend any time with him too?

E E C —Yes, I did. I met with him for about three hours to discuss Dr. Edman when I was working on the biography, *V. Raymond Edman: In the Presence of the King*.

R R J —Tell us about the work on the V. Raymond Edman biography.

E E C —It was about 1968 that I began to do the work. My first wife had died and my second wife (JoAnn) and I were given the summer to go away to the East Coast to spend time with Uncle Joe Evans, the man who had done so much to help Dr. Edman through his years of schooling. He was also a trustee of the college. He was a great lover of Chinese people and culture and donated a great number of items to the school. He gave us much help.

R R J —Who published your biography of Dr. Edman? Is it still in print?

E E C —It was published by Moody Press (Chicago) but is out of print now.

R R J —Tell us a little bit more about Dr. Edman since you studied his life so carefully and wrote a biography of him. Who was he and how did you know him?

E E C —Well, I knew him as both the president of the college and as a friend. I also read many of his papers and had many discussions with those who knew him. He suffered a great deal from about 1947 to 1949. He was falsely accused of irregularities.

He was given the Faculty Grant for 1947-48 and went to Yale, leaving Dr. Voskuyl, an eminent chemist, as acting president. The main accusation brought against Dr. Edman was the lack of academic leadership. He seemed, to his critics, to over-emphasize the spiritual and missions aspects too much. This hurt him with some faculty. He was also falsely accused of improprieties regarding women. Herman Fischer and R. E.

Nichols looked into the matter and the trustees declared that there was nothing wrong. There was one particular faculty member, who was very popular with the students, who rejected premillennialism; Dr. Edman had to let him go. All of these difficulties came to an end in 1949.

Dr. Edman felt that the 1950 revival, with its forty continuous hours of student and faculty participation in confession, the library, a gift of R. E. Nichols, and the Fred McManis gift of half of his company were ample returns that seemed to give the final approval on his leadership.

RRJ —Were you also at Wheaton when Dr. Armerding was the president?

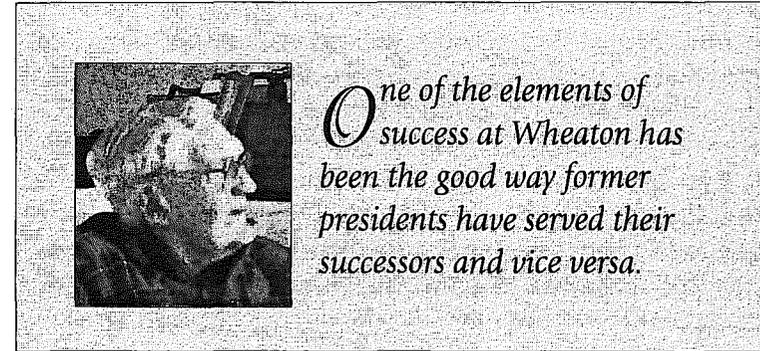
EEC —Yes, he is a very good friend of mine. He came to me one day when he was still at Gordon College and asked, “Do you know any job you can help me find? I think the Lord might be leading in a way that my time at Gordon might be coming to an end.” I told him I did and I would give his name to Wheaton. Originally, he was hired to teach in my own department, history.

RRJ —So Dr. Armerding first came to Wheaton to teach in the history department?

EEC —Yes, he was an excellent teacher. Later he became provost and finally president when Dr. Edman became the chancellor.

RRJ —Were you in chapel the day Dr. Edman died in the pulpit while he was speaking on being in the presence of the king?

EEC—No, I wasn’t. He was speaking about meeting the king of Ethiopia and as he spoke of being in the presence of a king he referred to being in the presence of the Lord Jesus as the King. He fell down by the pulpit from a heart attack and entered the King’s presence from the chapel.



RRJ —Did Dr. Edman serve on the board of trustees?

EEC —Yes, he did, right until his death. One of the elements of success at Wheaton has been the good way former presidents have served their successors and vice versa.

RRJ —You taught for many years an adult Sunday School class at College Church in Wheaton. Tell us about that class and your ministry beyond the campus.

EEC —Yes, I did teach an adult class for years. Teaching that class provided a great deal of the material for my new book, *A Reader’s Guide to the Bible* (2002). I worked hard on the Bible and taught most of the books of the Bible. I taught it for about forty-two years altogether.

RRJ —You referred to your first wife much earlier. Tell us about your family as well.

EEC —I was married in 1938. My first wife died in 1967 from cancer. We had one son, Bruce, who is presently a senator in the Colorado Senate. It seems that this was his proper scope and purpose.

RRJ —Did your son also study history at Wheaton?

E E C —Yes, and he feels it prepared him quite well. He knew my work on *Saints and Society* quite well. In that book I trace the relationship between secular affairs and religion. This was the path he wanted to follow himself.

R R J —I had several of your classes at Wheaton, and as you well know, you were my advisor since I majored in history. The class I best remember, and the one I enjoyed the most, was the history of England. You taught this as an elective many times.

E E C —Yes, I taught this class. In fact, it was even required for English literature majors at that time. You couldn't understand English literature without English history. Since then they have changed the scope and they now teach small segments, such as Victorian England.

R R J —We were talking earlier about books and publishing. Talk about your book on revival, *An Endless Line of Splendor* (1986), and your interest in the subject. Many of our readers long to see revival and pray with us for such to happen again in our generation.

E E C —The book on revival came out of a desire to fill a gap that I saw. Revivals were often written about but a summary, as such, did not exist. That was what I aimed at in writing *An Endless Line of Splendor*. Richard Owen Roberts has done a complete bibliography of revival books, and he felt *An Endless Line of Splendor* served the purpose of providing a complete overview of world revivals well.

R R J —Did you ever meet J. Edwin Orr, the well-known historian of revivals who wrote so much on this subject during the twentieth century?

E E C —I met him in passing once or twice. I was acquainted, of course, with his writing. I helped to co-edit the *Dictionary of the Christian Church*, with James D. Douglas, who went off to

Singapore one summer. He left me with the task of fixing up some of Dr. Orr's objections regarding certain revivals. In time I was able to finally satisfy Dr. Orr.

R R J —Did you ever teach overseas during your time at Wheaton?

E E C —We went in 1973 to Manila to teach at the Asian Theological Seminary. We got there just after a dictator took away the guns from the people. Before that time people all carried guns. I taught a course on Roman Catholic church history and JoAnn taught in the Bible school which had been founded by American soldiers.

R R J —You've mentioned your wife JoAnn. She is a talented and gifted writer herself. Tell us a little bit about her work.

E E C —Her first main work was a survey of the Bible, Old and New Testaments. She sent the work to NavPress. They published it and it sold quite well (5,000 copies a year) and then a new editor had a different mind and wanted to sell more copies, so they decided to stop publishing these books. There is a tendency to publish only what sells in fairly large quantities.

She taught Christian education in the Graduate School at Wheaton and also helped to lead the women's studies at College Church. She wrote a book called *Welcome Friend, Welcome Stranger*, which follows out the biblical admonitions on showing hospitality.

R R J —Tell us about some of your former history students. Some have become quite important historians over the years.

E E C —One of the men who is most highly regarded is John Baldwin who went to Johns Hopkins University and then served as a teacher there. His dissertation was on medieval France. The French committee on honors phoned him one day and told him they wanted to give him an honor. He heard

nothing for some time and then several years later they phoned again and they said, "You had better sit down. You are getting a Legion of Honor." This is the highest award given in France.

Three of the men I taught were at a dinner recently, two of whom teach at Wheaton and one who teaches at Taylor, all former students and now Ph.D.'s. There are a great number of such former students. I think also of Frank Farrell who was one of my history students. He became quite a writer for awhile with *Christianity Today*. He then went on to teach Church history in several schools.

RRJ—We interviewed Frank Farrell last year in the *Reformation & Revival Journal*. Was he a student during the World War II years?

EEC—Yes, he was one of the war-time men, who came back and did such good work. These men had a real seriousness, like very few students I ever taught, because they knew the world, death, horror, and all the troubles of war.

RRJ—You also had Nathan Hatch, the historian at Notre Dame, as one of your students, didn't you?

EEC—Yes, I did, and he eventually became provost at Notre Dame.

RRJ—You were a member of the American Society of Church History, the American Historical Association, and the Conference on Faith and History. Were you involved in the founding of the Conference on Faith and History?

EEC—I felt that at the meetings of the American Historical Association Christians didn't get a chance to talk or to find fellowship. I engaged a room during one American Historical Association meeting and about thirty people came to the first luncheon meeting. We met and had a good time of fellowship. We kept on for four or five years, and it got a little too big for me to manage. I turned it over to Gordon College and

in time they turned it over to Calvin College. That's the way it started. I started it mainly for fellowship and they have diverged somewhat, and now it seems to be more about scholarship.

RRJ—You also served as a consulting editor with James Douglas on the *International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. That was a fairly long-term project. Tell us a little about that work.

EEC—That involved a good deal of work reading proofs. The publisher has since said on the front of the book that I was an editor. I was more of a consultant really. I told Jim that wasn't right.

RRJ—One of the things I always like to ask in an interview is about personal spiritual devotion. You were a scholar but you maintained a warm heart for God. Tell us something about



I strongly believe that scholarship and spirituality go together. I have always engaged in personal prayer and Bible reading. I have studied the Bible to feed myself and to teach and preach. Now being nearly ninety-three years old, I would say the Scriptures have been my main source of strength. I stay in the Bible and close to Scripture. I've always believed in the inerrant Scriptures and the God of the Bible and Christ his Son.

how you did this and what you used to keep your spirit strong over the years. You have loved the Lord over many years. How have you kept your zeal for the Lord as an academic?

E E C —I strongly believe that scholarship and spirituality go together. I have always engaged in personal prayer and Bible reading. I have studied the Bible to feed myself and to teach and preach. Now being nearly ninety-three years old, I would say the Scriptures have been my main source of strength. I stay in the Bible and close to Scripture. I've always believed in the inerrant Scriptures and the God of the Bible and Christ his Son.

I have a new book I am writing, which will be my last. It is on exposition for preachers. First, I am centering upon the Bible and Christ and then I will do the technical side.

R R J —You were my advisor in history, as you remember. You did something for me that I think you did for many of your students. You took a personal interest in me. You really encouraged me very powerfully. You did more than teach history. You really got to know your students. Tell us about how you got to know your students and why you took such a personal interest in them.



I enjoyed teaching a great deal but I enjoyed fellowship with students more. I felt that I was there for the students. They were not there for me and I needed to do my best to give them a complete system of training. I wanted to provide a well-knit understanding of history but the personal side was even more important to me.

E E C —I enjoyed teaching a great deal but I enjoyed fellowship with students more. I felt that I was there for the students. They were not there for me and I needed to do my best to give them a complete system of training. I wanted to provide a well-knit understanding of history but the personal side was even more important to me.

Some of my classes at times were very large, which made it hard to personally know all the students. I remember having classes with 170 students at times. I taught an ancient history class during the World War II years that began at 7:00 a.m. This class had over seventy students in a fully-packed room. It was quite a challenge. It did not allow me to know students as much as I liked.

R R J —You were born in 1910, so do you have any remembrance of Woodrow Wilson as president?

E E C —No, remember that I was a Canadian then.

R R J —I asked about Woodrow Wilson for a specific reason. President Wilson's father was a Presbyterian minister and once pastored First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. That church is now pastored by a former classmate of mine, Raymond Ortlund, Jr., whom I think you also know.

E E C —That reminds me to say that one of the things I so approve of is the way so many Wheaton College students have gone on to become ministers and missionaries. A lot of important pulpits are served today by former history majors of mine at Wheaton. I am really encouraged by that. Your work, for example, is very important for the good of the Church.

R R J —It is interesting to me that history would be a major many students who go into the ministry would choose at Wheaton.

E E C —Yes, history and English would be the two most

commonly chosen majors. I always thought that they were the best preparations. History, in my view, was the best because we were dealing with facts.

R R J—I have personally never regretted that I had a history major as my own background. It prepared me for further graduate work in the Bible and theology and beyond in my writing and teaching ministry.

E E C—History also teaches you the very important lesson that you need to go to the sources. I tried to teach students this way and always had them read one book on sources.

R R J—As you think back over nine decades-plus, tell us about the Lord's faithfulness to you over all these years of life. Many of our readers are much younger and would be interested in hearing how the Lord has blessed you so wonderfully.

E E C—One thing I think of is having two wives who were both helpful in every way. I also think of the Lord blessing me with writing ability and how he led me to use that in a way I would never have imagined. If Dr. Edman hadn't gone over to Grand Rapids and met with Bernie Zondervan as he did I would never have been able to use that gift as I eventually did. After doing nine books I look back with much gratitude about all of this kind providence.

R R J—That parallels my own experience a great deal. I wanted to write but had no real opportunities for years. When I was over forty-two years of age someone recommended me and then other opportunities followed.

E E C—Dr. Edman supplied me the opportunity and thus like you I became an author. More important to me, however, were the students I had over those many years and the lives I got to touch.

R R J—As you look back now your greatest joy was found in the students.

R R J—The older students are the ones who come back and talk to you after many years. They tell you how much they appreciated your work. This seems to happen after they have had some years to reflect upon what you gave to them. The one thing my students tell me they did not appreciate was my writing on the chalkboard.

R R J—I need to explain that statement for those who are reading this interview. Dr. Cairns' writing was quite unique and memorable to his students. He wrote like many physicians do who write our prescriptions. He would write prolifically on the board, but we strained to decipher the words in class.

E E C—I would have to interpret my writing for my students. My left hand is to blame for that.

R R J—Thanks for taking the time to share something of your full and long life with us, Dr. Cairns. I know you touched my life very deeply. I will always be profoundly grateful to God for that. I hope our readers will also benefit in some way by your work. And your contribution in Church history will undoubtedly continue in the years ahead as students read your work. I am going to work myself to see if we cannot get your book on revival republished as soon as possible. I would ask our friends to pray that this might happen in the coming year.

Note

Dr. Cairns' newest book, *A Reader's Guide to the Bible*, is a practical overview of the entire Bible. It provides an original and clear outline to the whole of sacred Scripture. It was published by a company based in Singapore, Genesis Books. It is nicely bound and available to readers for \$13.00 from the Reformation and Revival office.