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Willett, Herbert Lockwood (5 May 1864-28 Mar. 1944)

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WILLETT, Herbert Lockwood (5 May 1864-28 Mar. 1944), clergyman, lecturer and biblical scholar, was born near Ionia, Michigan, the son of Gordon Arthur Willett, a farm machinery merchant, and Mary Elizabeth Yates, a school teacher. Both the Willett and Yates families moved from upstate New York and settled in rural Ionia County. A formative influence cited by Willett in his choice of vocation was the fact that both families were active members of the Disciples of Christ congregation founded in the 1850s by the distinguished evangelist Isaac Errett. Willett never attended public school. Study under his mother's tutelage included the memorization of large portions of the Bible and poetry, an accomplishment that later lent distinction to his public and academic addresses. In 1883, his Disciple heritage led him to attend Bethany College in West Virginia, the school founded by the denominational leader Alexander Campbell, obtaining his B.A. in 1886 and M.A. in 1887. He married Emma Augusta Price in 1888; they had three children. Having pastored churches in Ohio for three years, his yearning for higher education led him in 1890 to take a leave of absence to begin work on a B.D. at Yale Divinity School, where he was persuaded by William Rainey Harper to specialize in the study of the Old Testament and Semitic languages. Willett left Yale in 1891 to return to his pastorate, but at the end of two years resigned his position and, urged by the indomitable Harper who held out the prospect of a faculty appointment, began work in the spring of 1893 in the Department of Semitic Languages and Literatures at the new University of Chicago, where his dissertation, "The Development of the Doctrine of Immortality among the Hebrews," earned him a Ph.D. in 1896. Inspired by the example of other faculty members, he did post-doctorate work at the University of Berlin in 1898-1899.

Willett's career choices were variations on the theme of Christian education, specifically, preaching, lecturing, publishing and teaching about the Bible. Although claiming his primary calling was that of the teaching profession, he was ordained as a Disciples of Christ minister in 1890, pastoring churches and providing supply preaching for sixty years. Willett commenced his ministerial duties in North Eaton and Dayton, Ohio, 1886-1893. In connection with his work at the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago, he was appointed the first pastor of the Hyde Park (now University) Church of the Disciples, 1894-1897, later serving as minister at First Christian Church in Chicago, 1905-1908, Memorial Church of Christ (Baptist and Disciple), Chicago, 1908-1912 and 1914-1917, and Kenilworth Union Church in Kenilworth, Illinois, 1926-1940.

Willett's career as an educator began in 1881 when he obtained a public school teacher's certificate and taught in the Yates school district for two years. In 1893-1895 he held the nation's first "Bible Chair" established at a state university, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he taught from October to April while concurrently doing graduate work at the University of Chicago during the spring and summer quarters. His career as a faculty member in the University of Chicago's Department of the Semitic Languages and Literatures was highly unusual. On the one hand, the Old Testament exegetical and survey courses he conducted for college and graduate students satisfied a unique requirement in Harper's design of a university that was "Christian in the broadest sense of the term." Recognizing his talents as a biblical educator, Harper heralded his protégé's considerable success as a popular lecturer in the University's beleaguered Extension Program and the American Institute of Sacred Literature, contractually granting Willett the unusual liberty to conduct classes on-campus for two quarters in exchange for off-campus travel and lecturing. On the other hand, although he moved steadily up the ranks from an instructorship in 1897 to a full professorship when the department was reorganized in 1915, protracted absences on the lecture circuit and leading of overseas tours together with the investment of his energies outside the common life of the department resulted in administrative and collegial friction that persisted up to his retirement in 1929. As a biblical scholar, he trod the path of a conscientious popularizer, expounding his often controversial vision of liberal Protestant higher criticism in thirteen non-technical books and hundreds of essays and editorials. Willett's forceful appeal as a public speaker and willingness to undertake the rigors of the lecture circuit made him a star attraction on the Lyceum, American Institute of Sacred Literature and Chautauqua platforms, where his message of a Bible responsive to a commonsense scientific worldview and the evolving social realities of the early twentieth century drew record crowds. "His lectures, delivered without notes, were on outlines one could remember, and were phrased simply and fluently, with no tricks of speech or ornamentation, no gestures or vehemence, and yet at times with a high eloquence" (Percy H. Boynton, 1944)

Willett's major legacy to Christian scholarship proved to be the creation in 1894 of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago, a fellowship foundation that has supported graduate study at the University's Divinity School for hundreds of Disciples of Christ students. Although the House's association with the University of Chicago and Willett's own growing national reputation maintained the idea of the denominational facility in the public eye, strident inter-denominational controversies over Willett's liberal approach to biblical scholarship and his inconsistency in pursuing capital endowments led to a deanship (1894-1921) marred by long years of organizational stagnation.

Willett's lifelong commitment to Christian unity found expression in his editorial work for the newly reorganized Christian Century, a leading non-denominational Christian weekly. In 1908, he acted as a delegate for the Disciples of Christ at the founding of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ and served as executive secretary of the Western Section, 1920-1925;

he was also instrumental in the founding of the Chicago Federation of Churches and held the office of president, 1916-1920. In 1937 he attended the ecumenical conferences at Oxford and Edinburgh as a delegate.

Willett died while delivering a series of Lenten lectures, "The Great Books of the Bible", at Winter Park, Florida. Through sermons, lectures and the press, and by means of the founding of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago, Willett's advocacy of Christian intellectual freedom and the value of an educated ministry significantly influenced the history of the Disciples of Christ in the first decades of this century.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Most of Willett's notebooks, correspondence and assorted memorabilia are located in the archives of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago and the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville. Bound photocopies of his unpublished autobiography *The Corridor of Years*, compiled and supplemented by his grandson, Herbert Lockwood Willett III, are also available in Chicago and Nashville. Records and papers chronicling his teaching career are housed in the Archives of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Special Collections Department of Joseph Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. His more important books include *Our Plea for Union and the Present Crisis* (1901), *The Moral Leaders of Israel: Studies in the Development of Hebrew Religion* (1916), *Our Bible: Its Origin, Character and Value* (1917), *The Bible through the Centuries* (1930), and *The Jew through the Centuries* (1932). Significant studies of Willett's career include M. Eugene Boring, "The Disciples and Higher Criticism: The Crucial Third Generation" [a comparison of J. W. McGarvey and Willett], in *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciple's Relation to American Culture, 1880-1989*, edited by D. Newell Williams, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1991, pp. 29-70, and Leo G. Perdue, "The Disciples and Higher Criticism: The Formation of an Intellectual Tradition" [a comparison of James Philip Hyatt and Willett], in *ibid.*, pp. 71-106. A comprehensive bibliography of Willett's works remains to be compiled; the fullest bibliography appears in Boring, "The Disciples and Higher Criticism," pp. 68-70. A portrait of Willett painted in 1929 by Charles W. Hawthorne hangs in the Herbert Lockwood Willett Library of the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago.

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