

This Week in Eden History

Sept. 3 | H. Richard Niebuhr, 1915 Eden graduate and prominent Christian ethicist



*H. Richard Niebuhr, date unknown.
Possibly taken early 1920s at Eden's
former Wellston campus. | Eden
Seminary Archives*

Helmut Richard Niebuhr, one of the most important 20th-century Christian ethicists, was born on Sept. 3, 1894 in Wright City, Missouri. His father, Gustav Niebuhr was a German emigrant and pastor in the Evangelical Synod of North America; his older brother, Reinhold, was a prominent public theologian; and his sister, Hulda, a seminary professor in Christian education. Richard (he did not care for the name “Helmut”) graduated from Elmhurst College in 1912 and Eden in 1915. He received an M.A. from Washington University in 1918 and began teaching at Eden. He completed his Ph.D. at Yale in 1924 and became President of Elmhurst College, serving until 1927. He returned to Eden as Academic Dean—the first in the school’s history—serving from 1927 to 1931. He modernized many aspects of both schools and laid the groundwork for their academic accreditation.

In 1928, Niebuhr became chair of the Evangelical Synod’s Commission on Closer Relations with Other Church Bodies. The commission’s work led to the merger that created the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1934.

Niebuhr accepted a position as Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale Divinity School in 1931, was raised to full professor in 1938, and promoted to Sterling professor in 1954. He influenced American religious thinking through the students he advised and his writings. As the Chair of Graduate Studies, he guided the development of such prominent scholars as James Gustafson and Sallie McFague. His writings reflected his evolving thinking and shaped scholarly theology in the 1950s and 60s. Prominent books include *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), *Christ and Culture* (1951), and *The Responsible Self* (1963).

H. Richard Niebuhr died on July 5, 1962 in Greenfield, Massachusetts.