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Alexander Campbell on Education

Gary Holloway

> We must awaken to the cause of domestic education. There is no substitute for it. Public schools, private schools, Sunday school, are all good and useful; but none of them, nor all of them, afford a substitute for the family school and parental education.
>
> Alexander Campbell

Recently much attention has been given to the problems of education in America. In the media, Congress, state legislatures, and other public forums, citizens debate questions of curricula, textbooks, and funding. Perhaps the most perplexing issue is the overall goal of our education system. What kind of citizen do we want our schools to produce? How can we best teach the values necessary to preserve the republic?

For Christians these questions are overshadowed by a more important one: how can we best pass on the faith to our children? Is there a place for Christian faith in public schools? Are our schools at least neutral regarding religion or are they actually hostile to a living faith? What kind of school best trains our children to be salt and light to the world?

Our perspective on these questions will be broadened by a return to an earlier time in United States history when the idea of public education and the difficulties of implementing it were first discussed. Specifically we will look at the educational proposals of Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), who as an

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educator and a member of the Virginia constitutional convention discussed the issues of the control and direction of public schools.

Campbell's Education[1]

When Alexander Campbell was born in Ballymena, Ireland in 1788, his father Thomas was still a student at the University of Glasgow in Scotland where he received his degree in Theology in 1791. Thomas returned to Ireland to serve as a Presbyterian minister. Alexander thus entered a family that prized both religion and education.

Alexander's earliest schooling was from his father who supervised his study of English. For a while he did attend private academies (there was no government-sponsored schooling), first at Market Hill and later at Newry. At he age of nine, however, he returned home where his father was his sole teacher. His studies consisted of language acquisition: English, French, Latin, and Greek. Temperamentally, Alexander lacked self-discipline, preferring outdoor work to study. However, he did have a prodigious memory enabling him, even at a young age, perfectly to memorize sixty lines of blank verse in fifty-two minutes. Eventually Thomas exposed him to the analytical philosophical texts of the day. Alexander particularly appreciated the works of John Locke.

Sometime in Alexander's youth, Thomas began to include other young men in the studies and so formed his own academy. As one of the older boys, Alexander began to assist his father in teaching. Thus he was trained by formal education and apprenticeship to become a preacher and teacher. In 1807, when Thomas emigrated to America, he left the nineteen- year-old Alexander in sole charge of the Academy.

The departure of Thomas also indirectly led to Alexander's university education. In 1808, Alexander and the rest of the Campbell family set sail to join Thomas in America. On the second day of the voyage, they were shipwrecked off

[1] For information on Alexander Campbell's education see Robert Richardson, *The Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 1 (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1897) 19-194 and Clarence R. Athearn, *The Religious Education of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1928).

the coast of Scotland. This misfortune allowed Alexander to spend almost a year at his father's alma mater, the University of Glasgow.

The University had a 400-year heritage and was originally organized, like all medieval universities, into the schools of Arts, Theology, Canon Law, and Medicine. By the time Alexander enrolled, these schools had been reorganized into thirteen departments or colleges. Alexander entered not the Divinity department (as might have been expected), but the department of Humanity, which included courses in Greek, logic, natural science, and moral philosophy.

Alexander's university education was thus a broad one, centered on the humanities. He learned the current techniques of literary criticism and applied them to English and Scottish literature. He also studied Science, especially the empirical method, which he would employ in many contexts throughout his life.

The subject of Moral Philosophy was most influential on Campbell's later proposals on education. The thought of Thomas Reid, a professor at Glasgow a generation earlier, was dominant in moral philosophy at this time. Reid's view of moral reasoning as a basis for ethics fit nicely with Alexander's interest in the scientific method. Both concepts became important in his later views on moral education.

The education of Alexander Campbell thus took place in the constructs of home, school, and church. At Glasgow he had his first encounter with another institution concerned with education: the State. For years Scottish education had been under the control of local parish ministers and had not been available to a large portion of the population. In Alexander's time at Glasgow there was a fierce debate on whether educational opportunities should be offered by the State to the larger public. Those opposed to popular education feared that an informed citizenry would rebel against the current authority. Those for increased educational opportunities insisted that an educated public would actually prevent revolution.

A new institution, the Sunday School, was embroiled in the controversy. In the twenty years from Alexander's birth until he entered Glasgow, around

5000 of these schools had been started in local parishes. These were not Sunday Schools in the modern sense, but were designed to teach literacy to children and adults on Sunday evenings by studying the Bible, the catechism, and also secular subjects. Many leaders of the Sunday School movement lived in Glasgow. One of them, Greville Ewing, befriended Campbell and made him a teacher in his Sunday School. Campbell thus stood on the side of those who favored increased education for the public.

Since the Church of Scotland was a state church, the government became involved in the issue of control of the Sunday Schools. Would the Church of Scotland control all schools or would other religious sects have their own schools teaching their own particular doctrines? Campbell and others called for a third alternative: non-sectarian schools that taught a common Christianity. The State would insure that such schools remained non-sectarian.

To summarize, Alexander Campbell's earliest education took place in the home. The home was to be the primary locus for learning in his thought for the rest of his life. He also attended schools closely associated with the church. In spite of that close association, Campbell did not believe in a narrow sectarian education, but in an education based on a common acceptance of the Bible, moral reasoning, and secular truths. This common teaching was to be supervised by the State, but locally controlled by ministers and teachers. This constellation of educational institutions—home, school, church, and state— was formative of Campbell's later educational theory.

Campbell's Theology and the Role of Democracy

In 1809, Alexander and the family set sail again for America. this time their voyage was smooth, and they were reunited with Thomas in western Pennsylvania. Both Thomas and Alexander had separately become dissatisfied with the divided state of Christendom and had decided to work for unity among Christians. At first, both father and son led this unity movement, but eventually Alexander became the primary spokesman for the "Disciples" (his favorite name for the group).

Alexander's hope for a unified Christianity centered on his goal of restoring the primitive, New Testament church. He believed if Christians would follow only the New Testament, and not their respective denominational creeds, the there could be unity in the essentials of faith, and plurality on non-essential "matters of opinion." Campbell also believed that a unified church would usher in a unified society which would be the beginning of the millennium. His envisioned a unification of both church and society.

Because of continuing doctrinal controversy among Christians and the increasing pluralism in American religion, Campbell later lost faith in the restoration of primitive Christianity as a means to societal unity. By the 1840's he was advocating a concept of civil religion as a unifying force. The American republic was based on religion, the Christian religion, and so all governmental and societal institutions must be Christian. This common American faith would spread until it encompassed all humanity.[2] By Christianizing America and then Americanizing the world, the millennium of peace would begin.

Campbell did not view this christianizing of America as an intrusion of something foreign into the American spirit, but rather as a recognition of the common faith that already pervaded the republic. Throughout his life he fought all attempts to make religion "sectarian," that is, to enforce one particular view of Christianity on the public. However, he believed there were certain doctrines—the reality of God, the work of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures—that all Christians held in common. Indeed all "men of good will" who objectively approached Christianity could not help but be convicted of these truths.

The basic problem with Campbell's "common Christianity" as a unifying force in society was that it was strictly a Protestant Christianity. Not only did it exclude atheists, Deists, and other unbelievers, but also Catholics and Jews. By 1860, the pluralism of religion in America and the obvious disunity of

[2] Richard T. Hughes, "From Primitive Church to Civil Religion: The Millennial Odyssey of Alexander Campbell," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (March 1976) 96-101.

America over slavery led Campbell to abandon his scheme of achieving the millennium through a common American faith.

This dream of a Christian America, however, is crucial to Campbell's educational proposals. More than any other institution, the school must be Christian in a non-sectarian way if the American republic is to take its rightful place as world leader.

Campbell's Educational Proposals

The primary responsibility of educating children falls on parents, said Campbell. Yet in a series of theses on education, he argued that schools were important tools that parents could use in that education. Two of his theses are:

> That it is the primary duty of all parents to educate their children in all useful knowledge; that for this especially the marriage covenant was instituted; and that christianity binds this upon christian parents by the authority and solemnity of its precepts and promises.
>
> That the schools, primary and secondary, or schools and colleges, are the most ancient and useful inventions for this purpose.[3]

Campbell thus proposes that education begin in the home and continue in the schools.[4]

All Americans agreed on home and school as centers of education. The difficult question was "What should be taught in the schools?" Should moral or religious teachings be allowed? If so, what texts should be followed? Campbell's unequivocal answer was that the Bible should be the central text in all schools in America, public or private. The purpose of this Bible teaching was not to enforce Christianity, but to provide a moral basis for society. In an address to a Virginia educational convention in 1841, Campbell argued:

> The philosopher, the statesman, the patriot, and the philanthropist, equally with the Christian, say intellectual without moral culture is a curse to each and every community. To educate the head and neglect

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[3] *Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 201.

[4] For more on the centrality of the family in education, see R. Edwin Groover, *The Well-Ordered Home* (Joplin: College Press, 1988) 85-110.

> the heart, is only giving teeth to the lion, claws to the tiger, and talons to the eagle to seize and devour their prey. The ablest politicians and the most profound philosophers of France, England, and America, now affirm that education in universities, in high schools and common schools, without the Bible and moral training is a national calamity rather than a public benefaction.[5]

Only the Bible can provide moral training for youth, said Campbell, but because it can be a controversial book, he did not propose teaching all of it. Instead he divided the content of the Bible into four categories: history, doctrine, precepts, and promises. Of these four, it was the doctrine that was divisive, so only the precepts, promises, and especially the history of the Bible should be taught. Every school in America should have a class in Sacred History.[6]

Campbell's own school reflected his consistency in his matter. In 1840, Bethany College was founded with Campbell as its first President. The college was a religious school with the Bible as its primary text, yet a clause in its charter prohibited the establishment of a theological professorship.[7]

The Bible was not to be the only subject of study. Indeed, to best understand the Bible the best commentary is the work of God in human history. Geography, chronology, ancient history, languages, and government all shed light on the Bible.[8] Campbell thus proposed a broad education in the humanities.

What about Science? Was there any room for it in the curriculum? Yes, for although there are no theories of astronomy, geology, or chemistry in the Bible, such theories do not affect the truth of Scripture. Indeed, Science should be studied because it deals with nature and so glorifies God as the Creator.[9] Campbell particularly deplored the ignorance of young Americans on human

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[5] Cited in Sadie Bell, *The Church, the State, and Education in Virginia* (Philadelphia: Science Press, 1930) 347. For more on Campbell's education proposals for Virginia and the nation, see Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954) 167-178.

[6] *Millennial Harbinger* (1845) 521.

[7] Bell, 315.

[8] *Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 202.

[9] *Ibid.*, 599-600.

biology and proposed a course on "Anatomy, Physiology, and Hygeia" be required, along with Sacred History, in each school.

His proposals on teaching methods were part and parcel of his curricular proposals. Since Bible doctrines were not to be taught directly to students, they must come to conclusions about doctrine themselves. Campbell thus advocated the inductive method of Bible study based on the scientific method. The method has three parts: observation, in which the facts of Scripture are learned; arrangement of the facts into some order; and deduction of particular doctrines from the facts.[10] The teacher was not to force beliefs on the students, but rather to encourage their thinking by asking questions.

It is not surprising that some Americans objected to this proposal to put the Bible in public schools. Roman Catholic Bishop John Purcell spoke out against the idea as early as 1836, rejecting these proposals as an attempt to force the Protestant Bible and Protestant beliefs on all public school children.

Campbell branded Purcell and other critics as "ultra-republicans" who objected to any religious and moral teaching of children in public schools. Their ideal, he said, was to rear children free of any moral or religious bias in order to allow them to choose their own religion and morality as adults. Campbell's reply was that such a value-free individual "never appeared amongst the children of men."[11] The question was not if children would be taught moral principles, but which ones they should be taught.

But if the Bible is used as a moral text, doesn't this automatically make the public school religious or sectarian? No, argues Campbell, because the Bible is not a sectarian book; no sect created it, only God.[12]The Bible can, of course, be taught in a sectarian way, but if the teacher is careful not to inject personal opinion, this will not happen.

Isn't the Bible to be taught simply the Protestant Bible? Campbell's response is ambiguous. At times he argues for a truly catholic understanding of Scripture that would include all believers, but his usual understanding of the

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[10] *Millennial Harbinger* (1850) 171-172.
[11] *Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 597-598.
[12] *Millennial Harbinger* (1850) 170.

common faith of Americans is that it is the Protestant faith. The "Romanists," were not true Christians nor yet true Americans. Only if these immigrants were properly educated could they become part of the common faith.[13]

To summarize, Campbell's far-reaching proposals for education grow out of his own educational background. Education begins in the home but continues in schools overseen by the State. The churches are to have no direct role in public education, such would be the "sectarian" education Campbell condemns, but they have an indirect role since the Bible is the primary textbook of public schools. The purpose of public education is to produce moral and religious citizens of a Christian nation that would lead the world into the Millennium.

Campbell and Current American Education

At first, there seems to be little in Campbell's proposals appropriate to our current situation. His dream of a Christian nation and Christian public schools has proven both unwise and not feasible. Instead the "ultra-republicans" have triumphed. Valueless education is the norm and we are reaping its results in a society increasingly without the civic virtues necessary to sustain a civilization. If Campbell were here, no doubt he would join those calling for the intentional teaching of values in public schools. However, the reality of our secular society would force him to more modest goals for this teaching: not the creation of a millennial Christian nation, but the establishment of minimal rules for social order.[14]

Campbell's proposals have more relevance as models for Christian schools. After his strong rhetoric against "sectarian" schools, it is hard to picture Campbell as an advocate of the contemporary Christian school movement. However, in light of the secularization of the public schools, he would be forced

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[13] Hughes, 99.

[14] One of the most eloquent contemporary appeals for the teaching of moral and religious values in schools is by African American law professor Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

(like many of us who have been strong supporters of public schools) to rethink his opposition. As John Leith says:

> This is a very difficult decision for many Protestants who have, in some measure, identified public education with the kingdom of God. The secularization of public education, however, the teaching of courses in such a manner as not to leave open the possibility of faith, or to make faith in God an unnecessary hypothesis, endangers the faith at its fundamental roots. Therefore Protestant churches, if they are to survive, will have to face with all seriousness the question of church schools in such a way that has never been raised in American education until now.[15]

If Campbell were around today, I believe our changed circumstances would make him a proponent of both the home schooling movement and private Christian schools. He would support the home as the primary educational institution, where children are first taught. Christian parents should accept full responsibility for the education of their children. He also would see Christian schools as "a useful invention for this purpose."

Some of Campbell's curricular proposals would go far in improving the teaching of many Christian schools. Too many Christian school teachers unintentionally teach their subjects from a secular perspective, that is exactly as they would if teaching in public schools. Although personally dedicated, exemplary Christians, if they use the public school curriculum and textbooks, then they have inadvertently allowed their teaching to become secularized. Such schools believe themselves "Christian" because they have Bible classes and daily chapel. Yet if other subjects are taught in an "objective," secular way, then these schools lose their unifying vision and soon fall victim to the same disintegration as public schools. As Michael Weed has said, such schools are "Christian more by convention than by conviction." [16]

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[15] John H. Leith, *From Generation to Generation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) 135. One prominent opponent of Christian schools, William H. Willimon, has recently been forced by the failure of public schools to change his mind. See "I Was Wrong About Christian Schools," *Christianity Today* 37 (February 8, 1993) 30-32.

[16] Michael R. Weed, "Christian Education: Conviction or Commitment?" *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 9 (Fall 1988) 30.

What can be done to give Christian schools that unity of vision? One can make the Bible the center of the curriculum, as Campbell suggested. This means that all subjects would be taught from a consciously Christian perspective. Instead of Bible instruction being segregated into one course, the Bible would be the primary text in all courses.

How would this work in a specific subject, Science, for example? It means much more than simply one form of "creation science" being substituted for evolution. It means Science would be taught with an understanding of both the religious and secular philosophical bases of modern scientific theory. Such Science would be a chastened Science, not claiming to answer questions of ultimate worth that are beyond its boundaries. As Campbell taught, since Science studies nature, then it is really a study of the God who made nature.

If Christian school administrators took this call for unity of vision seriously, they would work to help teachers develop a Christian perspective in every subject. This would entail a re-imagining of the entire curriculum to reflect the goals of the Christian school instead of the secular public school. And what would be the primary goal of such Christian schools? Not just a better education, but the only truly complete education.

> Education is not merely the development of man's powers and capabilities as an animal, intellectual, and moral being, viewed simply as a member of present society, but with reference to his ultimate position and destiny in the universe of God. [17]

Campbell's unified vision of a complete education was unworkable as a model for public schools, unworkable because the State is not the church. It will work as a model for church schools that serve as a bold witness to our society of what life and education look like lived under God.

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[17] Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1845) 521.

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