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Not The Only Christians:

Campbell on Exclusivism and Legalism

Gary Holloway

Some of our brethren were too much addicted to denouncing the sects and representing them *en masse* as wholly aliens from the possibility of salvation--as wholly antichristian and corrupt.

Alexander Campbell.¹

It was customary for Alexander Campbell to introduce topics for discussion in his journal *The Millennial Harbinger* by quoting extracts from letters he had received. The following letter caused more discussion and correspondence than any other he printed.

Dear brother Campbell--I was much surprised to-day, while reading the Harbinger, to see that you recognize the Protestant parties as Christian. You say, you "find in all Protestant parties Christians."

Dear brother, my surprize [sic] and ardent desire to do what is right prompt me to write to you at this time. I feel assured, from the estimate you place on the female character, that you will attend to my feeble questions in search of knowledge.

Will you be so good as to let me know how any one becomes a Christian? What act of yours gave you the name Christian? At what time had Paul the name of Christ called on him? At what time did Cornelius have Christ

¹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 564.

named on him? Is it not through this name we obtain eternal life? Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the gospel, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?²

This letter, by an unnamed woman from Lunenburg, allowed Campbell to answer several questions: Are only those immersed as believers entitled to the name Christian? Are all the Christians in the world to be found in the movement led by Campbell? Can we call the unimmersed "Christians" and still insist they be immersed?

Exclusivism and Sectarianism

Campbell is adamant in his reply to the letter: there must be Christians among the Protestant sects. Otherwise, he argues, there are "no Christians in the world except ourselves, or such as us as keep, or strive to keep, all the commandments of Jesus."³ Campbell thinks it obviously absurd to claim that his followers (and perhaps not all of them) are the only Christians. If they are, then "for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world."⁴ Thus the promise of Christ in Matthew 16:18 has failed and the gates of hell have prevailed against the church. Campbell says, "This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects."⁵

This gives some insight into Campbell's view of Restoration. He never thought the church has disappeared and he and others had rebuilt it from the ground up. Instead he thought the church had lost certain things that needed to be restored to it. In particular, sectarianism had obscured the true gospel, so Campbell and others called for believers to leave the sects and become Christians only.

This plea for unity, to "come out" of sectarianism, itself implies that there are Christians in the denominations. In Campbell's words,

² *Ibid.*, 411.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

1. Let me ask, in the first place, what could mean all that we have written upon the union of Christians upon apostolic grounds, had we taught that all Christians in the world were already united in our own community?

2. And in the second place, why should we so often have quoted and applied to apostate Christendom what the Spirit saith to saints in Babylon--“Come out of her, my people, that you partake not of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues”--had we imagined that the Lord had no people beyond the pale of our communion!⁶

In other words, to plead for unity necessarily means there are Christians to unify. Unfortunately, there were some even in Campbell's day who thought he wished to “make and lead a large exclusivist party” who claimed to be the only ones who were saved. He vehemently denies this by saying:

Now in this acceptance of the word [Christian], I think there are many, in most Protestant parties, whose errors and mistakes I hope the Lord will forgive; and although they should not enter into all the blessings of the kingdom on earth, I do fondly expect they may participate in the resurrection of the just.⁷

Thus those in his day and our own who think we are the only Christians cannot claim the restoration heritage of Alexander Campbell. Some have tried to paint him as inconsistent on this issue, claiming the “early Campbell” was a strict restorationist who saw his followers (or perhaps all the immersed) as the only Christians, while the “later Campbell” abandoned that position and became more ecumenical.⁸ Campbell himself refutes this charge by quoting his writings from the early years to show “. . . the opinion now expressed [that there are Christians among the sects], whether true or false, is one that I have always avowed.”⁹

In this opinion Alexander Campbell was reflecting the teaching of his father Thomas expressed twenty-eight years earlier in the *Declaration and Address*. Thomas called for all Christians to unite on what the Bible expressly taught. It is clear by this appeal that he thought there were Christians in the denominations:

⁶ *Ibid.*, 561.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 567.

⁸ Richard T. Hughes, “Churches of Christ,” in Samuel S. Hill, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1984) 167.

⁹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 561.

The cause that we advocate is not our own peculiar cause, nor the cause of any party, considered as such; it is a common cause, the cause of Christ and our brethren of all denominations.¹⁰

Alexander Campbell did not soften his stand on restoration, but rather he tenaciously clung to the ideals of both restoration and unity he received from his father.

Legalism and Baptism

The belief that there are Christians among the sects raises the question of baptism. As the Lunenburg letter asks, "What act of yours gave you the name of Christian?" In his preaching, his writing, and his debates, Campbell had strongly defended believer's immersion as the biblical form of baptism and had called on those baptized as infants to be immersed as adults. This emphasis led some of his followers to assume that only the immersed were Christians. They were shocked to find Campbell calling at least some of the unimmersed "Christians," and they accused him of abandoning his position on the importance of biblical baptism.

He replies by accusing some of his correspondents of being "ultraists," that is, legalists, on the subject of baptism. They have made baptism itself a savior, claiming it was the single standard by which one is judged to be a Christian. Such "water salvation" was never taught by Campbell:

I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian faith or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven . . .

Should I find a Pedobaptist [one baptized as an infant] more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians.¹¹

¹⁰ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, in Charles Alexander Young, ed., *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Joplin, Missouri: College, 1985) 91.

¹¹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 412.

Although baptism is important, it is not more important than Christian character. To deny the name Christian to those who display the character of Christ is to be the worst kind of sectarian. It is to promote the kind of legalistic, exclusivist barriers that Campbell worked all his life to tear down.

So if the unimmersed are Christians, does that mean immersion is not essential for salvation and is relatively unimportant? No, Campbell says, baptism is still unto salvation. How then can the unimmersed be saved? Campbell's answer is that some of the unimmersed who were baptized as infants have never thought to inquire whether their baptism was scriptural, but took such for granted. Paul talks of one who does not have outward circumcision, but has inward circumcision. In the same way, Campbell asks, "Can a person who simply, not perversely, mistakes the outer baptism, have the inward?"¹²

Obviously, one can willingly neglect immersion. If one is shown that he should be immersed as a believer, but refuses to do so, he does not have "inward baptism." But if one is simply ignorant and assumes that infant baptism is correct, one will be forgiven of the ignorance. In a lengthy paragraph, Campbell summarizes his position:

The case is this: When I see a person who would die for Christ; whose brotherly kindness, sympathy, and active benevolence knows no bounds but his circumstances; whose seat in the Christian assembly is never empty; whose inward piety and devotion are attested by punctual obedience to every known duty; whose family is educated in the fear of the Lord; whose constant companion is the Bible; I say, when I see such a one ranked amongst heathen men and publicans, because he never happened to inquire, but always took it for granted that he had been scripturally baptized; and that too, by one greatly destitute of all these public and private virtues, whose chief or exclusive recommendation is that he has been immersed, and that he holds a scriptural theory of the gospel: I feel no disposition to flatter such a one; but rather to disabuse him of his error. And while I would not lead the most excellent professor in any sect to disparage the least of all the commandments of Jesus, I would say to my immersed brother as Paul said to his Jewish brother who gloried in a system which he did not adorn: "Sir, will

¹² *Ibid.*, 567. In addition to this parallel to Paul's circumcision argument in Romans 2:25-29, Campbell also quotes Jesus who says "salvation is of the Jews," but then praises the faith of the Syrophenician woman. To Campbell, salvation belongs to the baptized, yet the unimmersed may be accepted because of their faith. These are the only two biblical illustrations Campbell uses to defend his position on baptism in his reply to the Lunenberg letter. It is surprising that he does not refer to those in Ephesus who are called "disciples" even though they had not been baptized in Jesus name (Acts 19:1-7).

not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be counted to him for baptism? and will he not condemn you, who, though having the literal and true baptism, yet dost transgress or neglect the statutes of your King?"¹³

Campbell strongly denies that admitting there may be Christians among the sects detracts from the importance of baptism. He sees himself steering a middle course between essentialists and non-essentialists on baptism:

The preachers of "essentials," as well as the preachers of "non-essentials," frequently err. The Essentialist may disparage the heart, while the Non-essentialist despises the institution. . . . My correspondent may belong to a class who think we detract from the authority of an institution the moment we admit the bare possibility of any one being saved without it.¹⁴

Campbell was not a legalist on baptism. Unfortunately, some of his followers are. We in Churches of Christ have been accused by many of believing in water salvation or baptismal generation. For most of us, that charge is untrue. However, there are those who make baptism a legalistic requirement for salvation. These "Essentialists," as Campbell calls them, so emphasize the act that they ignore the heart of the command. Some will not even accept all immersed believers as Christians, but only those who hold correct positions on a long list of issues. I once heard one of the prominent preachers in this group say that at times he thought he and his wife were the only faithful people left on earth and sometimes he was not too sure about her. I'm not completely convinced that he was joking. Such an attitude was Phariseeism to Campbell. More importantly, it is Phariseeism to Jesus.

So if Campbell believed immersion was not absolutely essential to salvation, did he advocate open membership in the church and an easy-going ecumenism? No. He would not call everyone "brother" who called God "Father." Obedience to Christ and his ordinances (including baptism) were essential to salvation. In this Campbell claims to agree with all Christians:

All professors of christianity, I mean all parties, make baptism, under certain conditions, essential to salvation. Roman Catholics believe so. Protestants say, that any one who knows that it is a christian ordinance, and wilfully

¹³ *Ibid.*, 565.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

disdains or neglects it, cannot be saved. I have never written or spoken any thing stronger than that.¹⁵

Campbell did not place himself with the "Non-essentialists" who despises the command to be immersed.

But one can obey only to the extent of his knowledge. If one does not know baptism is believer's immersion, then one cannot obey. However, one who knows and rejects the ordinance is without excuse. Campbell told all who would listen to him that scriptural baptism was immersion for forgiveness of sins. Such was required to be recognized as a member of his congregation. He did not downplay baptism to increase numbers. Neither did he judge all the unimmersed to be outside of Christ.¹⁶

The Continuing Struggle Against Legalism and Sectarianism

Not only was it Campbell's opinion that there were Christians among the sects, but this has been the teaching of prominent leaders in the church into the twentieth century. David Lipscomb (1831-1917) was the most influential leader among Churches of Christ in his day, a man known for piety in life and for soundness in doctrine. Lipscomb, like Campbell, believed there were Christians in the sects and called them to come out and be Christians only. He also saw a rising sectarianism within Churches of Christ that prevented some from leaving the sects:

There are some in nonsectarian churches who are sectarians, who violate the laws of God in order to oppose sectarians. They are sectarians in their opposition to sectarians. There are some in sectarian churches who will obey God and follow him in spite of the sectarianism of the churches in which they find themselves. As examples, there are persons in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches who were baptized to obey God rather than to please the sects. In this they rise above the sectarian spirit, despite the

¹⁵ *Campbell-Rice Debate* (Lexington, Kentucky: A.T. Skillman and Son, 1844) 458.

¹⁶ Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen say Campbell "sometimes engaged in a great deal of theological double-talk concerning baptism," *Illusions of Innocence* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988) 179. However, if one looks at their citations from Campbell in context, one finds not double-talk, but a consistent position: Campbell taught that one must be immersed to enter the kingdom, but also taught that the sprinkled who show true devotion to the Lord may have their baptism counted as lawful. See *Christian Baptist* 4 (1827) 172, 188-189.

parties in which they find themselves. They ought to get out of the sectarian churches, but they see so much sectarianism in the nonsectarian churches that they think they are all alike.¹⁷

In the generation after Lipscomb, no one was more respected than N.B. Hardeman (1874-1965). An educator and preacher, between 1922 and 1942 he spoke at five series of important meetings in Nashville, known as the Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons. The 1923 series emphasized the theme of Christian unity. Hardeman made it clear that he thought there were Christians in the denominations:

I do not claim, and have never done so, that those who have taken no stand with denominations are the only Christians upon the earth; but here is the contention: Having simply believed and obeyed the gospel, we propose to be Christians only. Now there is a wonderful difference between saying that we claim to be Christians only and we claim to be the only Christians. The Bible clearly predicts that the Lord's people, some of them, will be engaged in a state of confusion; and the Lord bids his people to come out of that state and just stand, if you please, as humble Christians only.¹⁸

In the years following Hardeman, there appears to be a hardening of positions in many leaders of the Churches of Christ. Abandoning the position of Campbell, Lipscomb, Hardeman, and other earlier leaders, some came to see the group known as Churches of Christ as the only Christians. They went beyond a legalistic stance on baptism to a legalistic insistence that one must be correct on all the "issues" (which they defined) in order to be a Christian.

As early as 1929, G.C. Brewer saw this sectarian approach entering Churches of Christ. He blamed it on "big preachers" who lacked the education and balance of earlier leaders in the movement. Thus the big idea of being "Christians only" entered the little minds of a later generation and was perverted into "we are the only Christians." Brewer says the "big preachers" of his day enforced their sectarian view by leading their followers "to suspect and to disfellowship" anyone who knew more
than

¹⁷ David Lipscomb, "Sectarians Taking Part in the Worship," *Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell* (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Company, 1952) 592.

¹⁸ N.B. Hardeman, *Hardeman's Tabernacle Sermons*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1923) 252-253.

they did.¹⁹

Ironically, some today claim they are the only Christians in the guise of following the “old paths.” As we have seen, their “old paths” are not old enough. They are directly contrary to the paths trod by the early leaders of the restoration movement.

Campbell quotes and refutes the Lunenburg letter because he thinks it contains insidious errors: legalism, sectarianism, and exclusivism. He insists on the value of immersion without making it a legalistic requirement. He attacks the exclusivist view that “we are the only Christians,” unmasking it as ungodly sectarianism. He calls Christians from all sects to come to the pure gospel and be Christians only. His voice and the voices of Lipscomb, Hardeman, Brewer, and countless others, both past and present, should be heard today.

¹⁹ G. C. Brewer, “More Criticism,” *Gospel Advocate* 71 (March 14, 1929) 245.

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