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Both Catholic and Protestant: Alexander Campbell and Tradition

Gary N. Holloway

What was Alexander Campbell's attitude toward tradition? This question must be answered if Campbell is to be brought into current discussions of faith and practice in Churches of Christ. However, to use Campbell's thought as our model creates many difficulties. For one, he probably would not approve. On many occasions he protested that he was not founding a new sect, but simply teaching the common faith believed by all Christians, the faith found in the New Testament.

To follow Campbell also tempts us to commit the "great man" fallacy of historical assessment, the mistake of reducing complex events or structures, such as a religious movement, to simple reflections of one significant leader. But just as one cannot explain Lutheranism by looking solely at Luther, or Presbyterianism by Calvin, so Churches of Christ cannot be explained merely by quoting Campbell.

A third difficulty is that Campbell, like Luther and John Wesley, wrote so much. For over 40 years he edited a monthly religious paper, most of which he wrote himself. Adding to this his sermons, lectures, debates, and other writings produces a significant body of material written over a long period of time. It is difficult then to say with finality what Campbell's position was on any subject. Through the years he wrote under many different circumstances and (like all good scholars) changed his mind on many matters.

With these caveats in mind, this paper will attempt to synthesize Campbell's thought on historical Christian traditions. Four terms he used are particularly important: "creeds," "tradition," "theology," and "catholic." Campbell can have a significant,

though not a final role in determining how we view these terms today.

Campbell as an Opponent of Theological Tradition

Alexander Campbell was an iconoclast who wanted to cut away all the underbrush of religious traditions so that the "pure gospel" would shine through. He contrasted "human traditions" (which he identified with theological systems) with the apostles' traditions that are found in the New Testament. Typical of Campbell's writing on tradition is the following:

Let human philosophy and human tradition, as any part of the Christian institution, be thrown overboard into the sea, and then the ship of the church will make a prosperous, safe, and happy voyage across the ocean of time, and finally, under the triumphant flag of Immanuel, gain a safe anchorage in the haven of eternal rest.¹

Why did Alexander Campbell object so strongly to theological tradition? Partially because he saw it as unnecessary, contradictory, and divisive. However, his primary objection was that tradition was not a sure guide in religious matters. The genius of Campbell's restoration was that it gave a sure basis for faith and practice. Any reasonable person, thought Campbell, could agree on the plain teachings of Scripture. If those teachings alone were followed, the purity and unity of the primitive church would be restored. Theological tradition, however, was mere human speculation on the teachings of Scripture. As such, it shared in human sinfulness and thus was an unsure guide. Campbell called tradition "doubtful and dangerous," and "a commingling of truth and error" that "could not serve as a firm basis for a divine faith."²

¹*The Christian System*, (Bethany: A. Campbell, 1839) 105-106.

²*Millennial Harbinger* (1837), 19; (1843), 35.

Campbell was particularly incensed by creeds as embodiments of theological tradition. Again, he objected that they were dangerous speculation and were divisive:

All creeds are mere theories of Christian doctrine, discipline, and government exhibited as a basis of church union. Being speculative, they have always proved themselves to be "apples of discord," or "roots of bitterness," amongst the Christian profession.³

If creeds could be accepted for what they are, mere human summaries of Scripture, then fine and good. But when creeds become authoritative and are used as tests of fellowship, they take the place of the Bible, which is the only sure guide in religion.

Interestingly, Campbell believed his new version of the Bible, the Living Oracles, would curb the use of speculative theology and creeds by restoring "a more evangelical diction." By calling things by Bible names and not by theological terms, creeds with their "heathenish terminology" would be supplanted.⁴

Campbell also had no use for "theology" as an academic discipline. When proposing the establishment of Bethany College, he said plainly, "We want no scholastic or traditional theology."⁵ This wish was formalized in the final section of the college charter:

And be it further enacted, that nothing herein contained shall be so construed as at any time to authorize the establishment of a Theological Professorship in the said College.⁶

³*Millennial Harbinger* (1847), 485.

⁴*Millennial Harbinger* (1854), 368.

⁵*Millennial Harbinger* (1839), 448.

⁶*Millennial Harbinger* (1840), 179. See also *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, (St. Louis: Christian Publishing Co., 1863) 485-491.

Campbell was most proud that Bethany College was not a "theological school," but "the only College known to us in the civilized world, founded on the Bible."⁷ His objection to theology was the same as his disgust with tradition and creeds: theology was human speculation, not divine revelation. All that was needed was the Bible.

Campbell's opposition to the term "theology" had a lasting impact. In 1933, when A.T. DeGroot compiled the first book-length bibliography of Disciple literature, he could not find a single volume that professed to be a systematic theology.⁸ That situation has changed among the Disciples; but even today, to my knowledge, no member of the Churches of Christ has written a systematic theology. Church periodicals and schools still by and large take great pains to avoid the term.

From the information cited above, one would be justified in seeing Campbell as a thorough-going iconoclast. His method was to cut down traditional theological systems root and branch, so that the true gospel could flower. One following in his footsteps today would be expected to fight all religious tradition, even (or especially) Church of Christ traditions, in order for the truth of God in Scripture to triumph. However, this view of Campbell is both a one-sided and a short-sighted one. Though Campbell had a reputation as an iconoclast, he actually built a religious movement that survived with its own traditions. He also was not always critical of tradition, creeds, and theology, but at times had surprisingly good words to say about all three.

Campbell as a Defender of Theological Tradition

Even though Alexander Campbell was a strong critic of "Protestant orthodoxy," he thought of himself as a Protestant in the tradition of the historic reformers Luther and Calvin. On many

⁷*Millennial Harbinger* (1850), 291.

⁸A. T. DeGroot, *Disciple Thought: A History* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1965), 22.

occasions he called himself a Protestant.⁹ He said clearly there were Christians in the Protestant sects.¹⁰ He called his own movement a "reformation" and compared it to the Protestant Reformation, even calling Luther and Calvin "God's chosen vessels."¹¹ After an extensive examination of Campbell's writings, Richard L. Harrison, Jr. concludes, "For Campbell, the Protestant tradition held a position of authority second only to scripture."¹²

Indeed, at one point Campbell even chided his followers for their objections to joining Protestants in supporting the interdenominational Sunday School union. He warned, "Our greatest error, Protestants themselves being judges, is that we are too Protestant in our aversions to the doctrines and commandments of men."¹³ Campbell realized that the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* could be taken too far. Just because an organization such as the Sunday School Union is not found in the Bible does not mean it is necessarily to be avoided. By making this admission, Campbell shows much more balance on the topic of "speaking where the Bible speaks" than have some of his spiritual descendants.

But how does such a positive view of Protestantism square with Campbell's strong condemnations of tradition, including Protestant tradition? One could simply admit that Campbell was inconsistent in his statements as anyone might be who wrote so extensively. However, many times Campbell has both positive and negative statements about tradition in the same document. Surely as careful a thinker as he would not be so obviously self-contradictory. One could see his opposing views on Protestantism as development in his thought, perhaps as another example of the

⁹For example, see *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, 309.

¹⁰*Millennial Harbinger* (1837), 411.

¹¹*Campbell-Rice Debate*, 587.

¹²Richard L. Harrison, Jr. "Alexander Campbell on Luther and the Reformation," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 19 (October 1984), 124.

¹³*Millennial Harbinger* (1847), 201.

early iconoclastic Campbell versus the later irenic reformer. However, both his praise for and his criticism of Protestantism occur throughout his career.

So how does one account for this apparent contradiction? One can do so only by taking seriously Campbell's contention that his protests were not against the Protestant tradition itself, but against Protestantism's "degeneracy from the standard of Christian excellence."¹⁴ As Harrison says:

The few references in which Campbell tried to establish some distance between himself and the reformers were always in the context of his affirming the ultimate authority of scripture and the necessity for the church to look to the Bible and to tradition for guidance. This is reinforced in his praise of the Biblicism of the reformers and his claim to be in continuity with Luther and Calvin.¹⁵

Harrison's conclusion may be hard to accept in light of the vehemence of Campbell's language against tradition. However, Campbell's strong language may be viewed as rhetoric, that is, language used to persuade. In struggling against the abuses of Protestantism, Campbell employed language that sounded as if he wished to destroy it. Such was not the case. Such language was simply the noise of battle, as Campbell himself makes clear by his positive assessments of the Protestant faith. In spite of Campbell's rhetoric, we are forced to agree with Harrison: "The Stone-Campbell movement is surely a part of and in continuity with the Protestant heritage."¹⁶

Campbell could even acknowledge the value of traditions preceding Protestantism. On many occasions, Campbell claimed

¹⁴*Millennial Harbinger* (1837), 319.

¹⁵Harrison, 149.

¹⁶Harrison, 149.

that he and his movement were "catholic."¹⁷ By this he meant not Roman Catholic but that he and his followers believed only what "is universally admitted by all denominations."¹⁸ What is universally believed by all Christians at all times in all places is the essence of catholicity. However, Campbell opposed the Roman Catholic Church precisely because it was not catholic but had its own peculiar teachings. He even argued that "Protestantism must purify itself from Popery" on "broad catholic and evangelical principles."¹⁹ By using the word "catholic" in this way, he places himself squarely in the stream of the larger Christian tradition.

In spite of his opposition to Roman Catholic tradition, Campbell could quote the church fathers when it suited his purpose to do so. For example, in *The Christian System* he gives extensive quotations from patristic sources on baptism.²⁰ In a later article he ridicules the Roman Catholic view that "the unanimous consent of the Fathers" was as authoritative as Scripture, since the fathers contradict each other. He goes on to say:

If there be any consent at all among the Fathers, it is in recommending upon all, and to all, the necessity, utility, and importance of reading the sacred Scriptures, as the true and only faithful source of faith and morals.²¹

Campbell follows this statement with several pages of quotations from Clement, Polycarp, Tertullian, Basil, Cyril, Chrysostom, Athanasius, and Augustine on the authority of the Bible.

¹⁷*Millennial Harbinger* (1837), 112; (1839), 212; (1847), 7; (1851), 522. Three times in *The Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell used the term "catholic" to describe his proposals for the church.

¹⁸*Millennial Harbinger* (1850), 292.

¹⁹*Millennial Harbinger* (1853), 564.

²⁰*The Christian System*, 189-196.

²¹*Millennial Harbinger* (1837), 20.

These quotations make it clear that Campbell knew the work of the church fathers and found their work helpful. He was not therefore opposed to "catholic" tradition. What he opposed was placing patristic teaching on the same authoritative level as the Bible. One must remember that the Catholic Church of his day was strongly Tridentine in its theology and certainly did place tradition on a par with Scripture.

Amazingly, Campbell even commended one of the historic Christian creeds. In all his criticism of creeds, he makes an exception for one, the Apostles' Creed. In 1832, Campbell quoted the creed and said, "I believe every word of it." Why this exception? Campbell claimed that the Apostles' Creed, while not written by the apostles, is not a collection of human opinions, but "a brief narrative of all the great gospel facts; . . . the Apostles' doctrine authorizes every proposition, or statement of fact, in this creed."²²

Fourteen years later, after years of rhetoric against creeds, he says, "We never objected to a creed properly so called. We have a creed--an apostolic creed. A luminous, comprehensive, soul-stirring creed . . ."²³ He then quotes the Apostles' Creed, which he interestingly traces back not to the first century, but to the third. However, Campbell is not content to leave the creed in its historical form. To the sixteen "facts" of the creed he adds nine others, including baptism for the remission of sins, weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and contributions for Christian purposes. These twenty-five articles of belief, he calls "the materials of Christian faith, piety and humanity."

So Campbell, the great foe of creeds, wrote a creed himself. It is particularly significant that the items he added to the Apostles' Creed--his views on baptism and the Lord's Supper--became the teachings that gave a peculiar identity to his later followers, particularly in Churches of Christ. Campbell's use of the creed is not inconsistent with his attacks on creedalism. As with Protestant

²²*Millennial Harbinger* (1832), 602-603.

²³*Millennial Harbinger* (1856), 701.

and Catholic tradition, he objected to creeds only when they claim equal authority with Scripture.

Campbell's faith in the Apostles' Creed, with his appended nine articles, does raise questions about the consistency of his view on biblical interpretation. If everyone can understand the Bible alike upon reading it as if for the first time, then why is there a need for summaries of the Bible such as Campbell's extended Apostles' Creed? Is not Campbell here admitting the need for a broad "catholic" tradition in interpreting Scripture? This does not place tradition on the same level as the Bible, but it does value the role of tradition in deciding what "gospel facts" are most significant.

Finally, Campbell could even use the term "theology" in a positive way. In *The Christian System*, he quotes with approval Luther's "favorite maxim": "One well acquainted with the scriptures makes a good theologian."²⁴ Although he usually disapproved of the term, Campbell was beyond a doubt a theologian himself. His quotation from Luther shows again that his quarrel was not with a biblically based theology but with speculative, authoritative theological systems that placed themselves above or alongside the Bible.

Conclusion

Alexander Campbell was a child of tradition. It has almost become a cliché to point out that Campbell's anti-traditionalism was itself part of a long tradition of iconoclasm going back to the Reformation. This essay has argued that Campbell was much more positive about the role of tradition, particularly the Protestant view of tradition, than he has been portrayed to be by some. True, Campbell had a strong rhetoric against tradition, creeds, and theology. But that is what it is--strong rhetoric used to fight abuses and apostasies in Protestantism. To expand his own

²⁴*The Christian System*, 263.

statement on creeds, Campbell never objected to tradition "properly so-called," but only to traditionalism, to granting authority to tradition above Scripture.



CONTRIBUTORS

Articles

James W. Thompson is President of the Institute for Christian Studies where he is also Professor of New Testament and Homiletics.

Allan J. McNicol is Professor of New Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Gary N. Holloway is Associate Professor of Church History and Librarian at the Institute for Christian Studies. He currently serves as Faculty Chairman.

Michael R. Weed is Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Book Reviews

Bob Burgess serves as a deacon for the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin, Texas.

Joe Crisp is the preaching minister at College Church of Christ in Victoria, Texas.

Michael S. Moore is the preaching minister at the Tatum Boulevard Church of Christ in Phoenix, Arizona.