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A Life of Alexander Campbell
by Douglas A. Foster (Eerdmans, 2020)

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A Life of Alexander Campbell is the thirty-first title to be published in Eerdmans' Library of Religious Biography. In keeping with other books in the series, including *A Christian and a Democrat: The Religious Life of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, published in 2019, Foster's biography is a substantial volume—350 pages in length, fully documented, with many photographs—and written in a style that can be appreciated by a wide cross section of readers.

Before turning to the text itself, readers are likely to be drawn to Campbell's portrait, created in 1861, five years before his death, that dominates the front cover. His stern, foreboding face in ruddy tones, framed by gray hair swept back and full beard, reveals the religious leader whom historian Richard T. Hughes, in a statement on the back cover, describes as a "complicated man. . . who defined himself as a simple, New Testament Christian, but whose view of the Christian religion was deeply shaped by the age in which he lived and by many of his less-than-noble characteristics."

Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) was a Scotch-Irish immigrant who in 1809 came with his mother and younger siblings to southwestern Pennsylvania to join his father who had come the previous year to prepare the way. Thomas Campbell's primary reason for emigrating to the new world was to establish a way of life free from the religious and political complexities of life in Northern Ireland. He was a minister in the New Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church and upon arrival had been accepted by the synod that was already functioning in that area. The multi-phrased title of this Presbyterian church manifested the interplay of nationality, political authority, religious identity and theological conflict that were roiling the society in which they lived—a complex story that Foster unfolds in Section One: Formation.

During the year they had been separated, Thomas had struggled with features of this system that were still operative among Presbyterians even though they made little sense in the new world; and Alexander had devoted the year to theological study. They quickly discovered that in this brief period of separation they had come to similar convictions about how to transform their ecclesial life in this new setting. Thomas had already started the process by gathering a group of like-minded reformers and drafting a set of principles that expressed their emerging convictions.

In Section Two: Creation, Foster describes and interprets the process by which this group of like-minded friends became a congregation and then began the process of enlarging the circle of their ecclesial influence, first with other Presbyterians, then with Baptists, and after that as the organizing center of an expanding network of Reformers. Even though he was still in his twenties, Alexander became their theological and organizational leader. This part of the story is familiar to people interested in American religion as it developed in the American middle west during its nineteenth-century frontier period. Quite early, Alexander Campbell came to believe in what he "called 'the ancient gospel and order of things.' Immersion for the remission of sins and salvation was, he believed, the missing key to everything else." Foster writes that Campbell's

“political, intellectual, and religious experiences in Ireland and Scotland, shaped by the American context of unlimited opportunity for progress, fueled his desire for a reform of church and society and drove him to almost frenetic activity to promote his ideas” (78).

From his home in the village he renamed Bethany, in Brooke County (soon to be West Virginia), he travelled much of the time. He published his own journals, first *Christian Baptist* and then *Millennial Harbinger*. In 1826 he edited and published a new edition of the New Testament, followed by three revisions in 1828, 1832, and 1835). In two books, he laid out his theological ideas. *The Christian System* (1835 and 1839) contains what Foster describes as “a kind of systematic theology,” and in 1851 “he produced the most thorough statement of his baptismal theology in his masterpiece, *Christian Baptism: With Its Antecedents and Consequents*” (77-8). Campbell lectured on a wide range of topics and addressed many of these issues in his journals. He engaged readily in debates, which were one of the important modes of public discourse during that era. Two of these debates earned him the reputation as the defender of protestant Christianity. The first was in 1829 with “the genial Welsh anti-Christian social reformer Robert Owen,” and the second was in 1837 with “the Roman Catholic bishop of Cincinnati, John Baptist Purcell” (114). Although much of this section of the book is already familiar to many readers, Foster provides a careful summary that can help them remember what they have previously understood and introduce this historical narrative to readers who only now are encountering it.

In the final chapter of this section Foster describes the creation of what he calls “two crucial institutions,” Bethany College in 1841 and the American Christian Missionary Society in 1849. Each of them was intended to be a practical way to embody key elements for advancing the American dream as he understood it. “Proper education,” he believed, “was key to restoring the ancient gospel and order of things, which would bring the unity of all Christians and the conversion of the world, thus ushering in the millennium” (138). Campbell was certain that “the non-sectarian teaching of Scripture was of central importance to the teaching of all the sciences and arts for a complete life and in order for America to fulfil its destiny. He lectured and lobbied extensively to persuade people across the country to develop public schools at all levels accordingly. His new college would be the model for this kind of education. It would have four departments: “preparatory and elementary schools for boys seven to fourteen years of age; an Academy of Arts and Sciences for older boys, the college proper, and a normal school for training teachers” (141). Campbell failed to see that his school would be as sectarian as those he opposed, Foster writes, and continues that it was “naïve of Campbell to believe that people who were ‘properly educated’ would agree with his conclusions—what he was absolutely convinced were clear and evident truths.” Even so, Foster continues, Campbell created a strong educational institution that provided “a magnificent education as evidenced in the statesmen, scientists, and religious leaders it produced” (143).

As his movement spread across the rapidly expanding midwestern frontier, Campbell became increasingly convinced that this network of preachers and congregations needed to be bound together by an organization for consultation and cooperation. In February 1842 he published a list of functions for which they needed some kind of organization: (1) Distributing the Bible abroad; (2) engaging in missionary efforts at home and abroad; (3) improving and elevating the Christian ministry; (4) protecting churches and their members from imposture and fraud; and concentrating the actions of tens of thousands of people. His conclusion was that “[W]e can have

no thorough co-operation without a more ample, extensive, and thorough church organization” (145).

In response to Campbell’s ideas, a committee of organizers developed plans for a meeting to be held in Cincinnati in October 1849. Campbell, however, believed that the date was too soon and needed to be postponed. One reason was the outbreak of a cholera epidemic in that area. Approximately 150 members of Campbell-related churches came anyway, established an organization they named the American Christian Missionary Society, and elected Campbell to be its first president. Although he did not attend the gathering, claiming “an unusually severe indisposition,” he did affirm that the convention had fulfilled his hopes for what they would do.

Throughout this second section of his book, Foster focuses attention on how this movement largely shaped by the ideas and labors of Alexander Campbell became a significant force in American religion. He describes significant relationships with other people, especially Walter Scott, and describes challenges that arose, especially those based on theological differences that were being argued with Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists. Foster freely acknowledges Campbell’s responsibility for some of the tensions, sometimes becoming feuds, that developed. In Section Three: Defense and Conflict, Foster focuses attention upon this darker side of Campbell’s life and work. During my own studies in the history and literature of this American religious movement, I have given some attention to the topics that are presented in this section, including relations between the Campbell movement and the Mormons. For the most part, however, I have avoided the aspects of Campbell’s life that are discussed in this section: the continuing opposition to Campbellism and clashes with Baptists and Presbyterians. Even more, I have resisted reading materials bearing upon Campbell’s clashes with colleagues, including Walter Scott, Barton W. Stone, Jesse B. Ferguson, Tolbert Fanning, and Robert Richardson. Not only is the breakdown of personal relationships painful to read, but the literary form often is challenging in its own right. Foster guides readers through these aspects of the story so that readers can understand what’s there even though they may not want to read the historical accounts themselves.

The most important chapter in this section traces the significant but often tense relationship between Campbell and Barton W. Stone who was principal leader of a reform movement that preceded Campbell’s. In reaction against the Presbyterian sectarianism that they encountered in the Ohio Valley, both men emphasized the importance of depending upon teachings and patterns of church life clearly stated in the Bible. Each man was confident that his synthesis of scriptural teaching was faithful to the spirit and letter of the text and a reliable guide for churches of their time. Although there were important differences between these two movements, the similarities were even stronger, which inevitably, it would seem, meant that popular opinion saw them as variants of the same movement. It seemed inevitable that they form an alliance. Much of the debate between Stone and Campbell was conducted in a continuing series of columns in their respective journals—Stone’s *Christian Messenger* and Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger*. The foremost event in the uniting of these movements took place during a four-day series of Christmas-New Year’s discussions in Georgetown and Lexington, Kentucky. Campbell did not attend, but Stone took an active role, stretching out his hand to a leader of the Campbell delegation on January 1, 1832, thus initiating the public uniting of these movements.

Early in a tragic story, whether it be literary or historical, it is likely that there will be intimations that the narrative will end in some kind of catastrophe, loss, or despair. That the life and work of Alexander Campbell took this form can be felt throughout Foster's comprehensive and appreciative biography. The dramatic denouement takes place in Section Four: Surrender, which contains three chapters: Slavery—the Movement's Greatest Threat, The Civil War and the Millennium; and The Death of a Reformer. These chapters describe events that revealed during Campbell's last years what Americans now are coming to understand and acknowledge more fully: that ours is "a civilization built on slavery" supported by the three pillars of church, academy, and state, to use words by Craig Steven Wilder in his book *Ebony and Ivy* (11). From early in his life, Campbell had been carried along by the "Puritan vision of a land created to bring about God's purposes, but he would form his own version of it" (43). Coupled with this was "a sense of religious superiority characteristic of the Seceder Presbyterians. . . The tendency to disdain anyone who did not share his heritage, education, or faith would manifest itself often throughout his long and influential career, including in his attitudes toward African Americans held in slavery in the United States" (31). In the chapters on slavery and the Civil War, Foster demonstrates Campbell's strong commitment to preserving the unity of North and South. Although he "denounced American slavery as inconsistent with the 'spirit of the age,' he insisted that the Bible never condemned slavery as inherently evil" (275). Despite this understanding of the Bible, Campbell acknowledged the mistreatment of slaves and advocated the gradual elimination of slavery in ways that would preserve the nation.

During the years leading up to the war, Campbell's millennial vision was increasingly threatened. He feared that the breakup of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches threatened the unity of his own movement. His distress over American involvement in the Mexican War, 1846-48, anticipated his even deeper distress over the nation's war with itself. It was increasingly difficult for Campbell to cling to his expectation that the United States would play the decisive role in fulfilling God's millennial action.

All of this was happening as Campbell was experiencing increasing stress in his personal life. His family was painfully divided over these matters, and Campbell himself was entering a period of diminishing ability with signs of dementia. These factors may account for the tone conveyed by the portrait on the cover of Foster's biography, but they are even more evident in two photos near the end of the book. Concerning one of them Foster writes: "The outbreak of the Civil War was crushing to Campbell and his vision for his reformation and the millennium. In his last years he wore an unkempt beard, and his face showed great weariness" (296). Abraham Lincoln died on April 15, 1865. Only a few months later, on March 4, 1866, Alexander Campbell reached the end of his life.

In this retelling of the life and work of Alexander Campbell, Foster leaves largely untouched many aspects of these labors. Two that I miss deal with important features of congregational life. The first is the "every Lord's Day Lord's Supper," to use a descriptive term in an address delivered half a century later at the centennial celebration of Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address. The "breaking of the loaf" on the first day of the week quickly became standard practice in all of the churches influenced by the Campbells. In many congregations today it is understood to be the central feature of this movement while "baptism for the remission of sins" has faded from prominence. Fortunately, Foster does include an extended excerpt from The

Christian System in which Campbell's understanding and appreciation of the Lord's Supper are clearly stated (328).

The second topic that I miss is Campbell's treatment of leadership in the congregation and the gradual evolution of the pattern. Throughout his active life he was distressed at the systems of authority and control exercised by clergy in the churches around him. The New Testament pattern that he perceived and established in congregations consisted of mature Christian men chosen and ordained by others in the congregation to be spiritual overseers: elders (also entitled bishops) and deacons. Evangelists were recognized as preachers and evangelists who traveled about proclaiming the message, organizing congregations, and serving as consultants to the churches. Early in the process, however, congregations developed a model of pastoral leadership that combined features of the elder and evangelist, and this practice became widespread. One impact of this history upon Christian unity in our time is that some church traditions find it difficult to recognize the sufficiency of celebrations of the Lord's Supper conducted by these leaders, especially because they develop their own, usually extemporaneous, communion prayers. Although this modern challenge need not be part of this biography, contemporary readers would benefit from a recounting of the background for this practice.

Alexander Campbell died more than a century and a half ago. What are we to make of him now? This is the question that Foster addresses in Section Five: Legacy, which contains one chapter, only thirteen pages long: The Shadow of Alexander Campbell. He describes tributes and memoirs published in years soon after Campbell's death that "set a precedent for idolizing Campbell that would continue far into the future" (321). He then identifies a continuing body of publications that provide a more scholarly and accurate remembrance of his life, work, and import. One value of these last few pages is that they provide a rationale for the kind of biography that Foster has written and for its inclusion in Eerdmans' Library of Religious Biography. This book can be useful to general readers as well as to members of the three denominational streams that trace their origins to that history—Churches of Christ, The Undenominational Fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Several times in this final portion of his book, Foster writes brief summaries that sum up his sense of the man he describes throughout the book. One example: "Alexander Campbell was a complex, brilliant, indefatigable, arrogant, racist, aggressive, prolific leader who made a lasting impact on the Christian world. He was a man whom God used and whom God chastened" (331). Paired with this is another statement: "Though he resisted experiential religion because of reliance on the gift of reason and rejection of what he saw as irrational excesses, he did in fact have a rich Christian experience, from his seldom-mentioned 'conversion experience' in Ireland to his moments of expressing the love of God and the beauty of community as clearly as anyone has ever done. Such moments of clarity and wisdom are moving and transformative" (332). As a life-long member of a church that claims Alexander Campbell as an ancestor, I am grateful for this biography that helps me understand and appreciate his life and work.