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Review of James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals*

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James L. Gorman, *Among the Early Evangelicals: The Transatlantic Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (ACU Press, 2017)

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Nearly all American religious historians among Disciples have noted, I think, the influences of Rowland Hill, Greville Ewing, the Haldane brothers, and both Glas and Sandeman. What they have not done is show the development of the broader transatlantic evangelical missions movement, and how the four themes of “mission, unity, primitivism, and millennialism” repeatedly showed up through the various missionary societies in London, and in Scotland and Ireland. I think this is Jamey’s main contribution – relating this story, and its connection to the Campbells, in such an organized and compelling way.

That said, however, most of the religious historians I know have recognized how, for the Campbells, unity and primitivism were connected to prior sources and contacts in Ireland and Scotland. Yet, these historians, with the exception, perhaps, of Tony Dunnivant¹ possessed less recognition of connections to either mission or eschatology, and their connections to each another. As Gorman points out, some connection between the two exists in Thomas Campbell’s *Declaration and Address*, though it’s not a major theme. I think it less likely that Alexander’s major influences in eschatology came through the transatlantic evangelical missionary movement, perhaps due to his age in 1808-09. By the time Alexander Campbell wrote prolifically in his new journal (1823 and after), for reasons well discussed in Jamey’s book, he was not making the kinds of explicit connections between mission and eschatology in the same interdenominational way evident in the work of the evangelical missionary movement and its societies. When Campbell wrote about his postmillennialism, he credited Dutch scholar Campegius Vitringa (1659-1722) and John Tower, whose book on eschatology first appeared in London in 1796 and then in America in 1808, just before Alexander arrived in the US. Campbell’s work in this area also resembled the writings of Daniel Whitby (1659-1722) of Salisbury Cathedral, though he claimed never to have read Whitby firsthand, but learned of his work through the writings of Walter Scott.² Further, his millennialism carried a strong dose of both English and American exceptionalism, and a fair dose of racism: “God has given, in awful charge,” he wrote in 1852, “to Protestant England and Protestant America – the Anglo-Saxon race – the fortunes, not of Christendom only, but of all the world.”³

Second, at least from how it looks from left field, when American historians have emphasized the ties between Campbellian ideas and the themes found in American democracy and on the frontier, they were not sounding a theme of American exceptionalism, but rather emphasizing how clearly this new movement in America lived into the cultural realities surrounding it, and allowed them to define the movement’s approach to religion – as I noted in *Joined In Discipleship* years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr argued that the “definition of religious truth” cannot avoid the effect of the “exigencies of church discipline, the demands of national psychology, the effect of social tradition, the influence of cultural heritage, and the weight of

¹ Dunnivant, “Evangelization and Eschatology: Lost Link In the Disciples Tradition”) *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, (Spring, 1993).

² See footnote six of my chapter on Campbell’s eschatology in *Joined in Discipleship*, 129.

³ *Millennial Harbinger* (August 1952), 462; also quoted in David Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America*, 53.

economic interest.”⁴ All of these factors played their role in shaping the early Disciples as they emerged on the American frontier, and usually not in a good way.

Third, when Gorman argues the influences impacting the early transatlantic evangelical missionary movement, he rightly begins with Pietists, Puritans, and Moravians of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. All quite different from one another, but each emphasizing the importance of “new birth,” whether through God’s initiative or human choice. These led to new Protestant expressions connecting mission to eschatology. Yet, equally important to the development of dissenting evangelicalism were the global effects of new ideas, leading to such events as the American Revolution (between 1765 and 1783) and the French Revolution (1789 and after). These revolutions arose from ideas circulating in transatlantic circles since the mid-to-late seventeenth century, including those developed in the covenant theology of Puritans (in England and the colonies), the expressions and experiences of English common law (Sir Edward Coke, Francis Bacon), the rationalist bent of Enlightenment thought (in people like John Locke, Voltaire, Jacques Rousseau, and many others) and the eighteenth century coffee house radicals and opposition politicians in England (John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon).⁵ Gorman explores the topic only by indicating briefly the concerns identified through “politically conservative eyes (141)” in Scotland. These revolutions, and the long developing ideas behind them, contributed especially to creating the independent mindsets found among dissenting evangelicals in England, Scotland, and Ireland (and America), altering understandings of their relationships to religious authorities, and challenging their traditional notions of the connections between church and state. As these ideas and events developed, they obviously shaped the American ideals the Campbells found when they arrived shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century. However, they also shaped the thoughts and commitments of the Protestant transatlantic evangelicals throughout the seventeenth century long before the founding of the London Missionary Society in 1795. In other words, the ideas shaping American religious self-understanding were actually English, European, and colonial ideas that were similarly shaping evangelicals in England, Ireland, and Scotland. The book does not significantly explore these transatlantic ideas and influences.

Fourth, the story of the Evangelical Society of Ulster, and Campbell’s role in it, is an interesting one (Chapter Four). In 1799, when the Antiburgher Synod began to resist the society, Campbell began to backpedal, removing himself as a member of the Evangelical Society of Ulster Committee and becoming a “simple subscriber.” The next year, the Synod’s position hardened and required complete disassociation. Campbell told the Synod he had not paid his dues for the last year anyway, and “gave full satisfaction as to his seeing eye to eye with the synod in this matter.” Gorman assumes that Campbell disagreed with the synod but acquiesced “in order to retain his Antiburgher identity and pastorate at Ahorey (112).” If this is true, it seems to be a clear lack of integrity on Campbell’s part. Gorman’s is an argument from silence, and in fact assumes what direct evidence seems to contradict. Perhaps he is right. Or, perhaps Campbell found himself interested, but not quite convinced his colleagues in the Evangelical Society were right and the Synod was wrong, so he stood on the side of the Synod with integrity. For this chapter and elsewhere, Gorman depends on the copies of minutes, records, etc., found among Lester’s papers in the Historical Society. Perhaps, the original sources found in the library of Union Theological

⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), 15.

⁵ See, for example, Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.

College in Belfast are much more comprehensive and could reveal more of the truth one way or the other. Who knows? Maybe there is more there than Lester copied. Perhaps Campbell wrote letters to Society leaders or Synod leaders detailing his view, and explaining himself, or principals expressed their disappointment in his decision. Personally, I would like to have seen Gorman depend less on Lester's papers and build his argument on a first-hand review of all the sources available in Ireland and Scotland pertaining to the development of the transatlantic evangelical missionary movement.

Fifth, the book certainly demonstrates that Campbell's *Declaration and Address* arose out of an existing transatlantic evangelical culture (but one also active in America). The themes mentioned by Gorman are all there.⁶ Yet the document also differs from the Evangelical Society of Ulster. It would have been helpful if the book had provided an analysis of the Ulster founding document and how it resembled Campbell's document.⁷ Campbell's Society is not an interdenominational effort, really. It does not reach out to the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Congregationalists. Its main audience is, as the book notes, the Presbyterians who dominate the region where it was published. Its expectations associated with the "express commands" and "approved precedents" of the Divine Standard, its refusal to accept human opinion as playing any role in ecclesial authority, its negative view of "hireling" clergy, and its declaration as "evil" anything that claims authority for something that is not a "Thus Saith the Lord"⁸ make it very difficult for even Presbyterians to join the Society without leaving their Presbyterian churches. Previous societies discussed in the book stressed cooperation and partnership that did not condemn the politics or denominations with which members had association. As Gorman notes (176), the elder Campbell's goal rested more on a society with a goal to restore an apostolic unity through a Bible that needs no human interpretation – a Bible that clearly provides a rule for doctrine, worship, discipline, and government. Leave the world of human opinion (denominations), join us, understand the clarity of the Bible, and restore apostolic unity. There is little in the document that provides a venue for interdenominational cooperation in mission, the goal of previous societies. Campbell's society seems something quite different from those interdenominational societies affiliated with the evangelical missions movement.

Sixth, the degree to which the Campbells are exemplifying the evangelical missions movement as they begin their work in America is still not amply developed by the book. Is there any evidence that either Campbell is keeping in touch with the movement from 1809, after the younger Campbell's arrival, to 1823, when Alexander starts *The Christian Baptist* and has clearly entered his "anti-missionary society" phase? Their congregation's support (prior to 1822) of the Baptist denominational missionary society is not clear evidence. Does either Thomas or Alexander Campbell write for the *Evangelical Magazine* in London or *The Missionary Magazine* in Scotland? Do they report the founding of the Christian Association of Washington to any of these magazines, to the London Missionary Society, the Hibernian Society, or in letters to Hill, Ewing, or the Haldanes? Did they send money to any of the societies associated with the transatlantic missions

⁶ Unity, anti-sectarianism, restoration, mission, millennialism, Enlightenment tolerance, individual interpretation, itinerant preaching, Bible distribution, and voluntary societies.

⁷ Or briefly summarized David Thompson's argument if he did the analysis in his article on the connections between Ireland and the *Declaration and Address*.

⁸ Even though it is rather ironic there is no such thing as a "Thus Saith the Lord" declaring things as evil that are not connected to a "Thus Saith the Lord."

movement during these years? Is there any evidence in America that they connected in any way to the New York Missionary Society (founded in 1796)? One of the great attributes of the transatlantic missionary movement Gorman presents here is the way all the adherents and societies kept in touch with one another, supported one another's work, preached and visited in one another's locations, etc. There seems to be none of these meaningful connections for the Campbells after 1809. Why is that the case if both Campbells are clearly entrenched in the transatlantic evangelical missions movement prior to 1809?

Among the Early Evangelicals makes clear the transatlantic movement affected the theological development of both Thomas and Alexander Campbell. The ideas of the evangelicals in England, Ireland, and Scotland, as Gorman indicates, take root in America through them in peculiar and particular fashion, and then are influenced by the American culture that surrounds them. Yet, the transatlantic ideas affecting the evangelicals in England, Ireland, and Scotland were also, at the same time, affecting the evangelicals in America. As Sidney Mead put it, there were basically three religious ideas "prevailing during the Revolutionary epoch in which the denominations began to take shape." Those three ideas he defined as follows: "the idea of pure and normative beginnings to which return was possible; the idea that the intervening history was largely that of aberrations and corruptions which was better ignored; and the idea of building anew in the American wilderness on the true and ancient foundations."⁹ All three of these ideas are also clearly and emphatically embedded in Campbell's *Declaration and Address*. In this way, as well as reflecting transatlantic evangelicalism, the reformers associated with the Campbells were also "typically American."

⁹ Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 1963, 111.