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Alexander Campbell and 2022: Three Ways He Teaches Me How to Live as a Christian Today

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Founders Day Lecture
Bethany College
March 3, 2022

**Alexander Campbell and 2022:
Three Ways He Teaches Me How to Live as a Christian Today**

To the Board of Trustees, administration, faculty, students, and friends of Bethany College, thank you for the invitation to be with you again this year for Founders Day—this time in person. It is truly a pleasure.

It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves; and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.
Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, September 1837.

Alexander Campbell attracted both ardent admirers and determined foes during his lifetime, yet in the century and a half since his death he became largely unknown or misunderstood, especially outside of the religious movement he helped establish. Inside, descriptions were almost universally admiring, depicting him as an unparalleled preacher, writer, theologian, educator, and one of the most learned men in America.¹

Since publishing *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, I have sometimes felt compelled to start my lectures about him with the statement, “I assure you that I do not hate Alexander Campbell.” I truly don’t. Quite the contrary, I admire him immensely, for his ideals of simple Christianity and unity among all followers of Christ, and his relentless pursuit of his understanding of the kingdom of God.

In last year’s Founders Day Lecture, I described three formative influences that shaped Campbell, and explored implications of those influences for today. First, he was deeply impacted by the belief that God had chosen the United States as the special agent of divine action in the world—including restoring Christianity to its primitive purity. The American Civil War shattered Campbell’s Christian nationalism leading to his complete surrender to God’s will, however, different that was from his expectations. There is today a surge of a particular kind of white Christian nationalism confronting Christians. Some, like Campbell, have come to see with the eyes of faith the ultimately destructive nature of such a belief.

Second, I examined the impact of domestic terrorism on Campbell, both in the north of Ireland and in the United States. When he first arrived in this country, he thanked God that here the terrorism he had experienced in Ireland did not exist. Yet during and after the Civil War that very kind of hate-filled violence became widespread. His fear and his longing for peace is being experienced by many in this nation today as domestic terrorism has come to pose the highest safety threat to Americans according to the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI.

¹ See for example *Gospel Advocate* 130 (September 1988) 11-27.

The final influence I examined last year was inextricably entangled with the others. Campbell's socialization into white supremacy as a justification for slavery and the subordination of people of color. Though opposed to slavery as a moral evil in his early years in the United States, he came to accept it as biblically sanctioned, though economically and socially harmful to white citizens. Today too, Christian nationalism, domestic terrorism, and white supremacy, have become woven into a destructive web to which even many **Christians** have become blinded.

This year I focus on aspects of Campbell's best impulses and wisdom—as well as his frailty—that have taught me how to live as a follower of Christ in the polarized nation and world of 2022. These lessons, I believe, are part of the work of God's Holy Spirit to shape me, and perhaps all of us, more into the image of Christ.

(1) Alexander Campbell's view of the Christian's relation to politics.

Historians have often portrayed Campbell as fully embracing America and its governmental system as part of God's millennial plan for perfecting humanity. Clearly there is much in Campbell's writings to confirm that view.

For example, as mentioned last year, after arriving in the United States in 1809, he and his family traveled west to meet his father, Thomas. One night he took a late walk, and when he returned to the inn and tried to lock the door, he discovered there was no lock. Robert Richardson, his first biographer, described Campbell's reaction.

Coming direct from the Old World, where nocturnal outrages were frequent (referring to the ongoing strife in northern Ireland), and every house had its bolts and bars, he was much impressed with such a token of fearless security, and congratulated himself still more in having reached a country . . . where robbery and injustice appeared to be undreaded and unknown. . . . after his devotions, he fell into slumber amidst grateful reflections upon the goodness of Providence in bringing him to a land under the benign influence of the free institutions, the equal rights, the educational advantages, and the moral and religious elevation secured to all in a purely Protestant community.²

At times he held human government up as a gift from God. In 1845, he wrote that God had established three institutions to save the world from evil, the family, the **state**, and the church. Each was both divine and powerful, and humanity could not be developed, purified, or blessed without them.³ The following year he insisted that civil government was bestowed on the world by God's grace and that neither the church nor the world could exist without it.⁴

² Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:209–10.

³ Alexander Campbell, "Intolerance," *Millennial Harbinger* (July 1845): 316.

⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. XV. Is Capital Punishment Sanctioned by Divine Authority?" *Millennial Harbinger* (March 1846): 124.

But his 1852 address at Jefferson College at Canonsburg, PA (today part of Washington and Jefferson College), titled “The Destiny of Our Country,” is seemingly the strongest endorsement of the United States and its government in all his writings.

In our country’s destiny is involved the destiny of Protestantism, and in its destiny that of all the nations of the world. . . . To us, . . . he has given the new world and all its hidden treasures, with all the arts and sciences of the old. Europe, Asia, and Africa look to Protestant America as the wonder of the age, and as exerting a preponderating influence on the destinies of the world. We have, then, a fearful and a glorious responsibility. Let us cherish in our individual bosoms this feeling of personal as well as national responsibility; and not only enter upon, but prosecute, the duties which we owe to ourselves, our country, and the human race.⁵

The following year he asserted that “The American system of government is the **best** in the world. . . . I believe that the excellency of the American system of society and government consists in its nearer approach to Christianity than that of any other national polity in the world. . . and that is its superlative beauty, excellency, and glory.”⁶

Yet despite these sometimes-glowing evaluations of the United States and its government, he was profoundly ambivalent about both. I contend that he was much more cautious and pessimistic than positive. Reflecting his Calvinist formation regarding human nature, even his positive statements often include the admission that while we may have the best possible human government, all governments, including that of the United States, were a concession by God to restrain fallen humanity and were in opposition to God’s government.

In his theology text *The Christian System*, first published in 1839, he stated that the reason republics are a blessing to humanity and that government officials in a republic like the United States were better than kings was because “we can get rid of them sooner.” He went on to insist that “Ever since the commencement of [the] kingdom [of Heaven], the governments of this world have either been directly opposed to it, or, at best, pretended friends; and therefore, their influence has always been opposed to the true spirit and genius of the Christian institution.”⁷

In 1832 Campbell evaluated the United States government by contrasting the “philanthropy”—that is, the intent to promote human welfare above any other impulse—of Christian preachers with that of statesmen and patriots.

The very soul of politics is cold calculating selfishness. . . . There is not a drop of generosity in the wine which a statesman drinks. . . . It is ourselves, our country, perdition whom it may. The products of our soil, our industry, our genius must be protected, impoverish whom it may.

⁵ Alexander Campbell, “The Destiny of Our Country,” in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1864), 179.

⁶ Alexander Campbell, “Church Organization—No. V,” *Millennial Harbinger* (September 1853): 487-8.

⁷ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System, In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation* (Pittsburgh: Forrester & Campbell, 1839); (Cincinnati: Bosworth, Chase and Hall, Publishers, 1871), 146, 159-60.

If the native benevolence of [the politician's] soul should prompt a different policy—if the love of his species should make a single struggle, or if conscience should remind him of “the golden rule,” he silences every appeal by the arguments of retaliatory policy or self-defensive measures.⁸

While this might be sound policy and good logic, Campbell declared, it is selfishness, not philanthropy!

Yet it was during the factious presidential election of 1840 that Campbell made some of his most condemnatory accusations of the American political system and its evil effects on Christians. The Whig party was moving toward its collapse, largely over slavery. In September he wrote how he had observed fellow Christians, having just shared the elements of the Lord's Supper in the “common hopes and joys of immortality,” begin arguing, often heatedly, about their support of the Whig or Democratic candidates, shoving aside the uniting act in which they just participated and embracing “the respective idols of a divided people.”

American politics, he asserted, were “national and mammoth forms of pride and cupidity; or they are a concentration of selfishness in its most repulsive attributes . . .” The spirit of politicians and the spirit of God are as antagonistic as flesh and spirit, as hatred and love, as heaven and hell; and he that would faithfully and truly serve the one, must abjure all allegiance to the other.”⁹

While he did concede that if citizens believed US slavery laws were unjust and unchristian, they should go through the political system to change them, he did so only because he was afraid of the alternative—the violent agenda of Abolitionists.¹⁰

Clearly Campbell was engaged in a struggle in coming to settled beliefs about how he as a Christian should relate to the government of the United States. As he moved through the 1840s and 1850s, the struggle became increasingly intense. His 1852 declaration that Anglo Saxon America was God's hope for the world in his *Destiny of Our Country* speech was in reality a desperate shout against the noise of events rapidly leading to the dissolution of the nation.

During my seventy years as a Christian in the United States, I have shared in Campbell's struggle. I have at times taken a simplistic approach, assuming from most of what I heard at church and in my community in north Alabama that as a Christian citizen of the United States I should take an active part in the nation's political system. In looking back on that period in my life, I realize that I cast my votes for clearly selfish reasons—I voted for the candidates who promised me the best outcomes, more money, access to jobs and a comfortable safe life, and who took an aggressive approach to whatever enemies the candidate convinced me were my enemies too. I confess that I

⁸ Alexander Campbell, “The Christian Preacher—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* (March 1832) 115-16.

⁹ Alexander Campbell, “The Morality of Christians—No. XXI. Politics,” *Millennial Harbinger* (September 1840) 413-15.

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, “The Morality of Christians—No. XVIII,” *Millennial Harbinger* (March 1840) 102. See also Alexander Campbell, “The Impartiality of the Editor of the Harbinger,” *Millennial Harbinger* (January 1846) 4-5.

voted for racists, sexists, and xenophobes that have left a legacy of massive harm in this nation. My own selfishness contributed to this harm.

As I approached the middle of my life, I took the position that as a Christian I should separate from all partisan political activity as Campbell sometimes advised. I came to see human government as a necessary evil—a concession from God to help control outrages committed by selfish, greedy, and violent people; yet knowing that the government is itself guilty of moral outrages.

In more recent years, as I have come to grapple with what I saw as a growing and frightening evil in the nation's politics that magnified many of evils of the past—especially racism, sexism, and xenophobia—I concluded that I, like Campbell, should as a Christian use the system, as corrupt as it may be, to achieve the greatest good, or at least to impede the greater evil.

The lesson I have learned from Campbell in all this is NOT a final clear position on the Christian and government. The lesson for me is that Christians must **struggle** with this matter. I have examined his struggle; I have experienced it in my own Christian walk. Frankly, I'm not sure there is a totally satisfactory solution to this dilemma. I have close Christian friends who are political activists and others who are total separationists. But the stakes are too high simply to assume without serious examination what the Christian's relation to politics should be.

The other two lessons will perhaps shed light on this question as we seek to know how to serve Christ in this fallen world and nation.

(2) Campbell's essential rule for understanding and being shaped by scripture.

One of the most important commitments of Campbell's reform was to understand scripture rightly. This was not unique, of course. It was part of the DNA of Protestantism. Yet Campbell believed that the Church had become fractured and divisive largely because of flawed approaches to scripture. Very early in his career he began a quest to discover the rules of interpreting the Bible that would lead to true reformation and the unity of Christianity.

In the early 1830s Campbell wrote and published a series of articles in the *Millennial Harbinger* that were compiled and published as part of an 1835 volume titled *Christianity Restored*. At the end of seventy-five pages of detailed explanation, he condensed his principles into seven "Rules," most based on what we would label the Baconian, inductive, or scientific method. The first six are standard literary critical principles: determine the historical circumstances of the passage, the original speaker(s) and hearer(s), the context of words with multiple meanings, and the point of figurative language.¹¹

¹¹ Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, pp. 96-97.

Anyone of normal intelligence who is not deceived by false philosophy, creeds, and confessions, he said, has the native ability to use these rules to understand scripture accurately just like they would any other written or oral communication.¹²

But then Campbell introduced Rule 7. To know the truth of scripture that will benefit and make us holy, “the following rule is indispensable—We must come within the understanding distance.”

He then explains what he means by “the understanding distance.” It is first entering the quest to know scripture with a posture of humility, and second, being fixated by—overwhelmed by—a sense of God’s approval of and affection for us. A person carefully following all the technical principles he had just laid out might become skillful in intellectual interpretation of the words of scripture yet be utterly incapable of truly understanding God’s will.¹³

Humility of mind, . . . prepares the mind for the reception of this light; . . . opens the ears to hear the voice of God. Amidst the din of all the arguments from the flesh, the world, and Satan, a person is so deaf that he cannot hear the still small voice of God's philanthropy. But receding from pride, covetousness, and false ambition; from the love of the world; and in coming within that circle, the circumference of which is unfeigned humility, and the center of which is God himself—the voice of God is distinctly heard and clearly understood. All within this circle are taught by God; all without it are under the influence of the wicked one.¹⁴

In intense emotive language he describes how those who come within this understanding distance would be “raptured with the moral scenes which the Bible unfolds.”

This rule goes well beyond mere intellectual activity; here he insists that something more than the rational approach he had just explained at length was essential for understanding scripture.

Campbell strongly rejected the Westminster Confession’s statement that “the inward illumination of the Spirit of God” was necessary to come to a saving understanding of anything in the Bible, because he believed it removed individual ability and responsibility and substituted a mystical uncontrollable force.¹⁵ Yet he knew there had to be something beyond a merely rational and intellectual approach. That is what he called “coming within the understanding distance.”

Campbell saw this as completely within the individual’s control, in contrast to the Westminster Confession’s “inward illumination.” Yet Campbell’s rule reflects the Westminster Confession’s

¹² Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism With Its Antecedents and Consequents* (Bethany, VA, Alexander Campbell, 1852), 233.

¹³ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 2nd ed., 1839, Chapter 2, “The Bible,” https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tcs2/TCS202.HTM; Walter Thomas Viner, in his 2009 dissertation on Campbell’s “Logic of the Heart,” proposes that Campbell’s “Baconianism was mediated by an intuitive sensibility.” Walter Thomas Viner, “Logic of the Heart: Alexander Campbell’s Rhetoric and Hermeneutics on Christian Identity, Slavery, and Church Organization” (PhD dissertation, University of Memphis, 2009), 68-70.

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, p. 18.

¹⁵ *Westminster Confession I*: 6. <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>

insistence that true understanding of scripture necessarily requires more than mere intellectual effort.¹⁶ It was total humility before God, a spirit of affection for and absolute submission to God who is love. Without this disposition, one cannot grasp and be transformed by scripture. This description of how to understand scripture in “all matters of piety and morality” is, to me, moving and compelling.

Grasping this profound truth is extremely important. But that is not the lesson I learn from him. The lesson that strikes me so powerfully is this: if even a person like Campbell who has come to such a profound understanding concerning the necessity of submission, humility, and love in approaching the written word of God, can be blinded on a matter that reflects the very nature of God, I must be intensely self-reflective and self-critical about things I have missed that are central to the nature of God and what it means to be a Christian.

The issue that blinded Campbell was the most politically and morally divisive one of the United States of his day **and today**—race. Both Alexander and his father Thomas had severely critiqued American slavery when they arrived in America. In his first editorial for the *Christian Baptist* in 1823, Campbell said the clear evidence of the church’s apostasy was “those **Christians**, who are daily extolling the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and at the same time, by a system of the most cruel oppression, separating the wife from the embraces of her husband, and the mother from her tender offspring; violating every principle, and [destroying] every tie that endears life and reconciles [humankind] to [its] lot; and that because might gives right, and a man is held guilty because his skin is a shade darker than the standard color of the times.”¹⁷

The longer he lived in this country, however, the more Campbell’s attitude changed. At the close of his 1845 series “Our Position to American Slavery,” he asserted that based on abundant Scripture testimony, the relation of master and slave was not sinful or immoral. And while slavery in the United States hindered maximum national and individual white prosperity, the relation of slave to master could never be made “a term of Christian fellowship or a subject of discipline” if people were truly governed by the Bible.¹⁸

Much as I may sympathize with a black man, de declared, I love the white man more. As a political economist, and as a philanthropist, I have many reasons for preferring the prospects and conditions of the Free to the Slave states; but especially as a Christian, I sympathize much more with the owners of slaves, their heirs, and successors, than the slaves which they possess and bequeath.¹⁹

Based on his hermeneutical principles—crowned by the “indispensable” Rule 7—Campbell should have seen slavery for what it was. His moving description of how to hear the “still small voice of God’s philanthropy” and understand scripture in “all matters of piety and morality” was, quoting his own rule, drowned out by the din of arguments from the flesh, the world, and Satan,

¹⁶ Ibid. He may have feared some might accuse him of that, so he closes his principles and rules of interpretation with the strong assertion that the Bible is a book of historical **statements of fact**, and these facts reveal all the truth of religion and morality. There may be resonance between Campbell’s position with some forms of what is now called “virtue epistemology.”

¹⁷ Alexander Campbell, “The Christian Religion,” *Christian Baptist* 1 (August 1, 1823): 25.

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, “Our Position to American Slavery—No. VIII,” *Millennial Harbinger* (June 1845): 263.

¹⁹ Alexander Campbell, “Our Position to American Slavery—No. V,” *Millennial Harbinger* (May 1845): 234.

that is the arguments used by white Christians to justify slavery—including white superiority and Black inferiority, God’s social order that supposedly justified the enslavement of Blacks, and his desperate need to avoid division over slavery in his movement. As he said so eloquently in describing the “understanding distance,” with humility, and the rejection of pride, covetousness, and false ambition, the voice of God would be heard distinctly. In this matter, Campbell couldn’t hear it.

The lesson is that the same thing can happen to me, and to you, even with the best intentions and intellectual understandings, if we fail to come within that “understanding distance.” That includes bringing to scripture questions that are not drowned out by the din of arguments of the flesh. What does God value most? What does scripture say is of first importance? What takes precedence in matters of controversy that involve the oppression of human beings who carry the image of God? What conclusions have I reached that harm people for whom Christ died? Campbell’s rule seven is where such questions will arise and allow us to be “ravished by the moral scenes which the Bible unfolds.”

(3) Alexander Campbell’s explanation on how to discern a true follower of Christ.

Campbell is sometimes criticized for making intellectual assent to correct doctrinal facts the essence of Christianity. While he was exceedingly rational in his approach, that is a misreading of Campbell and his theology. One of the most striking evidences of that can be seen in a controversy that began in 1837 and threatened the very essence of his reform. The things he wrote in the heat of this controversy provide perhaps the most moving expressions of Campbell’s core beliefs about what it means to be a true disciple of Christ.

In the August 1837 *Millennial Harbinger* Campbell had commented to a church leader in Great Britain who had asked about cooperating with others in missionary, anti-slavery and temperance efforts, that he believed there were Christians in all the Protestant churches as exemplary as any in the churches of his movement.²⁰ A woman from Lunenburg, Virginia, challenged the statement and pushed Campbell to say how anyone could be a Christian unless they had repented and been immersed for the remission of sin. Since the churches of his reform were the only ones who believed and practiced this doctrine, she implied, he was wrong to say there were Christians in other churches.²¹

Campbell denied that he had compromised his conviction that immersion of believers for remission of sin was the baptism of the New Testament. Yet he also forcefully rejected the idea that a person achieved salvation by submitting to baptism. While true that the name Christian was first given only to immersed believers, he said, it was not because they had been immersed, but because they had put on Christ.²²

As for identifying who is a Christian, Campbell gave a simple definition. “But who is a Christian? I answer, every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the

²⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Letters to England No. I,” *Millennial Harbinger* (June 1837): 272, 274.

²¹ Alexander Campbell. “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” *Millennial Harbinger* (September 1837): 411.

²² Alexander Campbell, “Christians Among the Sects,” *Millennial Harbinger* (November 1837): 506-7.

Son of God; repents of his sins and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will.”²³

He then made a sharp distinction between deliberate disobedience or willful ignorance and being honestly mistaken. Many who were in his view mistaken about baptism were deeply devoted to Christ and obeyed as far as they understood Christ’s commands. “I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all who have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven.”²⁴

For Campbell, something even more fundamental than the act of baptism was the ultimate proof that one was a Christian: “It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves, and this does not consist of being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.” He continued that if he had to choose between someone who had been sprinkled as an infant who was “more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually minded and more devoted to the Lord” than one who agreed with his understanding of immersion, “I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him who loveth most.”²⁵

The case is this: when I see a person who would die for Christ; whose brotherly kindness, sympathy, and active benevolence know 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[s] 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 . . . 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 not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be counted to him as baptism? and will he not condemn you, who, though having the literal and true baptism, yet does transgress or neglect the statutes of your King?’²⁶

Even with his strong and consistent convictions regarding baptism, for Campbell, inward transformation manifested by the image of Christ in the life of the individual was the confirmation that one was a Christian. While he continued to teach that “faith, repentance and baptism was essential to [one’s] constitutional citizenship in the Messiah’s kingdom, and to their sanctification and comfort as Christians,” it was the person whose life was shaped like Christ as he so movingly described who was the true Christian.²⁷

²³ Campbell, “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” 411.

²⁴ Campbell, “Any Christians in Protestant Sects,” 412.

²⁵ Campbell, “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” 412-13.

²⁶ Alexander Campbell, “Any Christians Among the Sects?” *Millennial Harbinger* (December 1837): 565.

²⁷ Campbell, “Christians Among the Sects,” 508.

And so, I close. Alexander Campbell has taught me some of the most profound lessons of my life on how I should live as a Christian in 2022. He has taught me that there is an inevitable struggle regarding how I understand my identity as a follower of Christ and my relationship with my nation, its government, and its politics. I have learned that that struggle must be informed by my understanding of the nature and will of God revealed in the written word, an understanding that must go far beyond the intellectual accumulation of data and precise articulation of doctrinal or theological precepts. I must come within the understanding distance of scripture, with an humble, submissive, loving attitude that approaches the text with the questions that seek the heart of God and the welfare of all who are created in the image of God. And I have learned that the individual who has been in fact transformed by that encounter with Christ through the Spirit and the word, and who seeks the welfare of all God's image bearers, is the true Christian, the true disciple of Christ.

I should restate the title of the Lecture slightly but significantly: Three ways that Alexander Campbell IS TEACHING me about how to live as a Christian in 2022. Three lessons I am **learning**. My growth is nowhere near complete. But I believe that because of Alexander Campbell I have begun learning important lessons that are enriching my life before God and allowing me to struggle alongside people like you to be formed increasingly into the image of Christ.

Thank you for the honor of addressing you today.
Amen.