

2024

## Alexander Campbell as a Paradox

Gregory E. Sterling

Yale Divinity School, [gregory.sterling@yale.edu](mailto:gregory.sterling@yale.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sterling, Gregory E. (2024) "Alexander Campbell as a Paradox," *Journal of Discipliana*: Vol. 77, Article 5. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.discipleshistory.org/journalofdiscipliana/vol77/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Disciples History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Discipliana by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Disciples History. For more information, please contact [jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org](mailto:jmcmillan@discipleshistory.org).

# Alexander Campbell as a Paradox

BY GREGORY E. STERLING<sup>1</sup>

This is my first visit to Bethany, although it has been a part of my life's story. The closest that I have come to Bethany before today was, ironically, in Texas in the late nineteen seventies. I had been invited to speak at a small rural church. While there, the minister, who was in his eighties, invited me home for lunch. After lunch, he said: "I have something that I want to show you." He then took a couple of letters out of a metal box and handed them to me. I immediately recognized the handwriting: the first was a letter from Alexander Campbell to Selina, his wife, while he was a representative at the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829–1830. My host explained that he had been given these when visiting Campbell's home in Bethany many years previously. I asked him if he was going to donate them to a library for preservation. He said that he was going to sell them to help with his retirement. I asked him how much he wanted for them, and he replied that he would get back to me. When I returned home, he called and said that he had decided he wanted \$10,000 for the letters, a price that was considerably more than presidential letters sold for at the time. It might as well have been \$10,000,000 for me at that time. I thanked him and politely declined. The letters eventually found a home at the Center for Restoration Studies in the library of Abilene Christian University, for which I am grateful.

I will never forget the excitement that I felt when I thought I might have some letters from Alexander Campbell in my own library for a period of time. Why? My father was a minister for churches in the Stone-Campbell or Restoration movement for forty-six years. It would have been impossible for someone in my position to grow up without hearing about Alexander Campbell. I have always been more captivated by Campbell than Stone—the other major figure in the Stone-Campbell movement, largely because I admired Campbell's intellectual acuity. When I say admired, I mean that I own many of his writings and edited volumes, including the seven volumes of the *Christian Baptist* (1823–1830) and the forty-one volumes of the *Millennial Harbinger* (1830–1870), of

---

<sup>1</sup>Gregory E. Sterling is Dean of Yale Divinity School, where he is The Reverend Henry L. Slack Dean and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament, and he was invited to give this lecture as the Founder's Day address for Bethany College (Bethany, WV) on February 29, 2024.

which he edited thirty-five from 1830 to 1864. While American religious history is not my field of expertise, this tradition means a great deal to me existentially.

While I have admired Campbell, I have always found him to be a paradox, a paradox that I am not sure he fully recognized in himself but which seems obvious to someone at my remove. He was an elite who was, at the same time, a populist—somewhat like Thomas Jefferson, only more of a populist than Jefferson. I would like to explain why I find him paradoxical and how the resolution of this paradox might help us think about the values that we hold today.

## The Paradox

### *An Elite*

Campbell was born on September 12, 1788, or just after the American Revolution, in what we would call Northern Ireland today, where he spent the first two decades of his life.<sup>2</sup> His father, Thomas, was a minister and determined—like many parents today—that his child would receive a fine education. He sent Alexander to an elementary school and then to an academy run by two of Alexander’s uncles. At the age of eight or nine, Alexander returned home to be tutored by his father. To his father’s dismay, he was not very interested in his studies. When Thomas added French to his curriculum, Alexander was less than enthralled. One day he took his French text on *The Adventures of Telemachus* outside and sat down under a shade tree and promptly fell asleep. A nearby cow saw the book lying on the ground and intrigued at the thought of French cuisine, consumed it. His father was enraged and said that “the cow had got more French in her stomach than he had in his head.”<sup>3</sup> With this, his father decided to practice tough love and put him to work as a laborer on the farm in order “to break him into his books.” It worked. Alexander asked his father if he could return to his studies,

---

<sup>2</sup>For the details on Campbell’s life, I am principally indebted to Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell: A View of the Origins, Progress, and Principles of the Religious Reformation which he Advocated*, 2 vols. (1897; repr. Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, n.d.); and Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). See also Eva Jean Wrather, *Alexander Campbell: Adventurer in Freedom. A Literary Biography*, ed. D. Duane Cummins. 3 vols. (Fort Worth, TX: Disciples of Christ Historical Society/ Press, 2005–2009).

<sup>3</sup>Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:31–32. See also the account in Wrather, *Alexander Campbell*, 1:23–29, who has a slightly different sequence of these events.

determined to become “one of the best scholars in the kingdom.”<sup>4</sup> He never forgot this commitment. In fact, when Campbell added the third and final section for guests to the “Campbell mansion,” he had the sitting room lined with wallpaper that rehearsed the adventures of Telemachus!

Thomas was a better minister and teacher than he was a farmer. When Thomas could not make ends meet on the farm, he moved and opened a school where he continued to teach his son, preparing him for the university by making sure that he knew Greek and Latin. He also had Alexander read John Locke, a major figure of the Enlightenment who championed empiricism. Locke’s philosophy had such an impact on Alexander that he reprinted the “Letter on Toleration” in the 1844 volume of the *Millennial Harbinger*, calling Locke “the great Christian philosopher” in his introduction.<sup>5</sup>

When Thomas Campbell’s health began to fail, his physician advised him to take a long sea voyage. Thomas took his advice and did what so many of his time did: he sailed to America. When he was settled, he sent for his family. The family set sail from Northern Ireland in October of 1807, but a fall gale drove the ship onto a rock off a Scottish island, smashing the hull. Fortunately, the family escaped unharmed but were forced to wait for ten months before they could sail again. Alexander made the most of the enforced reprieve by attending the University of Glasgow, where, among other activities, he took a course with George Jardine, a student of Thomas Reid, an influential figure in Scottish Common Sense philosophy. Jardine introduced Campbell not only to Reid’s philosophy but to Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum*. It is critical to know that the epistemology of Bacon, Locke, and Common Sense philosophy shaped Campbell’s thought for the remainder of his life.<sup>6</sup>

The family was able to sail to America the following year, in 1808, and reunite with Thomas. In America, Alexander met and married the daughter of a wealthy farmer, Margaret Brown, in 1811. Her father, John Brown, owned a good deal of land around

---

<sup>4</sup>Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:32.

<sup>5</sup>Alexander Campbell, “Locke on Toleration,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1844): 11–17, 55–61, 105–9, 151–58, 250–53. See his also obituary, “John Locke,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 143.

<sup>6</sup>He was also heavily influenced by Dugald Stewart, another Common Sense philosopher, who taught at the University of Edinburgh at the time that Campbell was at Glasgow. In a speech before the Charlottesville Lyceum in 1849, Campbell called Stewart “the greatest of the metaphysicians.” See Alexander Campbell, “Is Moral Philosophy an Inductive Science?” *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: J. Challen & Son, 1863), 95–124 esp. 101. For an overview of the influence of these thinkers on Campbell, see Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An Anecdotal History of Three Churches* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1981), 24–40.

Bethany and deeded 300 acres to Alexander in 1815. Alexander was a shrewd businessperson and added to this original bequest until he owned almost all of the land in and around Bethany. In addition, he acquired land in Ohio and Illinois, largely through defaulted loans. He launched several business ventures including a very successful publishing business, importing merino sheep from Ireland (known for their fine, soft wool), and developing a lumber business. He died a very wealthy man.

I have recounted these aspects of Campbell's life to illustrate the social standing of Alexander Campbell. He was exceptionally well educated and wealthy. He was also a noted speaker and debater who traveled extensively. He was what we would call an elite.

### *Also a Populist*

Yet, at the same time, Campbell was a populist who railed against the established clergy and championed the common person. When Campbell first arrived on American soil, the church was connected to the state in many places. In Connecticut, for example, it was not until the state constitution of 1818 that the separation of church and state took place. This meant that until that time, the state paid the salaries of the clergy and treated them as public servants. The result was that the clergy were well paid and had high social status. The separation of church and state was a factor in the development of professional schools that were supported by donors (not just for theology, but for law and medicine as well). The first professional school was Andover Theological Seminary, founded in 1808, the year that Alexander sailed for America. The establishment of professional schools was part of a movement: at Yale, the medical school was founded in 1810, and the divinity and law schools in 1822.

A conflict emerged in American society between those who wanted well-educated clergy and those who favored a radical democratic approach.<sup>7</sup> It is important to know that the same debates took place over law and medicine as well as divinity. The tension in religion was virulent. Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards and president of Yale College, left no doubt where he stood when he spoke at the founding of Andover in 1808. He criticized "those who declare, both in their language and conduct, that the desk ought to be yielded up to the occupancy of Ignorance." He illustrated what he meant: "While they insist, equally with others, that their property shall be managed by skillful agents, their judicial causes directed by learned advocates, and

---

<sup>7</sup>Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989), 17–46, provides an overview of the key figures and issues.

their children, when sick attended by able physicians, they were satisfied to place their Religion, their souls, and their salvation, under the guidance of quackery.”<sup>8</sup>

The objects of Dwight’s scorn were not singular but consisted of varied movements. One of these emerging movements was the Christian Movement. In a span of less than two decades, four figures began proclaiming a new understanding of Christianity based on democratic principles that eschewed tradition, insisted on the sufficiency of the Scriptures, and called on each individual to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves: Elias Smith in New England, James O’Kelly in Virginia, Barton Stone in Kentucky, and Alexander Campbell first in Pennsylvania and then Virginia. Campbell stood out from the others in two respects: he was the only one who had not lived through the American Revolution—even if the others were quite young during the Revolution—and was the only one who had attended a university. Yet he was as fierce as any of his colleagues in denouncing the established clergy. In the second year of his first journal, *The Christian Baptist*, Campbell penned a satirical “Third Epistle of Peter” in which he lambasted the clergy of his day.<sup>9</sup> It is clearly a pseudonymous letter, although it was alleged to have been found in an ancient city by a wandering monk who provided a French translation from which the English was made. In the letter, Campbell is merciless—embarrassingly so. The letter urges the clergy to use exalted titles, live in expensive homes, eat exquisite cuisines, and drink expensive foreign wines. Here is one sample:

And when you shall hear of a church that is vacant and hath no one to preach therein, then be that a call unto you, and be ye mindful of the call, and take ye charge of the flock thereof and of the fleece thereof, even of the golden fleece.

And when ye shall have fleeced your flock, and shall know of another call, and if the flock be greater, or rather if the fleece be greater, then greater be also unto you the call. Then shall ye leave your old flock and of the new flock shall ye take the charge.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup>Timothy Dwight, *A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Theological Institution in Andover, and at the Ordination of Rev. Eliphalet Pearson, LL.D., September 28th, 1808* (Boston: Farrand, Mallory, and Co., 1808), 7–8.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Campbell, “Third Epistle of Peter,” *Christian Baptist* (July 4, 1825), 243–47. For the *Christian Baptist*, I have used the Gospel Advocate edition (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1955). It is important to note that by clergy, Campbell meant those of the established churches. See Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2:60–61.

<sup>10</sup>Campbell, “Third Epistle of Peter,” 247.

It is hardly a wonder that Campbell was less than beloved by the clergy of his day.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps I can best summarize Campbell's populism by noting that if I had been in my position during Campbell's lifetime, I would have been the object of his scorn—an irony that is not lost on me.

## Resolving the Paradox

How can we resolve this paradox? The most recent biography of Alexander Campbell attempts to address the tension between Campbell as an elite and as a populist by suggesting that Campbell was a limited populist, much like Thomas Jefferson.<sup>12</sup> This is to say that Campbell believed that those who were naturally gifted should lead. Douglas Foster thinks that this explains Campbell's treatment and attitude towards groups in American society that were not considered equals or were looked down upon. In particular, Campbell shared the popular prejudice against Catholics and Blacks. I make the following statement after just going through the release of *Yale and Slavery*, a volume that chronicles Yale's relationship with enslaved persons and the racism that gave it birth—a painful experience.<sup>13</sup> I regard Campbell's position with respect to slavery—which was more enlightened than the view of many but fell short of abolition<sup>14</sup>—with the same regret and shame that I do the position of many of my predecessors at Yale.

---

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Campbell wrote a series of essays on the clergy in the initial volume of the *Christian Baptist*: "The Christian Religion: The Clergy—No. 1," *Christian Baptist* 1 (October 6, 1823): 49–62; "The Clergy—No. II," *Christian Baptist* 1 74(November 3, 1823): 71–74; "The Clergy—No. III," *Christian Baptist* 1 (December 1, 1823): 85–88; "The Clergy—No. IV," *Christian Baptist* 1 (January 5, 1824): 105–9; "The Clergy—No. V," *Christian Baptist* 1 ( February 2, 1824): 124–27. Campbell continued his fusillade in later articles. For a summary of Campbell's critique of clergy, see Wrather, *Alexander Campbell*, 2:17–27.

<sup>12</sup>Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell*, 54–57. It is worth remembering that Jefferson championed the separation of church and state and did not include a department of religion/theology in the charter for the University of Virginia. On the role of religion in Jefferson, see Thomas S. Kidd, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2022), esp. 215–26, on the University of Virginia.

<sup>13</sup>David Blight, *Yale and Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

<sup>14</sup>On Campbell's views on slavery see "Slavery and Anti-Slavery," *Millennial Harbinger* (1835): 587–90; "Our Position to American Slavery," *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 49–53; "Our Position to American Slavery—No. II," *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 67–71; "Our Position to American Slavery—No. III," *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 108–12; "Our Position to American Slavery—No. IV," *Millennial Harbinger*

## Democracy

But why did he critique the established clergy? This was not a result of racism and it is hard to attribute it solely to arrogance. I think that his critique largely sprang from his understanding of democracy. In an 1815 letter to his uncle Archibald in Ireland, Campbell wrote: “I cannot speak too highly of the advantages that the people in this country enjoy in being delivered from a proud and lordly aristocracy...” He explained: I have had my horse shod by a legislator, my horse saddled, my boots cleaned, my stirrup held by a senator. Here is no nobility, but virtue; here there is no ascendance save that of genius, virtue and knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> The meritocracy of his adopted country came to mean a great deal to him. In a speech that he gave in honor of the Fourth of July in 1830, Campbell said: “The *fourth July*, 1776, was a memorable day, a day to be remembered as was the Jewish Passover ...”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the birth of American democracy was sacred. Yet, it is important to note that Campbell did not equate America with the kingdom of God. In the same speech, he went on to say: “A more glorious work is reserved for this generation—a work of as much greater moment, compared with the Revolution of 76 ... the emancipation of the human mind from the shackles of superstition, and the introduction of human beings into the full fruition of the

---

(1845): 145–49; “Our Position to American Slavery—No. V,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 193–196; “Our Position to American Slavery—No. IV” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 232–36; “Our Position to American Slavery—No. VI,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 236–40; “Our Position to American Slavery—No. VIII,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 257–64; “American Slavery,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 355–58; “American Slavery,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1845): 418–129; “Origin and Progress of the North American Slave Trade,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1848): 593–97; “A Tract for the People of Kentucky,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1849): 241–52; “Letter from Brother Smith,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1849): 413–15; “Slavery,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1849): 473–74; “The Fugitive Slave Law,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 27–32; “Queries Touching the Fugitive Slave Law,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 224–28; “Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 247–52; ; “Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law—No. III,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 309–17; ; “Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law—No. IV,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 386–92; ; “Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law—No. V,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 425–85; “The Fugitive Slave Law—Once More,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1851): 621–32; “Disturbance in Bethany College,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1856): 54–59; and “Reported Troubles in Bethany College,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1856): 111–17..

<sup>15</sup>Cited by Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:465–66.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander Campbell, “An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July, 1830,” *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia: J. Challen & Son, 1863), 367–78, esp. 374.

reign of heaven.”<sup>17</sup> Campbell made a distinction between America and the kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

Campbell’s critique of the clergy was grounded in his radical sense of democracy: the congregation, not the clergy, had authority.<sup>19</sup> He wanted to abolish the line between clergy and laity in order to put both on equal footing before God. He used to say: “The true clergy are the Lord’s lot or people. God made men, the priests make laymen. Man is the creature of God, a layman is the creature of priests.”<sup>20</sup> He understood that Christianity was liberating and that America had taken a step in this direction. Several years ago, I was flying across Australia from Perth to Melbourne. I happened to be seated next to a young woman from New Zealand who asked me what I did. When I told her, she asked what I thought about the decline of Christianity. I responded that while it was declining in Europe and North America, it was booming in the East and the global South, especially Africa. She responded: Isn’t this because the people who live in those regions are ignorant and superstitious? I answered that substituting one ‘superstition’ for another was not an adequate explanation. A different driving force attracted them to Christianity: Christianity offered them democracy and an opportunity to advance. I suggest that this is what Campbell saw as well.

Alexander Campbell’s critique of the clergy of his day is matched by the critics of institutions today. There are individuals and groups who are assailing our judicial system, the integrity of branches of government, universities, and many other institutions. For example, I am sometimes asked if I feel that I have a bullseye on my back at Yale. I answer unequivocally yes. The Divinity School pays more than \$130,000 per annum in federal taxes thanks to a group of politicians who singled out 27 universities for taxation. In other words, we have lost \$400 in financial aid for each

---

<sup>17</sup>Campbell, “An Oration in Honor of the Fourth of July,” 375. See also p. 377.

<sup>18</sup>Campbell was a postmillennialist as the name of his second journal indicates. He thought that if enough individuals would become Christians that the millennium could begin in America, but he did not identify the political government of America with the kingdom of God. For his views and those of others in the movement see David Edwin Harrell, Jr. *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 26–61, esp. 39–58. Cf. also Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948)185–210, esp. 202–10.

<sup>19</sup>Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 1:390, pointed out that Campbell’s critique of the clergy created more animus against him than any other aspect of his thought. Cf. also 2:54–55.

<sup>20</sup>Cited by Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2:660.

student since all extra funds have gone to financial aid. Some organized groups are deliberately working against the institutions that have built our democracy.

There are, however, two fundamental differences between the efforts of the populists of today and Campbell. First, Campbell defended democracy; the current populists are attacking democracy. Campbell did not assail the judiciary, the executive branches of government, or other democratically based institutions; the current populists do. Second, Campbell did not identify America with the kingdom of God; there is a distinct movement of individuals today who do.<sup>21</sup> As a Christian, I find this inexcusable: the kingdom of God should never be identified with a human political entity. I am a proud American and have routinely defended America when my European friends were unfairly harsh against her; however, the identification of America with the kingdom of God is religiously indefensible in my judgment. Campbell did not make that mistake.

### *Individual Conscience*

The obverse of Campbell's critique of the clergy was his insistence that each person had a right and a responsibility to read the Scriptures for themselves. In his 1820 debate with John Walker on the topic of infant versus believer baptism, Campbell told his audience: "Go home and read your Bibles; examine the testimonies of those holy oracles; judge for yourselves, and be not implicit followers of the clergy." He went on to warn that the clergy "have taken away the key of knowledge from the people."<sup>22</sup> More positively put, Campbell contended for "the inalienable right of all laymen to examine the sacred writings for themselves."

But what happens if we all read the Scriptures and draw our own conclusions? While I think Campbell was naïve in his reliance on Common Sense philosophy to create a hermeneutic to read the Scriptures and failed to take into account the prejudices that we all—including Campbell—bring to a reading of the Scriptures, he did realize that individuals would draw different conclusions. Ed Harrell formulated the reality in a memorable sentence: "The Disciple of the pre-Civil War period did not simply tolerate

---

<sup>21</sup>One of the most important critiques is Phillip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>22</sup>Cited by Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2:27.

diversity—he was diversity.”<sup>23</sup> Campbell attempted to handle differences by making a distinction between private judgments and entrance requirements into the fellowship of God. In an article dealing with slavery, he wrote: “Amongst the peculiarities of our profession there is one prominent one—that we are not allowed to make our own private judgement, interpretation or opinion, a ground of admission into, or of exclusion from the Christian Church.”<sup>24</sup> The obvious issue is what is a private opinion and what is a moral principle that cannot be compromised.

While there are problems with Campbell’s position, it has merits as well. Campbell recognized the importance of thinking for oneself and living with others who have different opinions. On university campuses, we call this academic freedom or free expression. In our settings, Bethany and Yale, we can only claim to believe in academic freedom if we are willing to defend the right of someone to speak with whom we disagree. Let me offer two stories: one from each university that I have served. While I was in the dean’s office for the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Notre Dame, a group of women students decided to put on a version of the *Vagina Monologues*. I remember speaking with the Provost, who asked that we include a panel discussion afterward and invite someone who would accurately state the Roman Catholic position on the various topics. When word came out that we would have this production, my phone rang continuously for a week with calls from angry alumni. I learned to pick up my phone at some distance from my ear. For the entire week, I defended the production on the grounds of academic freedom. On Friday of that week, a group of faculty came to see me and requested that I pull an invitation to the Vice President of the United States, who was scheduled to speak on campus. He had been invited by a student group and accepted. I responded by saying that I had spent the entire week defending the *Vagina Monologues* on the ground of academic freedom. If they wanted me to cancel the invitation to the Vice President, I would also need to ban the *Vagina Monologues*. We either believe in the right of those with whom we disagree to speak, or we do not. It was a week I will never forget.

The greatest defense of academic freedom that I have known occurred at Yale.<sup>25</sup> In 1963, a group of conservative students invited the governor of Alabama, George Wallace, the most famous advocate of segregation in his day, to come to Yale and speak. Wallace had stood in the Capitol for his inaugural speech and infamously

---

<sup>23</sup>Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America*, 59.

<sup>24</sup>Campbell, “Our Position to American Slavery,” 233.

<sup>25</sup>The story was told by President Peter Salovey, “Free Speech, Personified,” *The New York Times* (Nov. 26, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/26/opinion/free-speech-yale-civil-rights.html>

declared, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Shortly after the invitation was issued, Klansmen bombed the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, killing four young Black girls, severely injuring another, and an additional 13–21 people. The combination of the invitation and the bombing of the church created an enormous uproar on the Yale campus. The president of Yale was trying to decide whether to pull the invitation or not. A law student, Pauli Murray, who went on to be a famous civil rights activist and the first African-American woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church, wrote President Kingman Brewster a letter urging him not to cancel the invitation. Why? She was as far from George Wallace in her thinking as anyone on the Yale campus. However, she understood that his right to speak was her right to speak. This is academic freedom. We will undermine the heart and soul of the American university and of American democracy if we silence the voices of those we oppose.

## Conclusion

In 1840, Campbell received a charter from Virginia to establish a new college, Bethany College. The charter has one provision that strikes most of us as odd: it prohibited the establishment of a chair in theology.<sup>26</sup> While I would not concur with this—how could I as dean of a divinity school—I recognize it as part of Campbell’s commitment to the democratization of religion. It illustrates the dialectic that we all have with Campbell: there is a great deal to celebrate and there is plenty with which we might disagree.

However, there are not many people who have launched a religious reform movement that has endured for two centuries and become a major religious movement in the US. There are not many who have established a college that has endured for nearly two hundred years. As someone who is responsible for a divinity school that is more than 200 years old, I perhaps have an unusual perspective. Whatever you think of the religion of Alexander Campbell, I hope that you appreciate what he accomplished: it is remarkable by any measure.

But I hope that you will more than admire him. I hope that you will consider two of the basic principles upon which he based Bethany College. At a time in our country when some question the future of our democracy, remember your origins as a democratically

---

<sup>26</sup>Alexander Campbell, “Charter of the Bethany College,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1840): 176–79, esp. no. 14 on p. 179: “*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.” For details, see Robert Frederick West, *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 196–201, esp. 198.

based institution. Our democracy is both precious and fragile. Campbell knew a different political system in his Irish youth and was exhilarated to experience American democracy, which he also believed existed religiously in the New Testament. I hope that you will remember how he anchored this school in our country's democratic principles.

The challenge for each of us to weigh things for ourselves has never been greater. We live in a time when foreign governments are actively trying to disrupt elections in our democracy, a time when artificial intelligence makes it difficult to distinguish the real from the constructed, a time when advocates posing as populists want to subvert the very democracy that they allegedly champion. May the training that you receive here at Bethany College enable you to use your critical capacities to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, the selfless from the self-serving.

It has been more than four decades since I held the letters of Alexander Campbell in Texas and I have traveled a long way. Thank you for sharing your university home with me. It is my religious home and I am grateful to have this moment in my life.