

Campbell's Rude Awakening, Realization, and Revision

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(This great insight into our history as a Movement may be a “rude awakening” for some of you who read it. The original article is longer, so I am using only the latter portion for this email. Leroy is gracious to share it with us. The first part dealt with Campbell’s expectation of an improved world before Christ’s return.)

He had reason in the 1830s to hold these realistic goals. The preaching of the ancient gospel and the restoration of the ancient order of things – which he saw taking place – would unite the Christians in all the sects in the millennial church, and ameliorate all society.

RUDE AWAKENING

Time was not on Alexander Campbell’s side. His vision of a triumphant future in a glorious new world of plenty gradually gave way to a rude awakening. Conditions in America were deteriorating, not improving. There were financial depressions. Slavery was not dissipating, but growing worse. Sects continued to multiply. They were not burying the tomahawk of party conflicts. While his movement enjoyed impressive growth, it was not measuring up to his millennial expectation. Besides, it had problems of its own, which took much of his time and effort. In the years leading up to the Civil War he wrote less about a coming millennium. They were years of realization and revision. There was no millennium on the horizon, no millennial church, and no church uniting. It is arguable that by the 1850s church and society were worse off – not better off. If Campbell’s millennial views were correct, things would be improving. It was time for a mid-course correction.

A telltale sign of a change in his thinking is when he began to refer to what had been “a movement” as a denomination. Such language as “our denomination” and “other denominations” in the Millennial Harbinger would not have appeared in The Christian Baptist. We have seen that he had no intention of starting another denomination. He had launched “a new reformation” – as he liked to call it – within the church. It was neither a sect nor a denomination. But in time he realized he had added another church – a denomination – to American society. He at last referred with regret to the necessity of starting a new denomination.

But he – and his people – continued to refer to their efforts as a reformation, and it was still a unity movement. But it was now “a denomination” within the church at large with these distinct goals. While accepting denominational status, Campbell was adamant about not being a sect. A “denomination” meant that they were a distinct religious body with clearly defined marks of identification, such as a particular name or names. A sect claims to be within itself the entirety of the body of Christ, to the exclusion of all other Christians. He, therefore, clearly distinguished between a sect and a denomination. But he was now issuing the denial in broader terms, such as: “You’ll never make a sect of us, because we are catholic, very catholic.” In these years of revision catholic became a self-defining term.

Campbell's new church by 1849 had its own missionary organization, known as the American Christian Missionary Society, and he served as its first president. In Christian Baptist days there was not only no such organization, but he was critical of such innovations.

Since a denomination by definition has a name, Campbell and Stone debated about what name they should wear as a church. Stone – using Acts 11:26 as a proof text – argued that they should call themselves “Christians” since it was a divinely-given name, and that their congregations should be called Christian Churches or Churches of Christ. Campbell saw “Christians” as a nickname, bestowed by unbelievers – a name the apostolic churches did not accept – but it was nonetheless a name that he could live with. He preferred simply Disciples of Christ. The problem was resolved – more by happenstance than by decree – by their wearing all three names – Christian Churches, Churches of Christ, and Disciples of Christ – a denomination with three names.

ENCOURAGES CHURCH ORGANIZATION

In his earlier years there was little or no cooperation among the congregations. The polity was a radical congregationalism, with each church going its own way. But by 1841 there were upwards of 2,000 congregations – representing most every state in the union and several foreign countries. They could no longer function as a small group of radically independent frontier churches. In that same year Campbell began a series of essays of church cooperation that signaled a dramatic change from his Christian Baptist days. “Our organization and discipline are greatly defective, and essentially inadequate to the present condition and wants of society,” he wrote. He may have surprised his readers when he went on to say – correcting what he saw as a common fallacy – that a local congregation needs more than a Bible. It needs organization.

“A book is not sufficient to govern the church,” he dared to write. He pointed out that one cannot simply hand a Bible to a congregation and leave it to its own devices. Laws are not self-enforcing, but are executed through duly-ordained agents. That is why God placed apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors in the church. Likewise, if congregations are to act in concert – if they are to cooperate in any way at all – it must be through some agency. He wrote of the “necessity” of a more adequate organization.

After twenty-eight installments on the subject he rested his case by naming five things that they could not effectively accomplish without “a more ample, extensive church organization” – the distribution of the Bible abroad, missionary work, improve Christian ministry, check and remove imposters and fraud in the ministry, and church-wide cooperation.

When some of his people questioned the creation of agencies – seeing it as contrary to their plea for “a restoration of the ancient order” – Campbell complained that “There is too much squeamishness about the manner of co-operation.” One is not to look to the New Testament for a “model” for every detail for the work of the church such as that which Moses gave for the building of the tabernacle. It would be impossible for the New Testament to provide details for every aspect of the church's mission, he insisted. One may as well ask for a precept for translating the Bible from Greek to English or for the building of a meetinghouse, he chided. He

lamented that some of his people had rather do nothing -- including withholding the gospel from the masses – for fear that they might do something the wrong way.

But by and large, his people had no problem in forming agencies and learning to cooperate. They not only had a missionary society by 1849, but by the 1840s they had numerous local, area, and state agencies. By 1845 there was the American Christian Bible Society and a Sunday school and Tract Society. By 1849 there was a national convention. And by 1845 there were three colleges, counting Campbell's own Bethany College.

He also softened his views on the clergy – or at least he allowed for a special class of preachers, sent out and supported financially by a congregation or a missionary agency. But they were to be evangelists – preaching to the lost and organizing churches. He still held that elders and deacons were to care for established churches, insisting that it was a “satire” on a church to hire someone to preach for it. He was especially concerned for “wandering stars” – preachers who were unsent and unwanted, and sometimes ill-prepared or morally irresponsible. While he was earlier critical of seminaries, he now looked to the colleges, including his own, as an answer to an uneducated ministry.

MID-COURSE CORRECTION

Equally significant was his mid-course correction in reference to the plea for unity. By the 1840s he was referring less to a unity based on “a restoration of the ancient order” or a restoration of primitive Christianity. In an 1839 essay, he stated that while unity had been his “darling theme” all along, “it was some time before we could see clearly the ground on which all true Christians could form one visible and harmonious union.”

In an ecumenical gathering in Lexington, Kentucky in 1841, he set forth what that ground was – “the catholic rule of union.” It read: “Whatever in faith, in piety, and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union.” He submitted this as a resolution before the large audience, which gave its approval by an overwhelming standing vote. It recognized that while people will differ to the point of disunity on what constitutes a restoration of primitive Christianity, they can unite on the basics of the faith that they hold in common.

While this revised approach to unity – what he called “catholic grounds” – was expressed by Campbell for the rest of his life, he is remembered for his earlier emphasis on unity through restoration. He often expressed the catholic rule for unity in terms of “the seven facts” of Ephesians 4:4-6, which he sometimes reduced to three – “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” We unite upon the facts themselves – not on theories or opinions about the facts. He would also sometimes express the catholic rule in terms of uniting upon the universal principles of faith – centered in Jesus Christ – while allowing for differences in particulars. He cultivated a fondness for the term catholic – “We are catholics,” he liked to say – not Greek or Roman Catholic – just catholic. They had a catholic rule of faith and practice, the Bible; they wore a catholic name or names; they practiced a catholic baptism; they served a catholic table; they had a catholic plea for unity. []

The foregoing is a portion of Essay 67, Part A, "Realization and Revision." You may be on the mailing list for his weekly email sendouts by request sent to leroy.ouida@worldnet.net.

(Cecil Hook: June 2005)

Talkin' Texas: Aransas Wildlife Refuge is the winter home of North America's only remaining flock of whooping cranes.