

Alexander Campbell

From "Seven Great Lights"

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“A good man, and just.”—Luke 23:50.

One hundred and five years ago, last September,¹ there was born, in the county of Antrim, Ireland, a child whose name was destined to be closely linked with one of the worthiest Christian bodies. That child was Alexander Campbell. In the veins of his mother ran the blood of that noblest product of French character, known to us as the Huguenots; the occasion of her departure from the land of her nativity being that base act, which casts so dark a shadow on French history and reveals so clearly the weakness of the heartless and extravagant Louis XIV, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Freed from the persecutions of France, the family of this godly woman settled in the rich, fertile, gently undulating land of Antrim, devoted themselves to agriculture, and established schools, one feature of which was that the Bible was to be taught in their curriculum, prayerfully and systematically—a feature which our American commonwealths might well sanction and cultivate as one of the strongest safeguards of national prosperity and perpetuity.

The whole family of the Corneigles—this was the name of Campbell’s maternal ancestors—were then devoted and ardent members of the Presbyterian Church, attending with regularity its services, maintaining with consistency its rites, and defending with consecrated fearlessness its doctrines. It was at this period that Thomas Campbell, then a school-teacher and a young Presbyterian theologian, became acquainted with a member of this family, and afterwards, united to her in marriage, and became the father of our present subject.

Since one of the most important factors in a man’s life is to be the son of his father, it may be well to look briefly into the character and history of Campbell’s paternal ancestor. We know that his mother was a woman of good blood, sterling worth, consecrated piety. Was his father equally worthy? Originally, this man’s father—Alexander’s grandfather—was an advocate of Romanism; but impressed with the unscriptural, traditional character of that system, he left it for the Church of England, to which he was attached, and for

¹ Remember, this was written in 1892.

which he enthusiastically labored till the day of his death, in his eighty-eighth year. Thomas Campbell—Alexander's father—was reared in the nurture and admonition of the Church of England; but in early life, the subject of deep religious impressions, and possessed of a sincere and earnest love for the Scriptures, he in turn abjured Episcopacy as his father had abjured Romanism, and united himself to the Presbyterian faith. This his father, a staunch Churchman, did not relish, insisting that it was the duty of a man, to use the old gentleman's language, "to serve God according to act of Parliament." But Thomas Campbell thought differently. Says a biographer: "The cold formality of the Episcopal ritual, and the apparent want of vital piety in the Church, led him to desire the company of the more rigid Covenanters and Seceders." He associated with them, grew in grace and knowledge, and became a devoted, fearless, aggressive Christian.

It is unnecessary to follow Thomas Campbell's history further than to say that, with deep religious convictions, he entered, as a student, Glasgow University, studied medicine as well as literature and science, completed his literary and scientific studies, entered the divinity school, graduated in theology, and became an authorized and acceptable Presbyterian minister.

It was in the early years of Thomas Campbell's ministry that Alexander was born. As a boy, Alexander had a trait which, strange as it may seem, oftentimes portends a successful life; namely, indifference to books and fondness for play. Sir Isaac Newton, when a youth, was regarded the dunce of his school— was written down by his teacher as an absolute failure; and yet it was he who afterwards scaled the heavens, weighed worlds as in a balance, discovered laws which were unknown quantities in science, wrote "Principia," and died, saying, with his characteristic modesty, that the secret of his success was his "capacity for patient toil." Milton, when a youth, was supposed to possess but a single talent; but see how this talent aroused others, and how at last—as poet, scholar, and statesman—he grandly served God, Great Britain, and his whole generation. Not quite as unpromising as Milton and Newton, and, perhaps for this very reason not quite so great, was young Alexander; still, he was anything but scholarly in instinct. His most popular biographer gives this incident as illustrative of his lack of studiousness at the age of nine years, when he began the study of French: One warm day,

having gone out in the field to study his lesson, he lay under a tree to rest, when unexpectedly, he fell asleep. "A cow that was grazing near approached, and, seeing the book lying on the grass, seized it, and, before he was sufficiently awake to prevent, actually devoured it. Upon making report of his loss, his father gave him a castigation for his carelessness (such things were more common a hundred years ago than now), and enforced the punishment by telling him that the cow had more French in her stomach than he had in his head,"—a fact which, of course, young Alexander admitted, and perhaps rejoiced in.

This experience seemed to teach the youth a lesson, which proved to be most salutary and helpful. From this time forth he developed a remarkably industrious nature—first, like Robert Burns, as a field-hand; and then as a student. His intellectual nature began to assert itself. Life began to assume for his youthful mind proportions both solemn and momentous; and as in the British House of Commons we hear Richard Sheridan, after an apparent failure, introducing his speech with the prophetic words, "It's in me, and, by the grace of God, it will come out of me!" so, at this time of his life, we hear Alexander Campbell, with a great relish for his books, declaring his life purpose: "If God will help me, I shall become one of the best scholars in all the kingdom." His memory was marvelous— a rich gift to one who knows how to use it, but dangerous to one who becomes its slave instead of its master. On one occasion, it is said, he committed to memory, with absolute precision, sixty lines of difficult blank verse in fifty-two minutes. He became a close, sympathetic student of Locke's "Letters of Toleration," and one sees, in all his discussions of Civil Liberty and Religious Freedom, how deeply saturated and greatly helped he had become by the exalted sentiments of this noble Christian thinker and philosopher.

But more interested are we at present in young Alexander's religious training and culture than in his intellectual growth. It is the presence or the absence of early religious advantages that shapes destiny here and hereafter. Voltaire felt all through life the effect of an infidel poem committed at the age of five years, and Hume never recovered from the deleterious influence upon him of an argument against Christianity heard by him in youth. Men are largely what their early associations are—not necessarily so, but generally so.

Young Campbell's early associations were among the very best—his mother a pious, devoted Christian woman; his father a strong, staunch, strict, Calvinistic Presbyterian minister. For such a one as this father the Synod gave these orders: That he should have family worship twice a day, catechize his children, teach them the duty of private devotions and the glory of a godly example. Was the discipline severe? Yes; but better, far better, the Scylla of Puritanism even than the Charybdis of Laxity! It is just this, largely, that makes the difference in character between Nero and Paul; in religious life, between Byron and Montgomery; in godliness, between Burns and Cowper. "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom," and this beginning of wisdom should be the prominent element in the beginning of life.

Trained under these influences, Alexander Campbell was being educated for greater changes than his youthful imagination had ever dreamed. Mighty religious revolutions and upheavals were at this time in an incipient and embryonic state, and were soon to be felt as a great tidal wave throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom. Just as the shock that centuries ago buried Lisbon was felt even in Scotland, so the influence of independency, beginning in a small circle, was spreading, and was to continue spreading until it should bear with tremendous weight upon all the thinkers of that period. At the head of this movement were four great men, strong in brain and in heart: Rowland Hill, Alexander Haldane, John Walker, Alexander Carson. Each of these had broken off from the Church of England, and was now proclaiming, with mighty power, evangelical truth, uncovered by human ritual as never before since the apostolic days, untainted by human tradition as never before since the period of its primitive purity. These men were essentially, fearlessly progressive. As another has summed it up, they proclaimed the independency of the Churches; they protested with vehemence against any inquisitorial authority by man or Church over human mind or conscience; they protested against the hierarchy of papal Rome; they defended themselves against the arrogance of a National Church; they taught with vigor and effectiveness that the only condition of eternal life, both in this world and in that to come, is living, personal faith in a living, personal Christ. In short, they placed Christianity above Churchism, and asserted the unmeasured and immeasurable worth of the individual soul. Such doctrines were strange for that

day; not that they were new—for they are the doctrines of the New Testament—but that they had been buried so long and so deep under the lumber-pile of tradition, and covered so long under the *debris* of the ages. Now, for the first time, they are being unearthed, with anything like a genuine revelation. Their unearthing produces an excitement like that which attended the ministry of John the Baptist, or of Peter the Hermit, or of Savonarola the Reformer.

Now, as a direct and glorious result of the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley, with others already mentioned, there was formed what was known as "The Evangelical Society," consisting largely of Church of England adherents. To this, Campbell's father united himself, and was known far and wide as an earnest, devoted worker. Note the changes thus far in the family, each in the direction of progress: First, Romanism; then, Church of Englandism; then, Presbyterianism; now, Independency, or Evangelicalism. It takes a genuine man to change his denominational relations, and, in the change, advance ever nearer to Scriptural truth, and with the satisfaction of doing more fully the divine will. Thus far the Campbells have unquestionably been the subjects of this uplifting experience.

Passing by that part of Alexander Campbell's life which deals with his university course in Glasgow, his impressions of Dr. Ewing's "*Rules of Church Government*" and Dr. Innes's "*Reason for Separation from the Church of Scotland*," we come now to that period of his history in which we are specially interested—his life-work on the American Continent, which he adopted as his home in the year 1809, a young man now, just out of his "teens."

The one thing which, at this period of his life, appears to have influenced our subject more than anything else was the "*Declaration and Address*" to Christians, issued by his father—an earnest, manly expression of a deep religious conviction. Its last clause, "This society" (no Church was at first contemplated; that was an afterthought, even as Methodism was an unexpected outcome of Wesley's evangelical methods)—"This society will countenance nothing as a matter of faith or duty for which there cannot be expressly produced a 'Thus saith the Lord,' either in expressed terms or in approved precedent,"—impressed young Campbell as nothing else had ever impressed him; and well it may, for it is the very essence of the Christian religion, the very glory of the Christian

body. Talk about Christian union! It can never be effected save upon this basis: God's Word unchanged; from it no subtraction; to it no addition; in it no alteration. There is no unity save that of truth; and truth, when genuine, is incorruptible, untransferable, unchangeable, unbuyable by gold, uncoercible by power, unconquerable by authority.

By means of fidelity to the "Thus saith the Lord," Campbell is constrained to make a radical change in his views and denominational relations. It would seem that there had been changes enough in his family—first, Romanists; then, members of the Church of England; then, Presbyterians; then, Independents,—but two others still are to follow. There were many things in the way of doctrine held by the Independents, to which Campbell could not agree in the light of Scripture. He devoted time and prayer to their investigation. The more he studied them, the less Scriptural they appeared to his candid mind and God-loving soul. He was too honest and too fearless to occupy long an abnormal position; so at last, in 1810, he comes squarely out into the light with this announcement: "Becoming disentangled from the accruing embarrassments of intervening ages, and coming firmly and fairly to original ground, let us take up things just as the apostles left them—to begin at the beginning; to ascend at once to the pure fountain of truth; to neglect and disregard, as though they had never been, the decrees of popes, cardinals, synods, and assemblies, and all the traditions and corruptions of an apostate Church." This position, firmly taken and intelligently maintained, led our subject to the Baptists, whose fundamental, distinguishing characteristic is not immersion, nor immersion of the believer, nor a regenerated Church membership, but God's Word as the only rule of faith and practice, out of which come the polity and doctrines that characterize them. With a Baptist Church Campbell united, and that too, he tells us, with a sense of privilege and pride such as he had never before experienced. Enthusiastically he expresses himself under date of December 28, 1815:

I am now an Independent in Church government [which is the Baptist doctrine of Congregationalism], of that faith and view of the gospel exhibited in John Walter's letters to Alexander Knox [which is the

*Baptist doctrine of a living, personal faith in Christ],
and a Baptist so far as respects baptism.*

The fundamental faith of Campbell seems to be expressed in one sentence, often repeated by him: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." The supreme aim and purpose of Campbell seemed to be "to restore," as he expresses it, "the ancient order of things" as it related to the gospel and to the Church.

First, to restore the Bible to its proper place and authority—as against the assaults of Rationalists, who deny the possibility of revelation; as against the Romish claim for tradition, that it is equal in authority to Scripture; as against Protestant creed-makers, who formulate human systems and make them the bases of denominational life and fellowship. Second, to restore Christ to his rightful place and rank in the Church and in the thoughts of men—as against the dishonoring claims of Unitarians, who discrown him of his divinity; and the mistreatment of Trinitarians, who often disown him as leader under the direction of human leadership and party spirit. Third, to restore the practice of the apostolic Church in the simplicity of worship.

There is a demand for the emphasis of these exalted principles today—God's Word, the Infallible Oracle of Jehovah; Jesus Christ, in the glory of his miraculous incarnation, his spotless character, his matchless teachings, his majestic deeds, his atoning death, his radiant resurrection and ascension, and his eternal mediatorial pleadings at the right hand of God; and the Christian Church as Christ and the apostles founded it.

Though in these character-lectures it is not our purpose to discuss in way of refutation the tenets of any Church or denomination of Christians, still, as we have given Campbell's ancestors' and his own reasons for departure, first from Romanism, then from Church-of-Englandism, then from Presbyterianism, then from Independency, it seems proper that, in conclusion, we give our subject's reasons for

leaving the Baptists, not discussing at all the relative worth of his or the Baptists' position.

First, Campbell became dissatisfied with the name "Baptist." It carried with it, to his mind, a "party designation," and he was earnestly for Christian union. He preferred the name "Disciple," as preferable, he tells us, to "Christian," because more modest and of more frequent use in the New Testament. And few unbiased minds will deny that, of all the different Christian bodies, the followers of Campbell wear the noblest and most meaningful name. The designations "Christian" and "Disciple" each have the sanction of Scripture, and that in itself is a mighty argument for them.

More, Campbell appears to have differed quite materially, in those far-away years, with Baptists in Kentucky, Virginia, and Missouri regarding slavery. He unsparingly denounced it as "the largest, blackest spot on our national escutcheon, a many-headed monster, a Pandora's box, a bitter root, a blighting, blasting curse;" and one cannot but feel, as he studies those days and the different expressions by Campbell and his brethren on the question of Negro emancipation, that these discussions had more to do than is generally supposed with the separation from each other of men who then had, and today have, so much gloriously in common. It is the political as well as religious element that must here be taken into consideration. True, it was not predominant; but, on the other hand, it was not inoperative.

Again, between our subject and the Baptists of that day there arose discussions and differences touching "regeneration" and "reformation"—not so much, we take it, in regard to the fact of the thing as about the philosophy of it. Some of the discussions show subtleties worthy of mediaeval schoolmen. Better for us that we accept the fact of salvation, and seek not to fathom its plan.

Finally, Campbell found himself laying more stress upon baptism than his Baptist brethren. Hear his words:

Perhaps neither Baptists nor Pedobaptists sufficiently appreciate baptism... When Ananias said unto Paul, 'Arise, be baptized and wash away thy sins, calling upon the name of the Lord,' I suppose he must have believed that his sins were now washed away in some sense in which they were not before. We confess that

the blood of Jesus Christ alone cleanses us, who believe, from all sins. The water of baptism formally washes away our sins. The blood of Christ really washes away our sins. Paul's sins were really pardoned when he believed; yet he had no solemn pledge of the fact, no formal acquittal, no formal purgation of his sins, until he washed them away in the water of baptism.

Such was the position of Campbell; and, tenaciously holding that view, he organized Churches advocating and propagating it. And today the followers of Campbell are found all over our land, an earnest, God-fearing, Bible-loving body, reiterating constantly and fearlessly the motto of their most prominent leader: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

But we must close our study. As author, preacher, debater, evangelist, educator, founder of the Bethany College in West Virginia, Alexander Campbell devoted his best days and energies to the propagation of what he believed to be truth, ever showing himself to be a good man and just. He died triumphantly in the Christian faith on March 4, 1866, among his last words these, in honor of that Christ whom he loved so well: "His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Almost with these words upon his lips, and altogether with this inspiration in his heart, he ascended to his rainbow home above, there, in the circle of just men made perfect, to await the arrival of all who love his Sovereign and Savior.

*He sets as sets the morning star, which goes
Not down behind the darkened west, nor hides
Obscured amid the tempests of the sky,
But melts away into the light of heaven.*