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The Spirit and the Ministry, According to Alexander Campbell

LEE SYNDER

In a lifetime of controversy, Alexander Campbell held positions that aroused bitter opposition. He argued that baptism is the immersion of adult believers, the old covenant did not include Christians, and that professional preachers are hirelings. However, nothing else he taught was as shocking as his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. His doctrine is still startling in its simplicity and still has the potential to animate the church.

CAMPBELL'S ASSAULT ON REVIVALISM

Alexander Campbell was a practical man. His mind kicked into high gear in crises, such as when he had to decide whether to baptize his infant daughter, or when he prepared for an impending debate, or when he had to solve a church problem, or answer a plea from a reader. As a young man, he saw no need to question the traditional Reformed doctrine concerning the Holy Spirit. In an early sermon from 1811, he mentioned that the Holy Spirit worked directly and immediately on sinners, a view he would reject later.¹ As late as 1817, he still believed the Word was dead without the Spirit, that “when the Holy Spirit accompanies this word, then, and then only, is it effectual ...”²

However, Campbell soon had reason to re-examine his doctrine. From 1817 to 1819, his father, Thomas, lived in Kentucky. Thomas observed that Baptist preachers were not teaching the Bible; instead, they mostly appealed to peoples' emotions.³ Alexander did not have much exposure to revival preaching, being too busy with his own speaking, but now he had his father's disturbing report about the emotional excesses of revival meetings.

About this time, he also became acquainted with a young schoolmaster, Walter Scott. Scott's clear thinking and careful reading of the Scripture are visible in several articles about the Holy Spirit that he wrote under the name of “Philip” in Campbell's *Christian Baptist*. No doubt, the rich conversations with his father and with Scott shaped Alexander's final doctrine of the Spirit—the doctrine that was so offensive to Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian clergy of the Second Great Awakening.

The Second Great Awakening spanned the first half of the 19th century. The revivals and camp meetings that were the most visible feature of the Awakening perfectly matched the temperaments of the people of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The revivals gave an emotional outlet to hard-working frontier people.

The Reformed theology behind the revivals stressed that a fresh divine work was essential to each person's salvation.⁴ Fallen people were unable to believe in Christ on their own, whether they heard a sermon or read the Bible. The Holy Spirit must do an immediate miraculous work before a depraved sinner can believe. Unless God chooses to perform that work, a person might read the Bible forward and backward yet still be unable to trust God for salvation.⁵

In order to be sure that they were among the elect, people hoped to have some emotional experience, perhaps by praying at a mourner's bench at a camp meeting until spiritual relief came. Such an experience confirmed that God's Spirit had given them a saving faith. Consequently, preachers who were spiritual catalysts for these confirming experiences were well-appreciated by their listeners.

Another reason the revival meetings were so popular was that, to pragmatic Americans, it made sense to organize salvation into a technique. Being saved seemed to be a process like growing corn, a process a person could follow and expect certain results. Ahlstrom pointed out that the Methodists especially excelled at organizing camp meetings.⁶ His comment confirms Campbell's canny observation that "the doctrine of American Revivals ... has made Methodists of all the Protestants in America, except a few genteel Episcopalians."⁷

To Campbell, this process of salvation did not ring true. He had himself experienced the seeking, the despair, and the sudden assurance of salvation for which Calvinists prayed.⁸ However, he later abandoned much of his early religious heritage. He regretted the time he had spent in fruitless seeking when he could have obeyed the Word and been assured of his redeemed standing before God.

Campbell attacked the popular doctrine of the Holy Spirit and its miraculous communication of faith.

In the *Christian Baptist*, and later in the *Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell attacked the popular doctrine of the Holy Spirit and its miraculous

communication of faith. He explained that it is unscriptural to teach people that the Spirit would do something it never promised to do. Many people who sought this gift of faith for a long time experienced despair instead of assurance, and a few even committed suicide.⁹

Not only was the Calvinist teaching concerning the Spirit's work unscriptural and without consolation, but it was also inconsistent with the genius of Christianity. The revivalists' gospel taught people to focus on their own feelings instead of on Christ and his word. In place of this unhelpful gospel, Campbell developed his own original insight into the communication of the Spirit.

His college education gave him the tools he needed in order to figure out how the Spirit of God communicates with the spirits of humans. He had studied "logick," grammar, and the philosophy of the mind under George Jardine at the University of Glasgow in 1808. He had read Locke on human understanding and George Campbell on rhetoric, which included the study of faculty psychology and of all persuasion, whether divine or human in origin. He synthesized biblical texts on the Spirit together with the teachings of Bacon, Jardine, and Locke. He concluded that the Holy Spirit speaks *to* the lost through the medium of words. Furthermore, the Spirit speaks by the same medium *in* those who are saved.

The train of thought that led him to these conclusions followed along this track. Francis Bacon had argued that the most important knowledge is the knowledge of facts, which are acts. Campbell saw that the genius of the gospel is that it is based on facts rather than doctrines. No one will be lost for holding a wrong opinion but only for resisting true facts. This means that Christianity's endless debates about human opinions have been useless.

People have the ability to believe the saving facts of the gospel because these facts have been testified to by witnesses. Faith simply believes the testimony of a credible witness. (A fully developed faith, though, is not just an intellectual process but is a commitment of trust.)

"Saving faith," a favorite subject of preachers, is not some particular spiritual species of faith; it is simply the belief of saving facts. The facts that save a person are the gospel facts—that God expressed his love in his Son who died and rose again, and who commanded obedience to be preached to all nations. Any person who believes the gospel thereby experiences love for God and also wants to obey him. Obedience, in turn, produces happiness like that which the Ethiopian enjoyed after his obedience.

So to Campbell, facts or acts come first; next comes testimony about the facts; testimony elicits faith; faith arouses feelings; then feelings lead a person to obedience.¹⁰ Gospel preachers, then, ought not to stir up audiences by emotional preaching, for such appeals have nothing to do with faith. Instead, they should direct

people's attention to the testimony of the Holy Spirit contained in the Word; this testimony is able to create faith in them.

The Spirit has always been a witness. In the days of Jesus and the apostles, the Spirit worked miracles in order to call attention to their words and to show that their messages were true. Now, the time is past for such miracles, because the testimony inspired by the Spirit has been preserved in the Bible. The gospel accounts by now have been thoroughly confirmed by witnesses. Accordingly, the Gospel of John claims to give life to those who believe its facts (John 20:31).

Exactly how does the Spirit witness to Christ? In place of the popular belief that the Spirit communicates miraculously without using any means, Campbell offered his offensive claim. In effect, he taught that God, when communicating to people, is subject to the laws of rhetoric. That is, the Holy Spirit communicates in the same way that human spirits do, by means of appeals, arguments, and reasons, which are embodied in symbols. Through these words, the

Spirit coaches the saved and convicts the lost. All of the appeals the Holy Spirit can make are put forth in God's word, from the first chapter of Genesis where he hovered over the waters to the last invitation in Rev 22:17. In this book are the Spirit's arguments, "*and the only power which one spirit can exert over another is its arguments.*"¹¹

The chief argument that the Spirit proffers to fallen humans is the love of God displayed in the Gospels—"we love God because he first loved us."¹²

This love is made visible to human eyes by the acts of God in Jesus and is confirmed through the testimony of witnesses recorded in the Bible. A person who believes the testimony and arguments in the Word thereby believes the Spirit. Anyone who rejects the Bible's testimony rejects the Spirit, for the Spirit has no other motivations to offer outside the Word. Any preacher, then, who wishes to communicate the mind of the Spirit to the spirits of an audience, should make the same motivational appeals that the Spirit used in the written Word.

Some of Campbell's opponents admitted that the Spirit often did work through the Word, but when it chose, the Holy Spirit could work directly upon the human spirit by some spiritual power. When his opponents were questioned, though, Campbell found they could not explain the nature of this spiritual power. He replied that there are only two kinds of power in the world—physical and "moral" ("mental") power. A farmer operates on the soil by using the physical power of his hands, but if he wants to get his son to help him plow, his spirit may operate on that of his son only by using moral power—arguments and appeals communicated to his son through words.

Some Reformed preachers taught that the Bible is a dead letter unless the Spirit accompanies it. Campbell considered this to be an abominable doctrine, for the living Word cannot be dead. The Spirit cannot be separated from the Word. Whatever the Spirit does now (the age of inspiration having passed), is done through the Word, and whatever the Word does is done by the Spirit, who does not add any new light to the Word but who always accompanies it. Exactly how the Spirit accompanies the Word Campbell refused to say or even to speculate about, for that has not been revealed.¹³ He declared, "I am at war with all theories both true and false."¹⁴

What is clear, though, is that it is a mistake to preach either the Word alone or the Spirit alone.¹⁵ To counter some Reformers who eliminated the work of the Spirit entirely, Walter Scott wrote a "Discourse on the Holy Spirit," which Campbell published as a supplement to the *Millennial Harbinger* in 1831.

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Campbell's explanation of the Spirit's work undermined the validity of the revivals. When preachers cited the great excitement of the revivals as evidence that the Spirit was working among them, Campbell observed that people often mistake emotional excitement for the moving of the Spirit.¹⁶

By attacking revivalism, Campbell was simultaneously debunking the authority of the preachers who led the revivals. He said that,

in the production, increase, and exaltation of moral authority, I know of nothing which contributes so much as those revivals . . . It seals the mission of a man to be 'the instrument' of, or the great actor in, a revival; pretty much the same way as miracles did the mission of the apostles.¹⁷

If this were not enough to stir up controversy, he went one step further by ripping from the ministers their cherished divine call. At the same time, he bestowed the Spirit's call to a much larger class of ministers who were engaged in a broader ministry. Here is the essence of Campbell's doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the ministry:

I know what you term "a call" is just what I felt a hundred times when a boy. And I still feel it. I feel that it is my indispensable duty to call upon sinners to reform, and to flee from the wrath to come. I also feel that it is my indispensable duty to write and publish this paper, and to make use of all righteous means to circulate it far and wide. . . . I am as much called by the Holy Spirit to publish the "Christian Baptist," as any man upon the earth is called to preach the gospel. What think you of this? A man that can read well, and who finds persons who cannot read the testimony of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, is also called by the Holy Spirit to read those testimonies; and in so reading, he is preaching the gospel. I think the whole amounts to this, and the whole controversy issues here; those who feel it their duty to preach the gospel, call this sense of duty "a call of the Holy Spirit;" and when they feel it their duty to visit the sick, and to feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, they consider this sense of duty a mere dictate of conscience, or a part of religion, and do not rank it so high as a special call of the Holy Spirit; whereas in fact it is the same in every respect. . . . Now I am led to think, from the apostles' doctrine, that the poor widow, or the waiting maid who labors industriously in her station, and who obeys Christ, is just as good a servant of God and "minister of Jesus Christ" as ever John Calvin was, or any other preacher or teacher is.¹⁸

Letters in the *Christian Baptist* and in the *Harbinger* show that Campbell's simplified doctrine of the Spirit shocked both his readers and his critics. It put him at odds with the popular preaching of his day and stirred up mighty opposition. He had undermined the credibility of revival meetings, the authenticity of the ministerial call, and the validity of numerous parachurch organizations engaged in benevolent work and social reform.¹⁹

Critics charged him with denying the existence of the Holy Spirit, with making the Word into the Spirit, and with blaspheming the Spirit. Such charges are still brought against members of the Stone-Campbell movement today.²⁰

When his doctrine is understood in its entirety, though, rather than minimizing the Spirit, Campbell maximized the Word of the Spirit. He stressed that the Spirit's work is always to bear witness to Christ. So if you want to see the Spirit work, said Campbell, preach Christ. If you want to please the Spirit, do not pray to the Spirit nor praise the Spirit, for it is absurd to pray and sing to what is already within you. Do not even teach about the Holy Spirit. Instead, glorify the Messiah and you will please the Spirit.

In a sense, Campbell liberated the Spirit by magnifying its work in the Word. For example, people who think they need a supernatural call to become elders may experience such a call or they may not, depending (in Campbell's view) on their emotional makeup. However, Campbell argued that the Spirit gave the New

Testament qualifications for church offices and now gives congregations people who have such qualifications. In this way, the apostles still appoint, as they did in Jerusalem, all people who possess

the qualifications which they, by the Holy Spirit, prescribed. . . . It is, indeed, the Holy Spirit, and not the congregations, which creates Bishops and Deacons. The Spirit gives the qualifications, both natural and acquired, and, speaking to the congregations in the written oracles, commands their ordination or appointment to the work.²¹

Beyond this explanation of the call to church offices, Campbell's conception of the ministry is absorbed into his vision of the Spirit at work in the church. While Christ is the head of the church, "the Spirit is the heart of it."²² The Spirit forms the character of the believers. They in turn do acts of mercy and justice and exhibit transformed lives, becoming themselves the Spirit's testimony to the world that Jesus is Lord.²³

EXHORTATION

Of what value now is Campbell's doctrine of the Spirit? Some applications seem appropriate here.

Many of Campbell's original readers found in his teaching the motivation to study and to disseminate the scriptures.²⁴ After an additional two centuries of research into communication, rhetorical theory, and the philosophy of language, scholars now understand symbols to be more powerful than people in Campbell's day could have guessed. It is hard to imagine any way that God could touch the human heart and mind without using symbols, most of which are human words. Accordingly, various congregations in the Stone-Campbell Movement are exploring ways to incorporate more Scripture into their worship and are encouraging members to read the Bible more regularly.

The study of the mind and brain has changed a great deal since Campbell's time. Nevertheless, regardless of how a believer's mind functions, the Spirit is steadily transforming it into the mind of Christ, using the lathe of the Word.

Although Campbell was a chilly rationalist who was uncomfortable with emotional displays, he taught that conversion and sanctification affect a person's whole mind. This thoroughness of the Spirit's transforming work is good for modernists to contemplate as they have exerted a lot of effort to keep human emotions out of the church building. Now, as though in retribution, postmodern believers revel in emotions the way modernists did their intellects. Perhaps preachers could respond to these postmodernists by putting more biblical stories into their messages. The stories would give the Spirit something to work with and would also satisfy the postmodern passion for emotional involvement.

Finally, Campbell's doctrine of Christian ministry is worth celebrating. He took the priesthood of all believers seriously. By teaching that the Spirit's call is not confined to a small clerical class, he sanctified the persistent daily ministries of the secretary, the teenager, the prison inmate. It is no wonder that Campbell's writings sent out hundreds of farmers and laborers to spend every spare moment teaching, preaching, debating, and often neglecting their own livelihoods. They knew they could do something to help; and in this knowledge, they perceived their own call into the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 D. Newell Williams, "The Gospel as the Power of God to Salvation: Alexander Campbell and Experimental Religion," in *Lectures in Honor of the Alexander Campbell Bicentennial, 1788-1988* (Nashville: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1988), 137.

- 2 James Esstep and Alexander Campbell, "Circular Letter." Reprinted by T. L. Stephens as *Views of Mr. Alexander Campbell Concerning the Doctrines of Election and Reprobation ...* (Fulton, MO, 1856), 20.
- 3 Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell...* (n.p., 1897). Reprinted (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, n.d.), Vol. 1, 487.
- 4 More specifically, the theology of the early years was Calvinistic. Later, it was influenced by the techniques of the Methodists and the "New School" theology, which incorporated principles of Scottish Common Sense Philosophy. See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), Vol. 1:506-10.
- 5 Richardson, 2:105.
- 6 Ahlstrom, 1:530.
- 7 Alexander Campbell, "Letter to Elder William Jones. No. VI.," *Millennial Harbinger* (August, 1835), 355.
- 8 For some of these stories of the Restorationist pioneers, see Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Holy Spirit in the Early Restoration Movement," *Stone-Campbell Journal*, no. 7 (Spring 2004): in press.
- 9 John Mark Hicks, "'God's Sensible Pledge': The Witness of the Spirit in the Early Baptismal Theology of Alexander Campbell," *Stone-Campbell Journal*, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 17.
- 10 See Carisse Mickey Berryhill, "Alexander Campbell's Natural Rhetoric of Evangelism," *Restoration Quarterly*, no. 30 (1988):111-124.
- 11 Campbell, "The Whole Work of the Holy Spirit in the Salvation of Men," *Millennial Harbinger*, (July, 1831): 294.
- 12 Campbell, *The Christian System*, 5th ed. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1901), 220-1; cited in Williams, 135.
- 13 His father thought Alexander had already gone too far by theorizing about moral and physical power, which is why the chapter on that subject was omitted from the second edition of *The Christian System*. See Richardson, 2:355.
- 14 Campbell, "To Paulinus," *The Christian Baptist* (September, 1826): 269. Campbell, ed. 1835. Revised, D. S. Burnet. *The Christian Baptist; Edited by Alexander Campbell*. 1 vol. (Cincinnati: D. S. Burnet. 1983). (Reprint Joplin, MO: College Press.)
- 15 Campbell and N. L. Rice, *A Debate between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice, on ... Baptism; Also, on the Character of Spiritual Influence. ...* (Lexington: Skillman and Son, 1844). (Reprint Germantown, TN: Religious Book Service, n.d.), 614.
- 16 Campbell, "Rebaptism," *Millennial Harbinger* (November, 1831): 482.
- 17 Campbell, "Logic of the Ins and Outs ..." *The Christian Baptist* (January 1828): 403-4.
- 18 Campbell, "Reply," *The Christian Baptist* (December 1826): 292.
- 19 See Ahlstrom, 1:512-20 on how the Awakening encouraged the formation of voluntary associations.
- 20 Campbell, "Letter to Elder William Jones," 355.
- 21 Campbell, "The Kingdom of Heaven," *Millennial Harbinger* (Extra, August, 1834): 423.
- 22 Campbell and Rice, 616.
- 23 Campbell, *System*, 223-4; 234-5; 256-7; cited by Williams, 137.
- 24 See Berryhill, 124.

