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ALEXANDER CAMPBELL'S PRINCIPLES OF  
INTERPRETATION AS SEEN IN HIS  
CONCEPTION OF THE CHURCH

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Exegetical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

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by  
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June 1957

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. THE NEW HEBREW SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES . . . . .	10
III. DO JEWISH AUTHORITY CAN DICTATE INTERPRETATIONS FOR US . . . . .	15
IV. DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS . . . . .	20
V. CHRISTIANITY MUST IDENTIFY ITSELF . . . . .	25
VI. THE SCRIPTURES SPEAK IN OWN . . . . .	28
VII. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE LITERAL AND THE ALLEGORICAL SENSE . . . . .	30
VIII. COMMON SENSE AS A CRITERION . . . . .	35
IX. CONCLUSION . . . . .	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	70



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II. THE SOLA SCRIPTURA PRINCIPLE . . . . .	10
III. NO HUMAN AUTHORITY CAN DICTATE INTERPRETATIONS FOR US . . . . .	15
IV. DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS . . . . .	20
V. SCRIPTURE MUST INTERPRET ITSELF . . . . .	25
VI. THE INTENDED SENSE IS ONE . . . . .	28
VII. THE RELATION BETWEEN THE LITERAL AND THE FIGURATIVE SENSE . . . . .	30
VIII. COMMON SENSE AN ARBITER . . . . .	36
IX. CONCLUSION . . . . .	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	70



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

It is proposed in this essay to make a study of, and to set forth as clearly as possible, the principles of Scripture interpretation which guided Alexander Campbell in developing his doctrine pertaining to the church.

In order to accomplish this and to understand some of the conclusions he reached, it is necessary that we study his antecedents. To do this we must go to Scotland from whence he hailed.

A. C. Watters in his important book published in 1948 tells us that, "after the Scottish Reformation in the sixteenth century the rival claims of Episcopal and Presbyterian polities within the church of Scotland alternated in their fortunes until the Revolution of 1683 brought about the settlement of Presbyterianism as the form of church government."<sup>1</sup>

One must remember that Scotland continued to have a state church, which as just stated, was not Episcopal, but Presbyterian.

The union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707 brought about other changes. The religious and politi-

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<sup>1</sup>A. C. Watters, History of the British Churches of Christ (Indianapolis: Butler School of Religion, 1948), p. 5.



cal turmoil produced a clergy in the state church of Scotland that leaned toward English deism. These men were more interested in culture, in studying the classics, and in the affairs of the state than in religion.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the people of Scotland, though Presbyterian, were not in sympathy with a state church whose clergy was so worldly-minded. What added to the dissatisfaction was the fact that gradually, the rights of the congregations were taken away by the state. Union Parliament in 1712 restored the so-called patronage and took away the right for each church to select its own minister; and in 1731 the General Assembly passed an act giving the right to the elders to choose an elder when there was a vacancy in the presbytery.

A violent reaction on the part of the people set in and the so-called Seceder Church was started. This Secession amounted to a restoration of Calvinism.<sup>3</sup> During the first part of his ministry, Thomas Campbell, the father of Alexander Campbell, was in full agreement with this movement.

At this time several influential men came to the conclusion that the polity of the state church did not conform to the church of the New Testament; that the National Covenant

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 5,6.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 6.



in Scotland of 1683 which formed the basis of the state church was without authority because the church as founded by the apostles was separate from the state.

Though there were some differences among them relative to the meaning of some passages in the Scriptures, yet all were in agreement on the fundamental principles of procedure, all believed the Scriptures to be inspired of God, containing the complete revelation of the whole counsel of God, and therefore, having absolute authority.

Standing on this platform, they concluded there is no validity in formal creeds or confessions; nor scriptural justification for legislating bodies such as synods.<sup>4</sup>

The intention and aim of these men was to reform the existing church by restoring the apostolic church of the New Testament. This is the reason why the movement has been called the Restoration Movement. Each of them set forth and emphasized what he thought had been the nature of the early church.

John Glas resigned from the ministry of the state church in 1730 over doctrinal differences. He believed each church in the apostolic era had been an independent unit, which administered its own affairs, conducted its own worship, and established its own ministry; that for its autonomy each

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<sup>4</sup>Winfred E. Garrison, An American Religious Movement (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1945), p. 9.



church had a plurality of elders or bishops; that there was no distinction between clergy and laity; that preachers were not a professional class; that the early disciples took communion weekly; that each Christian belonged to a local congregation where he endeavored to fulfill his obligations to the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Sandeman, a prominent leader and son-in-law of John Glas, endorsed his doctrines, but went beyond him by stating that natural man "in his sins" and without supernatural aid could believe and accept the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

Two wealthy brothers, Robert and James Alexander Haldane, laymen of the Scottish church, felt that the state church was too exclusive and lacked interest in the moral conditions of the people. To them the existing church was no more than a respectable institution having the support of the state, the clergy of which seemed to be more interested in their own professional dignities than in preaching the gospel. Acting upon their own initiative and financing their own projects, they started evangelistic missions in Scotland, but attempts in Africa and India were thwarted by the Anglican church. To them a return to the Apostolic church was the answer to the problem. On most doctrines they

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<sup>5</sup>Watters, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Garrison, op. cit., p. 23.



were in agreement with John Glas.<sup>7</sup>

None of these restoration movements gained a large number of adherents but all greatly influenced Thomas and Alexander Campbell, the foremost leaders of the "Restoration" in America.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Campbell of Scottish ancestry, born in County Down, Ireland in 1763, received a call from a Seceder Church in Ahorey in 1798 where, he remained until he, because of ill health, came to America in 1807. He frequently attended the services of a Congregational Church in Ahorey and heard such men as James Haldane, John Walker, Alexander Carson and Rowland Hill preach. They turned him away from strict Calvinism. He was also greatly influenced by the writings of John Glas, James Haldane and John Locke. Thomas Campbell was well aware of the "reformation" in progress in Scotland.<sup>9</sup>

His son, Alexander (born 1788), with the rest of the family started for America on October 1, 1808, but the ship ran aground, was wrecked and the family stayed in Scotland. That winter he studied in the university of Glasgow and became intimately acquainted with Greville Ewing, a teacher the Haldanes had sent to the university. What he learned that winter changed the course of his whole life.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 26, 27.

<sup>9</sup>Watters, op. cit., p. 24.



Robert Richardson rightly says, "The knowledge which he obtained in regard to the religious reformation then progressing in Scotland made a deep impression on his mind."<sup>10</sup>

Garrison remarks on the importance of Campbell's associations and studies during this winter in this way:

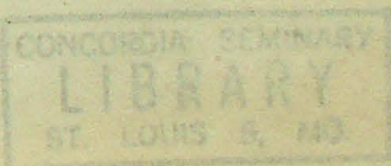
In Ewing's conversation and Glas' and Sandeman's books, Alexander Campbell found not only the general concept of a needed restoration of primitive christianity, but such specific ideas as these: the independence of the local congregation; weekly observance of the Lord's Supper; a plurality of elders; the denial of clerical privileges and dignities; the right and duty of laymen to have a part in the edification and discipline of the church; and a conception of faith as such a belief of testimony as any man is capable of by the application of his natural intelligence to the facts supplied by Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

We now have to think of the work of the Campbells in the new world. The Restoration began in America shortly after the colonies had won their independence and when immigration was moving westward. West of the Alleghenies was the sparsely settled frontier. In 1800 there were only five or six sects, besides several very small ones represented there; but taken altogether, they did not constitute over ten per cent of the people: no other country had such a small percentage. There was, however, a degree of religious liberty in America that had never before existed;

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<sup>10</sup>Robert Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1897), I, 176.

<sup>11</sup>Garrison, op. cit., p. 67.





church and state were separate and support or attachment was purely voluntary.<sup>12</sup> Moral conditions, it must be stated with sorrow, were depressing from the religious point of view.<sup>13</sup>

Immediately after arriving in America, Thomas Campbell withdrew from the presbytery of Chartiers and the synod in western Pennsylvania on September 13, 1808 for the following reasons: to have closer relation with other churches; to reject creeds as a standard and place the Bible in this position; to remove creeds as a test of fellowship; to remove clerical monopoly and allow ruling elders to exhort and pray in public; that faith in christianity is rational not mystical; that Christ died for all men.<sup>14</sup>

He formed an association of men from various churches interested in "reformation". It was called 'The Christian Association of Washington'.

Shortly thereafter, he wrote the "Declaration and Address", which was the Magna Charta of the movement. There are five main points to it:

1. The essential, intentional and constitutional unity of the Church of Christ.
2. The supreme authority of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Ainslie, The Message of the Disciples for the Union of the Church (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1913), pp. 95-6.

<sup>14</sup>Garrison, op. cit., p. 65.



3. The relative value of theology, the futility of creeds.
4. The essential brotherhood of all Christians.
5. The fact that by removing innovations, all Christians will find themselves united.<sup>15</sup>

Alexander came to this country just as the document came off the press and found himself in full agreement with it.

Together, Thomas and Alexander Campbell formed the Brush Run Church in western Pennsylvania in 1811. Alexander preached for this church. The birth of his first child revived the study of baptism. After a diligent study of the Scriptures and after much meditation, he reached the conclusion that baptism was intended for adults only and it was to be performed by immersion, not sprinkling. In 1812 all the members of the church were "baptized."<sup>16</sup>

In 1813 the Brush Run Church was admitted to the Redstone Baptist Association; the Campbells felt that they could best carry out their reforming efforts affiliated with a church; but they were never orthodox Baptists. They baptized upon a simple confession of faith, rather than on an experience related by the candidate; they observed the Lord's Supper weekly, not quarterly; they re-

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<sup>15</sup>Watters, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 25.



jected the idea of a clergy class. The tension increased when Alexander delivered his historic sermon on the law in 1816 at the annual Redstone Association at Cross Creek, Virginia. In it he declared there was a breach between the Old and New Testaments; the demands of the Old were nailed to Christ's cross and ceased to be valid. The Campbells and their adherents withdrew when relationship was no longer possible and joined the Mahoning Baptist Association in 1823.<sup>17</sup>

In that same year, Alexander began to edit The Christian Baptist which had for its thesis, "the restoration of the ancient order of things". In it he attacked the clergy, synods, associations, missionary societies and all innovations that usurp authority over the local church.<sup>18</sup>

By and by the Mahoning Association was disbanded; and in 1850 the Baptists forced the Reformers from their ranks.

1832 is a momentous year for the movement. Outstanding men from the Disciples in the east, who had come to number about 12,000, met with the leaders of the "Christian" movement in Kentucky, whose ranks embraced about 15,000, to decide on conditions of merging. The Disciples agreed to accept open communion, and Barton Stone, the leader of the Kentucky movement, agreed to accept adult baptism by immer-

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 26.



sion for remission of sins as a condition of church membership.<sup>19</sup> Campbell preferred to bear the name "disciple"; Stone desired the name Christian;<sup>20</sup> the latter was gradually adopted.

In 1830, Campbell discontinued the Christian Baptist and began to edit the Millennial Harbinger. He changed his views and in his editorials upheld doctrines he had formerly condemned. In the first publication, he had taught that the local church was the only unit organized by the apostles and nothing else should be organized to do the work of the church. After 1830, while he thought of the universal church at work in promoting evangelism, education and Bible Societies, he held this could be accomplished by organizing the churches on a national scale, pooling the resources, appointing a board of directors and having yearly conventions. When the American Christian Missionary Society was established in 1849, he became its first president.<sup>21</sup>

Campbell engaged in several famous public debates; full stenographic accounts of which were published, these accounts constitute important sources for us as we study his views. In The Christian System he set forth his own convictions about the New Testament Church.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>20</sup>Richardson, op. cit., II, 571

<sup>21</sup>Earl West, The Search for the Ancient Order (Nashville: The Gospel Advocate Co., 1949), pp. 169-180.



## CHAPTER II

### THE SOLA SCRIPTURA PRINCIPLE

The purpose of this thesis is to determine the rules or principles of interpretation the Campbells, and especially Alexander Campbell, followed in formulating their doctrines relative to the church.

One of these is Sola Scriptura -- accepting the Bible as the only source of doctrine. This is one of the outstanding characteristics of the whole so-called Restoration Movement dwelt on in the introductory remarks, and this characteristic becomes evident in the views the Campbells expressed on the various phases of the doctrine of the church.

At the home of Abraham Altars, near Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, in <sup>1809</sup>1811, Thomas Campbell in his speech to the assembled group, related the divisive conditions of the existing churches and stated the purpose and basis of the Restoration Movement. All sects, he said, could be united into one body if they discarded creeds and confessions and accepted the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. They must also refrain from arguments about controversial matters in the realm of opinion and expediency. He held that God has spoken to man and His whole counsel and complete will has been revealed to us in the Bible. The Bible



is, therefore, the infallible standard. He pointed out how men in past centuries had not been content with the Bible alone and had formulated doctrines and rules which were often in direct conflict with the Scriptures. Nevertheless, these theories became part of the doctrine of the churches. The result of this was division and conflict. A return to the simple teaching of the Scriptures and the resolve to abandon everything for which one could not find scriptural warrant would bring unity, he said, and was the only way of solving the problem of division. His concluding statement in this address, gives a summary of his position. It is as follows: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."<sup>1</sup>

This grand principle was fully sanctioned by his son, Alexander Campbell. He vowed to let it guide him in all the teachings in reference to the church. In his debate with Purcell, the Roman Catholic bishop,<sup>2</sup> he said, the "perfect rule is the Bible; and the reason for its perfection is its inspiration."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1897), I, 231-6.

<sup>2</sup>Held in the Sycamore Meetinghouse, Cincinnati, from the 13th to the 21st of January, 1837, on the Roman Catholic Religion.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Campbell and John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1914), p. 210.



His definition of the church ran as follows:

It is a society of disciples professing to believe in one grand fact, the Messiahship of Jesus, voluntarily submitting to His authority and guidance, having all of them in their baptism expressed their faith in Him and allegiance to Him and statedly meeting together in one place to walk in all His commandments and ordinances. This society with its bishops and deacons is perfectly independent of any tribunal on earth called ecclesiastical.<sup>4</sup>

Our interest in quoting this definition is not to determine whether it is correct, but to set forth Campbell's principles of interpretation, and more specifically to show in this instance that he professed to be guided by nothing but the Scriptures themselves.

In showing that this definition is correct, he appealed to the Scriptures. These are his words: "The Bible alone must always decide every question involving the nature, the character or the design of the christian institution. Outside the apostolic canon, there is not, as it appears to me, one solid foot of terra firma on which to raise the superstructure ecclesiastic."<sup>5</sup>

In the June issue of the Millennial Harbinger, 1853, he set forth his views pertaining to the description of the church. These are his remarks:

The church that Jesus Christ founded was to be the pillar and stay, or support of the truth, as it was developed in the days of plenary inspira-

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<sup>4</sup>Richardson, op. cit., II, 58.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., II, 495.



tion. On its exterior form and character, as upon a monumental pillar, was to be engraven or inscribed, in letters to be known and read by all men, that it was a house which God, and not man, had founded. It was a divine, spiritual, and neither a political nor human organization. Its solid and enduring basis was based upon a rock, even Christ Jesus. Under the ground were the inspired prophets of past dispensations. Above these, and above ground were the twelve original apostles of the Lamb, slain from the foundation of the world. These made a firm basis, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in His supreme divinity, and the head of the corner in His glorified humanity. It was thus fitted to be an habitation of God through the Holy Spirit that dwelt in the hearts of all its living members, which were cemented in one faith, and in one hope, and cordially united in one spirit, under one sovereign Lord, and one God and Father of all.<sup>6</sup>

This is quoted to confirm the view expressed above that Campbell intended to make the Scriptures the source of his teachings concerning the church.

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<sup>6</sup>Alexander Campbell, "Church Organization", The Millennial Harbinger, III (June, 1853), 301



### CHAPTER III

#### NO HUMAN AUTHORITY CAN DICTATE INTERPRETATIONS FOR US

On account of his Sola Scriptura principle, Campbell rejected the authority of tradition. Consequently, he believed interpretation must not be guided by what others have said, like the church fathers, or the Pope, or the church itself in its councils, or the confessions.

In the before mentioned debate, Campbell turned his attention to the question of the validity of tradition by asking: "Is there an infallible rule of faith? If so, where shall it be found?"<sup>1</sup>

We have a perfect rule, Campbell argued, "our rule is the Bible alone."<sup>2</sup>

"The Roman Catholic rule contains one hundred and thirty-five large folio volumes superadded to the Bible and the apocrypha! These are composed of the following parts and parcels: 1st, apostolical Fathers, 35 folios; 2nd, eight volumes of Decretals; 3rd, ten volumes of bulls of the popes; 4th, thirty-one volumes of canons and decrees of the councils; 5th, fifty-one folios of the Acta Sanctorum -- acts of the saints."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell and John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1914), p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 210.



"It requires a whole council to move it and apply it to a single opinion."<sup>4</sup>

Campbell then proceeded in his argument by asking the question: "But where is the inspiration of the one hundred and thirty-five folios? Does it require this immense library to make us understand the Bible?"<sup>5</sup>

The issue before them could be settled, Campbell said, if the Catholic bishop would accept the Bible as the only standard and the only authority. This is the true position, Campbell believed, for the Bible contains the only inspired books. He said, "Jesus Christ was able to give a perfect rule. He, therefore, inspired twelve apostles to form that rule and enjoined us to hear them."<sup>6</sup>

For this reason he objected to the position of the Romanists, that we are bound by the interpretation of the church. The authority, he said, is the Bible - the Bible alone and the church must abide by it, but, "the Romanist says the church or the Bible explained by the church is his infallible rule!"<sup>7</sup>

On the before stated premise, Campbell attacked creeds and confessions of faith. The last proposition in the Camp-

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 209.



bell - Rice debate,<sup>8</sup> involved a discussion on the expediency and tendency of ecclesiastical creeds as terms of communion, or fellowship. That he did not wish creeds to guide a person in interpreting the Scriptures is shown by this statement: "They falsely assume to be a proper exponent of the Scripture doctrine; and to be plainer and more intelligible than the Bible."<sup>9</sup>

In view of his belief in the Bible and his attitude toward creeds and tradition, it became necessary for Campbell to clarify his position of Sola Scriptura. He expressed his belief in the extent and fulness of the Scriptures in this way. God's revelation is whole and complete; therefore, we must stand in awe of the silence of the Bible; what God has concealed is as divine as its revelation. God, in His infinite wisdom has determined what man should know and of what he should be ignorant. To intrude on the unrevealed is vanity and as wrong as to wilfully misinterpret the Scriptures.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Held in Lexington, Ky., from the fifteenth of November to the second of December, 1843, on the action, subject, design and administration of christian baptism; the character of spiritual influence in conversion and sanctification and the expediency and tendency of ecclesiastical creeds as terms of union and communion.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism (Lexington: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), p. 902.

<sup>10</sup>Robert Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1897), I, 231-6.



The intention of Alexander Campbell to make the Scriptures alone the source of christian doctrine, becomes apparent, too, in what he says about expediency in the church's teaching and practice. This is his definition:

They are then, in one sentence, those things or forms of action, which it was impossible or unnecessary to reduce to special precepts; consequently they are not faith, piety, or morality, because whatsoever is of faith, of worship, or of the morality of christianity, was both possible and promulgated; and is expressly and fully propounded in the sacred scriptures. The law of expediency, then, has no place in determining the articles of faith, acts of worship, nor principles of morality. All these matters require a "thus saith the Lord" in express statement, and the sacred writings have clearly defined them. But in other matters that may be called circumstantial of the gospel and of the Church of Christ, the people of God are left to their own discretion and to the facilities and exigencies of society.<sup>11</sup>

Expediency, then, concerned itself with the fulfillment of God's commands, where He had not specified the means or methods.

It also had a broader application. There are, Campbell wrote, "many things, indeed, that are of vital importance to the well-being and prosperity of the kingdom of Christ which are left to the law of expediency."<sup>12</sup> The examples he gives of this are: the translation and distri-

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<sup>11</sup>Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1912), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.



bution of the Scriptures, meeting houses, baptistries, and the Lord's table.

The question will arise, "who shall ascertain and who shall interpret this law of expediency?"<sup>13</sup> He answers his question this way: "We all agree that expedients are to be chosen with regard to times, seasons, and other circumstances. Changes in these always change expedients."<sup>14</sup>

"Now the law of expediency is the law of adopting the best present means of attaining any given ends. But this is a matter which the wisdom and good sense of individuals and communities must decide. This is not, this cannot be a matter of standing revelation."<sup>15</sup>

It is evident that, with him, it became a matter of principle to hold that where God has not spoken, we too must not legislate, but realize that in this respective sphere there is freedom. For that reason we may well put the principle, just pointed to, under the general head of Sola Scriptura as viewed by Campbell. Whether or not he always followed this principle is a different question.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.



## CHAPTER IV

### DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENTS

As we read Campbell's works in the sections in which he deals with the church, we come upon this principle of interpretation that the exegete must carefully distinguish between the Old Testament and the New Testament. How this principle operated in his interpretation of the Scriptures is well brought out in the history of Garrison and DeGroot, who wrote as follows about the "Sermon on the Law"<sup>1</sup> (August 30, 1816):

This sermon was his declaration of independence for the whole Christian Church as against the entire system of the Old Testament law. In it Campbell undertook to do for his own time what the apostle Paul had done for the churches of the first century in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans -- to show that the Christian gospel is a new institution and not an extension and modification of the Hebrew legal system. This thesis was presently to be elaborated in the Walker debate.

The argument of the "Sermon on the Law" was that the christian system, for the individual believer and for the church, is based on the New Covenant which though historically connected with the Hebrew regime and prophesied in it, is radically different in principle and content. With the coming of Christ, the law was done away; not merely the ceremonial law, but the whole law.

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<sup>1</sup>Delivered before the Redstone Baptist Association at its annual meeting at Cross Creek, Va. Elder Pritchard, regular minister for the Baptist Church at Cross Creek, Va., refused to let Campbell speak, but events so happened, that Campbell was chosen to address the assembly. Elder Stone, who was to speak, became ill and public demand forced Pritchard to acquiesce in favor of Campbell.



The immutable principles of morality which had been embodied in the law are still in force, not because they were in the law, but because they existed before it and independent of it. The law had declared them, not created them.<sup>2</sup>

This correctly presents Campbell's position and delineates one of his fundamental principles of exegesis.

He, himself, in the rules of interpretation which he published in the Christian System, says in Rule 2:

In examining the contents of any book, as precepts, promises, exhortations, etc., observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates. Is he a Patriarch, a Jew or a Christian? Consider also the persons addressed, their prejudices, characters and religious relations. Are they Jews or Christians, believers or unbelievers, approved or disapproved? This rule is essential to the proper application of every command, promise, threatening, admonition, or exhortation, in Old Testament or New.<sup>3</sup>

We may also quote some other sentences of his in confirmation:

It has often been remarked, that all artificers have their own rules, by which they are regulated their respective arts and calling. It is equally plain, that teachers of religion who embrace different systems, have each their own rules, in going to work to support their peculiar tenets. This is strikingly manifest in the Baptists' and Pedo-Baptists' mode of supporting their different views on the doctrine of baptism. When an advocate for Infant Baptism begins to support his tenets, he leads you back to the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 2000 years before the institution of baptism. He tells you of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace and persuades you

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<sup>2</sup>Winfred E. Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, A History of the Disciples of Christ (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1948), p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1912), p. 97.



to consider that old musty covenant of circumcision, is just the same as the covenant of grace. He labors hard to explain the items of this old covenant, and to make you believe that they are just the same with those of the new. After having led you by the hand through a dark and intricate labyrinth, explaining allegories, types and metaphors; sometimes unfolding mysteries, at other times creating mysteries, which never before existed, he arrives at the borders of the New Testament times. As soon as he enters the New Testament, he has to go back to the Old Testament; thereby showing you that the Old Testament is plainer than the New.<sup>4</sup>

Just what Campbell meant by these words is explained by a statement he made in the Rice debate. He said:

But I blame him, too, for going into the Old Testament!! Not at all. I blame no man for going into the Old Testament. I wish he would go into it thoroughly. I only blame him for abandoning the New, and going to the Old to find what his creed calls "a sacrament of the New Testament".<sup>5</sup>

It is obvious from these words that Campbell is here making the distinction in question; that he wishes to say one could not prove one's doctrine on the argument of analogy-- that baptism came in the place of circumcision. The matter is so important that a few more quotations will be welcomed.

Whatever one may think of his position, it is certain that he made the distinction between the two covenants an important factor in his interpretation of the Scriptures.

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<sup>4</sup>Alexander Campbell and John Walker, Debate on Christian Baptism (Pittsburgh: Eichbaum and Johnston, 1822), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup>Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism (Lexington: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), p. 902.



He believed true religion in the history of man to be divided into three ages or dispensations - the Patriarchal, the Jewish and the Christian. In each the mode of worship is different and each had its own peculiar requirements and commands. Following this rule, he naturally concluded that baptism was commanded in the New Testament, not the Old. These are his statements in support of his conclusion in the Maccalla debate:

Has he not solemnly vowed his belief of it as the system of doctrine taught in the Bible? Has he not promised, solemnly promised to teach the doctrines which it contains? Does it not say that baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament? Why then does he go to the Old Testament to find it? Does it not say that baptism was ordained by Jesus Christ? Why then does he go to Abraham and to Moses to authorize it? Does he not, in his first proposition, make it an ordinance of Moses, or of the Jewish Church? Does he not originate it in the law of circumcision? Why then pledge himself to teach that 'baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament ordained by Jesus Christ?'; or does the phrase New Testament mean both the Old and the New? Does the name Jesus Christ mean both Moses and the Messiah?<sup>6</sup>

Campbell's references above are to Mr. Maccalla's own words and to the Presbyterian Confession of Faith.

This proposition, that there is a distinction between the Old Testament and the New, when used by Campbell to interpret the Scriptures, as we have seen, was applied to God's will to man. He believed the New Testament contains all God has commanded and enjoined upon us to believe and

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<sup>6</sup>Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, A Debate On Christian Baptism (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 46.



obey, which implied that the Old Testament would not be regarded by him as containing per se doctrines binding for us in the days of the New Testament. This is his position:

Because I say that all Christianity is contained in the New Testament, as the Patriarchal and Jewish is contained in the Old, with many predictions of New Testament times; I say, because I maintain that the New Testament scriptures are the perfect, complete and perspicuous rule of faith and practice, as far as respects Christianity; I am called an antinomian and am impeached with utterly throwing away the Old Testament Scriptures.<sup>7</sup>

Under this general heading, we must examine Campbell's view on the purpose and use of the Old Testament in the life of a Christian. He believed the Old Testament should be studied. "In the plan of study, one must recognize that though both Testaments are inseparably connected, constituting one perfect and entire revelation; yet, as to what directly and properly relates to the immediate object, the New Testament sets forth the perfect pattern for the Church."<sup>8</sup>

The Old Testament, he said, provides the proper background to the New Testament:

I shall only further premise here, that no man can well understand the New Testament, who has not profoundly read the five books of Moses. Certainly, without that knowledge, he is not fit to be a teacher in the Christian religion.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Campbell and Walker, Debate on Christian Baptism, pp.140-1.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Richardson, Memoirs of Alexander Campbell (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1897), I, 231-6.

<sup>9</sup>Campbell and Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism, p. 289.



## CHAPTER V

### SCRIPTURE MUST INTERPRET ITSELF

The infallible rule of interpretation of the Scripture is the Scripture itself; and, therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture which is not manifold but one, it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly. This article embraces one of the best rules of interpretation we have seen. The sense of every passage is one, not two, three or manifold.<sup>1</sup>

The above quotation was introduced early in the Maccalla debate by Campbell and is taken from the Presbyterian Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, section 9. It contains a principle of interpretation that Campbell approved and used, namely, that, in order to understand the meaning of a passage of Scripture, one must refer to parallel passages dealing with the same subject, thus making the Bible a commentary on itself.

The application of this rule is seen in the following section of the Maccalla debate:

While so explicit in the department of propositions, we shall once more call your attention to the verbs bapto, raino, cheo, pluno, and louo, and from a few examples shew that they are as certainly and as definitely expressive of different actions, as en, eis, and ek are different in application and meaning. Lev. XIV. 6 - 8, 'Then he shall take the living bird, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet hyssop, and (perform another action, VIZ.) bapsei, dip them, then he shall (perform another action, VIZ.) periranei,

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, A Debate On Christian Baptism (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 46.



sprinkle of the blood. Then he who is cleansed shall (perform another action, VIZ.) plunei to imatia, wash his garments, and he must yet perform another action, VIZ. lousetai, wash his body in water. After these four actions are performed (not one and the same action), he may come into the camp, but he must not enter his house for seven days, and until he has repeated two of those actions again.' After shaving off his hair he shall repeat the action of washing his clothes, plunei to imatia, he shall wash his clothes and also another action, lousetai to soma, wash his body in water, verse 9. In a subsequent part of the ceremony of cleansing a leper we shall find the actions of pouring, dipping and sprinkling contradistinguished in a similar manner, verse 16. Three actions are described. First action of the priest, he shall pour ekchei, or pour out into his left hand. The second action of the priest is bapsei, he shall dip his right finger into the oil of his left hand. Then comes the third action ranei, he shall sprinkle it with his finger. Here we have bapto, cheo, and raino occurring together, as descriptive of three distinct actions -- actions minutely described essentially different, of ceremonial import, and clearly contradistinguished from each other. Sprinkle, dip and pour, are assuredly not one and the same import in English, they denote three actions. In Greek, you see, their meaning is as distinct and as different as in English. In the same chapter again these words are contradistinguished verse 26, and the priest shall (epichei) pour into; and verse 27, he shall (ranei) sprinkle; verse 41, he shall (ekchei) pour out; and verse 51, he shall (bapsei) dip, and last of all, same verse (periranei), he shall sprinkle the house seven times.

The same marked difference between these three terms occurs Lev. IV. 6,7. 'And the priest shall (bapsei) dip his finger, then he shall perform another action, he shall (prosranei) sprinkle before; then he shall, verse 7, perform a third action, (ekchei) he shall pour out the blood at the base of the altar.' Is it not most remarkable that we should so often find these three words occurring so close together; and so completely contradistinguished from each other, as if to put to silence the cavils of mistaken men! Take another instance or two of these words as given above, Lev. XVI. 24, lousetai to soma, he shall wash his body; verse 19, ranei, sprinkle blood with his fingers seven times; Num. VIII, 7, he shall (periranei) sprinkle;



and in the same verse (plunousi) they shall wash ta imatia, their clothes. Once more on this point, Num. XIX. 18, 19, "Bapsoi he shall dip (eis) into the water, and (periranoi) he shall sprinkle it upon the house, and they shall pour out, (ekcheoi) and he shall (periranoi) sprinkle, and he shall (plunei) wash his garments, (ta imatia) and lastly, he shall (lousetai) wash himself in water." In three verses here we have cheo, to pour, raine, to sprinkle, bapto, to dip, pluno, to wash garments, and louo, to wash the body. I presume there never was a disquisition upon the meaning of any set of words, capable of so clear and convincing proof, as we have offered upon these terms."<sup>2</sup>

"Therefore, we test a definition by placing it in all places in which we find the word it defines."<sup>3</sup>

The above is in agreement with the "Principles of Interpretation" Campbell wrote in The Christian System, and which he vowed to follow. We quote here Rule four in confirmation:

"Common usage, which can only be ascertained by testimony, must always decide the meaning of any word which has but one signification; but when words have according to testimony, (i.e. the dictionary) more meanings than one, whether literal or figurative, the scope, the context or parallel passages must decide the meaning: for if common usage, the design of the writer, the context, and parallel passages fail, there can be no certainty in the interpretation of language."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>

Campbell and Maccalla, Debate on Christian Baptism, pp. 293-6.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism (Lexington: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), p. 244.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Nashville: Mcquiddy Printing Co., 1912), p. 16.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE INTENDED SENSE IS ONE

The quotation from the Presbyterian Confession of Faith contains a second principle of interpretation: The intended sense of a Scripture is one (sensus literalis est).

We may cite some instances in which Campbell depends upon this rule for the exegesis of a passage. Here is what he says concerning this:

But it is possible that the sagacious, the learned, the wise, the shrewd Mr. Maccalla affirms that a sucking infant can, without any reference to the correct meaning of words, be called a disciple or scholar of Christ! An infant disciple! It is a contradiction in terms. But did Mr. Maccalla prove that infants were called disciples? No. He asserted it. He said that they were so-called in Acts, Chapter XX. Did he state the circumstances of the case? Did he allude to the occasion, or refer to the context in which these words appear? No. Were infants mentioned in the Chapter? No. A singular way of affording New Testament authority for infant baptism, to allude to a chapter where neither infants nor baptism is mentioned! His second New Testament reference was to the words of the Saviour, saying, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God." This, though a more usual reference than the former, is just as irrelevant, for two substantial reasons, besides many others. The first is, this was spoken a considerable time before christian baptism was appointed, consequently could have no reference to it whatever. In the next place, these infants were brought to Christ for one particular purpose, which is specified, consequently, as the Confession of Faith says, "The sense of the Scripture is not manifold but one" can have no reference to infant sprinkling.

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Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, A Debate on Christian Baptism (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 67.



A second quotation from Campbell's works which involves the same verse and the same rule may be given. It is as follows:

His (i.e., Maccalla's) references to "suffer little children" and to the "holy children" are condemned by his own Confession of Faith, according to the rules of interpretation prescribed in that confession. He has not in his late address, adverted to one objection I made to them before, from that rule of interpretation. "The sense of every passage of scripture is one", consequently, as baptism was not referred to on that occasion of the pronouncement of these words, they have no reference to the controversy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

We agree that it is to be taken in its most common or liberal sense, and in this we agree with the general declaration of all critics of religion, who say with Maccalla, "that the words of a law are generally to be interpreted in their usual or most proper signification not so much respecting the words as their general and popular use." In this we also agree with the disciples of common sense. For did that not under the tyranny of a blinded zeal, would ever think that the word, the sacred word, of a plain and obligatory promise or institution, was not to be understood literally but figuratively?

Campbell shows the first meaning of a word in its literal sense in preference to more remote or figurative meanings.

Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, *Journal of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (London: Simpkin and Co., 1847), p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 107.



## THE RELATION BETWEEN THE LITERAL AND THE FIGURATIVE SENSE

Campbell was guided in Bible exegesis by the following rule: It is the literal sense of passages which we must find; figurative meanings must be ascribed to a passage only where this is clearly indicated.

He believed every important word can be used figuratively as well as literally. Here is what he says: "That every word of any note has both a figurative and a literal meaning, I presume all grammarians, lexicographers, and critics will confess."<sup>1</sup> He believed the context would determine which, but generally, unless the context demands otherwise, the word is to be taken literally. Concerning the word "baptism", its meaning and use, he has this to say:

We argue that it is to be taken in its most common or literal import, and in this we agree with the concurrent declarations of all critics of eminence, who say with Blackstone, "that the words of a law are generally to be understood in their usual or most known signification not so much regarding the propriety of grammar, as their general and popular use." In this we also agree with the dictates of common sense. For who that was not under the tyranny of a blinded zeal, would ever think that the word, the emphatic word, of a plain and obligatory precept or institution, was not to be understood literally but figuratively!<sup>2</sup>

Campbell chose the first meaning of a word or its literal meaning in preference to more remote or figurative meanings:

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, A Debate on Christian Baptism (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 267.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 268.



To Maccalla he says:

Like Dr. Ralston, he argues that the word baptizo and baptismos "are not used in a literal but figurative sense" in relation to baptism. So say the Socinians with respect to the title of Messiah. It is a refuge of all errorists to hide themselves in mystery, in allegory, in figurative representations. In this way nothing is certain. Dr. Doddridge says, "I am more and more convinced that the vulgar (common) sense of the New Testament, that is, the sense in which an honest man of plain sense would take it, on his first reading the original, or any good translation, is almost everywhere the true and the general sense of the passage. I choose to follow the plainest, and the most obvious and common interpretation, which, indeed, I generally think the best." Notes on Matt. XVIII, 17, and 2 Cor. VIII, 1.<sup>3</sup>

Campbell pointed out, that unless one followed this rule, the true meaning of the Scriptures would be confused and perverted. For this reason one must strictly adhere to this principle. These are his remarks on this point:

I have also proposed to take the common or literal meaning of the terms in dispute as given by Greek lexicographers, and as used by Greek writers, sacred and classical, and to abide by their decision. Has Maccalla acceded to this proposal? No. Now what is his course? It is simply this: First to adopt no standard of appeal, to fix upon no definite terms. But it is, secondly, to throw everything into uncertainty, by representing these terms as ambiguous, by vague allusions to their figurative use, and by one of the grossest sophisms, fallacia accidentis; as when we say a thing must be so; I say this is his course of darkening, confounding, and perplexing the subject, and at the same time the minds of the auditors. We have again and again shewn, that in all institutes and ordinances, civil or religious, the words are to be taken literally, or in their commonly received sense; and more especially in positive appointments.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 277



With respect to passages having a figurative meaning, Campbell willingly admitted that such passages occur in the New Testament. How is one to find them?

One clue for the exegete to look for, in determining whether a passage has a literal or figurative meaning, is its language and style. Campbell's view on this is given in his own words:

In interpreting positive precepts, and in commenting upon poetic or symbolic effusions, we do not proceed upon the same principles, so far as the acceptation of words is concerned. In positive statutes and laws we look for perspicuity and precision in the selection and use of words. In poetry and symbolic narratives and descriptions, we expect a free, rich and luxuriant style. Moses, the lawgiver, and Isaiah, the prophet, John, the evangelist, and John, the prophet, in his apocalyptic visions and descriptions, are not to be interpreted in the same strict and grammatical way. In describing nature, providence, redemption, and in proclaiming a law, enacting an ordinance or issuing a commission, men think, and feel, and speak in different words and images.<sup>5</sup>

Figurative, or tropical language, as Campbell calls it, is not usually the primary meaning of words, but usage has attributed to many words, secondary or remote meanings.

Campbell enters into a discussion of this in his debate with Rice as follows:

Mr. Rice says, a tropical word, or as I understand it, a word used tropically, is not a figurative word with the critics. This is a new doctrine in the schools. Whence comes the word that indicates figurative use? Comes it not from tropos, and that from tropo, to turn?

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<sup>5</sup>Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism (Lexington: A. T. Skillman and Son, 1844), p.129.



To turn a word from its proper signification, is to make it a trope; and that is what we call a figure. There is no dictionary of credit that otherwise explains and defines these words, or that distinguishes tropical from figurative language, as used in the schools of logic and rhetoric.<sup>6</sup>

When tropical language is encountered the limit or scope of interpretation is given by Campbell in The Christian System, in Rules 5 and 6 in his rules for interpreting the Scriptures:

In all tropical language ascertain the point of resemblance, and judge the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.

In the interpretation of symbols, types, allegories and parables, this rule is supreme:--ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point--to all attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory or parable.<sup>7</sup> (This rule has been expressed in the Latin words, Ne tropus ultra tertium.)

It is now necessary to examine some sections from Campbell, where the afore-mentioned rule is put into practice.

I introduce first Campbell's exegesis of Ezekiel 36:25, which is as follows:

As to the sprinkling of clean water so often alluded to, found in Ezekiel as expressed in the following words, a remark or two will be expedient and necessary. The words are: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from your idols will I cleanse you." The question is, what means here the phrase "clean water"? Is it common water, free from all physical impurities?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>7</sup>Alexander Campbell, The Christian System (Nashville: Mequiddy Printing Co., 1912), p. 17.

<sup>8</sup>Campbell and Rice, Debate on Christian Baptism, p. 161.



The water was sometimes called matharon hudoor, clean water, and sometimes hudoor rantismou, water of separation: the effect being put metonymically for the cause. This water of purification was to be used for one class of pollutions--a species of offences or pollutions artificially created, as it were, to complete the type.<sup>9</sup>

The passage, in Ezekiel, is always misapplied, except when quoted in the true technical sense of the law, which has given it its proper signification. The history of the case in Ezekiel is this--The Jews profaned the Lord and polluted themselves among the heathen. The Lord said, not for their sake, but for his own honor, he would bring them out and restore them to their own land, and as they had, by contact with the heathen polluted themselves, he, speaking in their own national and appropriate sense of the phrase, said, he would cleanse them by sprinkling clean water upon them, a symbol of sanctification externally, and that he would put his spirit within them; a passage which has no more to do with the sprinkling of common water for baptism, than any other ceremony of the law.<sup>10</sup>

Another example is in order at this place, to illustrate Campbell's thinking on the figurative use of words. This reference pertains to the tropical use of the word "baptism" in Daniel 4:33. He makes these remarks on the usage of the word in the verse mentioned:

As to Nebuchadnezzar's being baptized in the dew, it is evident to all, that the word is here used figuratively. Even Pede-Baptists must admit it on their own principle; for they do not suppose that they should administer baptism in the manner in which the impious monarch was baptized. The effect of the dew is here spoken of, the extent of his wetting is compared to the effect of baptism. This

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 162.



is a very ordinary figure of speech. He slept upon the dewy grass, and so was completely moistened, as though immersed in water. He was in the dew, overwhelmed with it as a person in a river.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Campbell and Maccalla, Debate on Christian Baptism, p. 269.



## CHAPTER VIII

### COMMON-SENSE AN ARBITER

In certain instances, Campbell said, one must appeal to common-sense or to the reasonableness of a certain interpretation to show its correctness.

This appeal to the credibility of the Scriptures was based, as he maintained, on his belief that God had designed the Bible and had adapted His will to the rational nature of man. He felt that if the people of his day had lived either during the age of the prophets or the apostles, they could have understood the messages they gave, in the same way that we understand a preacher today; that the persons addressed have always been the interpreter of what they heard; that the principles of interpretation are inherent in the nature of man and it follows that God has given to man a revelation which He expects us to interpret in accordance with our rational nature. It becomes a revelation, then, in human language, by men, to men, and it follows that if it is not intelligible, then it is not a revelation. If man cannot rationally understand the Bible, the only other way would be by miraculous illumination and this must happen each time it is read. But if this is necessary, why have the Bible at all? This is his reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell, "On the Rules of Interpretation", The Millennial Harbinger, III (February, 1832), 64-70.



It follows, then, that the Bible is to be interpreted in the same manner and by the same principles as all other books, because according to the above thinking and principles of interpretation in their substantial and essential elements began with and continued with man, instead of being invented.<sup>2</sup> From all this, it is clear that in certain cases Campbell made his own reason the arbiter as to the meaning of Scripture passages.

That common-sense or reason was a major factor in Campbell's interpretation (understanding) of the Scriptures is evident upon several occasions in his debates. In the Maccalla debate when the question of whether or not the Old Covenant continued in the form of the New, Campbell had this to say:

But to circumcision once more--Mr. Maccalla has read yet another extract from Dr. Mason, in vindication of that most singular of all principles; the changing of a seal while the covenant remains unchanged. Why, in the name of common sense, change the seal? Circumcision is as suitable yet as it ever was, if the covenant is the same. But how does the Doctor explain this mystery? By telling us "that the rite of circumcision was no more than a form in which the seal was applied." What sophistry! What disregard to common-sense! What an insult to human understanding!<sup>3</sup>

That Campbell, in interpreting Bible passages at times was guided by the reasonableness of revelation, is very obvious in his understanding of the teaching of Scripture about the Lord's Supper, a doctrine which in the wider sense belongs to

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Campbell and W. L. Maccalla, A Debate on Christian Baptism (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1842), p. 191.



the cycle of teachings pertaining to the church. In the Purcell debate, he gives the reasons why he rejects the doctrine of transubstantiation and at the same time sets forth his own view. This is what he says:

1. The incongruity of the idea of a sacrament with that of transubstantiation.
2. The unreasonableness of preferring a literal to a figurative sense in the interpretation of a phrase common in Scripture, which in no other case is so interpreted by the parties themselves.
3. The arrogance of the priests in assuming the power of working miracles, for the sake of a forced interpretation of a phrase without precedent or analogy.
4. The belief of such a transubstantiation destroys the credibility of all testimony, human and divine and tends toward atheism.
5. That the institution of the supper is commemorative and not expiatory, having nothing in the nature of a sacrifice for sin.<sup>4</sup>

Here Alexander Campbell evidently appeals to human reason in deciding how the Scripture passages pertaining to the Lord's Supper are to be interpreted.

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<sup>4</sup>Alexander Campbell and John B. Purcell, A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1914), p. 366.



## CHAPTER IX

### CONCLUSION

In this thesis our purpose has been to formulate, define and illustrate those rules Alexander Campbell compiled and applied in reaching conclusions and decisions on the meaning of Bible passages referring to the Church, rather than to give a full exposition of his conception of the pertinent doctrines. The examples, therefore, are taken from those sections of Campbell's writings where we found the rules used or referred to, on such subjects as baptism, The Lord's Supper, the covenants or any other subject that is included in the doctrine of the church.

We do not claim to have exhausted and used all the examples in Campbell's writings, where these principles are adhered to by him, but we have used those which we have deemed most suitable to exemplify his chief hermeneutical rules. We believe that we have set before the reader the fundamentals underlying the thinking of Alexander Campbell in his use of the Scriptures and that one has a guide here for the right approach to a study of his works.

To present a brief summary, the major principles of interpretation of Campbell for Bible exegesis, as they have been studied above, are as follows:



1. The Bible alone is our source of doctrine.
2. Our interpretations must not be guided by what others, like the church fathers, the pope or the church, or the Confessions have said.
3. We must distinguish between the Old Testament and the New Testament.
4. The Bible must interpret itself; it is its own interpreter.
5. The intended sense of a Scripture passage is one.
6. It is the literal sense of passages which we must find; figurative meanings must be ascribed to a passage only where this is clearly indicated.
7. In certain instances we have to appeal to common-sense or to the reasonableness of a certain interpretation to show its correctness.

Thus far, we have proceeded in an objective manner, giving what Campbell believed. The thesis, however, would not be complete without a word or two of evaluation on the hermeneutical principles of Alexander Campbell and his consistency in following them.

We think all conservative Bible scholars will agree that his rules are excellent with the exception of the last one where rationalism has entered. If this principle were followed and applied to every teaching of the Scriptures that transcends our human understanding, the true doctrine of the Scriptures would be eliminated in certain places. As to Campbell's consistency in adhering to these principles, the careful reader of his works will notice that he, in the course of time, differed with himself in his interpretation of certain Scripture passages.



Did it mean that he proved unfaithful to his principles of interpretation?

In The Millennial Harbinger, on the subject of church cooperation, he contradicted what he had written in The Christian Baptist. In The Christian Baptist, he believed the Scriptures to teach that each congregation should do its own work, fulfill its own mission and not transfer its duties and obligations to a board of directors, which formed a Missionary Society or to another church. Here is what he wrote:

They knew nothing of the hobbies of modern times. In their church capacity alone they moved. They neither transformed themselves into any other kind of association, nor did they fracture and sever themselves into divers societies. They viewed the church of Jesus Christ as the scheme of heaven to ameliorate the world; as members of it, they considered themselves bound to do all they could for the glory of God and the good of men. They dare not transfer to a missionary society, a Bible society, or education society, a cent or a prayer, lest in so doing they should rob the church of its glory, and exalt the inventions of men above the wisdom of God. In their church capacity alone they moved. Their church they considered "the pillar and ground of the truth"; they viewed it as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the house of the living God. They considered if they did all they could in this capacity, they had nothing left for any other object of a religious nature.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament is the only source of information on this topic. It teaches us that the association

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Campbell, "The Christian Religion," The Christian Baptist, I (August 3, 1823), 6-7.



called the church of Jesus Christ is, in propria forma, the only institution of God left on earth to illuminate and reform the world.<sup>2</sup>

In The Millennial Harbinger, 1849, he took a different stand and wrote:

In all things pertaining to public interest, not of christian faith, piety or morality, the Church of Jesus Christ in its aggregate character is left free and unshackled by any apostolic authority.

Matters of prudential arrangement for evangelizing the world, for the better application of our means and resources, according to the exigencies of society and the ever varying complexion of things around us--are left without a single law, statute, ordinance, or enactment in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

In this quotation from 1849, he evidently takes the position that the passages of Scripture on which he formerly looked as prohibiting the formation of larger bodies or associations, do not contain such a prohibition. We probably cannot accuse him of having turned his back on the Sola Scriptura principle; but it certainly cannot be denied that he altered his conception of the meaning of pertinent Scripture passages. The charge has been made that the principle of expediency gained the upper hand and made him deviate from his noble stand that the Bible must by all means be followed. It seems more charitable to hold that he gradually arrived at a different understanding of what these Scripture passages set forth, and that

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<sup>2</sup>Alexander Campbell, "How then, is the Gospel to Spread Throughout the World?" The Christian Baptist, I (September 1, 1823), 15-6.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Campbell, "Church Organization. No. III," The Millennial Harbinger, IV, No. 5 (May, 1849), 270.



he still endeavored to be loyal to the Bible as our only authority. Whether his new understanding was correct is a question with which we shall not concern ourselves at present.

The extent to which Campbell expounded the reasonableness of the Scriptures, may be justly criticized, for it is obvious that he went too far.

He was directly influenced by John Locke, especially his treatises: Essay Concerning Human Understanding, and The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures. In these Locke produced his theory of how one acquires knowledge. Among the ideas he propounds are the following: that religious knowledge, like all other knowledge, can only be acquired through the senses; that it is attained by rational or intellectual reflection upon facts or testimony; that feelings are no valid guide in religious knowledge; that knowledge can only come through revelation, since only through the senses can one acquire it; therefore, revelation itself must be clear and intelligible; that faith is the belief in testimony; that God is the only lawgiver.<sup>4</sup>

We submit this quotation in confirmation:

Precisely so is the spiritual system. The mind has its powers of receiving, assimilating, and enjoying whatever is suitable to itself, as the body with which it is furnished. While embodied, it has only its own proper faculties; but it has, also, organs and senses

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<sup>4</sup>Winfred E. Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, A History of the Disciples of Christ (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1949), p. 55.



in the body, by and through which it communes with it. It receives all the ideas of material nature by outward bodily senses, without which it could not have one idea or impression of the external universe.<sup>5</sup>

It must be admitted that the Bible is to be read and believed. It is also true that the Scriptures contain none of the offensive, fanciful or allegorical interpretations as do the apocrypha. Nevertheless, the heart of the message can be accepted only by faith.

Campbell was not consistent in his statements as to the degree one could understand the meaning of the Scriptures. He took the position, mentioned previously in this thesis, that if the Bible is not intelligible, it is not a revelation. On other occasions, he admits, there are statements in the Bible that one cannot fully comprehend. Such statements are the following:

The revelation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not more clear and distinct than are the different offices assumed and performed by these glorious and ineffable three in the present affairs of the universe.<sup>6</sup>

There is no debate upon spiritual operations. They are of an abstract nature and quality. It is not possible for a man to conceive of spiritual operations. The fact of the operation is as evident as gravity, but who can explain it? No man can form a single conception of any spiritual influence or operation. Who can grasp the idea of a spirit? Who can apprehend its nature, its identity, its form, its person, or its mode of living, moving and operating? We can neither

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<sup>5</sup>Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, A Debate on Christian Baptism (Lexington: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), p. 618.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 616.



have a consistent idea of a spirit nor any of its operations. That the Spirit of God operates on the human understanding and heart is just as certain as that man has an understanding and affections.<sup>7</sup>

He always addresses himself to man in harmony with his constitution: first addressing his understanding, then his conscience, then his affections. Miracles only excepted, he has never violated the powers given to man.<sup>8</sup>

One more quotation will close our inquiry on the reasonableness of revelation.

Obj. 1. "How can the common laws of interpretation apply to the Scriptures, when confessedly the Bible is a book which contains revelations in respect to supernatural things, to the knowledge of which no human understanding is adequate to attain"?

The fact alleged I cheerfully concede, but the inference drawn from it, I do not feel to be at all a necessary one, nor in fact in any measure a just one. So far as the Scriptures are designed to make known a revelation to us, respecting things that are above the reach of our natural understanding, just so far they are designed to communicate that which is intelligible. If you deny this, then you must maintain that to be a revelation, which is not intelligible; or, in other words, that to be a revelation, by which nothing is revealed.<sup>9</sup>

Thus our final verdict is that Alexander Campbell's principles of Scripture interpretation are very laudable, with one lamentable exception.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 708.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 747.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander Campbell, "On the Rules of Interpretation-- No. III," The Millennial Harbinger, III (March, 1832), 108.



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