*zAnnandale Lectures 2005*

**THE UNITY PHILOSOPHY**

**OF ALEXANDER CAMPBELL**

Earl Kimbrough

Philosophy, by one definition, is “a theory or attitude that guides one’s behavior.” This is primarily the meaning of the term as it is used in this study. A theory or an attitude is no greater than the knowledge and experience on which it rests. If it is based on truth and is faithfully pursued, it will be sound. But if it is based on partial truth or falsehood, or if the truth on which it is based is perverted in its application, the philosophy will be flawed, if not erroneous altogether.

Alexander Campbell’s religious philosophy was based on the Bible rightly divided. It centered in four specific branches of thought and activity: (1) the salvation of man by the gospel of Christ; (2) the restoration of apostolic Christianity in all of its salient features; (3) the unity of Christians on the Bible alone; and (4) the cooperation of Christians and churches in evangelizing the world. Campbell did not departmentalize these goals in his teaching, but blended them together into one system of religious philosophy. This he clearly set forth in his book, *The Christian System,* the full title of which is, *The Christian System, in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation.* While he did not subdivide his religious thinking, we are primarily interested here in his attitude toward Christian unity. The unity of Christ’s disciples is vital to the progress of New Testament Christianity in any age, as Jesus declared in John 17:20-21.

In pursuing this line of thought in reference to Alexander Campbell, we want to consider four phases of his unity philosophy: what it was, how he affected it, how he altered it, and what its legacy is.

**I. The Nature of Campbell’s Unity Philosophy.**

At the centennial celebration of *Declaration and Address* in 1909, J.W. McGarvey was one of five men who spoke on, *Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, and Walter Scott, Advocates of Liberty and Union in the Truth*. He began by pointing out the unpropitious circumstances by which each of these men was drawn into the vortex of a movement to restore apostolic Christianity, which had become lost in the maze of sectarianism. Of Campbell, McGarvey said: “He appears in the hills of western Pennsylvania as a young Irish immigrant, son of the Irish school master who had organized among the farmers there a small society with the Utopian purpose of bringing about union among the hostile religious sects of the day. He soon became a member of this society, and soon after, like many immigrants to American, he loves an American girl, marries her, and goes to ploughing corn on his father-in-law’s farm.”1

The young Irish immigrant readily embraced the union philosophy of his father, which is fully stated in *Declaration and Address*, and which he skillfully condensed in the splendid watch-word: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak, and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” The idea in this being that unity could be achieved in no other way acceptable with God than by the reception and implementation of this back to the Bible philosophy. As A.C. Smither expressed it: “Alexander Campbell quickly caught the vision of his father, and his great soul was captured by that magnificent truth. He saw the one church, supreme, omnipotent, magnificent. Its head was none other than the Son of the living God. Its power was the Holy Spirit. Its creed was faith in Jesus Christ. Its purpose was the salvation of the race. Its field was the world. Its conquest was to be of all humanity, in all ages and countries. To get this ideal before the men of his generation was his supreme task in life.”2

The younger Campbell realized at the start that the horizon of his father’s unity philosophy was much broader than that perceived by the elder Campbell when he reduced it to a Biblically compatible slogan. He had reflected but little upon it, when he said: “Well, father, if we are to be governed by this rule, we must give up infant baptism.” “Not one in the society had yet seen this inevitable consequence, but their eyes were being opened to see things which lay in their path unseen before, and now this venerable practice, which had held sway among the European believers for more than a thousand years, was laid aside, and with it affusion as a substitute for baptism.”3 It was not long before the society, the Christian Association of Washington, itself was abandoned and replaced by a congregation of believers seeking to pattern themselves after the congregational example of the apostolic church.

It is important to keep in mind in any evaluation of the work of Alexander Campbell that *the salvation of the human race* was the chief purpose of his ministry whether preaching, writing, debating, or conversing with a few people in a social setting. In his religious position, his appeal was twofold. (1) He carried a plea to the divided *religious world* for union upon the fixed standard of divine inspiration, not for the sake of union alone, but to the end that *all might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God to the saving of the soul*. (2) He pleaded with those of the *immoral world* who were estranged from God to surrender themselves in obedience to the will of Christ that they might be added to the church and enjoy the hope of eternal life in the world to come.

**II. The Application of Campbell’s Unity Philosophy.**

It was the unity rule of speaking only as the oracles of God, so tersely stated by Thomas Campbell, that led his perceptive son to insist on the abandonment of infant baptism, “and then to go on abandoning other traditions, one by one, until he was freed from them all.” At least that was his aim however much he may have came short of it in application and practice. He realized as did Stone, Scott, and many others, that the unity for which Christ prayed and upon which the apostles insisted could be affected on no other basis. While Campbell over time altered some of his views and perhaps allowed the magnitude of his popularity to warp some of his thinking, there is no indication that he ever changed his underlying concept of speaking only as the oracles of God.

McGarvey said: “It was this supreme devotion to the word of God that developed a movement having at first only the union of believers in view, into one having in view the complete restoration of primitive Christianity in its faith, its ordinances and its life, with union as a necessary result. For it was soon seen that the union for which Christ prayed, and upon which the apostles insisted, could be brought about only in this way. This, then, became, and has continued to be, the leading thought and purpose of the brotherhood, being the only practicable way of bringing about the union of God’s people. It has made what we call our Reformation the mightiest instrument for the furtherance of Christian unity thus far known to history; for thousands and tens of thousands of earnest men and women, enrapture by this plea, have come together from every sect and party to unite in living and laboring according to primitive teaching.”4

While by no means acting alone, Alexander Campbell became the most influential proponent of his father’s unity thought and purpose. However, it was Walter Scott who became the most eminent and successful evangelist of that early period. He took Campbell’s philosophy of unity to the common people. McGarvey said: “[Scott] had the boldness to seize upon every newly discovered practice of the primitive church, and to immediately restore it to its original place. As a consequence, he was the first [among the Campbells’ associates] to receive penitent sinners to baptism on the primitive confession, ‘I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ For many years he continued his work with untiring zeal, and with such forgetfulness of self that it became a common saying with him in his later years, ‘Brother, I am as poor as a church mouse.’”5

The same concept of unity upon the Bible alone was even earlier adopted by Barton W. Stone. His work began while the Campbells were still in the Presbyterian Church and before they came to America. Thus before their unity philosophy was formulated. Stone began such work, like Thomas Campbell, before he fully realized the implications of the ideas that he was advancing. In *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*, the signers willed the cessation of extra-congregational organizations, and advocated congregational independence, taking the Bible alone “as the only sure guide to heaven,” and, consequentially, the unity of Christians on this basis.

Alexander Campbell set forth the details of his unity philosophy in a series of thirteen essays in the *Christian Baptist*, entitled, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” which ran in volumes two and three, 1825-1826. He also set forth his unity philosophy in *The Christian System,* in a section called, “Foundation of Christian Union.” This was based upon Christ’s intercessory prayer for unity in John 17, which Campbell said: “we have chosen for our motto.” But to understand Campbell’s concept of unity, which no doubt inadvertently included his own built in roadblock to its reality, we must understand his view of the *millennium*. While he did not dwell at length on the subject, it underlay his Restoration ideal in general and his philosophy of Christian unity in particular. But before discussing that, let us notice what Campbell wrote in his essay on “Christian Union.”

He asked his readers to examine two propositions drawn from Jesus’ prayer, which he says “express Heaven’s own scheme of augmenting and conservating the body of Christ.” He then writes: “1st. *The testimony of the apostles is the only and all-sufficient means of uniting all Christians.* 2d. *The union of Christians with the apostles’ testimony is all-sufficient and alone sufficient to the conversion of the world.*” Campbell made these two propositions the basis of his missionary zeal: the unity of Christians based on the apostles’ testimony, and the conversion of the world based on this unity. He was convinced that these propositions could and would result in universal conversion to Christ. He said: “Neither truth alone nor union alone is sufficient to subdue the unbelieving nations, but truth and union combined are omnipotent. They are *omnipotent*, for God is in them and with them, and has consecrated and blessed them for this very purpose.”6

While he conceded that some might question whether the union of all Christians would bring about the conversion of the world, although he believed it had been proved in the *Christian Baptist* and *Millennial Harbinger*, he held that it was essential to the millennium. He said: “[T]here is no person, of whom we have heard, who admits a general or universal prevalence of the gospel, in which is usually called the millennial age of the world, and who admits that moral means will have any thing to do with its introduction, who does not also admit that the union of Christians is essential to that state of things. Indeed, to suppose that all Christians will form one communion in that happy age of the world, and not before it, is to suppose a moral effect without a cause.”7

Campbell’s success in propagating these propositions, making them widely acceptable to people in all walks of life, was due to their soundness, but it was greatly abetted by the character of his leadership. There is no doubt that many factors in his life contributed to the successful selling of his unity philosophy, as well as the other aspects of his Restoration goals. Aside from the greatness of the ideas themselves, there was the greatness of the man. In 1959, William Blake gave a summary of Campbell’s prominence in the field of reformation. He said: “Alexander Campbell was a great man by any reasonable standard. Rarely is a man distinguished for excellence by secular and spiritual considerations. The one generally has the effect of canceling the other. However, Campbell was held in esteem for his educational insights, his social sensitivity, and his platform ability. Spiritually, his knowledge of Scripture was probably unparalleled in his day [and it might be added, in our day as well]; prayer flowed from his lips as naturally as any words that he spoke; his home was like Luther’s, ‘A nursery for God’; he had profound respect for his fellow; he sought for himself the virtues which he preached to others; and he was a tireless searcher for and proclaimer of the truth.”8

The spiritual and secular were not separated in Campbell’s life. To him “all of life was a gift from God and should be lived in gratitude to God. This faith permeated all of his relationships: political, economic, social, and cultural.”9 Campbell possessed several notable traits that combined to produce his religious philosophy. Of all that might be mentioned—his deep personal faith, his unaffected piety, and his great reverence for the authority of the Scriptures—one of the foremost is surely his love for truth. While some sought to attribute lesser motivations, which by contrast might be as “molehills” to what Blake calls his “mountain motivation,” adding: “there was one object always before him: *truth*. He wanted the truth more than he wanted anything else. One who would seek to understand the greatness of Alexander Campbell must study him in this light.”10

Campbell himself wrote in 1830, a pivotal year in his life: “Often have I said, and often have I written, that *truth*, truth eternal and divine, is now, and long has been with me the pearl of great price. To her I will, with the blessing of God, sacrifice everything. And on no altar will I offer her a victim. If I have lost sight of her, God who searcheth the hearts, knows I have not done it intentionally. With my whole heart I have sought the truth.”11 Blake says such quotations from Campbell’s pen could be multiplied from all periods of his life. He never, from the moment he embraced the restoration philosophy of his father until he was laid to rest in “God’s Acre” on a hill overlooking Buffalo Creek in Bethany, West Virginia, did Alexander Campbell ever purposely neglect or abuse his devotion to divine truth.

It is this fundamental quality in the life and work of Campbell, perhaps above all others, that endears him to so many New Testament Christians today who, nevertheless, are fully aware of flaws in his philosophy. “Whether someone wishes to add, ‘the truth as he conceived it,’ is beside the point. There is always the possibility that our conceptions of truth do not correspond to objective truth. But it cannot be denied that one may possess an insatiable love for the truth in spite of the fact that some of his judgments do not harmonize with ultimate truth.”12 The fact that men so motivated by a love of truth and respect for Bible authority miss the truth at some point does not justify the rejection of the man himself. Whatever may be the defects in Campbell’s reasoning that one may think he sees, or whatever one may say in refutation of any such detected defects, it must be seen and done in the light of his ultimate devotion to truth. This by no means covers his faults, but it most certainly ennobles his quest for the ancient order of things. We say this in view of the next portion of this study.

**III.** **The Flaws in Campbell’s Unity Philosophy.**

There were some fundamental flaws in Campbell’s philosophy of Christian union, especially as it was, in the words of Champ Clark, “applied and ramified” by himself and others. These flaws eventually led, both directly and indirectly, to irreconcilable divisions in the movement and to the beginning of a progression in a major part of the movement into the maze of denominationalism from which he sought to deliver them and the religious world. This is one of the saddest commentaries on all of Campbell’s reformatory endeavors. From my perspective, it seems that Campbell’s unity philosophy foundered on two basic misconceptions that are interlocking and overlapping. The first was his post-millennial concept of Christianity. The second was his mistaken idea that, in order to convert the world and usher in the millennium, the church could not function in its congregational capacity alone, but necessarily must devise some means of cooperation in order to bring the nations of the world into submission to the King of Righteousness.

Campbell held the postmillennial view that before Christ’s return the primitive gospel would usher in a golden age of the kingdom of Christ in which the world would bow to his rule. While, as we said, he did not dwell on the millennium, being apparently more interested in the spread of the gospel that would bring it to pass, it nevertheless inspired his Restoration drama and drive for Christian union. Winfred E. Garrison said: “Evidently the millennium with which he was concerned was a happy condition to be approached by gradual ameliorative steps, not one to be created by catastrophic means or by divine fiat.”13 Nevertheless, it led Campbell to an overly optimistic expectation that a world virtually estranged from God almost from creation, in which the human race sank to the deepest depths of degradation, would rather swiftly be converted to a pure apostolic Christianity.

“The wonderful success which everywhere attended the primitive gospel thus presented by its advocates filled [Campbell and the early Restorers] with the most ardent hopes that the perplexed and erroneous religious systems of the day would be speedily overthrown, and that happy millennial period be ushered in when the gospel would triumph and Christ’s people be united.”14 While Campbell earlier believed that the expected millennial reign of Christ was rapidly approaching, it became apparent, as his work progressed, that the pace would be slower than he first anticipated. This led to his postponing the time of its arrival farther into the future. Further, his continued spiritual growth led to changes in his thinking that further complicated his plan for unity.

The most evident transition in Campbell’s thinking occurred around 1830 when he began publishing the *Millennial Harbinger*. Richardson said: “He thought the religious world was now sufficiently aroused from its apathy, and that the spirit of inquiry already set on foot would ultimately affect the deliverance of the people from clerical domination. From the rapid spread of the reformatory principles, the union of so many of different parties in the primitive faith, and the evident check given to the progress of the infidel schemes of Mr. Owen and others, he was also much impressed by the conviction that the millennial period anticipated by the Church was at hand.”15

Professor Roland Bainton of Yale, in a highly critical and basically erroneous view of Campbell’s plan for church unity, nonetheless, may have been right in saying: “He changed a great deal during his lifetime. He confessed that once he had been like the Indian’s tree, so straight that it leaned a little the other way.... In fact his whole program suffered change. One writer has suggested that until 1830 his effort was to unite the churches, that from 1830 ‘til his death the plan was to draw the receptive out of the unreformed churches. A third stage came after his death when the Disciples became a denomination and took their place as colleagues with mutual respect for the others. That stage may not have been reached by Alexander Campbell, but he was on the way. He was never static.”16 While I do not share this latter sentiment, I recognize its possibility.

Aside from whatever adverse contributions his millennial view and his changes may have made on the cause of Christian unity, there is yet another mistake that Campbell made which perhaps more directly than the others led to his failure in achieving a permanent union of Christians, even within his own movement. This was his view of the church. He recognized that the church exists in two forms: the local congregation and “the church of Christ, in the aggregate, [which] is the same as the kingdom of Jesus Christ—or the whole Christian community on earth composed of all them in every place that are baptized into Christ.” He also saw that there are two classes of officers: “Those who belong to a particular community, and those that belong to the whole kingdom of Jesus Christ. Each community has its own bishops and deacons … But besides these there were also officers that belonged to the whole Christian community.—Such were the Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, and public messengers of the Apostolic age, and such still are the missionaries and messengers to the communities of any one state, nation or province.”17

The idea of the church universal yet having officers that belong to the whole Christian community, which is utterly without scriptural foundation, led directly to perhaps the greatest mistake of Campbell’s career, and to the guaranteed destruction of any further hope of Christian unity. He abandoned apostolic authority on an erroneous supposition that paved the way for the American Christian Missionary Society. Campbell blatantly declared that: “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. This is the great point which I assert as of capital importance in any great conventional movement or cooperation in advancing the public interests of a common Christianity and a common salvation. My strong proof for this conclusion is that, while faith, piety, and morality are all divinely established and enacted by special agents—apostles and prophets possessed of plenary inspiration; matters of prudential arrangements for the evangelizing of 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.”18

Not one Scripture is cited in Campbell’s purely speculative reasoning in reaching this conclusion. The same Christ who carefully gave authority for every feature in the organization, work, and worship of the local church, in Campbell’s view, turned the universal church over to man to organize any why he chooses for the evangelizing of the world. He said it is left “free and unshackled by any apostolic authority.” It is “left without a single law, statute, ordinance, or enactment in the New Testament.” What proof is offered? None, except Campbell’s statement that it is so. It is my opinion, that Campbell in his lifelong quest for truth became myopic in his impatience with God’s plan for the evangelizing of the world and the slowness in realizing his millennial expectations. For this reason he simply abandoned his Restoration principle of speaking only where the Bible speaks, at least enough to add what he wanted by way of evangelizing the world. This same flaw, in one form or another, has been the basis for every innovation before and since in the organization, work, and worship of the New Testament church.

In this manner, Campbell ironically planted in his unity philosophy the seeds of its own failure. The unity of Christians on the Bible alone, which is the only basis of unity acceptable to Christ as evident in his prayer in John 17, can never be achieved by going beyond the word that Christ gave the apostles. But this is exactly what Campbell did in promoting the American Christian Missionary Society as the instrument for converting the world and ushering in what he believed would be a millennial reign of Christ on earth. It was incidentally Campbell’s belief that sectarianism would never yield to this rule that led to his devastating war on the religious world of his day. This, too, was a part of his unity philosophy.

**IV. The Legacy of Campbell’s Unity Philosophy.**

The seven churches of Asia reflect the philosophy of Christ and the apostles as it was perceived about sixty-five years after its inauguration by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. There are at least as many extant attitudes toward the unity philosophy of Alexander Campbell as it is “applied and ramified” today as existed among the churches of Asia. Champ Clark, speaking a little more than forty years after Campbell’s death viewed his legacy in institutional terms. He said: “Today our pulpit is ably manned, our periodicals ably edited, our literature ably written, our colleges and universities ably conducted; but in religion, as in politics, the pioneers hold the coign of vantage and reap the larger rewards in both results and reputation.” Clark compared this to the work of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton who “set the compass and fixed the chart by which the ship of state has been sailing ever since.... From the antipodal standpoint of our politics, they exhausted the subject. The rest of us have applied and ramified their theories—merely that and nothing more.” The trouble is that these have been “applied and ramified” beyond the realm of Scriptural authority.

One problem with Clark’s view of Campbell’s legacy is that it sounds a lot like the philosophy of the church at Laodicia. Clark said: “I rejoice that my father and mother were among the pioneers who did their part in our movement which has grown and spread like the mustard-tree of Scripture. In their day we were ‘the sect everywhere spoken against.’ We were few in numbers, poor in purse, and everybody threw stones at us. Now, *Gloria in excelsis!* We are numerous, we are rich, we are powerful, and we are therefore respectable.”19 And he might well have added: “And we are off the track.” A few miles to the northwest from Laodicia there was the church at Sardis, where some among the members had not defiled their garments, but where the rest had a name that they were alive but were spiritually dead. And farther west we find the church at Smyrna, whose riches lay in its spiritual relationship with Christ, while they were somewhat like the Restoration churches in the days of Clark’s parents: troubled by tribulation, poverty, and the blasphemy of their enemies.

When we reach the place where we are more concerned about being respected by the world, being rich in material assets, maintaining grand real estate, exercising political power in the land, being acclaimed in academic circles, and having a great desire to be numerous for the sake of numbers, than in being approved of God, rich in good works, whose only power is the gospel, and whose numbers include only the redeemed, the day will have dawned when conservative churches of Christ will have joined the ranks at Laodicia, or are ready to lie in state with the dead saints at Sardis.

Whatever good may be said about Alexander Campbell, and there is a world of good that can be said, he also made some grave mistakes, one of greatest was the creation of church cooperation through a centralized agency without a one shred of divine authorization. This utterly destroyed the basis of his philosophy for Christian union—“Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” It also laid the groundwork for the destruction of the very reformation to which Campbell devoted his life. In creating the missionary society, Campbell deliberately and admittedly acted without apostolic authority. F.B. Srygley said: “It is rebellion against God to determine not to follow the New Testament, and there is nothing worse than that.”20

**Notes**

1 W.R. Warren, ed., *Centennial Convention Report*.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*.

7 Ibid.

8 *Seminary Review*, Fall 1959.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 *Millennial Harbinger*, Mar. 1830.

12 *Seminary Review*, Fall 1959.

13 W.E. Garrison and A.T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ, a History.*

14 Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell,* Vol. 2.

15 Ibid.

16 Perry E. Gresham, *The Sage of Bethany*.)

17 *Millennial Harbinger*, May 1849.

18 Ibid.

19 Warren, *Convention Report*.

20 *Gospel Advocate*, Jan. 22, 1925.

(Earl Kimbrough, 2212 Malibu Drive, Brandon, Florida.)