

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

ON WAR

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I. INTRODUCTION

Alexander Campbell (Sept. 12, 1788-March 4, 1866) became the "most influential leader of the largest group of Christian people which had its origin upon American soil."¹ This group today is known by several names but basically consists of three: The Churches of Christ, The Christian Churches, and the Disciples of Christ. Campbell, in many respects, was ahead of his religious contemporaries in matters concerning philosophy, religion, science, politics, and education.² He spoke extensively and wrote on all of these issues.³ He was a distinguished preacher and lecturer. On one occasion he addressed a joint session of the U.S. Congress. Another time he spoke before the Missouri State Legislature. He was a district delegate serving to help re-write the Constitution of Virginia. He spoke to several colleges and philosophical groups. He was a great debater debating with the social experimenter Robert Owen on the evidences of Christianity (1829), The Presbyterian Rev. W. L. MacCalla on Christian Baptism (1823), and Rev. John D. Purcell on The Roman Catholic Religion (1837). Campbell was also president, founder, and one of the professors of Bethany College, Bethany, Virginia. In addition, through The Christian Baptist (7 vols., 1823 - 1830) and The Millennial Harbinger (24 vols., 1830 -1863) periodicals, which Campbell edited and in which he wrote extensively, he was able to contribute to the religious and philosophical ideas of the early years of the country. He also wrote many books and pamphlets.⁴

As a religious leader and thinker, Campbell expounded a plan to unite all Christians upon the creed of belief in Christ (as revealed in the Bible and empirically interpreted) instead of creeds written by men.⁵ This unity was to come about by

restoring the principles of New Testament Christianity to the Church.⁶ As a result of this plea for unity, hundreds of thousands of Christians by the middle of the 1800s had given up their creeds and joined the movement to restore New Testament Christianity, a movement which Campbell called "the present reformation".⁷

Eames summarized Campbell's significance well:

As founder and leader of the largest Protestant group in the new world, as crusader for a new basis for Christian unity, as a philosopher and religious thinker, as a debater, journalist, and educator, Alexander Campbell occupies a unique place in its intellectual history. His philosophy and religion has had a dynamic part in the shaping of the American mind.⁸

Although mainly a theologian, Campbell also had a great interest in the social, ethical, and political issues of his day. He wrote and spoke on "Moral Philosophy", "Women and her mission", "Education", "Capital Punishment", "The Amelioration of the Social State", "The Responsibilities of Men of Genius", "War",⁹ and "Slavery".¹⁰ Of the above, Campbell wrote and spoke most extensively on slavery and war. While his anti-slavery stance "underwent marked shifts"¹¹, his position on war was consistent through out his life.¹²

It is Campbell's position on war which is the focus for this paper. I will attempt to lay a general foundation for Campbell's ethics, then present his position on war, and conclude with a summarizing chapter.

II. THE BASES OF CAMPBELL'S ETHICS

Alexander Campbell's bases for ethical norms come primarily from two sources: Primitive Christianity, and Bacon and Locke's view of words and ideas. First and foremost, Alexander Campbell was a New Testament primitivist. He saw the New Testament as the only valid source for Christian ethical norms. Campbell wrote:

God now speaks to us only by his word. By his Son, in the New Testament, he has fully revealed himself and his will. This is the only revelation which we are to regard.¹³

This statement however did not totally do away with the Old Testament revelation, for in his diary of 1809 Campbell wrote, "The Word of God, which is contained in the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him."¹⁴ But, as a New Testament primitivist, the New Testament took precedence over the Old. In his Sermon on the Law, Campbell argues that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law. He states,

...the law or ten commandments is not a rule of life to Christians any further than it is enjoined by Christ; so that the reading of the precepts in Moses' words, or hearing him utter them, does not oblige us to observe them: it is only what Christ says we must observe.¹⁵

For Campbell there are three ages or dispensations into which the history of God and his relations to men are to be divided biblically: The first is the Patriarchal Age. This age and its precepts governed the time from Adam to Moses. It was the family stage of society in which God's ethical commands related to family or tribal situations. The second is the Mosaic Age which governed the time from Moses to the death of Christ. This was the time of national ethics, specifically of the Jews. The third age is the Christian Age which governs all men, and gives ethical norms for all mankind.¹⁶

For Campbell, the present kingdom of Christ began at his coronation in heaven and thus the laws for the Christian Kingdom are not found "antecedent to the day of Pentecost, except so far as our Lord himself, during his life-time, propounded the doctrine of his reign."¹⁷ As a result of this position, the book of Acts and the Epistles played a very high role in Campbell's ethics. Except for his stance on war; where he clung to the Sermon on the Mount, Campbell would rely almost totally on the Epistles for his social ethics.¹⁸

For Campbell, the Christian is required to follow the New Testament in principles of morality where there exists an express command by Christ **or** an approved Apostolic precedent. If the New Testament does not speak to the issue a hand, only then does one follow or fall back on the Old Testament for guidance. If nothing in the New Testament or the Old Testament speaks to the issue, then the Law of Expediency is invoked.¹⁹ This is the law of "adopting the best present means of attaining any given end." This Law of Expediency is to be governed by the law of love for "the law of love is the supreme law of religion, morality, and expediency."²⁰ Even though Campbell would advocate using the best present means to get to a given end, his ethics was not thoroughly consequentialist, for love must also rule the "means" to those ends.²¹

Campbell was convinced that the express teaching of the Bible could be determined and agreed upon. The problem of disunity among Christians over the essentials of the Christian faith and practice was more "attributable to false principles, or perhaps to the lack of all principles of interpretation than all other causes combined."²²

Campbell believed that there was a proper way to approach the Bible and it was through the empirical method. Having been influenced by John Locke and Francis Bacon's view of linguistics²³ (i.e., that words and ideas are inseparable), Campbell concluded that the Word of God revealed in the Bible was the way God revealed himself and his moral will for man. Eames states that for Campbell, "God's ideas are so closely related to the language of the Bible that the study of these reports from an empirical standpoint is the only method by which man may now, . . . , come to know God."²⁴ Campbell was convinced that an agreed-upon set of principles for interpreting the Bible, "could alone free the Christian world from theological imagination."²⁵ Campbell therefore set forth the following rules and principles for proper interpretation of the Bible:

- RULE 1. On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it.
- RULE 2. In examining the contents of any book, as respects precepts, promises, exhortations, &c. 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.
- RULE 3. To understand the meaning of what is commanded, promised, taught, &c., the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language, or the same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of other books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.
- RULE 4. 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 . . . more meanings than one . . . , the scope, the context, or parallel passages must decide the meaning...
- RULE 5. In all tropical languages ascertain the point of resemblance, and judge of the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.

RULE 6. In 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 the attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory, or parable.

RULE 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable:—We must come within the understanding distance.²⁶

Thus Campbell's bases for ethical norms consisted in that which is revealed in the Bible, specifically the New Testament, as determined by the empirical method. These things were considered valid for all times during their dispensation. Those issues not addressed by the Bible were governed by the Law of Expediency and love.

III. ALEXANDER CAMPBELL ON WAR

On the issue of war Campbell remained a pacifist throughout his entire writing career from the first issue of The Christian Baptist to his last comments in The Millennial Harbinger.²⁷ His most definitive statement on the subject of war, however, is his "Address on War"²⁸ spoken before the Wheeling Lyceum, Wheeling, Virginia, May 11, 1848. The substance of this chapter will therefore be devoted to explicating his view on war as set forth in that speech.

Campbell begins his address by considering the following question: "Has one Christian Nation a right to wage war against another Christian Nation?"²⁹ After discussing the terms in the question itself, he concludes that the term "Christian nation" is inappropriate. He states:

A proper Christian nation is not found in any country under the whole heavens. There is, indeed, one Christian nation, composed of all the Christian communities and individuals in the whole earth.³⁰

That one Christian nation, he explains, is defined in I Peter 2:9. Christians as a whole are a "holy nation". He states:

In strict logical and grammatical truth, there is not, of all the nations of the earth, one properly called Christian nation. Therefore, we have never had, as yet, one Christian nation waging war against another Christian nation.³¹

Campbell therefore rephrases the question to: "Can Christ's kingdom or church in one nation wage war against his kingdom or church in another nation?"³² To this question Campbell felt that men would answer with an "emphatic NO."

Therefore he again rephrases the question and asks:

Suppose...England proclaims war against our nation, or that our nation proclaims war against England: have we a right, as Christian men, to

volunteer or enlist, or, if drafted, to fight against England? ... Or has our government a right to compel us to take up arms?"³³

At this point Campbell steers the discussion away from a "natural law" or "divine right" answer to a Biblical one, one which he calls a "divine annunciation". He states that one must appeal to the "**ultimate** tribunal", the ultimate "oracular authority", "the infallible standard," the standard by which all questions on morals and religion must be decided, i.e., the Bible.

What does the Bible say about war? The remainder of Campbell's essay is devoted to answering that question. With eight points of argumentation Campbell supports his thesis that the spirit of Christianity is essentially "pacific." First of all, he argues that

The right to take away the life of the murderer does not of itself warrant war, inasmuch as in that case none but the guilty suffer, whereas in war the innocent suffer not only with, but often without, the guilty. The guilty generally make war, and the innocent suffer from its consequences.³⁴

Hence, although Campbell was in favor of capital punishment³⁵, justification for war could not come from that divine sanction since the innocent people, not just the guilty, always suffer.

Secondly, Campbell argued,

The right given to the Jews to wage war is not vouch-safed to any other nation, for they were under a theocracy, and were God's sheriff to punish nations. Consequently no Christian can argue from the wars of the Jews. . . The Jews had a Divine precept and authority; no existing nation can produce such a warrant.³⁶

The Jews were right in waging the wars God commanded because a divine precept to do anything is absolutely right forever.³⁷ Christians, however, are no longer under

the Mosaic dispensation and now take their orders from Jesus Christ. Campbell states:

What the God of Abraham did by Abraham, by Jacob, or by any of his sons, as the moral governor of the world, before he gave up the sceptre and the crown to his son Jesus Christ, is of no binding authority now... The very basis of the Christian religion is that Jesus Christ is now Lord - and King of both earth and heaven, and that his Father and our God no longer assumes to be either the Lawgiver, Judge, or King of the world ...

God the Father, in propria persona, now neither judges nor punishes any person or nation, but has committed all judgment to his Son, now constituted Head of the universe and Judge of the living and the dead.³⁸

At this point, Campbell sees the need to once again simplify his main question.

The question now to be answered is:

Has the Author and Founder of the Christian religion enacted war, or has he made it lawful and right for the subjects of his government to go to war against one another? Or, has he made it right to go to war against any nation, or for any national object, at the bidding of the present existent political authorities of any nation in Christendom?"³⁹

For Campbell, the answer to this question resides in Christ's announced purpose, and His pronouncements on individualistic ethics. In points three through six Campbell essentially argues that a Christian cannot lawfully go to war because Christ came to bring peace, and Christ's individualistic or personal ethical pronouncements forbid one to go to war for himself. Points three through six are:

Point three: The prophecies clearly indicate that the Messiah himself would be "the Prince of Peace," and under his reign "wars should cease," and nations study it no more."

Point four: The gospel, as first announced by the angels, is a message which results in producing "peace on earth and good will among men."

Point five: The precepts of Christianity positively inhibit war—by showing that "wars and fightings come from men's lusts" and evil passion, and by commanding Christians to "follow peace with all men'."

Point six: The beatitudes of Christ are not pronounced on patriots, heroes, and conquerors, but on "peace-makers," on whom is conferred the highest rank and title in the universe: -- "Blessed are the peace makers, for they shall be called the sons of God."⁴⁰

To further support his case that the Christian cannot go to war for himself, Campbell quotes many verses from the New Testament (especially those found in the Sermon on the Mount). The Christian is to endure evil treatment from others "without resistance or resentment." He must love his enemies and pray for them. He must never repay evil for evil. If his enemy hungers, he is to feed him. If he thirsts, the Christian is to give him a drink. Campbell insists that nowhere in the New Testament does the New King issue a decree for a person to enter into war.

Campbell thus reduces the national issue of war to a case of personal/individualistic ethics. One is not allowed to do nationally what one cannot do personally. Since one is to do good to one's enemy and love him, the Christian cannot lawfully participate in war.

For Campbell, "War is but organized barbarism -- an inheritance of the savage state".⁴² It is an abomination, unchristian, and even the greatest of human curses.⁴³ It can never be a just means of settling disputes.

The better path to follow was one of reason and negotiation. In place of war, therefore, Campbell proposed the establishment of a congress of nations and a high court of nations to settle International disputes.⁴⁴

In sum, Alexander Campbell felt war was wrong because (1) the new king, Jesus, had not advocated it, (2) rather, Jesus had commanded men to love their enemies,

not returning evil for evil, (3) there is no such thing as a purely defensive nor a totally just war, and (4) all war is folly and wicked.

By way of criticism there are at least **four points of weakness** in Campbell's argument against all war. **First** of all, there is the fact that Jesus gave his commands to individuals and did not address the issue of national ethics. Is it automatically to be assumed that personal ethics can and should always be applied on a national scale?

Secondly, Campbell needs to address the issue of whether or not love at times must involve punishment. If soldiers of one country attack another country, would it be wrong for a third nation to come to the defense of the innocent people caught in the war? Could not the soldiers of the third country be justified in fighting to protect the innocent?

Thirdly, it is indeed good to call for an international tribunal, but who would enforce its decisions. What would one do if one nation decided not to obey the tribunal's judgment?

Fourthly, Campbell needs to address more fully the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament. If Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the Old Testament Law (Matt. 5:17), how has he fulfilled the divine precepts of the Old Testament condoning war? Just because the Father is no longer assuming the position of Lawgiver, Judge, and King of the world, does that necessarily mean that everything commanded in the Old Testament is rescinded if not reiterated by Jesus? This is especially pertinent to the subject of war since Jesus did not expound on the issue of national ethics.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Alexander Campbell's ethics were based on his commitment to primitive New Testament Christianity, his trifold dispensational view of Scripture, his empirical hermeneutic of interpreting Scripture, and the law of love.

With respect to the issue of war, Campbell believed that since Jesus, as supreme King of the universe, has not commanded war, the Christian has no positive compulsion to engage in it. Secondly, since Jesus did command Christians to love their enemies, not to seek retribution, to do good to those who hate them, etc., it would be inconsistent for them to engage in war as a soldier. Thirdly, war cannot be condoned from the level of reason. Campbell argued that since in war the innocent always suffer, there can be no such thing as a "just war". Therefore all wars are evil and hence the Christian is forbidden to take part in them.

NOTES

¹S. Morris Eames, The Philosophy of Alexander Campbell (New Brunswick, NJ: Standard Press, 1966), p. 13.

²Eames, p. 13.

³For a good collection of Campbell's writings concerning these issues, see A. Campbell, Popular Lectures and Addresses (Nashville: Harbinger Book Club, 1954).

⁴See Eames, pp. 97-104 for a complete bibliography of A. Campbell's works.

⁵For Campbell's understanding of and the plea for the Biblical Christ and Biblical Christianity as the only basis for Christian unity, see his The Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as plead in the Current Reformation, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1866; reprinted by Arno Press and The New York Times, New York, 1969).

⁶Campbell wrote extensively on the New Testament order for the church in a series of articles in The Christian Baptist, under the heading "Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things". These articles have been collected and published under that same heading or title by Lincoln Christian College Press. Lincoln, IL, n.d.

⁷See A. Campbell, The Sermon on the Law: Delivered at Cross Creek, VA, 1816 (Lincoln, IL: LCC Press, 1971).

⁸Eames, p. 16.

⁹Addresses on these issues can be found in Popular Lectures and Addresses, see note 3 above.

¹⁰Campbell wrote most extensively on this subject. For a compilation of Campbell's work from The Christian Baptist through all the issues of The Millennial Harbinger on the topic of slavery, see Robert Tibbs Maxey, Alexander Campbell and the Peculiar Institution (El Paso, TX: Spanish American Evangelism, 1986), 332 pages.

¹¹Harold L. Lunger, The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954), p. 193.

¹²Lunger, p 262.

¹³The Christian Baptist 1 (1824):188.

¹⁴Quoted from Lunger, p. 26.

¹⁵Pp. 15-21, see note 8 above.

¹⁶Lunger, p. 29. See also Campbell's "Essays on Man in his Primitive State, and the Patriarchal, Jewish and Christian Dispensation" scattered throughout volumes 6 and 7 of The Christian Baptist.

¹⁷The Millennial Harbinger (1834):410, quoted from Lunger, p. 32.

¹⁸Lunger, p. 33

¹⁹On this law, see The Christian System, pp. 90-94; and Granville T. Walker Preaching in the Thought of Alexander Campbell (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1954), pp. 61-90, where he discusses Campbell's position on matters of faith vs. matters of opinion.

²⁰The Christian System, p. 94.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 90.

²²The Millennial Harbinger (1830): 488, quoted from Keith Ray, "The Relevance of Intentionality For Restoration Hermeneutics," A Journal For Christian Studies 6 (1986-87):66.

²³Eames, p. 24. Campbell was also influenced by Thomas Reid's "common sense" philosophy, see Lunger, pp. 122-23.

²⁴Eames, p. 25. Campbell, however, was not a total "literalist" in interpreting the Bible for he did believe that the Bible should be understood as literature and could use symbolism and other literary techniques.

²⁵Ray, p. 67.

²⁶The Christian System, pp. 16-17.

²⁷See Lunger, pp. 242-44.

²⁸Popular Lectures and Addresses, pp. 342-62.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 342.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 345.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*, p. 347.

³⁴*ibid.*, p. 363.

³⁵See Genesis 9:6 and Campbell's "Essay: Is Capital Punishment Sanctioned by Divine Authority?", in Popular Lectures and Addresses, pp. 311-41.

³⁶Popular Lectures and Addresses, p. 363.

³⁷*ibid.*, p. 350.

³⁸*ibid.*, p. 350-51.

³⁹*ibid.*, p. 351.

⁴⁰For these for points, see Popular Lectures and Addresses, p. 363.

⁴¹*ibid.*, pp. 356-58.

⁴²*ibid.*, pp. 363-64.

⁴³*ibid.*, p. 364.

⁴⁴*ibid.*, pp. 362-63.

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