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THE ORIGIN OF THE CAMPBELLITE MOVEMENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The origin of the religious movement started in the early part of the 19th century called the Campbellite movement will be the focus of this essay. Over its history, it has been known by many other names such as the Restoration Movement, the Disciples of Christ, the Christian Churches, or the Churches of Christ.¹ The adherents of the movement are often simply called Christians, Disciples, or Reformers. In this paper, the movement will be referred to by the name of its most famous exponent, Alexander Campbell, though supporters of the movement would like to call it by one of the names just listed.

There are four people primarily responsible for the origin of the movement. They are Thomas Campbell (1763-1854) and his son Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), Barton Stone (1772-1844), and Walter Scott (1796-1861). Origins of the movement can be traced back to several other individuals, and many individuals are involved in its development.

This paper will examine the early history of the Campbellite movement. The movement is very well documented from its inception and there have been many Campbellite historians to interpret the original source material. This essay will, in brief form, sift through some of this data by examining the movement from three vantage points. First, the *chronological origin of the movement* will be traced diachronically, starting briefly from its European background and with particular attention to the work of the four men listed above. As the origin of the movement is

¹ The latter three are the names of modern divisions of the church.

assigned several different starting dates in the literature, our goal will be to more clearly understand the origin of the movement.

Second, the *doctrine of the movement* will be examined. Because the doctrine is in such flux during its developmental stage, the next section of the essay will take a synchronic approach to describe Campbellite doctrine at a point where it has become more stable than during its developmental stage.

Third, the *foundational philosophies of the movement* will be outlined and their implications upon the Campbellite churches will be discussed.

CHAPTER II

THE CHRONOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF THE CAMPBELLITE MOVEMENT

Campbellite histories, from both supporters and opponents, mark a number of important events and dates in the development of the Campbellite movement. This section will outline these events in the interest of determining more precisely when the movement crystallized into its own sect.

European Backgrounds

The history of Campbellism can be started in Scotland, the land where Thomas and Alexander Campbell studied in Glasgow. A dissenter movement from the Church of Scotland, namely that of John Glas and Robert Sandeman, is where we begin. Glas left the church in mid 1700s and advocated weekly communion, the distinction between the Sabbath and the Lord's day, and an elder-rule style of Church government, and a liturgy based on the order of Acts 2:42. All but the latter features found their way into the Campbellite Churches, due to the influence of Glas' writing upon Alexander Campbell. Sandeman, Glas' son-in-law, started a church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Ebenezer White was a loose follower of Sandeman, and had established a church a year earlier in 1763. This is called the first Church of Christ by Garrett.² Sandeman contributed his view of faith to the movement, saying faith is "based upon testimony and comes

² Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, College Press Publishing Company, 1981, Revised 1994, Third printing 1997, pg. 39.

through man's assent to facts."³

The Haldanean movement also started with a withdrawal from the Church of Scotland. They did not desire to form a new sect but primarily to preach the apostolic gospel. They held to the sufficiency of the Scriptures and baptism by immersion. This movement is related to Walter Scott in that he was taught and baptized by James Forrester, a Haldanean preacher from Scotland who had settled in Pittsburgh.

Before 1809 in America

Regarding the American development of the movement, Disciple historian Winfred Garrison traces the origin of the Campbellite movement to the three denominations that were most influential in early American history: The Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Methodists.⁴ Other Campbellite historians agree with this approach.⁵

James O'Kelly, had been a preacher in the Methodist Episcopal church for about 30 years when he separated from the church over differences of church government in 1792. He formed the "Christian Church" on August 4, 1794. Rice Haggard, who had suggested the name "Christian" for O'Kelly's church, eventually became an influence on Barton Stone.

Stone left the Presbyterian Church in 1803 over charges of ecumenism involved in the ministry of the Cane Ridge revival (1801). He formed the Springfield Presbytery at that time, but one year later this organization disbanded. The date, June 28, 1804, marked the publication of *"The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery...the date Stone chose for the beginning of his reformation and a suitable one for the origin of the Christian Church and the begin-*

³ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴ Winfred E. Garrison, *An American Religious Movement: A Brief History of the Disciples of Christ*. St. Louis, Missouri: Christian Board of Publication, 1945, p. 41.

⁵ Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, pp. 47-95.

ning of the Stone-Campbell Movement."⁶

From the Baptist church came Elias Smith (New Hampshire) and Abner Jones (Vermont), who had left their associations in 1801 to form their own anti-Calvinistic churches. They also took the name "Christian," but there seems to be no consensus among historians as to the connection of this group with Campbell. Garrett says again "We find no distinctive kinship between such groups and the Stone-Campbell Movement..."⁷

Thus Campbellite historians seemingly attempt to portray validity for their unity movement by showing how the three mainline denominations were abandoned by O'Kelly, Stone, and Smith/Jones, later to be united into the Campbellite church. That is to say, all three mainline denominations were in some way removed from the apostolic gospel and in need of reform. But a synthesis of doctrine had not yet taken place and the three branches of the so-called reformation were not yet united. There are other important events in the history of Campbellism which will be examined in the following sections.

1809 – The Christian Association of Washington

Thomas Campbell, a Seceder Presbyterian minister, had come to America from Scotland in 1807. His family followed him soon after. By 1809 he formed the Christian Association of Washington after leaving the Presbyterian church in 1808 because of charges leveled against him regarding wrong practices of polity and a denial of the subjective element of saving faith.⁸ Their motto was the famous statement "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are

⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸ Malphurs, p. 40.

silent, we are silent."⁹

The association was transformed into a church on May 4, 1811 at a place called Brush Run. Alexander was licensed to preach; Thomas was appointed elder. This formation of a church, of course, was the very thing that the Christian unity motif so prevalent in the movement did not desire. The salve for this wound to their unity plea was to look upon themselves as a church working for reform among other churches.

Unsympathetic historians (particularly Baptists) note that the church was not made up of baptized members, since neither Thomas nor his son Alexander were baptized as believers by this time. That did not come until June 12, 1812, when both father and son were baptized by Baptist minister Matthias Luce, along with both of their wives, and Alexander's sister. At this stage, nothing of the remitting value of baptism was understood by either the elder or the preacher of Brush Run.

1813 – Church at Brush Run in the Redstone Baptist Association

The Brush Run Church was accepted into the Redstone Baptist Association in the fall of 1813. "This was not without much opposition from sound Baptists who 'saw through' the Campbellite movement."¹⁰ Alexander had been preaching at a number of the churches in the association before the acceptance of Brush Run into the association; he continued afterwards, still with opposition. This gave them a base of operations in which to practice their reformation ideas on other churches in the association.

Disciple historian Benjamin Smith claims that the Campbellite movement officially begin

⁹ Gerald Priest, Church History III (Modern) Course Notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002, p. 130.

¹⁰ Ross, Campbellism: Its History and Heresies, Ashland, Kentucky: Calvary Baptist Church, Reprinted from Baptist Examiner. 19--?, p. 33.

in 1816 at the delivery of Alexander's "Sermon on the Law" to the Redstone association.¹¹

1823 – Exodus from Redstone Baptist Association and Campbell-McCalla Debate

In August of 1823, the doctrinal contention with the other churches in the association came to a head. In order to avoid being disciplined and evicted by the Redstone association, Thomas Campbell left the association and started another church in 1823 at nearby Wellsburg, intending to join the Mahoning Baptist Association. His memoirs recount it this way:

"As he had been occasionally pressed by Elder Bentley to leave the Redstone Association and unite with the Mahoning, and as a number of the members of the Brush Run Church lived in Wellsburg and its vicinity, he concluded to form there a separate congregation in which he would have his membership, and which might afterward unite with the Mahoning Association. He announced, therefore, to the church at Brush Run, that for special reasons, which it was not at that time prudent to disclose, he desire from them letters of dismissal for himself..."¹²

Thus he quietly left the jurisdiction of the Redstone association in order to avoid discipline.

During this period also, Alexander debated with W. McCalla, a Presbyterian. Alexander viewed debate as "one of the best means of propagating the truth and of exposing error in doctrine or practice...And we are fully persuaded that a week's debating is worth a year's preaching, such as we generally have, for the purpose of disseminating truth and putting error out of countenance."¹³ Thus debating is exalted over preaching, but with no apparent Scriptural support. The Memoirs have a detailed account of the debate with McCalla, where Alexander said:

"I know it will be said that I have affirmed that baptism *saves* us. Well, Peter and Paul have so said before me. If it was not criminal in them to say so, it cannot be criminal in me... To every believer, therefore, baptism is a *formal* and *personal remission*, or purgation of sins. The believer never has his sins formally washed away or remitted until he is baptized. The

¹¹ Benjamin Lyon Smith, *The Millennial Harbinger Abridged*, Vol. 1 (Rosemead, CA: Old Paths Publishing Co., 1965), p. 409 as quoted in Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 129.

¹² Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, Vol. 2, Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Company, 1890, pp. 68-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

water has no efficacy but what God's appointment gives it, and he has made it sufficient for this purpose. The value and importance of baptism appear from this view of it. It also accounts for baptism being called the '*washing of regeneration*.'"¹⁴

Richardson summarizes what happened in the 1823 debate this way: "Thus, in 1823, the design of baptism was fully understood and publicly asserted. It was, however, reserved for Walter Scott, a few years later, to make a direct and practical application of the doctrine."¹⁵ To this we now turn.

1827 – Stone's Baptism of William Amend

On Nov. 18, 1827 an event happened which every Campbellite historian parks on as significant in the beginning of their movement. This event is called the "restoration" of the ancient gospel, the main actor was Walter Scott, and the occasion was his preaching a series on "the Ancient Gospel." Again quoting from Richardson in Alexander Campbell's Memoirs:

"Just as he was about closing his long discourse, and while he was exhorting the people to trust in the word of God in preference to all human systems of religion, a stranger entered the assembly, and when, a few moments afterward, the speaker closed by again quoting Peter's words and inviting any present to come forward and be baptized for the remission of sins, this stranger, to the surprise of all, at once stepped forward and presented himself. Here was a singular circumstance. This person had not been enlightened and convinced by the preacher, for he had heard only his few closing remarks. Yet he came forward with all the firmness of an assured purpose, and all the tokens of intelligent apprehension, to request baptism for the remission of sins!... The people were filled with bewilderment at the strange truths brought to their ears, and now exemplified before their eyes in the baptism of a penitent for a purpose which now, on the 18th of November 1827, for the first time since the primitive ages was fully and practically realized."¹⁶

The stranger was named William Amend. We see from this account a marked doctrinal beginning of the movement, particularly the primary place of baptismal remission of sins and the five-fold gospel plan that had also been developed by this time (Faith, Repentance, Baptism,

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 211-212.

Remission, and reception of the Holy Spirit). True faith, or even the Sandemanian view of faith, seems to be missing in this account, as Amend did not have any basis in the text of Scripture for his faith.

1830 – Baptists Separate from Campbellites

This section of Campbellite history is dated around 1830 though this is apparently not a single event but a collection of separations of various Baptist associations from those who followed the Campbells. Ross quotes from John T. Christian's *A History of the Baptists* regarding the Dover Baptist Association's separation from the Campbellite movement:

"We therefore, the assembled ministers, and delegates of the Dover Association, after much prayerful deliberation do hereby affectionately recommend to the churches in our connection, to separate from their communion all such persons as are promoting controversy and discord, under the specious name of 'Reformers.' That the line of distinction may be clearly drawn, we feel it our duty to declare, that ...[list of ministers]..., ministers within the bounds of the Association, have voluntarily assumed the name of 'Reformers,' in party application, ..."¹⁷

Consistent with the Campbellite principle of union, Campbell said "There was never any sufficient reason for a separation between us and the Baptists. We ought to have remained one people, and to have labored together to restore the primitive faith and practice."¹⁸

1832 – Union of the Stone and Campbell Movements

The Stone and Campbell movements united in Lexington, KY in 1832 in a meeting to promote the Campbellite doctrine of unity. Both sides proclaimed this concept, and struck hands in fellowship. This event is the last one in the early history of the Campbellite church, marking the end of its early period.

At the meeting, Garrett says of Raccoon John Smith,

¹⁷ John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists, Together with Some Account of their Principles and Practices*, Nashville, Tenn., Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1922, as quoted in Bob Ross, *Campbellism: Its History and Heresies*, pp. 65-67.

¹⁸ Richardson, *Memoirs*, p. 675.

"He spoke concerning the desirability and practicality of unity...showed how speculations and opinions, when contended for and made terms of communion, are always divisive. This can be avoided, he insisted, if believers would simply allow the Bible to speak for itself. Illustrating his point, he noted that the church has argued about the nature of the Atonement for centuries and was never able to resolve the issue, eventually dividing over it."¹⁹

Barton Stone shook hands with Smith and the union of the two churches was official.

This unity theme demonstrates a very liberal application of the phrase "in essentials unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity." The example used of the atonement can hardly, at least by conservative standards, be called a non-essential. Scanty must be the doctrinal basis for such unity as promoted by the Campbellites at this point in their history.

Conclusions

As we have indicated, Campbellite historians put the official start of the movement at different points along the timeline which we have briefly examined above. Most of the historians are probably quite biased, looking for the earliest date that a discernible connection can be made to the later Campbellite churches. Garrett even goes back to Servetus (executed in 1553 in Geneva under Calvin) and says that many Campbellite preachers would make similar points and use the same kind of illustrations that Servetus did in order to support the view that baptism rescues man from the abyss and is more than just an outer washing.²⁰

Historians thus have set the start of the movement variously at 1763 with the Sandeman churches, 1804 with Scott leaving the Presbyterians, 1809 with Thomas Campbell's formation of the Christian Association of Washington, 1816 in the midst of the Redstone Baptist association, 1827 with Scott's baptism of William Amend, or finally 1832 with the separation of the Baptists from the Campbellites.

¹⁹ Garrett, pg. 184.

²⁰ Ibid., pg. 34-36.

Certain doctrinal characteristics marked the church from the beginning, but the Campbellite's most important doctrine, baptismal remission, was not understood until 1827 with Walter Scott. Even then the Campbellite churches still belonged to Baptist associations. But doctrinally, this marks the start of the movement.

Practically, it is not until 1832, after being kicked out of the Baptist church, when the Stoneite churches united with the Campbellite churches that the Campbellite movement finally crystallized.

Then there is the over-arching question of whether a church was even formed at all. Baptist writer Ross makes a big point of the fact that neither father nor son Campbell were baptized when they began the church at Brush Run. In other words, the church started was not a church at all. Even when they were baptized by the Baptist Luce, the Campbell's did not understand their own later doctrine of remission. An intelligent submission to the rite of baptism has been a requirement in Campbellite churches throughout much of their history, indicating that those who started the movement were not officially part of the church according to their own doctrine. These issues are problematic for the Campbellite historian.

CHAPTER III

THE DOCTRINAL POSITION OF THE CAMPBELLITE MOVEMENT

Jeter, a Baptist contemporary of Campbell, notes something of the difficulty of understanding the doctrine of Campbell and his followers because it was unclear what he taught and many different positions could be supported from his writings.²¹ This was in connection with the Dover Baptist Association's proceedings on the eviction of Campbellite preachers in 1832. He mentions also that Campbell's opinions frequently changed.²² However, there is still a discernible core of doctrine which characterizes the movement. We will briefly examine that in this section.

Basic Areas of Disagreement

At various points in his polemic against Campbellism, Jeter mentions items which Campbell inveighed against in his writings. The professional clergy were renounced as hirelings, creeds and confessions were denounced, missionary societies and other cooperative institutions were put down, and denominationalism was decried.

The Ordo Salutis

The ancient gospel or "gospel plan" was originally Faith, Repentance, Baptism, Remission of Sin, and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Walter Scott had arranged the items in the gospel this way after consulting with some other Campbellite preachers. Later additions were made

²¹ Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined*, New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman; Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1855, p. 92.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 177, 338.

to the ordo: *Hearing*, Faith, Repentance, *Confession*, Baptism, Remission of Sin, reception of the Holy Spirit. In either case, the "gospel plan" was attractive because of its simplicity of expression.

Baptismal Remission of Sins

The development of the doctrine began early on by A. Campbell when he needed to determine whether to baptize his first child or not. By the 1830s, the doctrine was fully developed on the basis of the following texts of Scripture: Acts 2:38, Mark 16:16, John 3:5, Acts 22:16, and 1 Peter 3:21. Particularly the Acts 2:38 passage is used by Campbellites to prove their position on baptism of remission.

The basic point of the Campbellites on the Acts 2:38 passage is that baptism is "in order to" the remission of sins, i.e. that remission cannot be had without baptism. The literature is replete with rebuttals of this doctrine, primarily because the Greek preposition used, *εἰς*, rarely means "in order to." It is better translated "with a view toward" or something like that, to be in concert with the rest of NT doctrine on the matter of salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The other texts can be harmonized with the orthodox doctrine of salvation as well.

It has been noted at various points in the literature that this is not the same as baptismal regeneration, because the Campbellite does not believe in a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Jeter tries to explain from his vantage point in 1855 that the act of baptism was itself regeneration to the Campbellite. Normally the idea of baptismal regeneration is that baptism effects a regeneration or impartation of life. For Alexander Campbell, baptism, immersion, regeneration, and conversion are all the same thing. To be immersed to Campbell is to obey the gospel, to be born again. The believer who has not yet been baptized is still under the condemnation of his sins.

Faith

The Campbellite view of faith is that of "assent to facts." We must quote Campbell's own words at this point to show this remarkable view of the gospel:

"THOU ART THE MESSIAH, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD. The *two* ideas expressed concern the *person* of the Messiah and his *office*. The one implied concerns his *character*, for it was through his character, as developed, that Peter recognized his person and his Messiahship... Here, then, is the wholly mystery of the Christian institution—the full confession of the Christian faith. All that is peculiar to Christianity is found in these words; not merely in embryo, but in a clearly-expressed outline. A cordial belief and clear conception of these two facts will make any man a Christian."²³

By such words, and many like them throughout his writing, Campbell's conception of faith as a grasp of the concepts of the Messiahship and Sonship of Christ, is supposedly enough to save a person. It is unclear how this differs from that belief of the demons in James 2:19.

Epistemology

Garrison mentions the impact of John Locke's philosophy on Alexander Campbell, particularly his "Essay Concerning Human Understanding."²⁴ Scott and others actually carried this essay with them during their itinerant preaching along with their Bibles! This Lockian philosophy included such ideas as the "tabula rasa" that children were born with a clean slate. There was a rejection of natural theology, but empiricism ruled: "man knows by observing particulars."²⁵

The Campbellite view of faith can be traced to the Baconian epistemological idea that all true and useful knowledge is an acquaintance with the facts.

²³ Richardson, *Memoirs*, p. 522-523.

²⁴ Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Liturgy and Polity

Disciple churches early on insisted on weekly communion as the pattern of the NT church. Because of the dislike of Campbell for the clergy of the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist denominations, early Campbellite churches made little distinction between laity and clergy. Eventually, however, they had to make room for such ministers.

An important point in the Campbellite histories is made of the names taken by the churches. As noted in the introduction, there are several names used for them. The importance of the name against suggests the emphasis of the Disciples on the authority of the New Testament.

Other items of interest are the distinction made by Campbellites between the Lord's day and Sabbath, an approach which, doctrinally speaking, relates the Campbellite to the dispensationalist. The early Campbellites also did not prefer the use of musical instruments, and this has continued to the present day.

As Garrett says, the churches have a unity on several fronts: 1. The name "Church of Christ". 2. Acapella singing. 3. The "only true church" concept. 4. Exclusivistic and "un-denominational."²⁶

²⁶ Ibid., p. 434.

CHAPTER IV

THE FOUNDATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES OF THE CAMPBELLITE MOVEMENT

The movement under investigation promoted several basic principles as part of their design. This section deals in brief with these.

Reformation

The terms *restoration* and *reformation* are often used today to refer to the movement. Garrett argues these two concepts are used differently by recent Campbellite historians but were used interchangeably by the founders of the movement.²⁷ The idea of *reform* has to do with unity and change within an existing church while *restoration* smacks of more division, separating from an existing church and going back to "first principles" to establish a church on an earlier model, most probably the NT model. The idea is that Campbell wished to combine restoration with unity (equals reformation), instead of restoration with division!

In any case, the tag restoration is applied to the Campbellite movement because of the "restoration" of the ancient gospel plan by Walter Scott and the idea that baptism was first practiced in its Scriptural sense by him in 1827.

Union with Liberty of Private Judgment

An important premise of all the founding fathers of the movement is that of unity. They disliked the denominational divisions over what they considered matters of opinion in doctrine.

²⁷ Garrett, pp. 6-12, 36-37.

Thus, union should be promoted, with space for private judgment on issues that do not matter.

"Thus *faith*, and not *opinion*, was ever with Mr. Campbell the basis of Christian union. He advocated fellowship with all who received the teachings of the Scripture in their simple and obvious meaning, and whose conduct corresponded with these teachings."²⁸

This ideal was obviously difficult for the Campbellites to maintain, as they began their own church in 1811 at Brush Run, were removed from the Baptist associations in 1830, and were thus left on their own. Even today, there are three primary divisions of the Church, which divisions came about over the issues of the place of societies, musical instruments, fellowship with the un-baptized, open membership (that rebaptism is not necessary to transfer membership), and American theological liberalism.

Position on Creedal Statements

The opposition of Campbell and his followers to creedal statements can be observed by a quote from the Memoirs: "...among those Baptist churches which had adopted the principles of the Reformation. Several of them in Ohio and the western part of Pennsylvania, rejecting the Philadelphia Confession, decided to take the Bible as the only standard of faith and practice."²⁹ This well demonstrates the general mood regarding confessions and creeds. They are decried as "extra Biblical" and divisive, roaming into areas the Bible does not specifically address. "I have for some five-and-twenty years regarded creeds as both the cause and effect of partyism and the main perpetuating cause of schism, and have remonstrated and inveighed against them."³⁰

²⁸ Richardson, *Memoirs*, p.373.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 517.

Implications for the Campbellite Movement Future

The Campbellite emphasis on unity and the corresponding downplaying of doctrinal distinctions in confessions and creeds has naturally made the church very ecumenical. It is apace with the modern ecumenical movement in the sense that its basic principles of restoration and union promote the gathering of all kinds of different doctrinal views under one roof. It has no basis to keep such views out, except it contradict its own foundational philosophy of unity.

The Campbellite Church will thus continue to be plagued by the tension between union and restoration, primarily in the maintenance of its distinctive doctrine of baptism. This tension has been the cause of splits in the church in the last century, with some opting for more of the "unity" flavor, others for the "restoration" flavor. It will be interesting to see how this unfolds in the future of the movement.

The big problem, of course, is the Campbellite heresy of works-based salvation. Oh that God would lift the darkness from some Campbellite eyes today!

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