

Alexander Campbell as a Preacher

Theories on Preaching

by Carroll Elis

via The Preceptor, Vol. 1, No. 11, September, 1952.

Preaching is not for a lazy man, a sick man, or a tired man. Preaching the gospel is work. The greatest use which can be made of the human tongue is in the proclamation of the gospel of Christ. Effective preaching calls for a continued and intensive effort upon the part of the public proclaimer.

The primary source of study, inspiration, and motivation must come from the Bible. The preacher is a messenger of the Will of God, and the Will of God can be found only in the Bible. However, it is interesting to note that many gospel preachers have received help from the study of great preachers from the past. To read for example, about a man who was loyal to the Truth cannot help but have some effect upon the reader. One of the most outstanding preachers of the Restoration Movement was Alexander Campbell. It is a gross mistake to imagine that Campbell was the only person seeking to restore New Testament Christianity, and yet, it is a tragedy not to profit by his experiences and ideas. Alexander Campbell made many mistakes which should be recognized and condemned. Yet there are many great points in his life that should be appreciated. This article will consider Alexander Campbell as a preacher. Two points will be developed: (1) Campbell's theory or belief concerning preaching, and (2) how well he practiced his theory.

Alexander Campbell lived an intensively active life. He was an outstanding educator, farmer, social reformer, lecturer, writer, debater, and preacher. All of these activities were connected with his desire to restore New Testament Christianity. It was through the spoken word -- preaching and debating, that he achieved his greatest influence. He was an outstanding participant in religious debates. In 1820, he held his first religious discussion with John Walker in Mount Pleasant, Ohio. He next debated W.L. McCalla in Washington, Kentucky, in 1823. In 1829 his opponent was Robert Owen in

Cincinnati. His fourth discussion was again in Cincinnati with John B. Purcell of the Catholic Church in 1837. His last theological contest was in 1843 with N. L. Rice in Lexington, Kentucky. Henry Clay presided at this controversy, and a historical marker now stands in front of the Union Terminal in Lexington designating the site of the discussion. All of these debates were with outstanding men, were well attended, and did much to establish Campbell as a speaker. He spoke in almost every part of the United States. A contemporary said, "People would come from far and near to hear him, some of them making a day's journey. Others would follow him from place to place." (Archibald McLean, Alexander Campbell As A Preacher, St. Louis, 1908). His chief difficulty was generally to procure a building that would accommodate his crowds. Many of his audiences numbered from six to ten thousand. In 1847 he made a trip to England, Ireland, and Scotland, and spoke to crowded houses in all the larger cities. He preached before several state legislatures, and in 1850 spoke before a joint session of Congress. He was also in constant demand as a lecturer to colleges, literary societies, and associations of various kinds.

It is usually difficult to arrive at the philosophy of public speaking which a given great speaker of the past has held. Campbell was generous to posterity in that, though there is no evidence he had formal training in public speaking, he formulated some rather definite principles. While he was a student in the University of Glasgow he wrote in one of his notebooks "qualifications necessary to attain excellence in the composing and pronouncing of sermons." In 1836 he wrote to J.R. Howard, the editor of the Christian Reformer, and gave some rules for writing in a religious paper. These two constitute a good index to his theory of public speaking. I should like to give them to you, and then to examine the evidence to see how well he measured up to his standard.

Campbell's Rules for a Preacher and Preaching

1. The preacher must be a man of piety, and one who has the instruction and salvation of mankind sincerely in his heart.

2. A man of modest and simple manners, and in his public performances and behavior must conduct himself so as to make people sensible that he has their temporal and eternal welfare more at heart than anything else.

3. He must be well instructed in morality and religion, and in the original tongues in which the Scriptures are written, for without them he can hardly be qualified to explain Scriptures or to teach religion and morality.

4. He must be such a proficient in his own language as to be able to express every doctrine and precept with the utmost simplicity, and without anything in his diction either finical on the one hand or vulgar on the other.

5. A sermon should be composed with regularity and unity of design, so that all its parts may have a mutual and natural connection, and it should not consist of many heads, neither should it be very long.

6. A sermon ought to be pronounced with gravity, modesty and meekness, and so as to be distinctly heard by all the audience.

Let the preacher, therefore, accustom himself to articulate slowly and deliver the words with a distinct voice, and without artificial attitudes or motions or any other affectation, (Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2 vols, (Cincinnati, 1897, I, 138).

Campbell's Rules for Writing

The following are the tenets which he sent to J.R. Howard:

1. Introduce nothing into your pages that is not of obvious practical utility.

2. Remember, many readers have minds. Therefore give a reasonable variety.

3. Avoid the appearance of dogmatism. Be independent, but not disdainful of the views and opinions of others.

4. Be not too fond of analogies, new ideas, fine sayings and smart repartees.

5. Be assured that moral influence depends upon moral goodness; and therefore our reputation for moral goodness is essential to

moral usefulness. We must show a good spirit as well as good arguments.

(J. R. Howard, *The Christian Reformer*, Paris, Tennessee, 1836, April 1, 1836).

In addition to the aforementioned principles, it is well to recognize that Alexander Campbell did not believe in textual preaching. In an article headed, "Texts And Textuary Divines", he fully explained what he meant by the term "text."

I would rather derive the term directly from the Greek verb *tixto*, beget or bring forth, from which *texos* or *textus* might be ingeniously formed, and this might be translated an egg., or something pregnant with life, which by the laws of sermonizing becomes a full grown sermon. (*Christian Baptist*, pg. 145).

Particularly in the *Christian Baptist*, Campbell made war against what he called "the textuaries." Often times he would ridicule the using of texts in the following manner:

...a certain textuary did take for his text the words of a wicked man, found in Matthew 25: the false accusation of the wicked servant who told his lord..."You are an austere man." This was the text. The preacher could not spell well, and he made it "You are an oyster man." But the misfortune was, "he raised his whole doctrine" on the word oyster. In his exordium, for he too was an orator, he told his audience that his object was to show how fitly the Savior was compared to an oyster man, or oyster-catcher. Accordingly his method was -- First, To show the coincidence or resemblance between his Savior and an oyster-man. Second, To point out how suitably oysters represented sinners. Third, To demonstrate how beautifully the tongs which the oyster-man uses to take up oysters, represented "ministers of the gospel." Fourth, To prove that the oyster-man's boat was a fit emblem of the gospel and of a "gospel church," into which the oysters or sinners are put when caught or converted. His fifth head I have forgotten; but perhaps it was to show how the cooking and eating of oysters represented the

management and discipline of those sinners taught by those ministers of the gospel. He concluded with a few practical hints according to custom (Christian Baptist, pg. 203).

Numerous other examples of the same type of ridicule are found in Campbell's writing; he was continually objecting to those whom he designated as "scrap doctors."

Campbell had a serious reason behind such criticism, for he believed that textual preaching limited the speaker too much. He thought there was too great a tendency to discuss the subject from the point of view of the speaker rather than from that of the Bible. Campbell thought that subjects should be discussed, instead of texts. It was his practice to speak on topics such as "The Suffering of Christ," "The Law," "Jesus Christ is the Son of God," and "Salvation." As a rule, he did not read a text, but an entire chapter or a portion of it, for the basis of his lesson. This type of preaching undoubtedly had an influence upon his debating, for there is every reason to believe that the subjects on which he engaged in controversy had been his sermon subjects on numerous occasions.

Thus, we have considered Alexander Campbell's theory of preaching. It was not worked out over night, nor a static group of principles as perhaps is suggested by setting down rules. Campbell was a master preacher and one of the reasons is the excellent ideas that he had upon preaching.

Putting Theory into Practice

by Bill J. Humble

via The Preceptor, Vol. 1, No. 12, October, 1952.

It is evident that Alexander Campbell had a well formulated theory of public speaking. Early in his life he arrived at certain principles which should guide him in preaching. It is important for one who is seeking to persuade others to consider ways and means to accomplish his purpose. The theory, however, is useless unless it is carried into practice. Effective speaking requires the application of a theory, exactly as effective surgery and effective airplane building require it.

Next we will trace Campbell's ability to carry his theory into practice.

There is abundant material for research on Campbell as a speaker. For a period of over fifty years Campbell spoke in almost every part of the United States. Many of the people who heard him wrote their impressions of both the message and the messenger. Five of Campbell's debates were published and a book which contained his most important lectures. Rarely did he write out a sermon for publication, but other material makes up for this deficiency. From the evidence at hand it is possible to make an evaluation of Campbell's speech practices. In order to avoid repetition his theory may be reduced to five principles.

Principle Number One

Campbell's first precept was, "Be assured that moral influence depends upon moral goodness." Of the thirteen rules which Campbell gave, at least four concerned the manner of life of the speaker. He felt that above all the preacher must live a consecrated life, and have the salvation of mankind sincerely in his heart.

There were many things which gave Campbell a strong personal appeal. His appearance was in his favor. He has been described by contemporaries as being close to six feet in height with a physical frame well proportioned, as possessing the dignity of Webster. Timothy Flint, who Vernon L. Parrington says was the first literary man of the West, attended the Owen debate in Cincinnati and wrote not only a description of the events but of Campbell. "The champion of the covenant is a citizen of Bethany near Wheeling, a rather small head, of a sparkling, bright and cheerful countenance, and finely arched forehead: in the earnest vigor of youth, and with the very first sprinkling of white on his crown. He wore an aspect, as of one who had words both ready and inexhaustible, and possessed the excellent grace of perseverance, to a degree, that he would not retreat an inch in the way of concession to escape the crack and puddling of the dissolving world."

Even though Campbell was bitterly denounced by many for his religious views, most of his opponents did not impugn his sincerity

or honesty. His readiness to discuss religious differences, and the unimpassioned manner in which he debated caused the majority to be impressed by his integrity. Purcell after his debate wrote, "Campbell was decidedly the fairest man in debate I ever saw, and as fair as you can possibly conceive. He never fought for victory, like Dr. Johnson. He seemed to be always fighting for the truth, or what he believed to be the truth."

Campbell loved his family. Even though he traveled much during his life, he was in constant touch with his wife and children. Often he would take some of the children with him, and always wrote tender and affectionate letters home. After some of his children married, he would visit them, and was ever concerned with their welfare. So far as the writer has been able to determine, there was never any scandal attached to his name.

Precept Number Two

Closely associated with personal righteousness was Campbell's second precept: He believed that "a preacher must be well instructed in morality and religion." He thought that a preacher must have a broad background of knowledge. On one occasion he wrote with reference to sermons, "I am more concerned with matter than manner."

Campbell attended elementary school in Ireland, but after graduation received his instruction from his father. Under his guidance he studied English grammar, French, Latin, and Greek. He also spent much time in reading and memorizing selections from the British poets. Therefore one is not surprised to find numerous quotations and literary allusions in his speeches. He began early in life to commit a passage of Scripture to memory each day. He was a diligent student of the Bible, and his profound knowledge of the Bible is evident in all of his speaking.

Alexander Campbell attended Glasgow University for only one year. He was proficient enough in Latin and Greek that he often took his class notes in Latin, and made extra money by serving as a tutor in Greek. Early in life he formulated definite study habits which he continued throughout his life. He often would study fourteen hours a

day. [He had a study building built close to his home in the United States that had the windows built high above his head, where he could not be distracted by looking out the window, nor could anyone look in while he was busy at his studies -- Jim Sasser.] His speeches show great knowledge of the Bible, history, literature, and foreign languages. This background of knowledge gave him assurance, and brought solid substance to his discourses.

Precept Number Three

Campbell's third precept concerned language. He believed "a preacher should be proficient in his own language." He felt that simplicity and dignity should characterize the language of the pulpit.

His interest in his own language is shown by the fact that he was the first translator of the New Testament into modern American speech. Further proof of not only interest but study is his lecture: "The Anglo-Saxon Language: It's Origin, Character and Destiny." To see his appreciation of the English language and a brief example of his use of it, consider this passage from his address, "Its capacity is immense. For strength of frame it has bone and muscle of the Romans, the Goths and the Saxons. It has the patience and endurance of the German and the Dutch, both High and Low. It partakes of the vivacity of the French, of the genius of the Italian, the wit and spiritness of the Greek and Celt. For comprehension, if for nothing else, our language is chief amongst all the dialects of the earth."

Campbell's speaking vocabulary was immense. The influence of his writing must not be overlooked in this regard. He was a voluminous writer. All in all there are sixty volumes to his credit, and he always carried on a heavy correspondence. In his speeches he often used colorful and "loaded" words, but his style could not be described as florid. Dignity and loftiness, however, seemed to characterize his language rather than simplicity. At times his style seems rather pompous.

Precept Number Four

The fourth rule related to organization: "A sermon should be composed with regularity and unity of design." Campbell said, "To a

person well disciplined and practiced in classification, all nature, society, literature, science, art, even stand in rank and file before him, according to his intimacies with them. In the philosophy and skill of the greatest military chieftains that ever lived, he can assemble the greatest force to a given point in the shortest time. He too, superlatively enjoys his own knowledge, just as the prudent mistress of a household, who has a place for everything and everything in its place, enjoys all her resources. He also sees order, harmony, variety, fitness, beauty, from a thousand points inaccessible to one destitute of this sovereign art."

Campbell applied this principle in his speaking. There is no evidence that he prepared a written outline, but his speeches have a definite organization. The plan of most of them follow the same pattern. After a rather brief personal introduction, he would state the subject and almost invariably define the terms. His favorite method of definition was by etymology. Then he would state the points which he intended to develop. At the conclusion of each point he would make a brief summary. This would usually be more emotional than the development of the point.

His transitions were always clear. After a discussion of the points he employed a summary conclusion. They are never very long, and if there is an appeal for action it is brief and without much emotion. Campbell said that a sermon should not be very long. I will let you judge as to how well he adhered to this rule. His sermons lasted two hours, but that was according to the custom of his day.

Precept Number Five:

Here is the fifth principle that a preacher must be and do: Let the preacher accustom himself to deliver the Word with distinct voice, and without artificial attitudes or motions of any other affectation. He believed that delivery should not call attention to itself.

Campbell usually spoke extemporaneously because he felt it was the superior mode of delivery. His reason was, "Our words react upon ourselves according to their import; and hence we are sometimes wrought up to a pathos, a fervor, an ecstasy, indeed, by the mysterious sound of our own voice upon ourselves as well as that of

preachers were men who knew their Bibles. In those early days the brethren spoke extemporaneously as the audience liked to see a man "shoot without rest." Alexander Campbell was a generation ahead of his times as he employed the conversational style of presentation. He rarely made a gesture, and there was no beating of the pulpit, as he relied upon the power of truth as the means of informing, and persuading. It was common for a sermon to last for two to three hours. Having heard Campbell preach for the first time, "Raccoon" Smith commented to a brother Vaughn, "Is it not a little hard to ride thirty miles to hear a man preach thirty minutes?" "Oh," he replied, "it has been longer than that; look at your watch." When Smith looked at his watch he observed that Campbell had preached two hours and thirty minutes!

A striking contrast to the dignity of Alexander Campbell's style was the preaching of the unique "Raccoon" Smith. His sermons were characterized by boldness and humor. "Raccoon's" sermons were composed of three sections. The first part clarified misunderstandings of the restoration plea, the second division exposed the error of the times, and finally the three-hour sermon presented positive truth. The speaking eloquence gave Walter Scott the tag of the "Golden Oracle." Scott thrilled audiences on the Western Reserve in 1827 and 1828 when he baptized 1,000 persons each year. One of Scott's powerful sermons was entitled "Three Divine Missions," one hour each on the mission of Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church. Campbell, Smith and Scott illustrate contrasting styles, but similarity of sermon lengths.

Reading a sermon, stated Campbell, "made one embarrassed as if he was corseted." He further commented on this point: "What apostle read to those gathered, his own sermons or one purchased from another? Would Peter have been speechless if one day his sermon had been misplaced in the saddlebag? Could Paul not have prayed with the Ephesian elders at Miletus if the written prayer in his pocket has been lost?"

CONCLUSION

These men of God in the main clothed the gospel in the fitting attire of fine grammar. Although there were numerous exceptions, these restorers had preference for expository preaching. For their illustrations they drew heavily from the Bible, nature and history. There was no string of "death bed stories." Those who looked for pepper, salt and vinegar were surprised to receive

man, wine and oil. There is a relevancy to Campbell's description of great preaching, "when Christ is the theme, Charity the tone, Clarity the route and Certainty the foundation ... In a world of human doubts the church bears the message of divine assurance."

Frequently emotion was emphasized. On one occasion following a discourse by Walter Scott the audience was unable to rise and sing the invitation. Scott, under a brush arbor near Wheeling, West Virginia, was to raise the staid Alexander Campbell from his seat and Campbell shouted. "Glory to God in the highest." Moses K. Lard, preaching on the prodigal son story, painted the returned home scene so vividly that the worshipers turned to the rear of the auditorium to see if the prodigal was entering the door. Basically the sermons were free from a strong emotionalism.

Dabney Phillips (Deceased), Bible Light, July-August 2006