

Alexander Campbell on Interpretation 1 & 2

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL ON INTERPRETATION (1)

by Leroy Garrett

In one sense Alexander Campbell had no hermeneutics in that he saw no need for the Bible to have special rules of interpretation. It is to be interpreted like any other book, according to the rules of common sense. He saw no reason why the rules would be any different for interpreting Mark, Luke, or Paul than Shakespeare, Burns, or Locke. One should interpret the Bible the way she interprets the morning paper or a letter from a friend. Take the "naked text," he advised, and read it as if you had never read it before.

The Bible is for common folk, Campbell held, and they can understand it as well, or perhaps better, than the clergy. He once demonstrated this when he called a little girl who was playing outside his Bethany study, and asked her the meaning of a single line of Scripture, "The Master has come, and calleth for thee" (John 11:28). A Calvinist theologian had found much of his doctrine in that one line, including the Effectual Call.

Reading the passage in context, the girl told Campbell that it simply meant that when Jesus arrived at the home of Mary and Martha he asked to see Mary, and that Martha was telling Mary that. Campbell assured his readers that a child's innocence allowed her to see only what was in the text, while the clergyman's predispositions led him to impose what was not there.

Common sense interpretation!

Campbell was mindful of modern Biblical research, such as it existed in his day. This is evident in *The Living Oracles*, his own translation of the New Testament. He omitted a favorite "Campbellite" verse, Acts 8:37, which is the eunuch's confession, because it is not found in the oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts.

When Edgar J. Goodspeed produced one of the first modern versions of the New Testament he was criticized for leaving out the "Protestant" doxology at the close of the Lord's Prayer. He justified himself by pointing out that Alexander Campbell had done the same thing in his translation a hundred years earlier!

Some recent critics have faulted Campbell for viewing the Bible as "a book of facts," charging that this makes the Bible a legal code. The critics fail to see that to Campbell, as to John Locke before him, a fact is an act or deed, something said or done. as Webster concurs. Campbell distinguished between a fact and a truth, That God exists is a truth but not a fact. That God created the world is a fact.. All facts are, of course, also truths, but not all truths are facts. Facts or deeds have power to save; truths as such do not. "God is love" is a precious truth but not a fact. If God had not acted out his love we would yet be in our sins. That God so loved that he gave (fact or deed) makes all the difference. To save us God had to act, not just exist!

One can see that "the mighty acts of God" had special meaning to Campbell, and the grounds for unity. Truths invite theories, discussion. and debate, even dogmas. Facts call for a response, belief or disbelief. Acceptance of truths inform us; obedience to facts save us. Campbell called for the unity of all Christians on the basis of the "seven facts" of Ephesians 4:4-6 — one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God. These are facts because they are something said or revealed by God. Sometimes Campbell would reduce the seven to three — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, or even to two — one fact (Christ) and one act (baptism).

Campbell conceded that there might be many dogmas and opinions about these facts. Here he called for freedom of opinion, but it is the facts themselves that save and unite. This eventually took the form of a motto: "In essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, love."

The pioneers who followed Campbell had a way of making it even more compelling, which accounts for the rapid growth of the Movement:

Three facts to be believed — death, burial, resurrection of Christ;

Three commands to be obeyed — believe, repent, be baptized.

Three promises to be enjoyed — remission of sins, gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life.

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL ON INTERPRETATION (2) **by Leroy Garrett**

In Campbell's seven "Rules of Interpretation," included in his The Christian System, the last one is the most distinctive: We must come within understanding distance of the text, which he deemed "indispensable" to

understanding the Bible. We must approach Scripture with open minds and hearts, and with an eagerness to know the will of God. There is a circle of understanding, he noted, and God is at the center of the circle, and humility is the circumference. We must come within that circle. He thus made humility a rule for Biblical study.

The other six rules were more common, reflecting methods that one would use in the study of any other book, such as Rule 1: Consider the historical circumstances of the book. This is the who, what, where, and why of the text. Rule 3 points to what we have alluded to: The same laws of interpretation which are applied to the language of other books are to be applied to the language of the Bible. In this he was ahead of his time, for this calls for critical study, including that the scholars refer to as "lower" and "higher" criticism.

In other rules he provides guidance for dealing with figurative language. He urges the reader to "ascertain the point to be illustrated," and not to draw from the symbols more than is intended. The Bible is to be allowed to interpret itself. One rule urges that words be defined by "common usage," and that an ordinary dictionary will prove helpful.

Biblical study was to Alexander Campbell a pilgrimage of joy, an exciting adventure of learning and discovery. One cannot linger with holy Scripture long without catching its spirit, he allowed, and this is what the Bible is about, "to catch the spirit" of its great heroes.

One of Campbell's favorite verses, one upon which he often "discoursed" (He never called it preaching) was Malachi 4:2: "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings." To him this pointed up the progressive nature of revelation. First was the starlight age (Patriarchal), which gave way to the moonlight age (Mosaic and the prophetic), which led to the sunlight age (Christian), with each bringing more light. In this context he discussed the doctrine of available light, that a dispensation — or a person — is accountable only for such light as is available.

God does not expect a blind man to see or a lame man to walk, Campbell insisted, nor does he expect a man to obey a command he has never heard. But every person has some light, and he will be judged by his response to that light.