

The Unfinished Business of the Protestant Reformation: Alexander Campbell's Relationship to Protestantism

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In 1951 Charles Clayton Morrison delivered a series of lectures at the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago on Christian unity. Morrison identified the “distinctive idea” of his lectures as “the ecumenical movement [is] the re-emergence in Protestantism of the unfinished task of the Reformation.”¹ He entitled the resultant book *The Unfinished Reformation*. He suggested such a task had a good start in 1809 with Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, but the “ecumenical ideal” was “eclipsed by the restorationism with which it was coupled. The spirit in one,” he commented, “is in irreconcilable conflict with the spirit of the other.”² For Morrison, the “unfinished business” of the Reformation was Protestant unity.

For others, however, the “unfinished business” was restoration, which is, according to N. B. Hardeman's 1922 sermon entitled “Reformers and Restorers,” the key to unity itself. If “the world could unite” on four particulars, Hardeman avowed, then the church would no longer have a divided state. His four platform points were: (1) the “right creed;” (2) the “proper name;” (3) the “correct baptism;” and (4) the “right order of worship.”³ For Hardeman the Reformers made laudable attempts to

¹ Charles Clayton Morrison, *The Unfinished Reformation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1953) xi.

² *Ibid.*, 155.

³ N. B. Hardeman, *Hardeman's Tabernacle Sermons: A Series of Twenty-two Sermons Delivered in the Ryman Auditorium, Nashville, Tenn., March 28-April 16-1922* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1922) 265.

escape Roman Catholicism but their goal was not the same as the Restorers. The Reformation, according to J. W. Shepherd in his popular 1929 history entitled *The Church, The Falling Away, and the Restoration*, failed in that it “fell far short of a return to Jerusalem.” In effect, “the best that can be said is that the Reformation was a change of masters” because adherence to creeds became Protestantism new “popery.”⁴

When we raise the question of the unfinished business of the Reformation—which is a common theme within 19th century Stone-Campbell rhetoric—we raise the question that has plagued 20th century Stone-Campbell historiography, namely, which has priority: unity, restoration, or mission (evangelism)? In other words, what is the movement’s “founding vocation”?⁵ While Disciples of Christ have typically found it in some theme related to unity, Churches of Christ as well as many among Churches of Christ/Christian Churches have typically found it in the restoration motif.⁶ Others, particularly among Churches of Christ/Christian

⁴ J. W. Shepherd, *The Church, The Falling Away, and the Restoration* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1954; reprint of 1929) 121.

⁵ Cf. Anthony L. Dunnavant, Richard T. Hughes, and Paul M. Blowers, *Founding Vocation & Future Vision: The Self-Understanding of the Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999).

⁶ For example, see Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (Saint Louis, MO: The Bethany Press, 1975) for the Disciples of Christ, Earl I. West, *The Search for the Ancient Order: A History of the Restoration Movement*, 4 volumes (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1974-1987) for Churches of Christ, and James B. North, *Union in Truth: An Interpretative History of the Restoration Movement* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing, 1994) for Churches of Christ/Christian Churches.

Churches, have found it in mission.⁷ In this paper I return to this question through the lens of Alexander Campbell's relationship to Protestantism.

"I am a Protestant"⁸

When Robert Semple, a leading Virginia Baptist, appealed to the "established opinions, customs, and regulations" of Baptist order to stem the tide of Campbell's reform movement, Campbell appealed to "Luther and Calvin" who themselves "boldly" rejected such when they subjected their "popish" constraints to careful "examination." When one opens their Bible, according to Campbell, there is no need to pay attention to "established opinions, customs, and regulations." One simply reads the Bible. In this, Campbell says, "I am a Protestant."

Campbell recognized the ambiguity in such a statement, though it had a clear meaning in that particular context. Recognizing the elasticity of the term, he identified three kinds of Protestantism, which are: (1) "political;" (2) "ecclesiastic;" and (3) "spiritual." Campbell fully affirmed the first and last as laudable pursuits while dismayed by the middle category.⁹

Regarding "political" Protestantism, Campbell stressed the rise of Anglo-Saxon language, politics, and culture as a matter of divine providence and "Divine mission." God gave the "sceptre of Judah, the harp of David, the strength of Judah's Lion, and the wealth of the world" to the "Anglo-Saxons in Britain, and to the

⁷ Max Ward Randall, *The Great Awakenings and the Restoration Movement* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1983).

⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Reply," *Christian Baptist* 5.9 (7 April 1828) 432.

⁹ Alexander Campbell, "Address: The Destiny of Our County: Delivered Before the Philo-Literary Society of Canonsburg College, Pennsylvania, August 3, 1852, Being its Fiftieth Anniversary," in *Popular Lectures and Addresses* (Philadelphia, PA: James Challen and Sons, 1866), 168.

American Anglo-Saxons on this continent.”¹⁰ The great Saxon Martin Luther is the root of this rise to cultural and political power.

Political Protestantism is grounded in the maxim that one “ought not only to think but *to think for [oneself]*.” This “paramount duty” was resurrected and spread “by that illustrious Saxon to whom, more than to any other mortal being, the sons of Japhet in Europe and America owe their best literary, moral, and political institutions.” More than any “other religious or moral code,” Luther placed this at the heart of Protestantism, and when Anglo-Saxons adopted this “Lutheran creed of thinking, writing, and speaking without restraint on every subject of importance to the individual and society,” the “general superiority of that portion of our race which speaks the English language” emerged from the darkness.¹¹ Moreover, “in our country’s destiny is the destiny of Protestantism, and in its destiny that of all the nations of the world.” This destiny is the charge “God has given...to Protestant England and Protestant America.”¹²

The Protestant Reformation, which Campbell called a “glorious era,”¹³ fostered knowledge and reached into “every science, into every art, into all business life, and continues” to deconstruct old orders and erect new ones. Protestantism inaugurated and laid the foundation for cultural, scientific, and political developments in the new world.

¹⁰ Ibid., 169.

¹¹ Alexander Campbell, “Address on the Importance of Uniting the Moral with the Intellectual Culture of the Mind Delivered to the College of Teachers, Cincinnati, 1836,” in *Popular Lectures*, 453.

¹² Campbell, “Destiny,” 178.

¹³ Alexander Campbell, “Letters to England,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.7 2nd (2nd series; July 1837) 320.

Regarding “spiritual” Protestantism, Campbell affirmed the founding and “great principles of Protestantism.”¹⁴ Indeed, he welcomed the opportunity to defend and explain “the great redeeming, regenerating and ennobling principles of Protestantism” in his 1837 debate with the Roman Catholic Bishop Purcell.¹⁵ He characterized himself as an “advocate of Protestantism.”¹⁶

While the debate propositions themselves indicate what Campbell intended by this, Campbell tersely responded to criticism from some quarters that he too readily owned the Protestant appellation. In order to dispel any misunderstanding of the Protestantism he “defended,” Campbell quoted some particulars from various unidentified Protestant creeds, which were consistent with the debate propositions. The list reflects Campbell’s Protestant convictions.¹⁷

1. The authority of the Holy Scripture is the highest.
2. The decrees of Fathers and Councils are [only] so far to be approved as they agree with the word of God.
3. The reading and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures are open to, and necessary for all men, the laity as well as the clergy.
4. Masses are impious.
5. Purgatory is the invention of men.
6. The invoking and worshipping of dead saints is idolatry.
7. The Pope hath not the primacy over all the churches of Christ.
8. That is the church of Christ which bears the pure doctrine of Christ, and observes the ordinances instituted by him, in whatsoever place it exists.
9. Vows of celibacy are the inventions of men, and productive of uncleanness.
10. So many orders [of the clergy] so many marks of the beast
11. Monkery is a filthy carcass

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, *A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion Between Alexander Campbell, Bethany, Va. and the Right Reverend John B. Purcell, Bishop of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati, Ohio: J. A. James, 1837), 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Protestantism,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.7 (2nd series; July 1837) 305-306.

12. So many superstitious [activities] and the observation of various other ceremonies, manifestly obstructing the teaching and learning of the word, are diabolical inventions.
13. The marriage of Priests is both lawful and necessary.
14. The Bible is the only infallible and all-sufficient rule of religious faith and practice.

While Campbell's debate with Purcell was a full frontal-assault on Roman Catholicism, embedded therein were the foundational principles of Protestantism. In essence, we may boil them down to three.¹⁸

First, "the great central truth of Protestantism" is "'The Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible' as the only rule of faith and manners."¹⁹ According to Robert Richardson, both "Protestantism" and "our Reformation" share this conviction.²⁰

Second, another "central truth of Protestantism" is '*The right and duty of private judgment in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.*'"²¹ According to J. S. Lamar, this principle, along with the one above, "constitute the very core of Protestantism."²²

Third, another important Protestant truth is the priesthood of all believers. Campbell consented to this when he quoted Luther, that is, "All Christians belong to the same spiritual state; and there is no other difference between them than that of

¹⁸ J. W. Shepherd, *Church*, 136, drawing on his Campbellian heritage, correctly identified these three principles as well.

¹⁹ Alexander Campbell, "Prefatory Remarks," *Millennial Harbinger* 7.1 (3rd series; January 1850) 3.

²⁰ Robert Richardson, "Faith Versus Philosophy. No. I.," *Millennial Harbinger* 7.3 (4th series; March 1857) 136.

²¹ Alexander Campbell, "Christian Union.—No. IX.," *Millennial Harbinger* 4.4 (3rd series; April 1847) 219

²² J. S. Lamar, *The Organon of Scripture: or, The Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1860) 132.

the functions which they discharge.”²³ Representing this third point, John F. Rowe claimed “the rise of sacerdotalism destroyed the equality of discipleship.”²⁴

In light of this political and spiritual Protestantism, Campbell regarded the Protestant Reformation as “one of the most splendid eras in the history of the world” and “one of the most gracious interpositions in behalf of the whole human race.” He recognized his debt “to the intelligence, faith, and courage of Martin Luther and his heroic associates in that glorious Reformation.”²⁵ Luther and Calvin, in particular, “were God’s chosen vessels to accomplish at the proper time a mighty moral revolution, whose might, sway and extended empire over the human mind and destinies of the world, have not yet been fully appreciated.”²⁶ In this light, as Isaac Errett wrote, Protestantism is “*the only solid hope for humanity.*”²⁷

“I am too Protestant for Modern Protestant Taste”²⁸

For Campbell, Protestantism is a generic term. When others specify Lutheran or Calvinist, or Arminian or Methodist, this betrays the genius of the generic or “spiritual” Protestantism. In other words, this kind of sectarian specification is the essence of “ecclesiastic” Protestantism. “A true and well-defined Protestantism,” he

²³ Alexander Campbell, “Luther on Apostolic Succession,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2.3 (3rd series; March 1842) 142

²⁴ John F. Rowe, *A History of Reformatory Movements, Resulting in a Restoration of the Apostolic Church* (Cincinnati: F. L. Rowe, 1899), 1

²⁵ Alexander Campbell, *Christian System, in Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburg, PA: Forrester & Campbell, 1839), 2.

²⁶ Alexander Campbell, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice* (Lexington, KY: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844) 587.

²⁷ Isaac Errett, “Address of Elder Isaac Errett,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6.3 (4th series; March 1856) 146.

²⁸ Campbell, “Christian Union.—No. IX.,” 220.

wrote, would “enter [its] protest against any one and all of these, and be a better Protestant than any one or all of them.”²⁹ Otherwise, this is a “pretended Protestantism” rather than a “true, real and unsophisticated” one.³⁰

At the heart of this “ecclesiastic Protestantism” is the veritable loss of the core principles of Protestantism itself. In particular, when Protestant bodies wrote creeds, invested their clergy with their authoritative interpretation, and bound their people to its subscription, they abandoned Protestantism’s central core. Consequently, though Luther “bid [the Bible] march” out of prison, Lutheran clergy soon “loaded [it] with immense burdens of tradition drawn from the cloisters and the cells where it had been so long incarcerated,” and effectively “stopped the Reformation.”³¹ Unfortunately, rather than recognizing that neither Luther nor Calvin had “finished the work” they had begun, ecclesiastic Protestantism “imagined the Reformation was finished when Luther and Calvin died.”³²

This does not fault Luther or even Calvin. Indeed, “emerging from the smoke of the great city of mystical Babylon, [Luther] saw as clearly and as far into these matters as any person could, in such a hazy atmosphere.” It was incumbent on those who followed him to carry out his views to “their legitimate issue.”³³ “There was no Joshua to lead the people, who rallied under the banners of the Bible, out of the wilderness in which Luther died.” Instead, his followers “quenched the spirit of the

²⁹ Campbell, “Destiny,” 168.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

³¹ Campbell, “Prefatory Remarks,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.1 (January 1830) 4.

³² Alexander Campbell, “[Reply to Spencer Clack],” *Christian Baptist* 5.4 (5 November 1827) 387.

³³ Alexander Campbell, “Remission of Sins,” *Millennial Harbinger Extra No. 1* (July 5 18c30) 1

Reformation” as they harbored a “secret lust” for “ecclesiastical power,” which rendered them “Protestant Popes.”³⁴ Campbell thought it better to have a single Pope rather than “a herd of little ones.”³⁵ Consequently, though the Protestant Reformation had a promising start, it “ended in a Protestant hierarchy, and swarms of dissenters.”³⁶

The problem is, then, “modern Protestantism” substituted a new “popery” for the old one. Its creeds, subscriptions, traditions, and customs subverted the central principles of Protestantism, specifically, “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.” That is, in essence, the “*religion of Protestants*.”³⁷ What Luther and others gave the world in hope, the clergy, with its subscriptions and ecclesiasticism, took away, that is, the personal liberty to interpret the Bible for oneself. This contrasts strongly with Campbell’s intent, which Robert Richardson notes below:

The present Reformation proposes an immediate return to the broad and original platform of Christianity, as well as of true Protestantism. It urges, accordingly, the claims of the Bible alone, as the source of Divine truth for all mankind. It pleads for the exercise of man’s inalienable right to read and interpret the Sacred Volume. It seeks to establish a unity of faith, instead of that diversity of opinion that has distracted religious society. It desires to restore the gospel and its institutions, in all their original simplicity, to the world. In brief, its great purpose is to establish CHRISTIAN UNION upon the basis of a SIMPLE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY.³⁸

³⁴ Campbell, *Christian System*, 2

³⁵ Alexander Campbell, “Catholic Controversy. No. 2,” *Millennial Harbinger* 5.1 (January 1834) 12.

³⁶ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism: With Its Antecedents and Consequences* (Bethany, VA: Alexander Campbell, 1851) 15.

³⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Letter to William Jones, No. V.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6.7 (July 1835) 302.

³⁸ Robert Richardson, *The Principles and Objects of the Religious Reformation, Urged by A. Campbell and Others, Briefly Stated and Explained*. 2d ed. (Bethany, VA: A. Campbell, 1853) 6-7

With a return to core Protestant principles, Thomas Campbell believed “genuine radical reform” was possible, even—he wrote in 1829—“the restoration of the ancient gospel and the ancient order of things established by the apostles.”³⁹ This was Alexander’s determined plea to “fellow-professors of all the sects into which Christendom at this hour is most unfortunately severed.” It was time for a “radical and thorough reformation,” which is itself “*the restoration of original Christianity*.”⁴⁰ Though Campbell was aware of Anabaptist traditions, particularly within Baptists and dissenter circles, he did not think they themselves were sufficiently radical as they, too, had succumbed to ecclesiasticisms and creedal subscriptions.⁴¹

The Protestant Reformation shipwrecked on the rocks of creedalism, and it was unable to reach the shore because its reformation was not sufficiently radical, that is, it did restore the ancient order and ancient gospel. Indeed, a “farther reformation is needed.”⁴² As a result, Campbell advocates “not a reformation upon a dozen of other reformations; but a full restoration of the original gospel institutions as delineated on the sacred pages, and as practised [*sic*] by the first Christians.”⁴³

There is, however, one more respect in which Campbell is “too Protestant” for modern Protestantism. This appears in his concern for the unity of Christians.

³⁹ T. W. [Thomas Campbell], “To the Editor of the Christian Baptist,” *Christian Baptist* 7.5 (7 December 1829) 611

⁴⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Preface,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.1 (2nd series; January 1837) 3.

⁴¹ Alexander Campbell, “The Bible in Colleges,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3.5 (5th series; May 1860) 244. Here, as one example, Campbell lumps the Baptists and Mennonites with other sects.

⁴² Alexander Campbell, “Aspects of Romanism—Moral and Political. No. II.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.5 (2nd series; May 1837) 230.

⁴³ Alexander Campbell, “Letters to England,” 321

The context of his statement that he “is too Protestant” revolves around his concern for unity. He worried that the Evangelical Alliance was actually a Protestant Alliance where “modern Protestantism” was at the “centre” rather than “the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ It made Protestantism a sect itself, at least those who subscribed to the Evangelical Alliance. Rather than focused on Jesus the Christ, the Alliance consolidated Protestantism into a sect. Campbell refused to use Protestant creeds “to unchristianize other Protestants because they presume to differ from their interpretations of certain celebrated proof-texts.”⁴⁵

Rather than searching for the common denominator of Protestant doctrine and then constructing a platform for unity, Campbell believed a better center for union was already available in the confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In essence, Campbell suggested a centered-set form of unity rather than a bounded-set.

Now it so happens that amongst those called evangelical sects, there is a very general harmony in all the great facts, precepts, and promises of the New Institution. So far, then, as they are distinct parties, they are built not on fundamentals, but on circumstantials, themselves being judges. They allow each other to be right in the great matters, and wrong only in the minor matters. But their error is, that they prefer the minor causes of division to the major causes of union, and give to their circumstantials or expediciencies the weight, and reason, and authority due only to their own essentials. They would rather be sects because of the accidentals, than united in one great communion because of the essentials. But still worse, they make a *new foundation of union which is the centre of their affections*, in opposition to what Paul has affirmed—that ‘other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid—viz. *Jesus the Christ.*’ Are the peculiar foundations of each of the evangelical sects Jesus Christ?---!⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Evangelical Alliance.—No. II.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3.9 (3rd series; September 1846) 446

⁴⁵ Campbell, “Christian Union.—No. IX.,” 220

⁴⁶ Alexander Campbell, “Reformers *Not* Schismatics,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.5 (2nd series; May 1837) 196

Because Protestantism degenerated into different sects—each with their own peculiarity and resisting communion with the others, the Reformation floundered in the wilderness and never reached the Promised Land. Ultimately, then, “the Protestant Reformation was but a REFORMATION of a corrupted Christianity, not a RESTORATION of the primitive simplicity, beauty, and integrity of the original profession.”⁴⁷

“A Common Christianity”⁴⁸

On the one hand, Campbell admired the Protestant Reformation for its great core principles. On the other hand, the fruit of the Reformation distressed Campbell because creeds, councils, and clergies subverted those core principles. The division of Protestantism, of Christianity itself, disturbed Campbell, and he believed the path back was two-fold: (1) a core evangelicalism and (2) the restoration of the ancient order.

As the above lengthy citation indicates, Campbell thought believers in Jesus should unite on the foundation of Jesus alone. This entails, for Campbell, an “evangelical Protestantism,” which locates him within Protestant orthodoxy itself.⁴⁹ This is essentially equivalent to “spiritual Protestantism,” but it has more teeth. In fact, it is what Campbell called a “*common* Christianity.” This common ground in “elementary” and “fundamental matters” in “piety and morality” is something upon

⁴⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Tracts for the People—No. XXXVII.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6.10 (3rd series; October 1849) 550.

⁴⁸ Alexander Campbell, “Education,” *Millennial Harbinger* 1.6 (2nd series; June 1837) 258.

⁴⁹ Alexander Campbell, “The Importance of a Pure Version of the Christian Scriptures,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2.1 (4th series; January 1852) 41.

which “all good [people] of all denominations are agreed.” Consequently, “these great common principles and views form a common ground on which all Christian people can unite, harmonize and co-operate.”⁵⁰

This involves at least two moves. First, Campbell recognized that there is a common “*evangelical*” core, which all Protestants confess. This common core is what Campbell calls the “gospel facts,” which—at least in this list (other such lists may vary a bit but are essentially the same⁵¹)—are:⁵²

- the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- the nature of the sacrifice of Christ as a true and proper sin-offering
- the reconciliation to God through faith in that sacrifice
- the consequent effects of that faith in all acts of Christian obedience
- the nature of Christ’s kingdom and the new birth

Second, he appealed to all Protestants to recognize what is catholic or universal among them. We have, he wrote, a “catholic faith and a catholic Bible.” Consequently, he exhorted, “let us, then, have a catholic spirit, and co-operate with those who are doing all they can.”⁵³ In this way, “the rule of union shall be, that, whatever in faith, in piety, and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all

⁵⁰ Alexander Campbell, “Common Schools,” in *Popular Lectures*, 259.

⁵¹ Campbell, “Education,” 258, has this list: the evidences of the Christian religion—the arguments that prove the divine person and mission of the common Saviour—the reasons why he is to be accredited and receives as the only Saviour of the world—the necessity of faith in him—of repentance towards God—of a new heart and life—of supreme devotion to his will—the value of his death as a sin-offering—the necessity of his resurrection, and the certainty of his coming to judge and retribute the living and the dead according to their works. See my “Theological Orientation for Churches of Christ: Resourcing Alexander Campbell’s Trinitarian Christian System,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016) 21-36 for Campbell’s commitment to this core, particularly as it is epitomized in the Apostles’ Creed.

⁵² Campbell, “Reformers *Not* Schismatics,” 147.

⁵³ Alexander Campbell, “The Bible Cause,” *Millennial Harbinger* 4.1 (3rd series; January 1847) 5-7.

parties, shall be adopted as the basis of union; and whatever is not by all parties admitted as of divine authority, shall be rejected as schismatical and human.”⁵⁴

Campbell believed this was sufficient not only for believers in all denominations to cooperate across denominational lines but also to abandon their denominational loyalties, which are the leftovers of Protestant partyism. Even further, Campbell was willing to live with and among those who embraced these cardinal and evangelical principles. For example, he reminded the Baptists that given this common evangelical core, exemplified in the seven ones of Ephesians 4, he was willing to “bear a great many frailties and errors in judgment on the part of my brethren rather than separate from them.”⁵⁵

What, then, becomes of the “restoration of the ancient order of things and the ancient gospel” when unity is found in this evangelical common core without agreeing on the diversity of minutiae and particulars typically found in Protestant creeds? Do the particulars of the “ancient order and ancient gospel” become a new creed? Do they become a new set of particulars to which people must subscribe in order to live in communion and cooperate with each other?

Spencer Clack, one of the editors of *The Baptist Recorder*, wondered the same thing. Campbell’s response is worth a lengthy citation.

You (meaning myself [Campbell]) "object to creeds and confessions, and for the very same reason I could object to your ancient order of things. You object to creeds because they are not the Bible." Now let me tell you that this is not fact. I never did object to creeds because they were not the Bible. And recollect I use the term creed in its ecclesiastical import; and I call upon you to show where I have objected to creeds for this reason. Nor can you object

⁵⁴ Alexander Campbell, “Union of Christians—No. I.,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3.5 (2nd series; May 1839) 212 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁵ Alexander Campbell, “Reformers *Not* Schismatics,” 149-150.

to my "ancient order of things" for the same reason why I object to creeds and confessions. I object to creeds and confessions because made authoritative "tests of religious character and terms of christian communion;" and never can you, "for the same reason," object to the essays I have written on the "ancient order of things," because *I have never made them, hinted that they should be, or used them as a test of christian character or terms of christian communion.*⁵⁶

The ancient order and ancient gospel, then, do not function as ecclesiastic creeds, that is, they do not function as tests of fellowship or terms of communion; they are not the basis or foundation of union. They do function as creeds in the sense that they are faith statements or faith convictions. But these convictions do not rise to the level of fellowship lines. Indeed, none of the "restoration" articles dealt with anything in the evangelical core. Rather, they addressed what was lacking in the "present order of things."

The ancient order is not so much a specific platform for unity, much less a test of communion, as much as it is an attempt to align the "present order of things" with the "ancient order." It is a proposal for a reformation, a radical reformation, which is the restoration of ancient order in the contemporary church. The function of the articles is corrective or reformatory; it is an "ecclesiastic" agenda rather than an "evangelical" agenda.

In the closing number of the *Christian Baptist* Campbell describes the "present order" among Regular Baptists.

The present order of things amongst the Regular Baptists is this:--A person applies for baptism. He is called before the church, at its Saturday monthly meeting. He is interrogated respecting his conversion. He relates all that he has felt and thought, more or less, since the time of the commencement of a "*work of grace*" upon his heart. After being examined to the satisfaction of the

⁵⁶ Alexander Campbell, "Replication No. II to Spencer Clack.," *Christian Baptist* 5.2 (3 September 1827) 370 (emphasis mine).

church, the question is put--"Ought the candidate to be baptized?" If the church, or a majority of them *present*, give a verdict in his favor, he may then be immersed. He is then immersed *in the name of the Trinity* on a suitable occasion, and joins the church. This church of which he is a member meets stately once a month in its church capacity. After meeting on the Lord's day, and talking over the affairs of the neighborhood out of doors for a while, the preacher calls them into the house, either by going into the pulpit or giving out a hymn. They sing a few stanzas of a hymn or song, the precentor (sic) or the choir, as the case may be, standing, and the congregation sitting. This ended, the preacher prays *for the people*, and for a sermon, sometimes *for a text*, and for the conversion of the converted. Then comes the sermon, homily, or discourse, explanatory of some word, phrase, or verse found somewhere in the Old or New Testament. Sometimes it is the saying of an angel, a good man; sometimes the saying of a wicked man...The sermon ended, a prayer is made for a blessing upon the seed sown, or the doctrine delivered; a song is sung, and the benediction is pronounced.--Home they go.⁵⁷

The ancient order, with its articles on breaking bread, polity, and worship, is a direct response to the "present order of things." It did not address the evangelical core of the Christian Faith. In fact, Campbell's series was ignited by two contextual factors. First, in the Fall of 1824 he had recently completed a tour among churches, particularly Baptist churches. What he found disheartened him. He came away from that tour with a "greater clearness" than he previously had about what needed to be done. He now determined to address "the kingdom and dominion of the clergy" by arguing for "the restoration of the ancient order of things" as well as "the proper method of accomplishing it."⁵⁸ The present order signaled the need for the restoration of the ancient order, and this is the first time Campbell used this phrase in the *Christian Baptist*, just prior to inaugurating his series of articles on the topic.

⁵⁷ Alexander Campbell, "Response to 'Mr. Brantly's Views,'" *Christian Baptist* 7.12 (5 July 1830) 660.

⁵⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Editor's Tour," *Christian Baptist* 2.6 (3 January 1825) 124.

Second, the Baptist Missionary Association of Kentucky, meeting in Lexington, Kentucky in July 1824, recognized the difference between the present order and the New Testament. “It is obvious,” they wrote, “to the most superficial observer, who is at all acquainted with the state of Christianity and of the church of the New Testament, that much, very much is wanting, to bring the Christianity and the church of the present day up to that standard.”⁵⁹ Campbell took their cue and suggested some particulars that might help, that is, ways the present order might be brought up to the standard of the New Testament, which is the ancient order. The word “order,” it should be remembered, refers to ecclesial practices, which were designed by God as both means of grace and “means of spiritual enjoyment.”⁶⁰

The function of the “restoration of the ancient order,” therefore, was not the restoration of Christianity as if Christianity itself had not existed for the 1000 years prior to 1809 (or 1804). Rather, it was a reformation through restoration which adjusted the present order so that it might more faithfully practice the ancient order, that is, to practice Christianity the way the apostles and their converts did.

But if this has no creedal function as a test of communion, what is accomplished by an exposition of the ancient order? Campbell answered that question in the series’s first article. “A restoration of the ancient order of things,” he

⁵⁹ Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. 1,” *Christian Baptist* 2.7 (7 February 1825) 124.

⁶⁰ Leroy Garrett, “Reformation and Restoration: A Comparative Study of Martin Luther and Alexander Campbell,” in *Restoring the First-century Church in the Twentieth-first Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement*, edited by Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005) 268.

wrote, “is all that is necessary to the happiness and usefulness of Christians.”⁶¹ The ancient order is a means to the comfort and practical vitality of a Christian community, which is a kind of perfecting or sanctifying of the community. This is communal sanctification rather than foundational Christian identity. The restored order functions as a means of grace that enables believers to more fully experience their faith in community, actualizes the visible unity of the church as congregations conform to it, and tends toward the conversion of the world. A united church—in both faith (evangelical core) and practice (ecclesial forms according to the ancient order)—is equipped for mission, which is the primary task of the church.

In other words, Campbell’s project for the restoration of the ancient order as well as the ancient gospel is an agenda within “Evangelical Protestantism” rather than in opposition to it. Campbell never intended his ancient order to become a particular version of Protestantism around which a sect would emerge. That is the very thing Campbell adamantly opposed as sects were built upon what is unique. Rather, the ancient order practiced Christianity minus the particularities of modern Protestantism without unchristianizing Protestants.

Conclusion

Like the term Reformation, Protestantism could have a positive or a negative meaning for Campbell. Where reformations simply mean reforming existing institutions (e.g., reforming “popery”), they are nothing more than daughters of their “harlot mother.”⁶² Where Protestantism means different sects divided among themselves, they are nothing more than little “popedoms.” In such a case, just as

⁶¹ Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. 1,” 128.

⁶² Campbell sometimes used this mother/daughter language; cf. “Reply,” 432.

there was a need for a “reformation from Popery,” so there is also a need for “a *reformation from Protestantism*.”⁶³ Consequently, in 1853 Campbell wrote, “the restoration of original Christianity, and not the reformation of Popery or of Protestantism, is the polar star of all our aims and efforts *ecclesiastic*.”⁶⁴ When reformation is “radical and thorough,” it is effectively “*the restoration of original Christianity*,” that is, it renews the practice as well as the faith of New Testament Christians.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, when Protestantism owns its own core principles and confesses an evangelical faith, then it is Christian even if its “present order of things” is yet unreformed. This “spiritual” or “evangelical” Protestantism, along with its political cousin, is a bright hope for the conversion of the world to Jesus the Christ. Indeed, as Richard Hughes wrote, Campbell recognized “the seeds of primitive Christianity within the highest ideals of Protestantism,” and though he “refused to champion the Protestant denominations,” Campbell “gladly championed the Protestant *faith*.”⁶⁶

In this “spiritual” or “evangelical” sense, Campbell, as Richard Harrison noted, “affirmed that he was a Protestant, and that his movement was an attempt to carry the Reformation forward.”⁶⁷ Campbell intended to “finish what Luther and

⁶³ Alexander Campbell, “No. 6,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6.10 (October 1835) 434-5.

⁶⁴ Alexander Campbell, “The Current Reformation—No. I,” *Millennial Harbinger* 3.2 (4th series; February 1853) 61 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁵ Campbell, “Preface,” (1837) 3.

⁶⁶ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 37.

⁶⁷ Richard L. Harrison, “Alexander Campbell on Luther and the Reformation,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 19.4 (October 1984) 149.

Calvin had begun.”⁶⁸ In Campbell’s view, when this unfinished business was complete, the Restoration Era would outstrip the fame and significance of the Reformation Era because not only would it finish what the Reformation started, but the Restoration Era would launch the Millennial Era, which would involved the evangelization of the whole world. For “just in so far as the ancient order of things, or the religion of the New Testament, is restored,” Campbell wrote, “just so far has the Millennium commenced, and so far have its blessings been enjoyed.”⁶⁹

The unfinished business of the Protestant Reformation, then, was essentially two-fold. First, Campbell, as his father before him in the *Declaration and Address*, yearned for the restoration of the unity of the church. The Protestant Reformation had deformed through its incessant squabbles, divisions, and creedal lines. Through a return to its core values, Campbell believed Protestants could unite upon the foundation of Jesus the Christ, live in peace with each other, and cooperate together for the conversion of the world. This was the original purpose of the Christian Association of Washington that produced the *Declaration and Address* in 1809. In this sense, the original vision of the Stone-Campbell Movement was mission, and they were convicted that this mission is most effective when Christians are united in their faith.

Second, as a ecclesiastic means to that end, Campbell envisioned a more thorough reform, a radical reform, which he came to call a “restoration of the ancient order and the restoration of the ancient gospel.” This, if embraced by all,

⁶⁸ Leroy Garrett, *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An Anecdotal History of Three Churches* (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Co., 1981) 7.

⁶⁹ Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things. No. 1,” 128.

would facilitate the union and cooperation of Christians. If the Protestant societies would radically reform the “present order of things” in conformity to the “ancient order of things,” then those societies might achieve visible Christian union, and through Christian union those societies would cooperate for the conversion of the world (mission). At the same time, however, the restoration of the ancient order is not a boundary that circumscribes the center but a method for bringing the present order “up to the standard of the New Testament” for the sake of the health and mission of the church.⁷⁰

Recognizing the ecclesiastic character of the restoration of the ancient order as a method enables us to recognize the unity of the church as the primary unfinished business of the Protestant Reformation even as “the conversion of the world” or mission is the primary task of the Christian Faith itself. When restorationism subverts the unity of the Faith, it hinders the “conversion of the world,” but when restorationism serves the unity of the Faith it leads to the “conversion of the world;” it leads to mission.⁷¹

But, I add, restorationism is neither the Faith nor its unity; it is only a means toward the end; sometimes it is fruitful, sometimes not.⁷² When his theological heirs made restorationism the centerpiece of the movement, they exalted his “ecclesiastic” reforms to the level of the evangelical core. From this particularity, a

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. II.,” *Christian Baptist* 2.8 (7 March 1825) 135.

⁷² See Keith D. Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016) 7-20. Thomas Campbell himself, in the *Declaration and Address*, invited “brethren” to “point out a better way to regain and preserve that Christian unity and charity expressly enjoined upon the church of God” (cited by Stanglin, 12).

new Protestant sect emerged within Protestant ecclesiasticism. Whereas N. B. Hardeman titled his sermon "Reformers and Restorers," one of Campbell's' most significant self-descriptive articles is entitled "Reformers *Not* Schismatics."