CHRISTIAN STUDIES
SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

Volume 28 / 2016

Keith Stanglin
Editor

Michael R. Weed   M. Todd Hall
Founding Editor   Managing Editor

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Volume 28   2016

Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, "Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable." That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational super-structure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety— exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

Keith D. Stanglin
Editor
stanglin@austingrad.edu

Theological Orientation for Churches Of Christ: Resourcing Alexander Campbell's Trinitarian *Christian System*

John Mark Hicks

> A religion not honoring God the Father of all—not relying upon the person, mission, and death of the WORD INCARNATE—not inspired, cherished, animated, and inflamed by the Holy Spirit dwelling in my soul, is a cheat, a base counterfeit.[1]

> The "Christian Religion" confesses one "divine nature" and "three persons—the FATHER, the WORD and the HOLY SPIRIT."[2]

"The Christian System" is a series of numbered paragraphs under twenty-eight chapter headings, which provide a relatively comprehensive summary of Christian theology, or, as Alexander Campbell put it, "a completeness…in reference to the present demands of society."[3] The essay first appeared in the second edition of Campbell's *Christianity Restored* when the volume was retitled *The Christian System*.[4] Campbell issued several editions, and it became one of his most frequently and widely reprinted tomes.

---

[1] Alexander Campbell, "To B. W. Stone," *Millennial Harbinger* New Series 5 (September 1841): 401.

[2] Alexander Campbell, "Unitarianism, or, Remarks on Christian Union. No. II," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 3 (July 1846): 393.

[3] Alexander Campbell, "The Christian System," *Millennial Harbinger* New Series 3 (October 1839): 456.

[4] Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored* (Bethany, VA: M'Vey and Ewing, 1835) and Campbell, *Christian System* (Pittsburg: Forrester and Campbell, 1839). Campbell

I return to this classic work for several reasons. First, his essay is thoroughly Trinitarian (though this is rarely recognized), and a Trinitarian and inductive reading of Scripture shapes Campbell's presentation of the Christian system. Second, within recent years, theologians within Churches of Christ have increasingly called for rooting theology in an explicitly Trinitarian understanding of God. C. Leonard Allen, Ronald Highfield, Mark Powell, and Kelly Carter, among others, represent this trend.[5] Third, Campbell's approach to the Christian system is *catholic*, *narratival*, and *biblical*, which resonates well with my own theological interests. It is *catholic* because it locates the Stone-Campbell Movement within the "great tradition" of the Christian faith. It is *narratival* because it mimics the redemptive narrative of Scripture, epitomized in the Apostles' Creed. It is *biblical* because each chapter is replete with Scripture quotations set against the backdrop of that narrative. In this article, I tease out how Campbell's "Christian System" may help orient theological reflection within Churches of Christ in a more Trinitarian form.

The Theological Context of Campbell's *Christian System*

As every cursory reader knows, the esteemed reformer wanted to represent biblical ideas with biblical terms. Consequently, he rejected "Trinity," "Trinitarian," "Triune God," "Eternal Generation," "Eternal Procession," as "metaphysical jargon."[6] He avoided what he called "metaphysical abstrac-

---

did not like the original title since he thought it a rather arrogant claim. It was published with that title in his absence (cf. Campbell, "Events of 1823 and 1827," *Millennial Harbinger* New Series 2 [October 1838]: 466). The 1839 edition is available here: http://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tcs2/TCS200A.HTM

[5] C. Leonard Allen, *Things Unseen: Churches of Christ In (and After) the Modern Age* (Abilene: Leafwood Publishers, 2004); C. Leonard Allen and Danny Gray Swick, *Participating in God's Life: Two Crossroads for Churches of Christ* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2001); Ron Highfield, *Great is the Lord: Theology for the Praise of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Mark E. Powell, *Centered in God: The Trinity and Christian Spirituality* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2014), and Kelly D. Carter, *The Trinity in the Stone-Campbell Movement: Restoring the Heart of Christian Faith* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2015).

[6] Alexander Campbell and N. L. Rice, *A Debate Between Rev. A. Campbell and Rev. N. L. Rice* (Lexington: A. T. Skillman & Son, 1844), 863.

tions"[7] or "abstract speculation."[8] Nevertheless, by the late 1830s, Campbell grew concerned about the relationship between his reforming movement, the Unitarians of New England, and the Christian Connexion. In the 1840s this blossomed into a clear renunciation of the theological core of Unitarianism and the articulation, despite his avoidance of scholastic language, of an explicit Trinitarian theology.

The emergence of Campbell's strong Trinitarian language is directly related to the union of the "Reformers" with Barton W. Stone's "Christians" in the 1830s and the Christian Connexion's movement toward Unitarianism in the 1840s. In Campbell's eyes, Stone's theology was fundamentally Unitarian—he denied the full deity of the Son as well as the Son's role as sin-offering. In this atmosphere, Campbell invited Stone to discuss the atonement in the *Millennial Harbinger*,[9] which began in the summer of 1840 and ended in the fall of 1841.[10] When Campbell debated the Presbyterian N. L. Rice in 1844, Rice pointed out how Stone affirmed neither the eternal character of the person who became incarnate nor the efficacious nature of his death for sin.[11] In response, while Campbell did not agree with Stone, he suggested the Reformation's forbearance with Stone and like-minded individuals was a "redeeming policy."[12] From the late 1830s to the mid-1840s, Campbell conducted what amounted to a campaign to unite the movement and locate it within the "great tradition" of the Christian faith.

In 1839 Campbell published *The Christian System*. Most of the material published in the book was reprinted from his 1835 *Christianity Restored*. The major difference was the substitution of "The Christian System" for "Principles of Interpretation." Why does Campbell substitute a theological orientation for a hermeneutical one, especially when Campbell regarded hermeneu-

---

[7] Alexander Campbell, "Definitions and Answers to Questions—No. I," *Millennial Harbinger* New Series 4 (February 1840): 81.

[8] Alexander Campbell, "To Brother Henry Grew," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (April 1833): 154.

[9] Campbell, "Definitions and Answers," 82.

[10] The essays are available at http://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/bstone/mh/ATONE00.HTM.

[11] Campbell and Rice, *Debate*, 829–30, 853–54.

[12] Campbell and Rice, *Debate*, 865.

tics as such a critical tool for his restoration agenda? The persistent presence of Unitarian Christology among the "Christians" provided the occasion for his essay whose focus is not simply to summarize the Christian faith but to overturn Unitarian Christology and locate the Reform movement within the "great tradition." Campbell added this essay, as the preface to the second edition described, to correct misperceptions by outsiders who believed the movement was deficient "on some very fundamental points of the Christian System."[13]

Several particulars indicate this. First, the discussion of sin offering consumes fifteen of the essay's ninety-five pages, which is obviously out of balance with the other twenty-seven chapters.[14] Second, Campbell's essay "The Christian System," assumes the "operation of THREE DIVINE PARTICIPANTS, of one self-existent, independent, incommunicable nature" is "fundamental."[15] Indeed, Campbell's "Summary of the Christian System of Facts," which constitutes chapter twenty-three, is ordered in triune fashion.[16] A triune understanding of God is, according to Campbell, "necessary to all rational and sanctifying views of religion."[17] Third, the publication of the *Christian System* apparently precipitated the Stone-Campbell discussion on atonement as some questioned his "style as too Trinitarian."[18]

The first essay of the book, also titled "The Christian System," serves three fundamental purposes. First, it locates the Reform movement within the broad tradition of Christianity and thereby dispels misconceptions about the movement and "prevent[s] misrepresentation of their views."[19] This anticipates Campbell's enthusiastic response to the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846, though he thought it was insufficiently "catholic" in spirit.[20]

---

[13] Campbell, *Christian System*, xvii.

[14] Campbell, *Christian System*, 36–51.

[15] Campbell, *Christian System*, 74. Cf. Carter, *Trinity in the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 78-81.

[16] Campbell, *Christian System*, 73–75.

[17] Campbell, *Christian System*, 73.

[18] Campbell, "Definitions and Answers," 82.

[19] Alexander Campbell, "Forrester & Campbell," *Millennial Harbinger* New Series 3 (July 1839): 336.

[20] Alexander Campbell, "Christian Union.—No. X. Evangelical Alliance—No. V," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series (1847): 253. Cf. William R. Baker, "Christian Churches (Independent): Are We Evangelical?" in *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell*

It also illustrates Campbell's interest in discussing the "great principles of the Christian system, which are opposed to those narrow and restricted bonds of union, which unite a few against the many."[21] Second, it provides a "connected view of the great outlines and elements of the Christian Institution," and it does so in view of the "all-absorbing question of Protestant Christendom," which is to unite "*all Christians*" into "*one great community*."[22] Consequently, Campbell provides a summary of Christian theology, which might serve as a framework for cooperation and harmony among Christians. As with the Evangelical Alliance, Campbell sought to "co-operate with them just as far and as long as they please to permit" him.[23] Third, it narrates a systematic theology of the Christian faith through a biblical-theological Trinitarian lens. Campbell seeks to re-present biblical theology through the "facts" of the Christian narrative, and the fundamental orienting "fact" is the triune personhood of the one God who is revealed in the history of Jesus the Messiah.

The Trinitarian Structure of the *Christian System*

Not surprisingly, Campbell does not use traditional language. His interest is explicitly biblical. For example, whereas relations within the Godhead before the incarnation were between "God, the word of God, and the Spirit of God," after the incarnation they are between "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[24] Campbell believes, in light of biblical terminology, the Word became Son through the incarnation, and this does not diminish the eternal personhood of the Word who was "with God" from the beginning.[25] This

---

Movement, ed. William R. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 31–36.

[21] Alexander Campbell, "Reply to Waterman," *Millennial Harbinger* 5 (February 1834) 60.

[22] Campbell, *Christian System*, xvii.

[23] Campbell, "Christian Union.—No. X," 255.

[24] Campbell, *Christian System*, 25. Cf. "In *creation* it was simply GOD, the WORD of God, the SPIRIT of God. In providence and moral government it is the *Lord God*, the *Word*, and the *Holy Spirit*. In the gospel it is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Guest" (Campbell, "Christian Union.—No. VII. Evangelical Alliance—No. II," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 4 [February 1847]: 82).

[25] See Carter, *Trinity in the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 156–57, for an explanation of this theological move.

illustrates Campbell's fundamental principle in thinking about God: the "modus of Divine existence, as well as the modus of Divine operations in creation, providence, and redemption" are "inscrutable and incomprehensible" to "our finite minds." Consequently, we must root our theological reasoning in the reality of divine work and never "stretch our inquiries beyond the *terra firma* of revelation."[26] As a result, Campbell is more concerned with the Trinitarian persons in relation to creation (the "economic Trinity") than in eternal relations with one another (the "immanent Trinity").

Campbell, therefore, both structures theology around and limits it to the explicit facts and language of revelation. Campbell's structure is "creation, providence, and redemption." He sometimes calls them nature (creation), government (providence), and redemption, which corresponds with God's role as "Creator, Lawgiver and Redeemer."[27] The "Father, Son, and Spirit" each have their "own peculiar work and glory in the three great works of Creation, Government, and Redemption."[28] His "Summary of the Christian System of Facts" in chapter twenty-three describes the "peculiar work and glory" of each.[29] The whole redemptive story is viewed through the lens of the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

In the "economy of redemption," the Son and the Spirit are subordinate, and this is where Jehovah is "revealed in the *names* of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."[30] These "names" represent relations only within the economy of redemption and do not refer to the relations of the three divine participants in creation and providence as well as "before time."[31] The names reveal the relation of the Father, Son, and Spirit to each other in terms of their mode of existence and operation within the economy of redemption. In other words, the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are redemptive—Christian— terms. The work of creation and providence belongs to the Trinity before the incarnation—God, Word of God, and Spirit of God.

---

[26] Campbell, "To Brother Henry Grew," 155.

[27] Campbell, *Christian System*, 20

[28] Campbell, *Christian System*, 25.

[29] Campbell, *Christian System*, 74–75.

[30] Alexander Campbell, "Grew—Part 2," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (August 1833): 400.

[31] Campbell, *Christian System*, 25.

Given this structuring, the relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are essential for the understanding and practice of Christianity, according to Campbell. The conclusion of chapter five, "The Spirit of God"—which follows chapter three "God" and chapter four "The Son of God"—summarizes the significance of these chapters as the foundation of the whole Christian system.

> The divine doctrine of these holy and incomprehensible relations in the Divinity, is so inwrought and incorporated with all the parts of the sacred books—so identified with all the dispensations of religion, and so essential to the mediatorship of Christ, that it is impossible to make any real and divine proficiency in the true knowledge of God—of man—of reconciliation—or remission of sins—of eternal life—or in the piety and divine life of Christ's religion—without a clear and distinct perception of it, as well as a firm and unshaken faith and confidence in it, as we trust still to make more evident in the sequel.[32]

Campbell's "Christian System" has a Trinitarian structure. His understanding of the Trinity is eminently orthodox except for his denial of eternal sonship (though he does not deny eternal personhood). Even in this, however, he denies it because it implies, he argues, an ontological subordination of the Son to the Father within the immanent Trinity. Campbell wants to ascribe to the Logos (and Spirit) a deity equal to God (economically the Father) as the three share the same divine nature and thus are equally divine. The danger in this construct is tritheism but Campbell avoids that by affirming their singular ontology.

Campbell's Trinitarian thought emphasizes the social dimension of the divine life. The divine nature exists in three "relations" (or "modes of existence"). Rather than thinking in mathematical terms as if God were a "mathematical unit," Campbell draws on the analogy of "*relations* in human plurality." Though all humans share the same nature, they do not share the same relations. Human relations are defined by three relations of "derivation and modes of existence"—Adam as the original creation, Eve as derived from Adam, and children as born of the two. "While Eve proceeded from Adam in one mode, and Cain proceeded from Adam and Eve in another, all the resi-

---

[32] Campbell, *Christian System*, 26.

due of human nature is participated without any new relation or mode of impartation." [33]

> We can find something analogous to Trinitarianism in human nature; for human nature exists in three personal relations, and in but three essential personal relations. There was Adam possessing all human nature in one form in himself. There was Eve, emanating from him, and possessing all his nature, without abstracting any thing from him, leaving Adam in full possession of both a person and a nature. He had still a nature common with Eve, and a person peculiar to himself. Again, there was a child emanating from both these, but from neither of them alone, possessing all the nature of Adam and all the nature of Eve; possessing, indeed, all human nature, and yet a person distinct from both Adam and Eve. Here, then, are three persons possessing one nature—three personal relations in one common nature. [34]

Given that humanity is created in the image of God, the analogy—recognizing, of course, the transcendent God cannot be contained by any such analogies drawn from created reality—means we should conceive God "as having plurality, relation, and society in himself." There is a "plurality of personal manifestations in the divine nature." [35] This is not a matter of "inference only" since the economic revelation of God in "the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit" is the "revealed relation of three persons." It is on this "principle"—"I send thee," "I and thou send him," and "Jehovah and his Spirit has sent me"—that the "Christian economy is arranged and developed." [36] Just as it "was not good for man to be alone," so also "God never was alone." [37]

---

[33] Campbell, *Christian System*, 21.

[34] Alexander Campbell, "Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Union—No. III," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series, 3 (August 1846): 451. Campbell (452) believed his reasoning should not be dismissed because of "its novelty, its originality, or its pecularity."

[35] Campbell, *Christian System*, 21.

[36] Campbell, "To Brother Henry Grew," 159.

[37] Alexander Campbell, "Letter from Henry Grew—Part 1," *Millennial Harbinger* 4 (July 1833): 309.

Trinitarian Theology as "Necessary" Fact

Campbell had more problems with Arian, Unitarian, and Socinian Christologies than he did the Trinitarian one because Trinitarians do not deny (1) the eternal and thus fully divine relation of God and the Word and (2) the efficacy of the death of a Jesus who is less than divine can do nothing more than any other human. Campbell could be neither Arian nor Socinian because, in those systems, the death of Jesus becomes the death of one whose person is less than divine.[38] Since a creature "owes life" and everything else to the Creator, "if my Redeemer," Campbell argued, "was never more than a creature, he never could do more than pay his own debts." If he is not divine, then if he does not share in the society of the divine nature and therefore no one owes "but a few cents more to Jesus Christ than to any of the ancient martyrs."[39] Unitarianism, Arianism, and Socinianism "undeify the second Adam" and thus deny the gospel. It cannot, therefore, be a "gospel of the grace of God." "Divinity, absolute Divinity," Campbell writes, "in all its grandeur, dwelt in him, and shall forever dwell in him."[40] This is a necessary fact for the Christian system.

In his debate with Rice, Campbell insisted that there were "but two grand principles in Christianity—two laws revealed and developed" that are the "divine constitution of remedial mercy." These "*two* ideas" envelop "the *person* of the Messiah and his *office*." To confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, encompasses these two ideas and constitutes the "full confession of the christian [*sic*] faith." Indeed, "a clear perception, and a cordial belief of these two facts will make any man a christian."[41] It is the "central truth of the Christian system."[42] It is the "fundamental fact" of Christianity.[43] At the heart of this confession is the deity of the person whose death is a sacrificial sin offering. The divine character of the person is the root fact

---

[38] Campbell, "To Brother Henry Grew," 157–58.

[39] Campbell, "Grew—Part 2," 396.

[40] Alexander Campbell, "The Claims of the Messiah," *Millennial Harbinger* Fifth Series, 6 (January 1863) 11.

[41] Campbell and Rice, *Debate*, 822.

[42] Campbell, "Christian Union—No. V," 690.

[43] Alexander Campbell, "Foundations of Christian Union," in *Christianity Restored*, 118.

grounding the efficacy of the sin offering. Trinitarian theology is a presupposition of this "fundamental fact."

The importance of this for Campbell is evident in his dialogue with the Christian Connexion, who were in discussions with the American Unitarian Association of Boston in 1845–1846. Campbell insisted that "agreement in the doctrine concerning Christ, or a *declaration of our faith in the person, mission, and character of Jesus Christ*" was "essential to Christian union." The foundation of unity must be "who" and "what" Jesus is.[44] When Campbell engages Unitarianism his primary problem with its theology is this: it does not esteem the person of Jesus highly enough, and consequently it does not esteem his work highly, either. He extensively quoted the views of Unitarians on the person and work of the Son.[45] "Any theory," Campbell wrote, "that degrades my Redeemer to the rank of any mere creature, and his death to that of a distinguished martyr, expresses opinions more subversive of the Christian faith than those which Paul notices as making Christ of none effect."[46]

According to Campbell, one must affirm the "true and proper divinity or godhead of my Lord Messiah, and the real sin-expiating value and efficacy of his death, and of his death alone, based upon his peerless worth and divine majesty" which are "the rock of my salvation—the basis of all my hopes of immortality—the very anchor of my soul."[47] Part of the function of Campbell's Trinitarian theology is to secure the theological meaning of the empirical fact of Jesus' death. As a death for sin, motivated by the love of the Father, it secures the expiation of sin only on the ground that the death of Jesus was the death of the divine Son of God. This was a divine self-substitution for sinful humanity.

Campbell's rejection of Unitarianism, then, was a function of his Trinitarian theology. His response to Unitarianism in 1846 is similar to the re-

---

[44] Alexander Campbell, "Remarks—No. I," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 3 (April 1846): 222.

[45] Alexander Campbell, "Unitarianism, or, Remarks on Christian Union. No. II," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series, 3 (July 1846): 389–92.

[46] Campbell, "Christian Union—No. V," 692.

[47] Campbell, "To B. W. Stone," 401.

sponse of Trinitarians whom he finds "incomparably more rational and intelligible" than the Unitarians.[48] The Unitarians

> have *one personal God*—no *personal word of God*—no *personal Spirit of God*. They have, therefore, no society, no plurality in the divine nature. Nay, they have no divine *nature* at all, for with them *God is one person!*[49]

This, according to Campbell, denies the meaning of Christian baptism as we are baptized into the "three names of three persons" so that there is "as much personal name, glory, and honor in any one of these three as in another." This is what we confess in baptism. We confess one God in three relations—"three distinct persons entitled to the honor and reverence of every Christian convert."[50]

A Narratival Hermeneutical Orientation

On one hand, it seems rather odd that Campbell would compose such a systematic account of the Christian faith. Indeed, many sarcastically noted how the great opponent of "system-making" authored a "system." On the other hand, Campbell does not mean "system" in a scholastic sense, that is, a series of deductions from basic propositions. On the contrary, his sense of "system" excludes abstractions and speculations. Since "no system is insular and independent, no system can be understood abstractly."[51] For Campbell, the Christian "system" is a shorthand way of talking about the Christian narrative, which enumerates the facts Christians believe. These are understood inductively through reading Scripture, rather than inferred deductively from theological propositions.

Thomas Olbricht suggests Campbell, along with Walter Scott and others, embraced a narratival, biblical-theological approach to Christian theology. This is evident, according to Olbricht, in Campbell's "Christian System."[52] The Bible, Campbell writes, "is a book of facts, not of opinions, theo-

---

[48] Alexander Campbell, "Christian Union—No. III," 451.

[49] Alexander Campbell, "Remarks. No. II," 392.

[50] Alexander Campbell, "Remarks. No. II," 393.

[51] Campbell, *Christian System*, 1.

[52] Thomas H. Olbricht, "Recovery of Covenantal Narratival Biblical Theology in the Restoration Movement," in *And the* WORD *Became Flesh: Studies in History, Commu-*

ries, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. It is a book of awful facts, grand and sublime beyond description. These facts reveal God and man."[53]

When Campbell writes "facts" he does not mean abstracted propositions or an atomistic collection of data. On the contrary, facts are "the history of the past" or "anticipations of the future," which constitute "four-fifths" of Scripture.[54] Facts are "the alpha and the omega of both Jewish and Christian revelations."[55]

What Campbell does in the "Christian System" is draw out the facts of the redemptive narrative in order to offer a generous and unifying account of the Christian faith, which might provide a solid foundation for unity among Christians. "The work of redemption," he wrote, "is a system of work, or deeds, on the part of Heaven," and these deeds are "facts." Indeed, "fact," according to Campbell, "means something done;" it is a "deed," an historical act or event.[56] The Christian system is, essentially, a narrative of the great events of redemptive history by which God redeems.

> The gospel system is a system of redemption—a deliverance of its subjects from ignorance, guilt, and bondage. It contemplates a new creation—a transformation of man in body, soul, and spirit. It is, therefore, a great system of physical, moral, and spiritual means and ends. Hence its doctrine, its precepts, and its promises are but developments of a remedial system, originating in the benevolence of God, guided by his wisdom and perfected by his power.[57]

Within his essay, Campbell provides a summary of this narrative under the heading "The Purposes of God Concerning Man" (chapter eight). His succinct paragraphs carry us through the redemptive narrative of Scripture and suggest this brief outline, which I have constructed from the chapter:

---

nication and Scripture in Memory of Michael W. Casey, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and David Fleer (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 76–77.

[53] Campbell, *Christian System*, 17.

[54] Campbell, *Christian System*, 17–18.

[55] Campbell, "Foundations of Christian Union," in *Christian System*, 113.

[56] Campbell, "Foundations of Christian Union," in *Christian System*, 113–14.

[57] Alexander Campbell, "Tracts for the People—No. XIII. Baptism—No. X. The Design of Baptism—No. I.," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 4 (May 1847): 241–42.

- "The universe issued from the goodness of God," which expresses divine love.
- Humanity originated "moral evil in God's dominion."
- God purposed a redemptive "system," the "Christian system," before the foundation of the world to arrest the "contagion of sin" within the universe.
- This remedial system was implemented from the beginning and announced through promises to "Eve, to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, &c."
- "All the *purposes* and *promises* of God are in Christ," which means they were "consummated in and by him" and "contemplated, covenanted, and systematized in him and through him before the *foundation of the world*."
- The "whole remedial or gospel system was purposed, arranged, and established upon the basis of the revealed distinctions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."
- "Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, was elected…and appointed to be the foundation of the new creation."
- "In consequence of these gracious promises of God…
  - "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us…
  - became a Prophet, a High Priest, and a King over men…
  - became the righteous servant of Jehovah…
  - died, was buried, and rose again…
  - ascended where he had been before—then, in union with his Father, sent the Holy Spirit
  - who proceeded forth…to consummate the sanctification of his people….
  - [enthroned as] head over all things to complete the triumphs of his cause…
  - to lead many sons to glory—to raise the dead, judge the world, and revenge Satan…
  - to create new heavens and new earth, and to establish eternal peace, and love, and joy through all the new dominions."
- "The present elect of God are, then, those who are *in Christ*."

In essence, this is an expansion or elaboration of the Apostles' Creed, consistent with Campbell's appreciation for that ancient creed.[58] The Apostles' Creed, he wrote, "contains all the prominent christian facts,"[59] and it is "a

---

[58] See Gary Holloway, "Both Catholic and Protestant: Alexander Campbell and Tradition," *Christian Studies* 15 (1995-1996): 46–54.

[59] Campbell, "Dialogue on Heresy," *Millennial Harbinger* 3 (August 1832): 405.

brief narrative of facts, and of all the great gospel facts."[60] Campbell's "Christian System" puts meat on the bones of the Apostles' Creed.

This system of facts, or redemptive narrative, is fundamentally expressed in a single proposition (rightly understood—which is why the larger system of facts is important). That proposition is: *Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God*. This confession includes the "facts of [the] Messiah's life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven." As such, it "is the most fundamental proposition in the moral universe. It is the foundation of the system of redemption."[61] "This is the central truth of the Christian system" upon which Christian unity is founded.[62] It encapsulates the narrative, and assumes a Trinitarian theology.

Conclusion

Campbell's "Christian System" affirms the economic Trinity as a fact. This shapes his theology, Christology, pneumatology, and soteriology. But, interestingly, it does not significantly shape his ecclesiology, which is more rooted in "positive law" than it is the social relations of the Triune God.

Significantly, the Trinitarian "Summary" (chapter twenty-three) in the "Christian System" precedes his discussion of ecclesiology and ministry, which are: "Body of Christ" (chapter twenty-four), "Christian Ministry" (chapter twenty-five), "Christian Discipline" (chapter twenty-six), "Expediency" (chapter twenty-seven), and "Heresy" (chapter twenty-eight). Ecclesiology is essentially tacked onto the "remedial system" as a structure built on the remedial foundation but constructed without Trinitarian principles. Ecclesiology, then, operates on its own theological and hermeneutical principles essentially unaffected by Trinitarian theology. This tends to generate an emphasis on form rather than relation as the theological ontology is focused on positive prescriptions rather than relationality and communion. Stan Grenz offered a similar observation in noting how Stone-Campbell ecclesiology is too "Christocentric" and needs a more robust Trinitarian flavor.[63]

---

[60] Campbell, "Reply to Barnabas," *Millennial Harbinger* 3 (December 1832): 602.

[61] Alexander Campbell, "Tracts for the People. No. IV. Faith," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 3 (February 1846): 82.

[62] Alexander Campbell, "What is a Sect?—Who is a Sectary?—Are the Baptists a Sect?," *Millennial Harbinger* Fourth Series 1 (September 1851): 523.

[63] Stanley J. Grenz, "An Evangelical Response to Ferguson, Holloway & Lowery: Restoring a Trinitarian Understanding of the Church in Practice," in *Evangelicalism*

In Campbell's rejection of Unitarianism in 1846, however, he shows hints of applying a Trinitarian theology to the kind of relation God would have with humanity. Humanity was created to have "communion and society with God." God and humanity "first dwelt together in a terrestrial heaven," but humanity rebelled and was excluded from Paradise. While in creation God dwelt with humanity, in redemption God "dwells *in*" humanity so that the redeemed may be "brought back to live in God." This sounds teasingly close to the kind of mystical mutual indwelling of the Eastern Church, but in Campbell's mind it more probably fits with the factuality of God's relationship with us as drawn from the Gospel of John. Eschatologically, Campbell believed God will dwell "in and with" humanity in a renewed earth, a regenerated new heavens and new earth.[64] The tease, however, is humanity's participation in and communion with the society of God. In some manner, Campbell believed humanity dwells in God and God dwells in them in such a way that they share the same society. This is not an ontological union, but a communion between divine and human persons. This kind of Trinitarian thinking should shape the whole of our theology, including our ecclesiology.

At the same time, Campbell's narrative of facts, epitomized in the Apostles' Creed, locates him within the "great tradition," and he is quite willing to see himself in that way. Campbell does not believe Christian unity is found in the "ancient order" (ecclesiological form), even though he would prefer the full restoration of that "ancient order" as a way forward for Christian unity and the full assurance of believers. Campbell, however, never regarded conformity to that "ancient order" a test of fellowship or necessary for unity among fellow Christians. He is quite explicit about this. Campbell "never made" compliance to the ancient order "a test of christian character or terms of christian communion."[65]

& *the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. William R. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 231–32.

[64] Alexander Campbell, "Unitarianism as Connected with Christian Union—No. IV," *Millennial Harbinger* Third Series 3 (November 1846): 637.

[65] Campbell, "Replication No. II. to Spencer Clark," *Christian Baptist* 5 (3 September 1827): 370.

On the contrary, all that was necessary for Christian communion and character was the "Christian system," that is, its narrated facts. This is a shared heritage among followers of Jesus and the common confession of believers throughout the centuries. That narrative contains all the facts, commands, and promises necessary for Christian communion and character. It is, in that sense, an ecumenical orientation.

Contributors

John Mark Hicks is Professor of Theology at Lipscomb University.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Daniel Austin Napier is Associate Professor of Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack C. and Ruth Wright Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Keith D. Stanglin is Associate Professor of Historical Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology