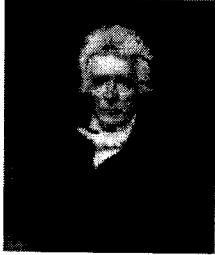


A Theological History of Restoration Movement Thought, Part 4 (Alexander Campbell and baptism)

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The driving force behind the Restoration Movement's doctrine of baptism is the writing of Alexander Campbell. Campbell's early writing certainly seemed to suggest that he considered baptism essential to salvation. And this was conventional wisdom within much of the Movement.

However, Stone had never considered baptism essential, considering receipt of the Spirit, as evidenced by a reformed life, a truer test of salvation. Nonetheless, he practiced baptism.

Campbell's views became much clearer in a series of articles in response to the so-called Lunenburg Letter written in 1837. When asked whether there are Christians among the "sects" or denominations, Campbell was glad to answer--

In reply to this conscientious sister, I observe, that if there be no Christians in the Protestant sects, there are certainly none among the Romanists, none among the Jews, Turks, Pagans; and therefore no Christians in the world except ourselves, or such of us as keep, or strive to keep, all the commandments of Jesus. Therefore, for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world; and the promises concerning the everlasting kingdom of Messiah have failed, and the gates of hell have prevailed against his church! This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects.

But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will. ...

I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven. ...

There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of faith, absolutely essential to a Christian--though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. ... But he that thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of clear and full vision.

Campbell taught baptism much as we teach it today, but refused to make it an absolute necessity. Rather, it would be sufficient that a believer obeys the command as well as he knows to do. A Christian could not refuse baptism once he learns of the command, but his salvation is not dependent on being correctly instructed.

Not surprisingly, this response was highly controversial and led to many protests, but Campbell would not budge from his position.

Now the nice point of opinion on which some brethren differ is this: Can a person who simply, not perversely, mistakes the outward baptism, have the inward? We all agree that he who willfully or negligently perverts the outward cannot have the inward. But can he who, through a simple mistake, involving no perversity of mind, has misapprehended the outward baptism, yet submitting to it according to his view of it, have the inward baptism which changes his state and has praise of God, though not of all men? is the precise question. To which I answer, that, in my opinion, it is possible. Farther than this I do not affirm.

My reasons for this opinion are various; two of which we have only time and space to offer at this time. Of seven difficulties it is the least; two of these seven, which, on a contrary hypothesis would occur, are insuperable:—The promises concerning an everlasting Christian church have failed; and then it would follow that not a few of the brightest names on earth of the last three hundred years should have to be regarded as subjects of the kingdom of Satan!!

If baptism as practiced by the Restoration Movement (and taught in the Bible) is essential, Campbell says, then for hundreds of years there have been no Christians and the church was absent from the earth, despite God's promise of an everlasting church. And many great men of faith would have to be considered lost in their sins.

The Movement did not uniformly follow Campbell on this point, which is remarkable considering his dominant influence on other points. Some churches adopted open membership. Others required baptism for membership but treated unbaptized believers as fellow Christians. Others treated all unimmersed as damned. The controversy continues until today.

I should add that Campbell was equally clear that he considered Baptist baptism sufficient and rejected efforts to rebaptize those baptized to obey God rather than for remission of sins. Indeed, he considered preaching rebaptism heresy—which was quite rare for Campbell.

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