

Alexander Campbell's Hermeneutical Rules and the Enslavement of Black People¹

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Alexander Campbell was deeply concerned with proper interpretation of the Bible. From extensive studies early in his career he distilled seven hermeneutical rules for rightly understanding and applying Scripture to one's life. Six of the rules reflect common sense critical principles, but his "essential" rule seven added a moral component that went beyond the intellectual. Campbell, however, failed to apply this essential rule to the enslavement of human beings.

My long-time intimate association with Alexander Campbell through years of writing a biography has given me a deep appreciation for this gifted and untiring servant of God. But it also has allowed me to push through the protective aura of sainthood that earlier church leaders, historians, and scholars formed around him. Some of the energy behind my critique of Campbell is, I suspect, fueled by guilt at sharing some of his less-than-noble attitudes.

In this brief study I draw from my work on Campbell's hermeneutic as it relates to his stance on slavery, race, and justice.²

¹ This essay was presented at the 2021 Annual *Stone-Campbell Journal* Reception at the 2021 Society of Biblical Literature meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

² Some of the scholars who have examined Campbell's hermeneutics and from whom I have learned are Burton Bradford Thurston, *Alexander Campbell's Principles of Hermeneutics* (ThD thesis, Harvard University, 1958); Walter Thomas Viner, "Logic of the Heart: Alexander Campbell's Rhetoric and Hermeneutics on Christian Identity, Slavery, and Church Organization" (PhD thesis, University of Memphis, 2009); Michael Casey, "The Origins of the Hermeneutics of Churches of Christ, Part One: The Reformed Tradition," *ResQ* 31.2 (1989) 75-91; Michael Casey, "The Origins of the Hermeneutics of Churches of Christ, Part Two: The Philosophical Background," *ResQ* 31.4 (1989) 193-206; John Mark Hicks, "Stone-Campbell Hermeneutics I—Campbell's Scholarly Baconianism," blog post, May 28, 2008, <https://johnmarkhicks.com/2008/05/28/stone-campbell-hermeneutics-i-campbells-scholarly-baconianism/>; and John Mark Hicks, "Stone-Campbell Hermeneutics II—Campbell's Reformed Hermeneutic," blog post, May 28, 2008, <https://johnmarkhicks.com/2008/05/28/stone-campbell-hermeneutics-ii-campbells-reformed-hermeneutic/>.

CAMPBELL'S HERMENEUTICS

The core tenets of Campbell's hermeneutics are largely accessible in his 1835 edited *Millennial Harbinger* articles, titled by the publisher *Christianity Restored*; his 1839 revision of that book published as *The Christian System*; and introductory material in his edition of the New Testament, *The Living Oracles*, first published in 1826.³

In both *Christianity Restored* and *The Christian System*, Campbell was clear about the nature of Scripture.

The Bible is a book of facts, not of opinions, theories, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. . . . These facts reveal God and man, and contain within them the reasons of all piety and righteousness, or what is commonly called religion and morality. . . . History is . . . the plan pursued in both testaments; . . . History has to do with facts—and religion springs from them.⁴

In the first chapter of *Christianity Restored*, Campbell asserted in a manner reminiscent of John Locke's "state of nature" (detailed in chapter two of his 1690 "Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government") that the Bible's first hearers and readers understood its words like any human would understand someone speaking to them. The ability to do so was common to everyone by what he called a universal native art. You simply talk or write to people and make yourself understood. That's what God did in Scripture. But because languages and cultures evolve, it becomes necessary to explain proper principles of interpretation of ancient texts like the Bible. Even so, those principles are plain and easy to acquire. Carefully discerned and applied, Campbell insisted, these rules produce great unanimity in any area of knowledge: "All who work by the same rules, come to the same conclusions."⁵ Then he proceeded to develop those principles in the next seventy-five pages.

At the end of that long discussion, Campbell condensed his principles into seven "Rules," which also appear in the second chapter of the *Christian System*. These rules are the streamlined version of his hermeneutic. The first six are what would be expected in light of the previous seventy-five pages. Determine first the historical *circumstances* of the passage, then the original *speaker(s)* and *hearer(s)*, the

³ Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored: The Principal Extras of the Millennial Harbinger*, Revised and Corrected by A. Campbell (Bethany, VA: M'Vay and Ewing, 1835); Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System, In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, As Pleaded in the Current Reformation* (Pittsburg: Forrester & Campbell, 1839); *The Sacred Writings of the Apostles and Evangelists of Jesus Christ, Commonly Styled the New Testament, Translated from the Original Greek by George Campbell, James Macknight, and Philip Doddridge, Doctors of the Church of Scotland* (Buffaloe, VA: Alexander Campbell, 1826).

⁴ Campbell, *The Christian System*, 18. https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tcs2/TCS202.HTM.

⁵ Campbell, *Christianity Restored*, 15-17.

context of any word with multiple meanings, and the *point* of any figurative language—beyond which one cannot legitimately go.⁶

Enlightenment philosophy was clearly a major source of Alexander Campbell's hermeneutic. He combined Lockean convictions of the mind as a blank slate and simple ideas coming from sense perception and reflection, with Francis Bacon's inductive method of meticulous observation of the facts of Scripture, to form the basis for discerning all of God's truth for humanity. Anyone using the proper methods, who is not deceived by false philosophy or distracted by creeds and confessions, had the native ability to do this with Scripture just as with any other communication written or oral.

Years later in his 1852 magnum opus *Christian Baptism*, Campbell reiterated his utter confidence in the Baconian inductive method:

The doctrine of the Bible, on any particular subject of inquiry, can be clearly and satisfactorily ascertained only by a full induction of all that is found in it upon that subject. When the induction is perfect and complete and fully comprehended on any one point, we can never have any more divine light upon that subject. This is our method of learning and of teaching what the Holy Spirit has taught on any given subject.⁷

So far Campbell says nothing unexpected. His principles reflect a deep commitment to the reliability of human reason and a rational critical method of understanding Scripture. But then in the *Christian System* Campbell introduces Rule 7. "For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable—We must come within the understanding distance." This rule, described as "indispensable," goes well beyond his Lockean and Baconian commitments. Here he admits that something more than the rational intellectual approach he had just set out at length was necessary to understand Scripture.

Campbell, though agreeing with most of the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith on "The Holy Scripture" in his earlier rules, explicitly *rejected* the Confession's insistence that "the inward illumination of the Spirit of God" was "necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word."⁸

To Campbell, such a notion seemed to remove individual ability and responsibility and substitute a mystical uncontrollable force, and he could not accept such a premise. Yet at the deepest levels of his consciousness he knew there had to be

⁶ *Ibid.*, 96-97. The rules as they appear in *The Christian System* are listed in the Addendum at the end of the text of this article.

⁷ Alexander Campbell, *Christian Baptism with Its Antecedents and Consequents* (Bethany, VA: Alexander Campbell, 1852) 233.

⁸ *Westminster Confession I: 6*. <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf>.

something more—something that was not merely rational and intellectual—something he called “coming within the understanding distance.”

He describes this posture first as one of humility, and second, of fixating on God’s approval of and affection for us. A person carefully following all the principles and rules he had just laid out might become skillful in interpreting the words of Scripture yet be utterly incapable of truly interpreting God’s will:⁹

Humility of mind, . . . prepares the mind for the reception of this light; . . . opens the ears to hear the voice of God. Amidst the din of all the arguments from the flesh, the world, and Satan, a person is so deaf that he cannot hear the still small voice of God’s philanthropy. But receding from pride, covetousness, and false ambition; from the love of the world; and in coming within that circle, the circumference of which is unfeigned humility, and the centre of which is God himself—the voice of God is distinctly heard and clearly understood. All within this circle are taught by God; all without it are under the influence of the wicked one.¹⁰

In intensely impassioned language he asserts that all those who do come within the understanding distance would be “raptured with the moral scenes which the Bible unfolds.”

Campbell implies that *this* posture toward God and Scripture, unlike the Confession’s “inward illumination,” is within the individual’s control. Campbell clearly denied that there was any mystical component in coming within the “understanding distance” that would take away human agency. Yet this rule is, in my opinion, analogous to the Confession’s insistence that true understanding of Scripture necessarily requires more than merely intellectual effort.¹¹

⁹ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 2nd ed., 1839, Chapter 2, “The Bible,” https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tcs2/TCS202.HTM; Walter Thomas Viner, in his 2009 dissertation on Campbell’s “Logic of the Heart,” proposes that Campbell’s “Baconianism was mediated by an intuitive sensibility.” Walter Thomas Viner, “Logic of the Heart: Alexander Campbell’s Rhetoric and Hermeneutics on Christian Identity, Slavery, and Church Organization” (PhD dissertation, University of Memphis, 2009) 68-70.

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.* He may have feared some might accuse him of that, so he closes his principles and rules of interpretation with the strong assertion that the Bible is a book of historical *statements of fact*, and these facts reveal all the truth of religion and morality. There may be resonance with Campbell’s position with some forms of what is now called “virtue epistemology.” See “Virtue Epistemology” at <https://iep.utm.edu/virtueep/#:~:text=Virtue%20epistemology%20is%20a%20collection,an%20important%20and%20fundamental%20role.&text=These%20virtue%20epistemologists%20tend%20to,accounts%20of%20knowledge%20or%20justification>.

CAMPBELL AND SLAVERY

How then did these rules for understanding Scripture affect Campbell's view of the enslavement of Black people in the United States? Both he and his father had substantial critique of the institution when they arrived in America. His first editorial for the *Christian Baptist* in 1823 described the work of Christ as delivering the needy and redeeming their souls. The apostasy of the church was clear, he asserted, in "those Christians, who are daily extolling the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and at the same time, by a system of the most cruel oppression, separating the wife from the embraces of her husband, and the mother from her tender offspring; violating every principle, and rending every tie that endears life and reconciles man to his lot; and that forsooth, because might gives right, and a man is held guilty because his skin is a shade darker than the standard color of the times."¹² This early expression indicates his reaction to the idea and effects of white supremacy.

While a number of subsequent events affected Campbell's stance on slavery,¹³ by the time of the crisis posed by the division of the Baptist and Methodist denominations over slavery in the mid-1840s, Campbell's examination of the nature of slavery and its relation to Scripture, the church, and the individual Christian reflected a different attitude. In the eighth and final installment of his series "Our Position to American Slavery," he summarized his points and rested his case. Based on abundant Scripture testimony, the relation of master and slave was not in itself sinful or immoral. And while American slavery was unfavorable to individual and national prosperity, partly because it made it difficult for Christian masters and their families to develop "that refined and elevated personal and domestic happiness so desirable to any Christian household," the relation of slave to master could never be made "a term of Christian fellowship or a subject of discipline" if they were truly governed by the Bible.¹⁴

Ultimately, then, his critique of slavery was that it was a detriment to the advancement of white America. Campbell did not see the plight of enslaved Africans as a major concern for himself or his movement. He assumed, along with virtually all whites, the myth of white supremacy.

Much as I may sympathize with a black man, I love the white man more. As a political economist, and as a philanthropist, I have many reasons for preferring the prospects and conditions of the Free to the Slave states; but especially as a Christian, I sympathize much more with the owners of slaves, their heirs, and successors, than the slaves which they possess and bequeath.¹⁵

¹² Alexander Campbell, "The Christian Religion," *Christian Baptist* 1 (August 1, 1823) 25.

¹³ See Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 273-288.

¹⁴ Alexander Campbell, "Our Position to American Slavery—No. VIII," *Millennial Harbinger* (June 1845) 263.

¹⁵ Alexander Campbell, "Our Position to American Slavery—No. V," *Millennial Harbinger* (May 1845) 234.

During the crisis surrounding the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, in a long and detailed argument drawn from biblical examples that he claimed upheld the legitimacy of owning human beings for life, Campbell sarcastically accused abolitionists of creating a biblical text to justify their agenda. “All men are born free and equal,” he asserted, comes not from Scripture but from “Saint Voltaire, and baptized by Thomas Jefferson.”¹⁶ In other words, the idea of the essential equality of all people came from infidel sources, not God!

A CRITIQUE OF CAMPBELL’S VIEWS ON SLAVERY

I now turn to a brief analysis and critique of Campbell’s mature stance on slavery in light of his rules for understanding Scripture. Based on his hermeneutical principles—crowned by the “indispensable” Rule 7—Campbell should have seen slavery for what it was. Campbell condemns himself in his own description of how to come within the understanding distance of holy Scripture. He gives a moving and compelling description of how to understand Scripture in “all matters of piety and morality.” But to use his words in rule 7, the din of arguments from the flesh, the world, and Satan (that is, the arguments used by white Christians to justify slavery—white superiority and Black inferiority, God’s clear social order that justified the enslavement of Blacks, the economic benefit to whites, and the need to avoid division over slavery in his movement)—the din of these arguments drowned out for Campbell the “still small voice of God’s philanthropy.” He had stated that with humility, rejecting pride, covetousness, and false ambition, the voice of God is heard distinctly. But in this matter, Campbell couldn’t hear it.

A major part of the “din” was the fear of division of his reform movement over slavery. He wrote, “To preserve unity of spirit among Christians of the South and of the North is my grand object, and for that purpose I am endeavoring to show that the New Testament does not authorize any interference or legislation upon the relation of master and slave, nor does it in either letter or spirit authorize Christians to make it a term of communion.”¹⁷

Frankly, even his first six rules do not unequivocally lead to that conclusion. There is another component that played an important part in his hermeneutical stance—Reformed theology. Reformed theology treated Scripture as essentially a *legal* document to be mined for commands, laws, regulations, and legal precedents. Campbell reflects that notion, for example, at the beginning of his fourth article in the series, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things” when he asserts “that

¹⁶ Alexander Campbell, “Slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law—No. II,” *Millennial Harbinger* May 1851, 252.

¹⁷ Alexander Campbell, “Our Position to American Slavery—No. V,” 195.

the word of the apostles” was “the constitution and law of the primitive church [and] shall be the constitution and law of the restored church.”¹⁸

John Mark Hicks makes the point, however, that if you read Scripture as a historical document to find the “facts”—as Campbell insisted was *the* basis for true understanding of Scripture, it becomes clear that the Bible is not a legal document. Hicks contends that “the Reformed hermeneutic runs roughshod over the very nature of Scripture itself and the way Scripture presents itself to us as a literary document. What other history do we read as primarily a legal text?”¹⁹

Using his Reformed approach that saw Scripture as a legal document, Campbell believed he could demonstrate to any rational person not deceived by wrongheaded selfish considerations, that slavery was approved and regulated by God, never condemned, or depicted as sinful. Therefore, one could not, based on the legal data gleaned from the Bible, make slavery a cause of division or contention between Christians. For Campbell, human enslavement and its massive cumulative trauma was as far removed from godly justice as it could be.

This crucial point helps explain Campbell’s inability to see slavery as inherently contrary to the nature of God, the work of Christ, and the central tenets of the gospel. If one treats the Bible as a legal document, then every piece of evidence, every precedent in the text, shows that God sanctioned and regulated slavery, and never condemned it. He apparently believed that this Reformed legal approach enhanced and augmented his Enlightenment hermeneutic, removing slavery as an impediment to the unity of his movement. But even his first *six* rules—which are simply basic principles of critical interpretation of the Bible—work against a literalistic and legalistic reading of Scripture and do not support his conclusions about slavery. And his Rule 7 devastates them.

CONCLUSION

Campbell justified his stance on slavery by ignoring an “indispensable” part of his own hermeneutic. His *seven* rules for interpreting the Bible are a very good start to faithfully interpreting Scripture, in my opinion. But I believe with Jerry Sumney that there must be a basis for interpreting Scripture that is driven by questions other than those Campbell was bringing to the text, such as: “What are God’s values? What does Scripture say is of first importance? What should take precedence in matters of controversy when they involve the oppression of human beings who carry

¹⁸ Alexander Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” *Christian Baptist* 2 (June 6, 1825) 158.

¹⁹ John Mark Hicks, “Stone-Campbell Hermeneutics II—Campbell’s Reformed Hermeneutic.” Blog post, May 28, 2008. <https://johnmarkhicks.com/2008/05/28/stone-campbell-hermeneutics-ii-campbells-reformed-hermeneutic/>.

the image of God?” Campbell’s rule seven is especially the place where such questions would arise. But for him this did not happen.

The forceful enslavement of human beings, its justification resting ostensibly on white supremacy and Black inferiority, but in fact rationalizing economic exploitation by the powerful, was as evil and wrong then as it is today. When white Christians push back and say it is not appropriate to judge the beliefs and actions of people from another time by today’s standards, others must push back harder and remind them that there are some things that are not ambiguous, even if most do not see them. We must ask *why* most Christians then and now have failed to see what was wrong with white supremacist ideology and their attendant oppression of human beings—people ostensibly committed to God and to Scripture. Might it be that they have failed, as did Campbell, to come within the understanding distance, never being “ravished by the moral scenes which the Bible unfolds”?

ADDENDUM: ALEXANDER CAMPBELL’S RULES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Rule 1. On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures, *consider first the historical circumstances of the book. These are the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it.*

The *order* in historical compositions is of much importance; as, for instance,—whether the first, second, or third, of the five books of Moses, or any other series of narrative, or even epistolary communication.

The *title* is also of importance, as it sometimes expresses the *design* of the book. As *Exodus*—the departure of Israel from Egypt; *Acts of Apostles, &c.*

The peculiarities of the *author*—the age in which he lived—his style—mode of expression, illustrate his writings. The date, place, and occasion of it, are obviously necessary to a right application of any thing in the book.

Rule 2. In examining the contents of any book, as respects precepts, promises, exhortations, &c., *observe who it is that speaks, and under what dispensation he officiates.* Is he a Patriarch, a Jew, or a Christian? *Consider also the persons addressed; their prejudices, characters, and religious relations.* Are they Jews or Christians—believers or unbelievers—approved or disapproved? This rule is essential to the proper application of every command, promise, threatening, admonition, or exhortation, in Old Testament or New.

Rule 3. To understand the meaning of what is commanded, promised, taught, &c., *the same philological principles, deduced from the nature of language; or the same laws of [16] interpretation which are applied to the language of other books, are to be applied to the language of the Bible.*

Rule 4. *Common usage, which can only be ascertained by testimony, must always decide the meaning of any word which has but one signification;—but when words*

have according to testimony (i. e. the dictionary,) more meanings than one, whether literal or figurative, *the scope, the context, or parallel passages must decide the meaning*: for if common usage, the design of the writer, the context, and parallel passage fail, there can be no certainty in the interpretation of language.

Rule 5. In all tropical language, ascertain the point of resemblance, and judge of the nature of the trope, and its kind, from the point of resemblance.

Rule 6. In the interpretation of symbols, types, allegories, and parables, this rule is supreme: ascertain the point to be illustrated; for comparison is never to be extended beyond that point—to all the attributes, qualities, or circumstances of the symbol, type, allegory, or parable.

Rule 7. For the salutary and sanctifying intelligence of the Oracles of God, the following rule is indispensable—We must come within the understanding distance.

There is a distance which is properly called *the speaking distance*, or the *hearing distance*; beyond which the voice reaches not, and the ear hears not. To hear another, we must come within that circle which the voice audibly fills.

Now we may with propriety say, that as it respects God, there is an understanding distance. All beyond that distance cannot understand God; all within it, can easily understand him in all matters of piety and morality. God, himself, is the centre of that circle, and humility is its circumference.

The wisdom of God is as evident in adapting the light of the Sun of Righteousness to our spiritual or moral vision, as in adjusting the light of day to our eyes. The light reaches us without an effort of our own; but we must open our eyes, and if our eyes be sound, we enjoy the natural light of heaven. There is a sound eye in reference to spiritual light, as well as in reference to material light. Now, while the philological principles and rules of interpretation enable many men to be skillful in biblical criticism, and in the interpretation of words and sentences; who neither perceive nor admire the *things* represented by those words; the sound eye contemplates the things themselves, and is ravished with the moral scenes which the Bible unfolds.

The moral *soundness* of vision consists in having the eyes of understanding fixed solely on God himself, his approbation and complacent affection for us. It is sometimes called a *single* eye, because it looks for one thing supremely. Every one, then, who opens the Book of God, with *one aim*, with one ardent desire—intent only to know the will of God; to such a person, the knowledge of God is easy: for the Bible is framed to illuminate such, and only such, with the salutary knowledge of things celestial and divine.

Humility of mind, or what is in effect the same, contempt for all earth-born pre-eminence, prepares the mind for the reception of this light; or, what is virtually the same, opens the ears to hear the voice of God. Amidst the din of all the arguments from the flesh, the world, and Satan, a person is so deaf that he cannot hear the still small voice of God's philanthropy. But receding from pride, covetousness, and false ambition; from the love of the world; and in coming within that circle, the

circumference of which is unfeigned humility, and the centre of which is God himself—the voice of God is distinctly heard and clearly understood. All within this circle are taught by God; all without it are under the influence of the wicked one. ‘God resisteth the proud, but he giveth grace to the humble.’

He, then, that would interpret the Oracles of God to the salvation of his soul, must approach this volume with the humility and docility of a child, and meditate upon it day and night. Like Mary, he must sit at the Master’s feet, and listen to the words which fall from his lips. To such a one there is an assurance of understanding, a certainty of knowledge, to which the man of letters alone never attained, and which the mere critic never felt. **Scj**