Let Us Cooperate for One: A Lesson in Polity from Alexander Campbell

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To bring Christians into a united body—“that they may all be one”—so that a more compelling witness can be given to the gospel (“so that the world may believe that you [God] sent me [Jesus Christ]”) Christians/Disciples came into being at the turn of the nineteenth century as a missional movement. To be effective, the movement had to take a certain shape—it needed to have a polity. From the outset, leaders of them of elitist pretensions.2 For Campbell, both episcopacy and presbytery, suspecting Campbell was not satisfied with the forms of freedom above all else): it was cooperation. Such as Baptists who prized congregational such as those Christians who had the Episcopal or Presbyterian leanings) nor autonomy (as was the case with Christians such as Baptists who prized congregational freedom above all else): it was cooperation. Campbell was not satisfied with the forms of polity that prevailed in his time. He rejected both episcopacy and presbytery, suspecting them of elitist pretensions.2 For Campbell, the basis of the Christian church—the only legitimate fount of ecclesiastical authority—lay in the local community of believers: the congregation. It is only each individual congregation, he affirmed, that has the authority to rule on matters of beliefs, worship, and the calling of ministers.

This, however, did not mean he embraced unmitigated independency, a nominalistic notion of the church that recognizes no religious entity beyond the local congregation. To Campbell, the congregation is an ambiguous concept—much the way the church is: it could mean either a local community of believers or a global community of all believers. So he states: That institution which separates from the world, and consociates the people of God into a peculiar community; having laws, ordinances, manners and customs of its own, immediately derived from the Saviour of the world, is called the congregation or church of the Lord. This is sometimes technically called the mystical body of Christ, contradistinguished from his literal and natural body. Over this spiritual body he is the Head, the King, Lord, and Lawgiver, and they are severally members of his body and under his direction and government:3

Furthermore, he states:

This institution, called the congregation of God, is a great community of communities—not a community of representative of communities, but a community composed of many particular communities, each of which is built upon the same foundation, walks according to the same rules, enjoys the same charter, and is under the jurisdiction of no other community of Christians, but is to all other communities as an individual disciple is to every other individual disciple in any one particular community meeting in any given place.4

Having affirmed congregational authority and having defined the global church as the assemblage of these congregations—and not of some mystical body of Christ—Campbell proposes a distinct explanation as to how individual congregations are to constitute the assemblage. At issue is whether the churches, as a collective, are to resemble a pointillistic painting, where individual points are not explicitly connected to each other but still—when taken together and seen from a suitable distance—form a pattern. Or whether the churches are to relate to each other more explicitly, as in a realistic painting, to engender an unmistakably distinct pattern.

Between pointillism and realism, Campbell proposes a middle position, perhaps like an impressionistic picture. And the key to this middle position is cooperation. Campbell states, “all these particular congregations of the Lord, whether at Rome, Corinth, or Ephesus, though equally independent of one another as to the management of their own peculiar affairs, are by virtue of one common Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one common salvation, but one kingdom or church of God, and as such are under obligations to co-operate with one another in all measure promotive of the great ends of Christ’s death and resurrection.”5

Here, it is important to emphasize under obligation. For Campbell, cooperation among Christian congregations is not a matter of option. Rather it is a matter of “Christian institution,” whose implementation is no less imperative than the implementation of other institutions, such as baptism or the Lord’s Supper. Thus, he asserts, “Nothing is essential to the conversion of the world but the union and co-operation of Christians.”6 For Campbell, cooperation, indeed, has cosmological significance. Thus he stated:

Does any one doubt the necessity, the power, or the utility of co-operation in all the holy charities of Christian life . . . let him devoutly listen to the triune voice of Nature, Providence, and Redemption. . . . These three infallible witnesses . . . harmoniously assert the necessity and the supremacy of co-operation in every great undertaking. Nature’s laws and powers, kingly and alone, never operate. . . . Atoms come together and mountains rise. . . . Planets circle around their suns, and systems of worlds are formed. . . . The Nature is one grand cooperative system. . . . And what says the remedial system in all its manifestations? . . . It is one great moral and evangelical co-operation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or angels, apostles, prophets, martyrs, positive and moral institutions, etc., as necessary to the renovation of man. With all this evidence before us, we must plead for cooperation among all the citizens of Messiah’s Kingdom.7

Campbell’s stress on cooperation should be taken to heart by us contemporary Disciples as we strive to shape One Mission. Cooperation imparts a distinct ethos to the Disciples, a unique hue—freer than unmitigated lines, more integrated than mere points.

Suggested Activities

Read and discuss the following texts:

- Campbell, Thomas. Declaration and Address, 1809
- Stone, Barton et al. The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery, 1804.

1 John 17:21, New Revised Standard Version
3 Alexander Campbell, Christian System in Reference to the Union of Christian and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity as Plead in the Current Reformation (1839; repr., Cincinnati, OH: H. S. Bosworth, 1863), 72.
4 Alexander Campbell, Christian System, 73.
5 Campbell, Christian System, 73
7 Campbell, Millennial Harbinger (1838), 268–69.