

"Christians should oppose all war."

Alexander Campbell—Man of Peace

By CALVIN HABIG

WAR. The mere mention of the term is guaranteed to strike varying chords of emotion in persons of all backgrounds, ages, and of both sexes. Today, again, we hear loud cries. Our President is surrounded by voices from all sides suggesting the action he ought to take with regard to the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and a host of other perpetual "trouble spots" around the world.

As Christians we are called not to be swept up in the flow of emotions, but to evaluate critically the trends of our times by the standard of the Word of God. The movement to restore simple Christianity has heard many varying views on the Biblical perspective on war over the past two centuries.

Few of these voices, however, cries with the logic, intensity, and authority of Alexander Campbell. While he was merely one man interpreting the message of Christ for his day, the Christo-centricity of his message commands itself to us today. Drawing his authority from the message of Christ, Campbell denied both the legitimacy of and the need for war.

The backgrounds of Campbell's views on war are typical of those of many of his ideas. They involve a combination of literalistic New Testament interpretation (especially of the Sermon on the Mount) combined with Enlightenment-styled rationalism. Integral to Campbell's ideas on war and peace was a familiarization with the rising peace movement of the early nineteenth century. This movement, which arose among the dissatisfaction of many with the War of 1812, continued to spread until its influence peaked shortly before the Mexican-American War. The writers of the peace movement (such as Thomas Grimke, Susane Jenyns, et. al) influenced Campbell and were quoted on the pages of the *Millennial Harbinger*.

But Campbell's pacifist leanings were not solely the product of the influence of others. The popularity of the movement quickly declined after the Mexican-American War and was almost dead by the time of the Civil War. Campbell's protests against war did not wane with the cessation of public support; indeed, they increased.

Why oppose war—Campbell lambasts war for its moral wrongs and consequences. War, he says, is unjust because "the guilty generally make war and the innocent suffer its consequences" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:325). This contrasts, says Campbell, with capital punishment (which he favored) in that in the case of taking the life of a murderer, none but the guilty suffers.

War is immoral, Campbell asserts, because it does not result in justice being served. War "never was a test of truth—a criterion of right. It is either a mere game of chance, or a violent outrage of the strong upon the weak" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:377). If nations truly believed that their cause was just and that the war's victor would be the side whose cause was just, Campbell sarcastically suggested a more limited conflict:

They could have saved these millions of men and money by selecting, each, one of their genuine Simon Pure patriots and heroes, and having them voluntarily to meet in single combat, before a competent number of witnesses, and encounter each other till one of them triumphed; and thus award, from Heaven's own court of unfaillible rectitude, to the nation of the survivor, the glory of a great national triumph, both in heroism and in justice (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:373).

War is immoral, both in its character as well as in its results, Campbell argues that war may be judged as unacceptable merely from viewing the consequences of its destruction. "It works mischief," Campbell pleads, "and ruin in all directions, and blunts or paralyzes the noblest and best feelings of the human heart" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1830:524).

Campbell's argument against war includes the argument of practical economics: war is always a disaster economically, both in funds spent and in wasted potential earning power. He says:

Give me the money, I would say, that has been spent in wars, and I will clear up every acre of land in the world that ought to be cleared—drain every marsh—subdue every desert—

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fertilize every mountain and hill. . . . I would fund, furnish, and endow as many schools, academies, and colleges, as would educate the whole human race—build meeting houses, public halls, lyceums, and furnish them with libraries adequate to the wants of a thousand millions of human beings (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:384-5).

Surpassing the moral wrongs of war are the wrongs that derive from attempting to wed war and religion. Campbell's strongest words were reserved for the clergy who blessed and even encouraged the spirit of war.

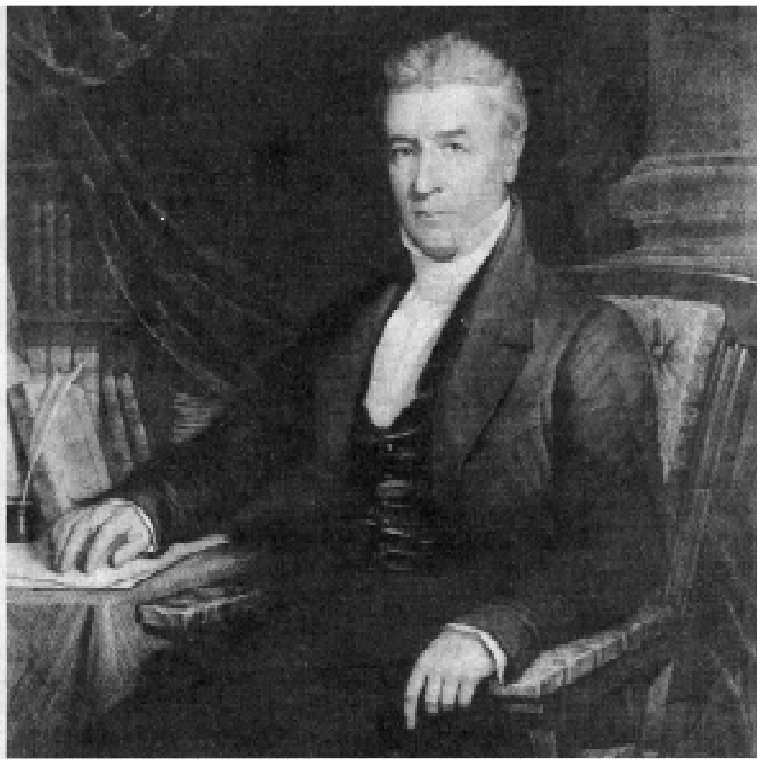
Campbell strongly held that war and the spirit of Christ were totally alien to one another. The preaching of Christ, especially the Sermon on the Mount, "checks every principle that would lead to war, oppression or cruelty" (*Christian Baptist*, 1873:18).

The sermon on the mount is an exponent of the Savior's mind and will on the subject of war. If he would not have any of them render evil for evil, and if he pronounced the highest honor and blessing on the peace-makers who can imagine that he could be the patron of war?

"Blessed," said he, "are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God." The sons of God are, therefore, the sons of peace. He had no benedictions for heroes, no benedictions for conquerors, no glory for a soldier covered with wounds in defense of his country. Such victors, and heroes, and patriots are nowhere mentioned with honor in the New Testament. Indeed, the spirit of war and the spirit of Christ are as antipodal as light and darkness, as good and evil (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:641).

Campbell stresses that not only is there no exhortation for Christians to go to battle, indeed there is in Christ's teaching against it. Shortly before His death, Jesus answered Pilate, saying, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36).

Campbell took these words of Jesus and from them deduced that Christ was saying, "My servants cannot fight for me, not even in a defensive war" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1846:640). In support of this he



Alexander Campbell

stressed the example of Christ, "who did not lift up his voice in the streets—who did not use so much as a broken reed, not to consume a single torch, until he make his laws victorious" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1820:309).

Protests answered—Campbell heard the protest of those who would say that a Christian must go to war when compelled by his government. In his "Address on War" delivered on May 13, 1848, he approached that question directly. Campbell reasoned that it is obviously against the spirit of Christ for a person to individually commit the acts included in war: to murder and to destroy. Any court of law as well as spiritual tribunal would condemn an individual who committed these acts against his neighbor.

The state, furthermore, has no right to force men to do that which is morally wrong. He concludes that, "a Christian man can never, of right, be compelled to do that for the state, in defense of state's rights, which he cannot of right do for himself in defense of his own personal rights" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1848:372).

Campbell applied his views of war consistently to the wars surrounding him in his new homeland. The Campbell family landed in New York just twenty-five years after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. As much as he loved his adopted country, he could not approve of the methods which brought about its existence. Campbell criticized the Revolutionary War, conjecturing,

Yet had Washington and his illustrious co-peers been still better educated than was the age in which they lived, and from which they took their counsels and their examples, who can tell but that without so much blood and so many years of suffering, by other policies and principles all that we enjoy might have been secured to themselves and their posterity for many generations (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1841:437).

Perhaps at the height of his career, Alexander found himself confronted with the tragedy of his country's being at war with Mexico over a minor boundary dispute. The Mexican-American War, which soured many on the possibility of a lasting peace only served to solidify Campbell's feelings on the incompatibility of war with Christian teaching. In an almost bitter tone, he described the war as "a war kindly undertaken for the benevolent purpose of acquiring more territory for the improvement of the condition of the African slaves and for civilizing and Christianizing the priest-ridden Mexicans" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1846:638).

At the end of his life, Campbell spent his last years grieving over the war that was seemingly tearing his country in two. Although recognizing that the War Between the States would, in all probability come, he was still deeply shocked when the shots were fired at Fort Sumter.

For peace, also—But Alexander Campbell was not simply *against* war; he was *for* peace. He stressed that Christians had the job of bringing men to Christ for salvation.

In his baccalaureate address at Bethany College for 1847, he commissioned the graduates that their "profession is not to kill and destroy, but to redeem and to rescue men from evil" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1847:432).

All the swords and cannons in the world will not truly conquer an enemy.

To conquer an enemy is to convert him into a friend. This is the noble, benevolent and heaven conceived enterprise of God's only begotten Son. To do this all aims and modes of warfare are impotent, save the arms and munitions of everlasting love (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1830:304).

In dealing with the practical considerations of international disputes that lead to war, Campbell was not silent. First, he proposed an extensive educational endeavor to replace "narrow patriotism" with a "Christian internationalism" (D. Ray Lindley, *Apostle of Freedom* [St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1957] p. 99). Second, he advocated, decades before the League of Nations, an international tribunal before which nations could take their case. He suggested arbitration both on an international as well as on an intranational scale. At the onslaught of the Civil War, he pled with both sides to select an impartial arbitrator, "and refer the whole matter to them, explicitly convenanting to abide the issue!" (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1861:347).

Alexander Campbell—a man of faith. But faith involved being integrally concerned with the ebb and flow of human events. When confronted with the gross injustice and immorality of war, he fought it. He stood against a passion-filled world and stood for the fact that war was morally, Biblically, and practically wrong. He invoked the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and concluded that "controversy will be sooner terminated and less danger will be incurred by turning the other cheek than by striking back" (Robert Owen and Alexander Campbell, *The Evidences of Christianity: A Debate* [Nashville: McQuiddy Publishing Co., 1957] p. 118). In the place of a war-plagued world Campbell pushed for the day when all men would fall at the feet of Christ and utter the penitent words, "My Lord and my God." ▲