

“Remembering the Past: Samuel and Alexander Campbell”
The Second in the Series “Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future”
1 Samuel 3:1-11

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread” (v. 1). These poignant words begin today’s scripture lesson about the call of that pivotal biblical character, Samuel.

“The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” That is one of the most depressing statements in the Bible, but it accurately describes the setting into which Samuel was called to serve God.

Let me begin by reminding you of the backstory. An Israelite named Elkanah had two wives: Hannah, who was barren, and Peninnah, who had many children. In that culture, a woman’s self-worth was tied to her ability to give her husband children, not only to inherit his estate but also to help farm and care for the livestock. Hannah was depressed about her barrenness, and it was only made worse by Peninnah’s constant mockery of Hannah’s “inadequacy.”

Elkanah was a devout man who traveled annually with his entire family to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Once, while at the shrine, Hannah beseeched God earnestly for a son, vowing that she would dedicate him to God as a Nazarite. To her delight, she soon became pregnant and gave birth to a boy whom she named Samuel. After the boy was old enough, she took him to the Tabernacle at Shiloh where he grew up under the tutelage of the high priest, Eli.

As Eli grew older, his sons took over most of the priestly work at the Tabernacle, but unlike their father, they were corrupt. They stole from the people’s sacrifices and offerings to God, and practiced all sorts of blatant immorality. Their ungodly character was well known, but their indulgent, elderly father did not remove them from their positions of leadership. Not surprisingly, with such corrupt men occupying priestly positions, it didn’t take long for religious life in Israel to fall to a new low. And that brings us to today’s scripture lesson—and that depressing statement: “The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

Very early one morning, before dawn, when Samuel was around 11 or 12, he heard a voice calling him. “Samuel! Samuel!” Assuming it was the elderly priest calling him, he ran to Eli’s bedchamber. “Here I am,” he said. Eli replied that he hadn’t called him; he should go back to sleep. Samuel heard the voice two more times, and each time he ran to Eli. The third time it happened, Eli realized it must be God calling the boy. So, he told Samuel that if he heard the voice again, he should respond, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.” The next time the

voice called, Samuel responded as Eli had instructed him. And what was the crux of God's message to Samuel? "I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle" (v. 11). That is, God was about to act to bring about a spiritual revival in Israel. Eli's family would lose control of the Tabernacle, and Samuel was going to be God's prophet, God's mouthpiece, to lead the people in a spiritual revival. Interestingly, one of the most influential reforms Samuel implemented in Israel was establishing a school for prophets, thereby multiplying his influence many times over and ensuring the word of the LORD would continue to come to Israel.

Keeping the story of the call of Samuel in mind, let us return to the story of the Campbells and the role they played in founding the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). You will recall last week that we left the story of Thomas and Alexander Campbell just as the family joined Thomas in the New World. I also remarked that religious life in America was at its lowest point since the founding of the nation—lower even than it is now, if you can imagine. Now, let's hear "the rest of the story."

Shortly after he was reunited with his family, Thomas Campbell issued a famous publication entitled "Declaration and Address"—a document historians of religion describe as one of the most important documents in American religious history. In "Declaration and Address," Campbell outlined the principles that were to shape what became known as The Restorationist Movement. This reform movement soon manifested itself in the establishment of the Brush Run Church in Washington County, Pennsylvania, in 1811—the first church organized upon these principles. Alexander, was ordained by the Brush Run Church the following year and joined his father in the work. Within a few years, Alexander, an extraordinarily gifted orator and writer, became the public face of the movement.

Alexander married Margaret Brown in 1811, and settled on land given to him by his wealthy father-in-law in Bethany, Virginia—now West Virginia—where he established a church and a seminary.

In addition to preaching and teaching—like his father—Alexander began to have public debates with noted Christian and non-Christian leaders of the day. These debates, which were printed and widely circulated, greatly increased public awareness of the Disciples' message of Christian unity and Christian liberty.

I simply must share a story from his debates. In 1843, Alexander debated N. L. Rice, a Presbyterian minister, at Lexington, Kentucky, a well-attended debate that was scheduled to last eighteen days. The convener for the debate was none other than Henry Clay—who, during his long life as a politician, served as Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Senator from Kentucky, Secretary of State, and ran for President three times. Stenographers of that debate recorded a delightful conversation between two women in attendance at one of the sessions. One woman said to the other: "Brother Rice must be a smart man . . . look at all those books on the table next to Brother Rice." In response, the other woman said, "Yes, he is smart, but all those books on that table were written by Brother Campbell."¹

Impressed by the attention the printed public debates were gaining, Alexander decided to open a publishing house to circulate the ideas of the Restorationist Movement, with particular emphasis on how the principles of a return to New Testament Christianity, so carefully outlined by his father in “Declaration and Address,” could be implemented in the life of the church. In addition to publishing a monthly journal, the Campbells also undertook the arduous task of producing an edition of the New Testament based on the best scholarship of the day.

Meanwhile, Thomas Campbell continued his work by establishing churches and schools in Cambridge, Ohio; Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; and Newport, Kentucky. All was going well, until Thomas invited some black men to attend school so that they could learn to read the Bible, an act that he discovered was against Kentucky state law. The conflict that ensued over Thomas’ opposition to slavery forced him to move back to Pennsylvania, where he assisted his son in the new seminary and the publishing house.

In 1840, Bethany College was founded, with Thomas serving as chair of the board, and Alexander serving as president. Bethany College is still in existence today, along with 13 other Disciples-founded colleges and universities, four of which are in Missouri: William Woods, Columbia College, Culver-Stockton, and Drury University. I had the pleasure of teaching for 14 years at Chapman University, a Disciples university and one of the oldest institutions of higher education in the State of California. Unlike many of their contemporaries—and many today for that matter—the Campbells felt that faith and reason were not competitors, but rather were complementary. And to this day, for Disciples, a deep religious faith and a good education go hand in hand.

Let me mention one other activity you might find interesting. During the winter of 1829-1830, Alexander served as a delegate to the Virginia Constitutional Convention, representing western Virginia. Other delegates at the convention included such notables as James Madison, James Monroe, and John Marshall. In the final vote on the slavery question, the western delegates were defeated by the more numerous delegates of eastern Virginia. This division over slavery later led to the formation of the State of West Virginia, a free state.

Clearly, Alexander Campbell was a man ahead of his time. Other political ideas he promoted included that women should have the right to vote, and that an international body should be established comprised of all the nations of the worlds to aid in preventing war and in promoting the general welfare of all people.²

In the remarkable lives of the Prophet Samuel and Thomas and Alexander Campbell we see devout individuals whom God raised up during times when religion was at low ebb. They were called to be God’s instruments of revival. One of their most important means of bringing about spiritual revival was education. Samuel not only taught the people; he also established a school for prophets. Likewise, the Campbells established churches, schools, colleges, a

seminary, and a publishing house. The Campbells believed that education should be a lifelong process, “from cradle to the grave,” as Alexander was fond of saying.

Religion in America has had its ups and downs, and today we are experiencing one of those low points. We know this from personal experience, and all the scientific sociology of religion polls confirm it. Church attendance has dropped from its highest point in the late 1950s to today’s low point. In fact, the largest segment of the US population today is the “religiously unaffiliated,” that is, those who identify with no religion. And when you move from the United States to Europe, the situation is even worse.

There are many reasons for this decline—more than I can discuss in a short sermon—but one of the more important reasons is a lack of rigorous education in most churches. When most people think of Christian education, they think of children’s Sunday School classes and innocuous little Bible stories. Sadly, few churches offer serious educational opportunities for adults—education that tackles “The Big Questions” of life; education that isn’t afraid of hard questions or doubt or curiosity. In my experience, a faith that does not engage in genuine critical thinking remains a kindergarten-level faith, and a kindergarten-level faith easily crumbles under the weight of real life. Such a faith is quickly set aside as irrelevant—as meaningless at best and misleading at worst. What real life calls for is a robust faith, an informed faith, a faith that joins hands with reason in the quest to answer the age-old question: “How should we then live?”

I believe I can truthfully say that Oakland Christian Church is committed to continuing the Disciples tradition of offering thoughtful educational experiences. If you are not already taking advantage of some of the educational opportunities on a regular basis, let me encourage you to do so.

The Greek word translated as disciple, *mathetes*, is built on the Greek root *math*, which denotes “the *mental effort* needed to think something through.” Thus, the expression “disciples of Christ” literally means “learners or students of Christ,” those who expend the mental effort necessary to think through the Christian faith. Our very denominational name points the direction to which we are to aspire.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Ibid.

² This historical summary of the lives of Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell is based on: H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1932), pp. 13-23 (web); and David R. Kenney, “Great Preachers of The Past: Thomas Campbell (1763–1854),” delivered at the Ninth Annual West Virginia Christian Lectureship (October 5-8, 2008), pages 59-73 (web); “Chronology of Alexander Campbell,” and various excerpts from the *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, on the website therestorationmovement.com; and B. J. Humble, *The Story of the Restoration*, (web).