

## Alexander Campbell and *The Millennial Harbinger* – Ignored Americans

Alexander Campbell represents an important American historical figure whose true significance has not been recognized by historians. His arrival in America, in 1809, coincided with many like him who arrived from European countries and who contributed in many ways to the development of America. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that by using the *Millennial Harbinger* as a primary source, a comprehensive picture can be developed, of how Alexander Campbell dealt with and what he thought about one of the most significant issues of his era – slavery. Campbell had a well-developed, nuanced position on slavery and the issues generated by it. The positions Campbell took on slavery, abolition, succession, government's place in society, and race relations were significant because he influenced many others. His border state position in northwestern Virginia and the religious movement he was instrumental in having its greatest strength precisely in the border states area made him significant politically and historically. This geographical location gave the positions advocated by Campbell on slavery issues applicability to both northern and southern portions of the country. Campbell's positions occupied a middle ground which did not advocate armed insurrection or open resistance to a duly elected government while acknowledging problems with slavery. In Campbell, neither the abolitionists nor the slave powers got a free pass. Campbell held both sides to account, and both sides needed to address Campbell and his views. Further, Campbell's views arguably represented the views of many, if not most, Americans in the antebellum era. He represented a voice that has been overshadowed by the tumult over the modern tendency toward the glorification of abolitionists and the vilification of non-abolitionists.

Campbell who wrote extensively about many topics and reached a broad audience, requires more extensive study as an intellectual. Large audiences heard him preach during over

40 years of church ministry, debate in many places on many topics, and hold numerous lectures on a variety of topics. Few of his lectures or sermons survive as a whole, but several of his debates exist as verbatim publications.<sup>1</sup> Many of his sermons were partially preserved in the journals of his followers and occasionally in newspaper accounts, especially during the many revivals Campbell preached.<sup>2</sup>

A noted and well-traveled intellectual, Alexander Campbell influenced many during the antebellum and Civil War eras. Campbell gave extensive thought to slavery, issues of race, abolition and other reform movements, and justice. Campbell's thoughts are readily available in his extant publications, secondary religious works, and his writings in the *Millennial Harbinger*. Not only was Campbell a contemporary to many of the salient events discussed, but he also functioned as a thought leader for many who affiliated with him religiously, a foil for many who opposed him, and an intellectual other contemporary intellectuals respected. One thing he was not - was ignored by the significant thought leaders of his era.<sup>3</sup>

During Campbell's lifetime, he enjoyed success as a farmer, teacher, founder and college president, preacher, statesman, postmaster, author, editor, and debater. He was also a publisher, patriarch, educator, dissident, reformer, apologist, first-generation immigrant, charismatic leader, and gifted communicator. He played an instrumental role in Christianizing American society,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Cherok, *Debating for God: Alexander Campbell's Challenge to Skepticism in Antebellum America* (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Alger Morton Fitch, Jr., *Alexander Campbell: Preacher of Reform and Reformer of Preaching* (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing Company, 1970); John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood* (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 240. George Barrell Cheever was significantly influenced by the writings and preaching of Alexander Campbell.

especially on the western Appalachian frontier of Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky.<sup>4</sup>

The *Millennial Harbinger*, started by Campbell in 1830, has usually been used by scholars to study the development of a specific religious tradition. But the *Harbinger* is also a treasury of snapshots that reflects the culture of antebellum and Civil War-era America. Campbell focused on religious themes and topics, but since he saw religion as impacting all of life, he addressed cultural topics that effected his readers. A significant majority of the articles and an even more significant percentage of the space of the *Harbinger* featured religious material, especially material significant for the Restoration Movement and the congregations devoted to it. Other material in the *Harbinger* represented topics of interest to involved men of the period. These more general interest articles discussed politics, Christian responses to cultural and societal trends, the literature of the period, historical digressions, and trends in American education. Rare items mentioned women's activities, but these generally represented male points of view. Items common to periodicals of the period which did not appear in the *Harbinger* included fashion, recipes, sketches and later photos, gossip columns, advice columns, non-religious announcements, advertising, agricultural information, business guidance and advice, travel articles, and sports.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Campbell's views about significant issues during the Antebellum period in America are readily available in over twenty thousand pages of writing found in the *Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell began the *Millennial Harbinger* in January 1830. Campbell served as the chief editor until January 1864 and continued to contribute articles and ideas until his death in

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<sup>4</sup> Peter A. Verkruyse, *Prophet, Pastor, and Patriarch: The Rhetorical Leadership of Alexander Campbell* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> David I. McWhirter, *An Index to the Millennial Harbinger* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1981), preface.

March 1866.<sup>6</sup> Through 1864 the *Millennial Harbinger* reflected its editor and no evidence exists that Campbell held views divergent from those published in the *Harbinger*. Readers, on occasion, accused Campbell of using the *Harbinger* as his voice rather than as a vehicle to reflect things of common concern to all in the Restoration Movement. To this point, few scholars have used the *Millennial Harbinger* for much besides religious source material.<sup>7</sup> This deficiency cries out for remediation.

Campbell's relationship with slavery and slaves is difficult to ascertain at best.<sup>8</sup> Per Campbell's admission, he must have owned slaves at some point. Campbell vehemently reacted when accused by George P. Smith, editor of the abolitionist *Biblical Expositor*, that he had sold slaves. Campbell indignantly replied, "So gratuitously false is this, that I not only never sold a slave, but have set free from slavery every slave that came into my possession by purchase, or in any other way!"<sup>9</sup> Most sources agree that well before the onset of the Civil War, Campbell freed any slaves he might have owned earlier.<sup>10</sup> For Campbell, emancipation for the slave was just one part of the equation; the emancipation of the master was just as critical. Campbell argued, probably from personal experience, that slavery was as confining and imprisoning for the master attempting to hold slaves under a Christian covenant as it was for the slave.<sup>11</sup>

Alexander Campbell stated his views clearly regarding slavery. But, he also carefully

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: the Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Howe represents a post Hatch author who uses Campbell, but in a very limited way. In Howe's broad ranging review of antebellum America Campbell certainly warranted more than the four brief mentions Howe makes of him.

<sup>8</sup> Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis, Missouri: The Bethany Press, 1954), 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger*, September, 1851, 516. Quotations are given as found. Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are unchanged from the original.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Oldham Fife, "Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slave Controversy," Indiana University, 1960, Ann Arbor, 83.

<sup>11</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, May, 1849, 242-249.

stated his views about what should not be done about the institution of slavery as it then existed in the United States.

I dislike slavery; all my habits and associations are averse to it, and I firmly believe that it would be better for our country-our whole country-were we honorably and safely rid of it. But my sympathies are not all with the slave, for, in many instances, the master is the one oppressed. Neither am I willing to join in a wild, reckless, and fruitless crusade against my fellow-citizens and fellow-Christians, who have the misfortune, as I regard it, to be connected to the system. If kindness will do nothing, violence will do less.<sup>12</sup>

Campbell cautioned others in the Christian churches to “Require no more from slaveholding brethren than Paul required.” Campbell did not see this as requiring less from owners of slaves but used it to caution congregations from making slaveholding a condition that required the expulsion of the slaveholding member for non-Christian conduct. Campbell accepted that Paul allowed the ownership of slaves and as such antebellum Christians had no right to refuse the same authority to fellow Christians, as long as American laws allowed the same. On the other hand, Campbell did not see slave ownership as the great good that many Southerners argued it to be.<sup>13</sup> Campbell acknowledged that slave ownership enslaved slave owners just as slavery enslaved the slave. Campbell’s sympathy for both masters and slaves resulted in significant misunderstandings. Campbell frequently returned to this topic to attempt to clarify his position and address the questions others had.<sup>14</sup>

That slavery was an institution accepted by God was pointed out by Campbell on many occasions. He noted;

The idea of master and servant is as old as the Bible, and has existed since the days of Cain and Abel. It was said to Cain, being the first born of mankind, that if he did well, “he should rule over his brother” Abel, and unto him his brother would look up. The younger shall serve the elder, is one of the most natural and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, February, 1851, 106-107.

<sup>13</sup> William J. Cooper, Jr, *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), xviii-xix.

<sup>14</sup> Fife, “Campbell,” 95.

ancient oracles in the world. It was said by the inspired Noah, that Canaan should be a servant to his brethren. From this I only argue, that the idea of servitude is coeval with society, antediluvian and postdiluvian. Two thousand years before the Christian era, the patriarchs were generally masters, and some of them great masters, over their fellow-men. Was it voluntary or involuntary, is not now the question. There was a necessity, in the very essence of society, for this relation. Orphans and unfortunate persons must be served, and they must serve in return. Such was, and is, and always will be, the irremediable condition of mankind.<sup>15</sup>

For those who argued that humans could never be property as the South claimed and that as such slaves could not fall under the government's responsibility to protect as other property, Campbell noted: "That a man is here as fully recognized as property as a house, an ox, an ass, is indisputable."<sup>16</sup>

It is the consummating statute of the divine constitution: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife; thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, nor his man servant, nor his maid servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's" property." This is our first argument in demonstration of the divine recognition and acknowledgment of the relation of master and servant, or of one man having a rightful property in another.<sup>17</sup>

To those who argued that the constitution of the United States indicated that men are equal and as such slavery is not allowable, Campbell responded with the observation that he had never seen two perfectly equal men. Campbell thus argued that the observation that all are equal, even if in the United States constitution, represented a philosophical ideal that even without slavery never quite panned out in society.

I am fully aware, that there is a text in some Bibles that is not in mine. Professional Abolitionists have made more use of it than of any passage in the Bible. It came, however, as I trace it, from Saint Voltaire, and was baptized by Thomas Jefferson, and since almost universally regarded as canonical authority-- "All men are born free and equal." This is genuine coin in the political currency of our generation. I am sorry to say, that I have never seen two men of whom it is true.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, April, 1851, 201-202.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, May, 1851, 252.

While admitting that slavery was not contrary to Biblical principles, Campbell was quick to point out that masters owed slaves several things as well. That masters would someday have to report to a higher authority how they had treated their slaves was a recurrent theme for Campbell. “And you masters, (kurioi, lords,) do justice to your servants, (douloi, slaves,) as they do justice to you, moderating threatening; knowing also that your master (kurios, Lord) is in heaven . . .”<sup>19</sup> A second admonishment that Campbell does not elaborate as much on noted: “Masters (lords) give unto your servants (slaves) that which is just and equal, knowing that you also have a master (lord) in heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

Among the most important of the duties masters owed to slaves, according to Campbell, was the duty to educate them. Campbell accepted the ability to read Scripture for themselves as the minimum duty owed by masters to their slaves. Campbell pointed out that further education would not increase the likelihood of slave revolt, but would instead allow slaves to be even more useful to their masters and themselves. Among the benefits of education, Campbell believed that eventually gaining the resources for each slave to earn their freedom was both a Scriptural and practical outcome. If other options for this education were not possible, either because “common schools” did not exist in the area or slaves were forbidden to attend school, Campbell argued the master was responsible for establishing a private system of schooling which slaves could attend.<sup>21</sup>

Campbell affiliated churches were some of the first to establish all-black congregations. By the onset of the Civil War Kentucky had four all-black churches, in Midway, Lexington, Louisville, and Little Rock. Most Campbell affiliated congregations in areas with large African

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, June, 1851, 313.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 314.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, May, 1849, 248-249.

American populations had mixed congregations.

In some cases, these congregations remained internally segregated, with blacks confined to only some areas of the church, while in others, the arrangement was more integrated. Many Campbell based churches had blacks, even slaves, in a lower church leadership position, like a deacon, usher, and even readers, but no integrated church had black preachers. In many integrated churches, masters and slaves attended the same services and accepted each other as individually responsible members of the congregation.<sup>22</sup>

Campbell was ahead of his time when he noted that most of the negative opinions many whites had about blacks were because “There is a state of most lamentable neglect here.”<sup>23</sup> Campbell argued that this neglect resulted in the thieving, brutal behaviors, sensual, filthy, and immoral behaviors that many antebellum whites associated with blacks. Campbell further argued that negligent masters were ultimately responsible for these behaviors, would reap the resultant problems associated with them, and be held accountable by a higher power for their contribution to these evils. Going much further than most of his contemporaries Campbell noted that slaves are “. . . human beings, made in the likeness of the creator, and having immortal souls to be saved and lost forever!”<sup>24</sup>

Campbell’s argument that slave discipline needed to follow church disciplinary procedures generated a significant amount of dissension among slave-owning members of the Campbell affiliated churches. Campbell argued that if a master physically punished the slave church discipline needed to follow as well. If the church found against the master restitution to

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<sup>22</sup> Fife, “Campbell,” 102-104.

<sup>23</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, December, 1852, 669.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*; For an opinion opposite to Campbell’s see Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 187-188: and Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1977), 153.



the slave would be required. The better policy, Campbell noted, would be for masters to follow church disciplinary procedures in all cases where they believed slaves required discipline. This procedure required at least two witnesses to any slave act which a master believed to warrant discipline. Initial attempts to resolve the issue required a reasonable and respectful manner. If this attempt failed other church members needed to become involved. As long as the slave remained a member of the church, he had the same rights as other members and could expect to receive the same impartial judgment. If the slave was found to be in error and refused to acknowledge his error and reform his behaviors, he could face expulsion from the church. The slave would then lose any of the protections of church membership. If the master were judged to be at fault and refused to accept the decision of the church, the master faced removal from church membership. Many slaveholders were reluctant to accept this level of church oversight into what they considered their prerogative. Few churches actually followed Campbell's recommendations faithfully.<sup>25</sup>

Campbell noted that although Scripture allowed slavery to exist, Scripture does not define exactly how slavery operates. Unhappy with the amount of space in the *Millennial Harbinger* that had been taken up by slavery and the immense amount of time he had expended on the topic, Campbell argued that the workings of slavery were the realm of the politician.<sup>26</sup> Campbell believed that the role of the churchmen ended with the establishment of the validity of slavery according to Scripture.<sup>27</sup> As such, Campbell did not address many of the individual issues surrounding slavery and its practices in the *Harbinger*. The political and legal system determined the legal and political mechanisms by which slavery operated in an area.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, December, 1852, 671.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, November, 1854, 472-473.

<sup>27</sup> Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 141-148.

It is, however, to be regulated by human laws, and it has been so regulated by very clear and explicit precepts, propounded by those commissioned by High Heaven as God's ambassadors to our world. Like every other relation in social life, it is subject to abuse.<sup>28</sup>

Campbell quickly acknowledged that just as the possibility of abuse existed, so existed the actuality of abuse. "Still, we are not at all insensible to the fact, that slavery in the United States has been so conducted, on the part of very many professors of Christianity, owners of large and small estates, as to outrage both humanity and the Bible, Old Testament and New."<sup>29</sup>

Campbell occasionally answered queries about specific slave related situations and gave his advice on the resolution of these issues. Campbell clearly stated that slave families needed to be respected as such and protected from abuse. This abuse included the sale of families in such a way that resulted in broken families. Using an example, Campbell noted:

It frequently happens, however, that A. owns the husband and B. the wife. And B. is obliged, by necessity of law, to sell the wife. He will, of course, (and such is the custom on the part of all Christians, known to me,) sell the wife either to the master of the husband, or, if he cannot do this, he will sell her to some one in the vicinity, as near as possible to her husband. Professors recklessly selling husbands or wives, so as to violate the relation, are justly fit subjects of church discipline, and might not to be retained in the communion of the faithful.<sup>30</sup>

Many attacked Campbell from many fronts over his views about slavery. Abolitionists believed he failed to argue for emancipation aggressively enough while pro-slavery forces believed that Campbell did not defend slavery enough.

In 1850, Kentucky's Constitutional Convention generated further controversy regarding slavery. Campbell contributed extensively to this discussion. Campbell saw slavery as a "Threat for the people of Kentucky" and argued vociferously for this position.<sup>31</sup> That Campbell's

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<sup>28</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, July, 1851, 386.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 387.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, September, 1851, 529.

<sup>31</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, May, 1849, 241.

arguments were effective and reached a wide audience was clear from the controversy and responses they generated.<sup>32</sup> Brookes, who wrote one of the most extensive responses to Campbell, understood that Campbell opposed slavery everywhere, not just in Kentucky. Although Campbell was not a resident of Kentucky and realized that readers might see him as an outsider interfering where he was not wanted pointed out that his extensive connections with Kentucky Christian churches made him a valid voice in this debate.<sup>33</sup> The convention eventually adopted a provision that prevented ministers from performing in a position of public trust in Kentucky, partly due to the influence on the convention by Campbell and other church leaders.<sup>34</sup> Several provisions adopted in this Constitutional Convention would affect Campbell's views over the next decade.

During the debates leading up to the convention, Campbell observed that slavery appeared to be profitable where tobacco, rice, and cotton were grown but did not appear to be profitable where grain farming and grass pasturage dominated agriculture.<sup>35</sup> In this view, many other agriculturalists echoed Campbell.

The eventual end of slavery remained an important topic for Campbell. Like many of his contemporaries, Campbell believed the problem of slavery was long term and that the solution would also need to be long term. Retaining the idea of colonization as the lynchpin for the eventual end of slavery longer than many of his contemporaries, Campbell noted "I am fully satisfied that the only rational--that is, practicable--way of abolishing slavery in America, if it

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<sup>32</sup> Iveson L. Brookes, *A Defense of Southern Slavery, Against the Attacks of Henry Clay and A. Campbell* (Hamburg, South Carolina: Robinson and Carlisle, 1851).

<sup>33</sup> Fife, "Campbell," 99.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>35</sup> *Millennial Harbinger*, May, 1849, 242-247.

ever can be done, is that proposed by the American Colonization Society”<sup>36</sup>

Going further than the American Colonization Society, Campbell noted that since the United States was out of debt and even generating a yearly revenue excess the federal government could assist in facilitating colonization. Campbell argued that Africa or somewhere in the Americas made the most sense for a colonization project, as did most of his contemporaries who supported colonization. Campbell proposed that ten million dollars of the American excess revenue assist colonization, by purchasing slaves to emancipate from any slave owners willing to sell, providing supplies for the colonization trip, and assisting the colony until it achieved self-sufficiency. In a somewhat novel idea, Campbell suggested that the then idle U. S. Navy be used to provide much of the transport for the colonization project. Campbell believed that federal money could be validly used for a colonization project because slavery was so detrimental and divisive to America. Since Campbell realized that family attachments made many slave owners unwilling to sell slaves whom they had grown accustomed to, he recommended the removal of younger slaves. Campbell believed that removing younger slaves in larger numbers allowed the natural elimination of slavery since fewer slaves would be born and fewer slaves would replace those who were aging.<sup>37</sup>

In the end, Campbell remained pessimistic about the possibility of resolving the slavery issue and the future of a united America.

I strongly affirm the strong conviction, that they will never abolish slavery in these United States. They may accomplish a division of these United States. They may create more slave States. They may increase slave territory. They may create international wars; cherish and perpetuate eternal discords and hatreds; but they never can, they never will, in my judgment, abolish slavery in this New World.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, September, 1851, 529-530.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, December, 1835, 587-589.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, September, 1851, 530.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This paper demonstrates that it is possible to use the *Millennial Harbinger* legitimately as a primary source document to derive rather complex positions on slavery for Alexander Campbell. Although some of the background material needs to be filled in from other sources to show how Campbell's positions interacted with the views of others during his lifetime and interacted with the events of his era, yet, much of the controversy generated by his views can be supported by letters to the editor that were printed by Campbell in the *Millennial Harbinger* with his and others' reactions to them.

Alexander Campbell had a variant of a "middle of the road" position regarding slavery and issues related to it. As this middle road narrowed toward the end of the Antebellum Era, Campbell's position became more tenuous. Despite the increasing resistance to Campbell's positions regarding slavery and slavery-related issues the churches, he was instrumental in developing remained strong and quite stable. The *Millennial Harbinger* alone cannot resolve these interesting phenomena, which showed an increase in conflict with Campbell and an increasing tendency by some affiliated churches to disregard Campbell's positions regarding slavery.

Campbell's belief that the American constitution provided a superior way to organize American political life comes through the pages of the *Harbinger* clearly and forcefully. The importance Campbell attached to the citizen's acceptance of authority, Scripturally and politically, is affirmed.

Abolition for Campbell, remained anathema much as it did for many southerners during the Antebellum Era. Unlike many southerners, though, Campbell's reasons for this view were different. Campbell believed that more harm was being done toward the eventual end of slavery

by abolitionist activities than good was being accomplished. The *Millennial Harbinger* also clearly delineated Campbell's position in this area and his rationale for his views.

The increased tendency of readers to question Campbell's positions on slavery provides a partial explanation to an important question regarding congregational church structures, democracy in American religion, and the question of how a churchman dedicated to unity among Christians could become one of the most divisive forces in American Christianity. A short answer is that as the middle ground shrank, both figuratively and geographically in America's slavery debate, during the Antebellum Era, additional forces sought to disrupt the unity around which Christian churches were coalescing. As slavery became a larger issue in the cultural life of the Antebellum Era, Scripture no longer served as the glue holding together diverse populations under an umbrella of belief. In some ways, the freedom encouraged by a congregational church structure and the teachings of Alexander Campbell allowed individual church members and congregations to begin to accept other sources for determining unity among themselves than Scripture, which had a pre-eminent place before the exacerbation of the slavery question. These differences became increasingly noticeable in the *Millennial Harbinger* as the Antebellum Era progresses. As Campbell begins to be attacked more frequently and more virulently regarding his slavery positions, his position on church unity also begins to come under attack and becomes less relevant to his readers, who were his fellow church members. Eventually, the result is a split in the Christian Churches between a southern branch that is willing to accept slavery and a northern branch that is not. Yet, Campbell manages to hold the Christian Churches together as a semi-unified church far longer than most of the established denominations who separated much earlier in the Antebellum Era into northern and southern branches.

How Campbell's views on slavery and how its issues affected America during the

Antebellum and Civil War Eras requires much more analysis, but the more in-depth historical assessment cannot just be based only on what is available in the *Harbinger*. The nuances of how Campbell's views affected America, and continue to affect it today, await more in-depth, scholarly study and a venue that allows more space than a single paper.

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