

# **More Than Vocational Preparation: Alexander Campbell's Method of Higher Education For Character Formation**

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*Abstract:* Today's pragmatic focus in education leads to an overemphasis on career preparation. Yet historically, the purpose of education was much broader than that. Alexander Campbell founded Bethany College in part to demonstrate his distinctive method for higher education, rooted in his ideals of biblical training for forming the whole person.

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Since the mid-twentieth century, a college degree has represented a path to qualify for “good” jobs to many people in the USA.<sup>1</sup> Institutions of higher education today tout outcomes of job placement because of accreditation requirements.<sup>2</sup> However, an examination of Alexander Campbell's method of education at Bethany College will demonstrate that Christian higher education must be more than just vocational preparation.

At Bethany, Campbell provided practical training that was rooted in the Bible to form the character of the whole person, regardless of how the student would earn a living. This paper examines Campbell's theology of higher education, illustrates how Campbell implemented his ideas at Bethany College, explores his distinctive method and program for higher education, and recommends applications for us today.

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<sup>1</sup> John F. Covalleskie, “What Good is College? The Economics of College Attendance,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 45 (2014) 93-101.

<sup>2</sup> Muynck, Bram de, Pieter Vos, Jan Hoogland, and J van der (Jan) Stoep. “A Distinctive of Christian Higher Education: Educating for Vocation.” *Christian Higher Education* 16, no. 1-2 (2017) 4.

## Campbell's Theology of Higher Education

In a letter dated March 10, 1836, Guerdon Gates and J. T. Jones of Jacksonville, Illinois wrote to Alexander Campbell that denominational colleges existed, so why not have a Christian college? Campbell printed their letter in *The Millennial Harbinger* with his reply that it was time to talk about this “grave question” that was already discussed in the past about the movement’s future.<sup>3</sup> Campbell wrote, “Those schools called Schools of Theology, have very generally, if not universally, filled the world with idle speculations, doctrinal errors, and corruptions of all sorts, terminating in discords and heresies innumerable.”<sup>4</sup> He said that not one of the institutions of higher education in the U.S. were “devoted to the Bible alone and to the catholic principles of simple, ancient, apostolic Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> After stating these observations, among others, Campbell wrote in the positive:

1. That the true science is the science of facts, or the knowledge of God’s works and ways—of his creations, and his providences. 2. That the union and harmony between true science and true religion is as intimate as the union between the soul and the body of man. 3. That the best commentary on the Holy Scriptures is a knowledge of God’s various works—the history of man in all ages, latitudes, climates, and under all forms of government, ancient and modern. Geography, chronology, and ancient history, as well as ancient languages, are therefore the best interpreters of all the manners, customs, and remote allusions found in the two Testaments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger* (1836) 197-202. In this paper’s citations, “MH” will stand for *The Millennial Harbinger*, all of which Campbell self-published from Bethany.

<sup>4</sup> MH (1836), 201.

<sup>5</sup> MH (1836), 202.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

These epistemological beliefs drove his theology, theory, and practice of education, including higher education. Several classical writers, including Francis Bacon, Thomas Smith Grimke, and John Locke, influenced his “philosophical blend of Christian and Enlightenment ideals.”<sup>7</sup>

Campbell had a problem with the way theological higher education was conducted in his era. “What Campbell finds wrong with theological education in his day thus stems from his view of the role of the Bible in man’s knowledge of God and of moral principles generally. The basic proposition to be understood in Campbell’s position is that the Bible is a *non-sectarian* book.”<sup>8</sup> This can lead to one misinterpreting Campbell as wanting to abolish these types of schools, but that was not so. “Their method of study was wrong, and their intention was wrong, but not their interest in things religious or their devotion to Biblical literature as sacred. Their failings were that they were unscholarly and unscientific.”<sup>9</sup> This is because the denominations used syllogisms to create their theology, and Campbell preferred to use the inductive method in hermeneutics (in part because of the influence of his professors at Glasgow).<sup>10</sup>

We want no scholastic or traditional theology. We desire, however, a much more intimate, critical, and thorough knowledge of the Bible, the whole Bible as the Book of God—the Book of Life and of human destiny, than is usually, or indeed can be, obtained in what are called Theological Schools. As we make the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible our creed, our standard of religion and of all moral science, we have no hesitation in saying that this institution, from the nursery class upward to the church classes, shall make that volume a constant

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<sup>7</sup> D. Duane Cummins, “Higher Education, Views of in the Movement,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 391.

<sup>8</sup> S. Morris Eames, *The Philosophy of Alexander Campbell* (Bethany, WV: Bethany College, 1966) 79, emphasis his.

<sup>9</sup> Eames, *Philosophy*, 79-80.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy R. Sensing, “Baconian Method and Preaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2001) 166-7.

study. All science, all literature, all nature, all art, all attainments shall be made tributary to the Bible and man's ultimate temporal and eternal destiny.<sup>11</sup>

According to Olbricht, in order to develop this new theology and “establish a thus saith the Lord,” Campbell took “the scholarly route. He thought that real scholarship was not a detriment to his plea, but rather the groundwork on which it was to be laid.”<sup>12</sup> If Christians were to leave behind the sectarian silos and go back to the first century church, “a vital, even scholarly knowledge of the New Testament seemed required.”<sup>13</sup> Biblical scholarship was important for his restoration ideal.<sup>14</sup> This type of scholarship became the foundation for how all people “could understand aright the original sources of the Christian faith and understand them alike.”<sup>15</sup>

Alexander Campbell had a high view of the Bible; thus he reasoned the only way that people can understand religious principles or morality was from Scripture.<sup>16</sup> The way to understand Scripture, then, was through “grammatical studies and knowledge of the original languages....Empirical study of God's Word, therefore, is the only way to know God.”<sup>17</sup> He applied the scientific method to the study of Scripture.<sup>18</sup> The Bible is “the true philosophy of

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<sup>11</sup> MH (1839), 448.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas H. Olbricht, “Religious Scholarship and the Restoration Movement,” *Restoration Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1982) 198.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Olbricht, “Religious Scholarship,” 199.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Eames, *Philosophy*, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Sensing, “Baconian,” 170.

<sup>18</sup> C. Kent Clinger, “Influence of Bethany College on the Higher Criticism Debate, 1841-1891,” *Discipliana* 58 (March 1, 1998) 46-47.

Divinity and the true science of humanity,” wrote Campbell in 1858.<sup>19</sup> The Bible is “essential to the perfect and complete development of man in his whole constitution—as a citizen of the commonwealth, a citizen of the kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

He wanted people to reach their highest potential through the discipline of formal education. However, Campbell lamented that very few people “have the capacity, the patience, the perseverance, the taste and the means adequate to its acquisition and consummation; and, equally to be regretted is the fact, that larger and more liberal provisions are not made for its extension and perfection, both by the State and the Church; as to both it is the greatest known or conceivable auxiliary.”<sup>21</sup>

Campbell also appreciated role that these institutions could help accomplish the work of the church and needed the support of the church. He wrote in 1858,

Colleges are, in every point of view, the most important, and inappreciable institutions on earth, second only to the Church of Christ in their inherent claims upon Christian liberality and Christian patronage. If they be not worthy of the smiles and the prayers and the contributions of a Christian community, I know not, beyond the Church, what is, or ought to be, an appropriate and approved object of Christian patronage and Christian liberality. We must have educated mind in order to the prosperity and progress of society.<sup>22</sup>

When he announced the formation of a new educational institution, Campbell knew the time was right to put these precepts into practice. “Institutions for forming human character, for moulding [sic] nature according to a divine model, are demanded by the spirit of the age—by the

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<sup>19</sup> MH (1858), 362.

<sup>20</sup> MH (1858), 366.

<sup>21</sup> MH (1858), 363.

<sup>22</sup> MH (1858), 364-5.

wants of the church—by the anticipations of a new era.”<sup>23</sup> He tied his eschatological view to the role of education. His speaking and writing on educational reform came from “his millennial conviction of its humanitarian importance.”<sup>24</sup> Campbell also understood the enduring legacy of educational institutions and methods in society.<sup>25</sup> Bethany College was one of the institutions that he founded.

### **Campbell Establishes Bethany College**

Alexander took money from his own estate to start Bethany College in 1840. The initial funds of \$15,000<sup>26</sup> came from his success in farming, business, as a postmaster, and as a publisher.<sup>27</sup> He offered his own labor and financial investment only if the brethren would also contribute their resources to the institution and send their children to learn at said institution.<sup>28</sup> Classes began on November 1, 1841.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> MH (1840), 48.

<sup>24</sup> D. Duane Cummins, “Educational Philosophy of Alexander Campbell,” *Discipliana* 59 (Jan. 1, 1999) 8.

<sup>25</sup> MH (1858), 364.

<sup>26</sup> \$15,000 in 1840 is approximately equivalent to \$384,150 in 2019 dollars. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, “Consumer Price Index, 1800-,” Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator/consumer-price-index-1800->.

<sup>27</sup> Perry Epler Gresham, “Alexander Campbell—Schoolmaster,” in *The Sage of Bethany: A Pioneer in Broadcloth*, compiled by Perry E. Gresham (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1988) 14, 18.

<sup>28</sup> MH (1839), 450.

<sup>29</sup> MH (1858), 362; Lester Grover McAllister, “Models of Ministerial Preparation in the Stone-Campbell Movement,” *Discipliana* 54 (June 1, 1994).

Bethany College had the specific purpose “to raise up a host of accomplished fathers, teachers of schools, teachers of colleges, teachers of churches, preachers of the gospel, and good and useful citizens.”<sup>30</sup> Campbell and other early leaders of the movement were enthusiastic about starting colleges and universities to help ensure that congregations had people who were able to teach the Bible well.<sup>31</sup> For Campbell, it was imperative for all Christians, not just preachers, to be trained in biblical scholarship. This is because all believers had the responsibility to understand the Bible. Campbell thought that “clergy, denominational seminaries, and denominational doctrine kept Christians apart rather than uniting them,” so he did not think that the primary role of Christian academia “as the training of ministers.”<sup>32</sup> This would have “singled out a special class of Christians” for the work of the ministry, but Campbell wanted every believer to participate in “the furtherance of the faith.”<sup>33</sup> The leaders trained at Bethany became those that propagated his reformation.<sup>34</sup> Students that focused on vocational ministry took courses in apologetics, sacred history, church history, biblical literature, Latin, and Greek, as they spent four years in the School of Sacred History.<sup>35</sup>

Bethany College was built on the “facts, documents, precepts, and promises” of God’s wisdom as revealed in Scripture, not the “patented orthodoxy and unpatented heterodoxy” of

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<sup>30</sup> MH (1839), 449, emphasis his.

<sup>31</sup> William Tabbernee, “Alexander Campbell’s ‘Teacher-Bishops’ and the Role of ‘Scholar-Pastors’ Among Contemporary Disciples of Christ,” *Mid-Stream* 38, no. 1–2 (January 1999) 108-9.

<sup>32</sup> Olbricht, “Religious Scholarship,” 200.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> McAllister, “Models,” 36.

<sup>35</sup> McAllister, “Models,” 37.

“factitious and accidental” institutions.<sup>36</sup> Campbell symbolically demonstrated this when he put a copy of the Bible into the new cornerstone of the rebuilt college building on May 31, 1858 because the Scriptures are the “true and proper foundation of every Literary, Scientific, Moral, and Religious institution.”<sup>37</sup>

He modeled Bethany after the University of Virginia because he had great respect for Thomas Jefferson.<sup>38</sup> Yet Campbell gave different weight of importance to certain subjects than Jefferson did. Bethany’s curriculum synthesized academic study with the practical aspects of life. According to Eames, in the daily routine of studies at Bethany were lectures on sacred history. He included the Bible as a textbook for scholarly study without the bias of sectarian creeds.<sup>39</sup> Bethany was “the only literary college in America to maintain a Department of Sacred History and Biblical Literature as an integral part of the curriculum.”<sup>40</sup> He also included other subjects of study in the scope and sequence. Campbell made “the sciences a significant part of the school and college curricula” which led “him to emphasize practical sciences for the average man.”<sup>41</sup> He wrote in 1839,

The course of instruction would indeed materially differ; not so much in the sciences taught, as in the manner of teaching some of them; not so much in the languages, as in the course of reading necessary to the acquisition of them. The immoral and profane poets and writers would be excluded, and selections of only what is rational, moral, and subservient to good taste and criticism be substituted

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<sup>36</sup> MH (1858), 365.

<sup>37</sup> MH (1858), 366.

<sup>38</sup> Gresham, “Schoolmaster,” 20.

<sup>39</sup> Eames, *Philosophy*, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Carpenter and Joel Shipps, *Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 88.

<sup>41</sup> Eames, *Philosophy*, 81.



for the demoralizing and unrestricted readings and studies too often tolerated, if not enforced, in literary institutions.<sup>42</sup>

He incorporated the liberal arts to help students become acquainted “with nature, society, and the Bible, to any extent commensurate with the wants of our nature and the limits of our existence.”<sup>43</sup> “Campbell thought education in all the disciplines helped in the proper interpretation of the Scriptures; hence Bethany was a liberal arts college.”<sup>44</sup> Campbell admitted that some students who would come to this school would not be Christians, and some would be uneducated in languages and sciences, so “Jewish and Christian history, chronology, ancient geography, ancient manners and customs, idioms, ecclesiastic affairs” were among the subjects that were taught.<sup>45</sup> A Bible study occurred every day of the academic year, in chronological order, to exegete

its *facts and documents*—historical, chronological, geographical; whether they be *natural, moral, or religious*, in reference to the past, the present, and the future of man. Theories, speculations, sometimes called *doctrines, faith, orthodoxy, heterodoxy*, come not within the legitimate area of Collegiate literary, moral, or Christian education.<sup>46</sup>

Campbell set very high standards for the academy. There was “not a false philosophy, a false theology, a false Christology, nor a false science of any sort, promulged, accredited, winked at or permitted in the whole course of education at Bethany College.”<sup>47</sup> Bethany College was

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<sup>42</sup> MH (1839), 448.

<sup>43</sup> MH (1849), 433.

<sup>44</sup> Olbricht, “Religious Scholarship,” 201.

<sup>45</sup> MH (1839), 448.

<sup>46</sup> MH (1858), 362, emphasis his.

<sup>47</sup> MH (1858), 236.

also one of the first higher education institutions to allow its students to choose electives.<sup>48</sup> Even after students earned a degree, Campbell believed that their education was not over; he advocated lifelong learning.<sup>49</sup> “Every student that has attained graduation...is merely licensed to become his own teacher and pupil...you owe to God, to Society, to your Alma Mater and to yourselves to continue to be students,” he said in a commencement address.<sup>50</sup>

Campbell understood this institution to be part of the church universal, even if it was chartered separately from a local congregation. Student life and discipline were to be handled as if they were “in the house of the Lord.”<sup>51</sup> In 1845 Campbell noted that 120 students were attending from 14 states.<sup>52</sup> “This institution, in the number, respectability, and general moral standing of its students, is steadily advancing from year to year.”<sup>53</sup>

Bethany College “became the mother of eleven higher institutions,”<sup>54</sup> and produced many second-generation preachers in the Stone-Campbell Movement. In 1858 Campbell reported six college presidents, 30 professors, and over 70 full-time evangelists among Bethany’s alumni. One student had even immersed “some two hundred disciples” while studying as an

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<sup>48</sup> Gresham, “Schoolmaster,” 22.

<sup>49</sup> Earl Eugene Eminhizer, “Alexander Campbell on Moral and Quality Education - Some New Light.” *Iliff Review* 41, no. 2 (Spr 1984) 28.

<sup>50</sup> MH (1860), 391.

<sup>51</sup> MH (1839), 448-9.

<sup>52</sup> MH (1845), 376.

<sup>53</sup> MH (1845), 375.

<sup>54</sup> Gresham, “Schoolmaster,” 17.

undergraduate.<sup>55</sup> Even so, the influence of Bethany was much larger than that: Campbell put his ideas about higher education to action in this institution. He was not an armchair philosopher. Campbell's words and deeds both revealed his well-reasoned, practical methods for Christian higher education.

### **Campbell's Method of Christian Higher Education**

Alexander Campbell created a college “that served the intellectual, moral, vocational, and religious development of students, an education that served the wholeness of person.”<sup>56</sup> More than ten years after Campbell began teaching at Bethany College, “he acknowledged the benefits of a constructive, biblically oriented, theology.”<sup>57</sup> He observed how the theological foundations of the school were lived out in its students: with an “energy of spirit, and a moral polish of character which this system has demonstrated as perfectly practicable” that “kindles in the soul aspirations and longings, which, in many instances, terminate in a spiritual renovation of the inner man, and a consecration of body, soul, and spirit, to the Lord of life and glory.”<sup>58</sup> Bethany's historical-grammatical biblical interpretation, integrated curriculum, and upright character of its professors contributed to the holistic spiritual formation of the student body.

Bethany was the first college “known to any history accessible to us, that was founded upon the Holy Bible, as an *every day* lecture and an *every day study*—as the only safe and authoritative text-book of humanity, theology, and Christology—of all true science upon the

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<sup>55</sup> MH (1858), 234.

<sup>56</sup> Cummins, “Educational Philosophy,” 14.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas H. Olbricht, “Alexander Campbell as a Theologian,” *Impact* 21 (1988) 24.

<sup>58</sup> MH (1858), 365.

problems of Divinity and humanity—of the world or worlds that preceded this, or that shall succeed it.”<sup>59</sup>

In Bethany College the Holy Bible is the only text-book on the whole history and philosophy of man—as the *object* of Divine philanthropy, and the *subject* of Divine government. And, notwithstanding that we have students from diverse Protestant denominations, we have never heard of one demur, at home or abroad, on the account of the literary, scientific, moral or religious education dispensed in said college.<sup>60</sup>

He included all three learning taxonomies: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor,<sup>61</sup> with an emphasis on the heart. Campbell understood “moral formation of character” to be the “paramount ideal” and “chief end of education.”<sup>62</sup> He used the Bible as the source of moral principles. He did this because he “could not see how the proper function of government, the function of promoting the general welfare, could be accomplished without enlightened citizens. And these citizens should be intellectually competent and morally responsible.”<sup>63</sup> In addition, Campbell wrote,

*the formation of moral character, the culture of the heart, is the supreme end of education, or rather is education itself. With me education and the formation of moral character are identical expressions....We contemplate a scheme in which the formation of the physical and intellectual man shall not be neglected, but which shall be always held in subordination to the moral man. In which, in one word, the formation of moral character, the cultivation of the heart, shall be the Alpha and the Omega, the radical, regulating, and all-controlling aim and object*

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<sup>59</sup> MH (1858), 362, emphasis his. “Christology” was lowercase in the original.

<sup>60</sup> MH (1858), 236, emphasis his.

<sup>61</sup> James R. Estep Jr., Michael J. Anthony, and Gregg R. Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008) 280-1.

<sup>62</sup> Cummins, “Educational Philosophy,” 9.

<sup>63</sup> Eames, *Philosophy*, 82.

in all the literary and scientific studies, in all the exercises, recreations and amusements of children and youth.<sup>64</sup>

In one of his strongest statements for the existence of Bethany College, and institutions of Christian higher education in general, Campbell said,

Men, and not brick and mortar, make colleges, and these colleges make men. These men make books, and these books make the living world in which we individually live, and move, and have our being. How all-important, then, that our colleges should understand and teach the true philosophy of man! They create the men that furnish the teachers of men—the men that fill the pulpit, the legislative halls, the senators, the judges and the governors of earth. Do we expect to fill these high stations by merely voting or praying for men? Or shall we choose empirics, charlatans, mountebanks, and every pretender to eminent claims upon the suffrages of the people? Forbid it, reason, conscience, and Heaven!<sup>65</sup>

Campbell did not use higher education just for the sake of expediency of supplying preachers to the new movement. Unlike other antebellum colleges that were started to secure educated ministers,<sup>66</sup> “a Bethany student was to be a creative, analytical thinker, a leader in whatever endeavor he chose to enter.”<sup>67</sup> Even though their core convictions remained the same, the faculty expanded the curriculum just one year after Bethany’s founding to include courses in agriculture, business, teacher preparation, and modern languages to respond to the changes in society and demands of the market to keep enrollment up.<sup>68</sup> Their position was “simply that

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<sup>64</sup> MH (1840), 157-8, emphasis his.

<sup>65</sup> MH (1854), 71.

<sup>66</sup> McAllister, “Models,” 34.

<sup>67</sup> Clinger, “Influence,” 48.

<sup>68</sup> Cummins, “Educational Philosophy,” 11.

which *educationally* meets and satisfies all the wants of man, in reference to the present, *now*, and to the eternal future, of his being, relations, obligations and destiny.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion: Character Formation in Today’s Academy**

Alexander Campbell’s influence in Stone-Campbell higher education is still felt today, yet much can be done to align current practices closer to his ideal. Some of the questions raised in this study for twenty-first century application are: How does spiritual formation occur in the academy? What is the best scope and sequence of curriculum in an institution of Christian higher education? Do we integrate biblical studies with other subjects, and, if so, how does that happen? What is the place of ministerial training in higher education?

Campbell had a holistic, integrated liberal arts curriculum. His position clearly articulated a high view of Scripture that interpreted the other sciences through the Bible. A separate study on sacred history affirmed the historicity, inspiration, and authority of God’s Word. The worldview of the curriculum and professors shaped the heads, hearts, and hands of the students.

He wrote,

The legitimate position, end, and aim of all colleges, properly so called, is, or ought to be, the education, or development of the whole man,—*body, soul* and *spirit*; and this, too, in harmony with the attributes and laws of God, exhibited and developed in the Five cardinal dramas of the universe: Creation, Legislation, Providence, Moral Government and Redemption.<sup>70</sup>

The goal of Campbell’s system of higher education was to educate people, no matter their vocation, for moral formation of character. Campbell did not limit Bethany College to the training of a new class of clergy. His aim was wider than the utilitarian practice of filling pulpits.

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<sup>69</sup> MH (1858), 367, emphasis his.

<sup>70</sup> MH (1858), 366, emphasis his.

Finally, Campbell advocated lifelong learning. Education should go beyond rote memorization, teaching to the test, or cramming for final exams, and instead to focus on learning how to learn so students can continue to teach themselves after commencement. Too often the transition out of school is abrupt and only focuses on the pragmatic function of “landing a good job” after walking the stage and turning the tassel. What if capstone classes helped students integrate the holistic objectives of education, functioned as a bridge between formal learning and lifelong informal learning, and served as a primer for life outside the institution (similar to how an orientation week serves as a primer to life inside the school)? The transition to the world outside of school must be greater than stopping by the career services office. Even before the final semester, many classes along the way should integrate theory with practice, give students tools to use when the course concludes, and provide reflection questions to aid in student application.

Alexander Campbell’s method of higher education provides practical training for life to shape the whole person—no matter what vocation the student pursues. This means our Christian colleges and universities should give students what they need: a biblical formation of the head, hands, *and* heart for lifelong learning and Christ-like character as they serve the church and the world according to their gifts and calling.

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