

## Was Alexander Campbell a Rationalist? A Response to Postmodern Views of Campbell's View of Scripture and Hermeneutics

*Introduction:* As the title of my presentation clearly states, the question I am considering today is whether Alexander Campbell was a rationalist. And as the subtitle of my presentation indicates, I am particularly concerned with whether Campbell was a rationalist in regard to his view of Scripture and hermeneutics.

My subtitle also indicates that I'm responding particularly to *postmodern* views. However, after some more thought, study, consideration, and discussion with others, I've come to recognize that the views that express that Campbell was a rationalist are not necessarily postmodern, especially since the claim of "Campbell as rationalist" began in the 1960s. So, my subtitle should be more along the lines of "A Response to the Views of Campbell's Scripture and Hermeneutics," or something like that. I apologize if I have disappointed anyone.

*My Approach:* To answer the question whether Campbell was a rationalist, my approach will be from a purely philosophical/theological perspective, i.e., I will be looking at the arguments given merely in the articles that claim Campbell was rationalistic in his approach to Scripture and hermeneutics. I will not be looking, for instance, at the historical context in which these arguments were first made—particularly during the 1960s—and are being perpetuated today. This particular aspect of my approach is significant because, as I hope to show, the argument that Campbell was a rationalist ultimately fails, and therefore something else may have been going on when the claims that Campbell was a rationalist began. I will not be able to look into any of those particular historical aspects. My approach here is merely to ask, as any one of us today would ask if we picked up an article that argues Campbell was a rationalist, "Is it true that Campbell was a rationalist is his approach to Scripture and hermeneutics?" To answer this question my procedure will be as follows:

First, I will lay out the views of scholarship that argue that Campbell's view of Scripture and hermeneutics place him in the stream of rationalism.

Second, I will lay out what these arguments essentially amount to and then assess whether the argument is a valid one.

Finally, I will conclude with some final thoughts of the implications that follow from answering the question of whether Campbell was a rationalist with respect to his views of Scripture and hermeneutics.

*Relevance:* Before broaching a discussion on the views of Campbell, it is necessary to state up front why it is important to determine whether Campbell was a rationalist in regard to his view of Scripture and hermeneutics. What is at stake here? I think we could say several things, including Campbell's reputation and accurate description of his views, the identity of the Restoration Movement itself, etc. But, once again, I am approaching this from a philosophical/theological perspective, and thus there are two primary things at stake here from this particular perspective (refer to the subtitle of the presentation): The nature of Scripture and how we do theology.

The Views of Campbell as a Rationalist:

(1) Thomas Olbricht, professor Emeritus of Pepperdine University, wrote an article entitled “The Rationalism of the Restoration” (*RQ* 11 (1968): 77-88). The title itself indicates Olbricht’s assessment of Campbell (and others in the formative years of the Restoration Movement). Olbricht critiques Campbell and others of the way they approached Scripture. He writes that “it is unfortunate” that Campbell and others “took up a Lockean approach to the interpretation of Scripture” in which “one is always working from bits of information and moving from them to more general views.” He adds that such an approach ignores the overarching themes in Scripture, and so “before these bits of information are of any value, the prior question, concerning the overruling [*sic*] themes in Scripture in which these bits are couched, must be raised.” Therefore, “the criticism is of the atomistic [and inductive] manner in which the data of Scriptures is conceived.” Although Olbricht criticizes Campbell in these matters, he concludes his piece saying, “Our generation could learn much from the *rationalism* of the early restoration leaders” [emphasis added].

(2) Michael Casey, also at one time a professor at Pepperdine, critiques Campbell in much the same way. In an article in the *RQ*, he writes, “Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell were conservative *rational* empiricists” (“The Origins of the Hermeneutics of the Churches of Christ, Part Two: The Philosophical Background,” 31 (1989), 205; emphasis added). Casey’s main problem with Campbell’s approach to Scripture is also induction. Casey summarizes his criticism of the Campbells thus: “Their basic *rationalist* approach represents a positivist outlook on scripture: The verses of the scriptures were individual historical facts, and the verses were to be gleaned from the scriptures in an inductive manner to construct biblical doctrine” (*ibid.*, 206; emphasis added).

(3) C. Leonard Allen, professor at one time at Abilene Christian University and Fuller Theological Seminary, also views Campbell as a rationalist, disagreeing with his inductive approach to Scripture. In his article “Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ: James S. Lamar and ‘The Organon of Scripture,’” he argues that much of Christianity in 19<sup>th</sup> century America (including Campbell and the Restoration Movement) was steeped in “Common Sense *rationalism*.” He states, “Alexander Campbell, steeped in Scottish philosophy through his father Thomas and a brief career at the University of Glasgow, was the chief influence” on the Disciples movement. Campbell’s influence, he continues, transformed the Restoration Movement “into a more *rational* and explicitly Baconian form,” and thus Campbell showed a “revulsion to speculation and the insistence on an inductive accumulation of ‘facts’” from Scripture” (“Baconianism and the Bible in the Disciples of Christ,” *Church History* 55 (1986), 69, 70).

(4) In similar vein, Russ Dudley of York College contends that Campbell imbibed from the well of Common Sense Realism which promoted the view that the Bible is “a sourcebook of facts, which any reasoning man could quarry out as the building materials for a logical system” (“Restorationist Hermeneutics Among the Churches of Christ: Why Are We at an Impasse?” *RQ* 3 (1988), 24). Although he does not accuse Campbell of being a rationalist *per se*, Dudley critiques Campbell in the same manner. He goes on to state that the method Campbell employed was a “literary model in which the Bible is seen as a sourcebook of scientific, empirical, factual

data.” Dudrey continues, “Campbell’s model of biblical literature was a ‘flat’ one; he tended to approach the Bible as ‘a collection of individual facts, the unity of which emerges from the facts themselves’” (the last quote here is from Olbricht, “Bible as Revelation,” *RQ* 8 (1965), 229-30). Such an approach, says Dudrey, is based upon “a dictation model of inspiration.” Indeed, Campbell “shared his father’s very literalistic approach to the Bible.” Campbell was “biblicist to the extreme.”

(5) Following in the same line of thought as Olbricht, Casey, Allen, and Dudrey, David Little of the University of Queensland argues that “inductive reasoning was championed by some [i.e., Campbell] in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement as the perfect and final method in biblical interpretation” in nineteenth century America (“Inductive Hermeneutics and the Early Restoration Movement,” *SCJ* 3 (2000), 5). He continues, “By *rationalistic*, inductive methodology, all could see the Bible alike and find common agreement in Scripture, thereby ending religious division” (emphasis added). He goes on to say that this method paved the way for the Bible to become “no more than a fixed rule book that transcended time, geography, and culture.” He critiques the inductive method of biblical interpretation as being “atomistic”; “it separated words from their context (topical studies) and joined widely diverse individual texts in an effort to classify them according to subject matter. . . . There is often no regard for the larger historical or theological context which give words and texts their particular meaning in the first place.” Little also argues that the inductive method makes the Bible “a codebook for Christian doctrine and objective facts, with logical syllogism playing a large part in a correct and ultimate understanding of the truth.” Finally, the “hermeneutics of induction” make “spirituality . . . primarily an intellectual exercise, being an accurate understanding of the biblical text. . . . The focus continues to be on reason and intellect” when there is “more to spirituality than a correct understanding of Bible doctrine.”

What do all these criticisms amount to? After considering all the statements made above about Campbell’s approach to Scripture, the argument seems to be the following:

*Campbell as Rationalist Argument (CARA):*

1. Alexander Campbell is one who used the inductive method of biblical interpretation (which “flattens” the biblical text, makes the text atomistic, insists on accumulating “facts” from the text, and makes spirituality an exercise in intellect only).

2. One who uses the inductive method of biblical interpretation is a rationalist.

Therefore, Alexander Campbell is a rationalist.

In order for the conclusion to be true, premises 1 and 2 must be true. If one premise is false, then the conclusion that Campbell was a rationalist does not follow and is therefore false. So, the procedure to be followed here will be to assess each premise for its value of truth.

Assessment of the Premises:

*Premise (1):* Is it true that Alexander Campbell used the inductive method of biblical interpretation (which “flattens” the biblical text, makes the text atomistic, insists on accumulating ‘facts’ from the text, and makes spirituality an exercise in intellect only)?

Note that this premise really has two parts. The first is that Campbell used the inductive method. As to the truth of this statement, no one can doubt. There is no question whether Campbell used the inductive method of biblical interpretation. No one disputes that he used this method and endorsed it. But notice what the issue here really is: Campbell's use of the inductive method. The CARA is actually arguing that the inductive approach to biblical interpretation "flattens" the biblical text, makes the text atomistic, insists on accumulating 'facts' from the text, and makes spirituality an exercise in intellect only. So, in order to assess whether premise (1) is true, we must determine whether Campbell's use of the inductive method does these things.

First, does Campbell's inductive hermeneutic "flatten" the text? What the CARA means by this is that Campbell ignores the literary genre (prophecy, poetry, epistolary, history, etc.) when interpreting the text, including Scripture's use of tropes (e.g., hyperbole, metaphor, etc.), thereby making Scripture merely an "instruction manual." The text is "flattened" into one type of literature; it is merely a bunch of propositions strung together. Scripture is simply a place to go to find "what one ought to do" and "how to do it."

Is this true? Is this what Campbell's inductive method calls for? Does Campbell ignore the literary genre, etc., and thus flatten the text? Quite the contrary. He clearly recognizes the different types of literary genres of the Bible. Campbell states, "The Bible . . . including the Old and New Testaments,—completed in a *literary* point of view, is the work of at least *thirty-five* authors. . . . As authors, some of them appear in the character of historians, orators, poets, biographers, moralists, letter-writers, &c" (*Christianity Restored*, 17-18). In fact, one of Campbell's seven rules of interpretation is to "consider first the historical circumstances of the book," which include "the order, the title, the author, the date, the place, and the occasion of it" (*CR*, 8). Interestingly, John Mark Hicks (a Church of Christ scholar) says on his website that he appreciates "Campbell's original intent to approach the text in a historical rather than scholastic fashion. Campbell reminded us that Scripture is primarily (4/5ths) history and that Scripture is itself part of history" ("Stone-Campbell Hermeneutics I – Campbell's Scholarly Baconianism," <http://johnmarkhicks.wordpress.com/2008/05/28/stone-campbell-hermeneutics-i-campbells-scholarly-baconianism/>).

Campbell also clearly understands that the biblical text contains tropes of all kinds, including metaphors, analogies, parables, hyperbole, etc. He spends no less than fifty-two pages discussing tropes in *Christianity Restored*. "In no book in the world," states Campbell, "is the literal sense of words the only sense; and still less in the Bible" (*CR*, 26). Contrary to Russ Dudrey, then, Campbell was neither "literalistic" in his view of the Bible nor a "biblicist." "There is the *literal*, and the *tropical* or figurative meaning of words," Campbell states (*CR*, 25). Clearly then, Campbell's inductive method does not "flatten" the text but insists on keeping the literary genres and tropes in view.

Second, does Campbell's inductive hermeneutic make Scripture atomistic and insist on accumulating "facts?" What the CARA means here is that Campbell's method reduces the text to "bits of information" to collect into some "logical system" (i.e., theological system), thereby ignoring the context and the use of words.

Is this true? Is this what Campbell's inductive hermeneutic calls for? Again, Campbell argues against such a method. In an article titled "Texts and Textuary Divines," Campbell disparages those who make a theological system by isolating a single text from its context. He states, "An ingenious or an enthusiastic preacher may bring forth or create any dogma or doctrine he pleases from a *text or sentence, detached from the scope or design of the writer*; even from the same *text* sermons may be woven of the most discordant *texture*, as all the pulpits in the land attest. A whole system of theology has been deduced from one text, and a score of sermons have been woven from one thread" (*Christian Baptist*, 2 May 1825, vol. 2, 189). Elsewhere, Campbell takes aim at those who approach the text "atomistically": "If any other book were exhibited in the same *dislocated*, and distracted light, had as many debates about its meaning, and as many different senses attributed to its words; if any other book were read as the scriptures are commonly read, in the same *broken, disconnected, and careless manner* . . . there is every reason to believe that it would be as unintelligible and as little understood as the Bible appears to be" ("The Bible," *CB*, 6 March 1826, vol. 2, 172; emphasis added). In another place, Campbell emphatically states that "many texts are brought into field, and strung together, whose connexion is dissevered; and not one of which was, perhaps, designed to prove any such theory" ("To Amicus," *CB*, 3 July 1826, vol. 3, 242). He goes on to say, "It has often surprised me to find with what tenacity the *sound* of some texts is held, regardless of the *meaning*, because the *sound*, more than the *sense*, suits some favorite position," and texts are often "quoted to support a position which was not before the mind of the writer" (*ibid.*). The context is of utmost importance in interpretation for Campbell. His rule 4 of interpretation states, "*Common usage, which can only be ascertained by testimony, must always decide the meaning of any word which has but one signification*;-but when words have according testimony (i.e., the dictionary,) more meanings than one, whether literal or figurative, *the scope, the context, or parallel passages, must decide the meaning*" (*CR*, 97; emphasis original). These sentiments are expressed elsewhere in Campbell's works. These quotations, however, suffice to support the idea that Campbell's inductive hermeneutic was not atomistic, intent on collecting "empirical facts" to construct a logical system.

Third, does Campbell's inductive method of biblical interpretation make spirituality an exercise of the intellect only? The CARA argument here, as indicated above by David Little, seems to be that Campbell's inductive method reduces spirituality to merely a correct understanding of the biblical text. And as Little notes, spirituality is more than just the intellect. Now, if it seems that I have only repeated the CARA criticism in different words, you would be correct. The reason is because the argument is fallacious on the account of being *non-sequitur*. In order to see this, it is best to lay out the argument, which is basically this:

1. Campbell's hermeneutic of induction is an exercise of the intellect only.
  2. But spirituality is more than an exercise of the intellect only.
- Therefore, Campbell's hermeneutic of induction makes spirituality an exercise of the intellect only.

I think it is quite evident why this argument is fallacious. The reason is the conclusion does not follow from the premises. How does one get from a premise that states something about Campbell's *hermeneutic* to a conclusion about what he does to *spirituality*? One cannot; it is fallacious reasoning. Yes, premise (2) states something about spirituality, but not what Campbell

thinks about spirituality. The only way one can get to a conclusion about what Campbell makes spirituality from Campbell's hermeneutic of induction is to somehow connect the two. In such a case, one would have to supply a premise that shows that Campbell's spirituality is confined only to an exercise of the intellect. In other words, there is a missing premise here. Supplying the missing premise, the argument looks something like this:

1. Campbell's hermeneutic of induction is an exercise of the intellect only.
  2. Campbell makes spirituality an exercise of the intellect only. (missing premise)
  3. Spirituality is more than an exercise of the intellect.
- Therefore, Campbell makes spirituality an exercise of the intellect only.

As we can see, the conclusion is the same as premise 2. This is called begging the question. And this is in fact what the CARA does here. The CARA assumes what it aims to prove. The only way to get around this is to claim that Campbell limits spirituality to his hermeneutic of induction. The argument will then look like this:

1. Campbell's hermeneutic of induction is an exercise of the intellect only.
  2. Campbell limits spirituality to his (Campbell's) hermeneutic of induction.
  3. But spirituality is more than an exercise of the intellect only.
- Therefore, Campbell limits spirituality to an exercise of the intellect only. (from 1, 2)

But is premise 2 true? Does Campbell limit spirituality to the hermeneutic of induction? I think the evidence is to the contrary. Campbell is talking about hermeneutics when speaking of the inductive method of biblical interpretation, not spirituality. It may very well be the case that Campbell believes that spirituality includes hermeneutics and the understanding of Scripture, but he never argues that hermeneutics is all there is to spirituality. In fact, he emphasizes spirituality beyond reading Scripture for mere understanding; he emphasizes the need to read Scripture for devotional reasons, the need for prayer, the need to feel, love, and obey:

“I am assured that every one that is born of God feels as well as believes, hopes and fears, loves and abhors, rejoices and trembles, and that they are conscious of all these; that they are purified in their hearts, reformed in their lives, and zealous for good works; that they are fervent in spirit, constant in prayer, and intent on shewing forth the praises of him who hath called them out of darkness into his marvelous light. And I contend that, without these, a man is blind and cannot see far, and dead while he lives” (“The Baptist Recorder,” *CB*, 1 May 1826, vol. 3, 211).

Furthermore, Campbell states that it is through reading Scripture that Christians “feel the Spirit of God working in [them] to will and to do every thing pleasing to God” (“On Bible Reading,” *MH*, 1839, 344). Therefore, CARA is begging the question when it states that Campbell's inductive method makes spirituality an exercise of human intellect only.

The conclusion in regard to the first premise of the CARA argument, then, is that it is false. Therefore, technically the conclusion of the CARA argument does not follow, and thus Campbell is not a rationalist. This being said, however, I would like to evaluate the truth value of the second premise.

*Premise (2):* Remember that the second premise of the CARA argument states, “One who uses the inductive method of biblical interpretation is a rationalist.” The question is, is this true?

To answer the question, it is necessary to know exactly what a rationalist is. What makes one a rationalist? It seems that the CARA argument is that the inductive method of biblical interpretation is part and parcel of some type of rationalist system of philosophy, and so if you use induction, then you are a rationalist. But what kind of rationalist are they talking about? I find this question difficult to answer based upon the statements of those who give the CARA argument because the term is never defined. Thus the term “rationalist” is vague and can mean a variety of different things. So, I will have to pursue several avenues to determine what the CARA argument means when it uses the term “rationalist.”

The term “rationalist” is an epistemological term, i.e., a term that is used in the area of the theory of knowledge. This term has been used in many different ways throughout the history of philosophy. Perhaps we will discover which meaning the CARA argument intends by briefly discussing the various ways “rationalist” has been employed in the past.

First, the term “rationalist” has been used throughout the history of philosophy to refer to someone who believes all knowledge is gained via man’s reasoning processes only. One who believes this we say believes in *rationalism*. Rationalism is typically contrasted with empiricism, or the theory that states that knowledge is gained via sense perception only—sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing. The belief in rationalism is as old as philosophy. Rationalism dates back to at least the time of Plato, who believed that all knowledge comes from reasoning alone. He believed that the mind of man gains knowledge by *recollecting* what it knew when it existed in the presence of the eternal truths (what he called “Forms”) before taking on flesh.

Is this the type of rationalism the CARA argument intends? No, I don’t think so. There is no hint of Plato or his doctrines in the argument. And considering Plato’s rationalism is not compatible with the Christian worldview (Plato’s epistemology included the idea of recollection and the pre-existence of the soul), I doubt that this is what the CARA argument means.

There is a second way the term “rationalist” has been used in the history of philosophy, and perhaps this is what the CARA argument means. The second way “rationalist” has been used is to refer to those who believe in *cartesian* rationalism. This type of rationalism developed during the modern philosophy period (16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries). Cartesian rationalism was primarily the product of the Frenchman Rene Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes believed that the human mind contains innate ideas, or *a priori* truths, and from these truths the human mind has the ability to deduce other truths by using reason alone. Descartes’ rationalism was modeled after mathematics, since mathematics was believed to offer certain, indubitable conclusions because of its orderly deduction and clarity (see F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume IV Modern Philosophy*, 17).

Is cartesian rationalism the type of rationalism the CARA argument intends? At times it seems like it. For example, in David Little’s article, Descartes is given attention under the subtitle “Philosophical Backgrounds of Inductive Hermeneutics” (“Inductive Hermeneutics,” 11-12). But as it will be shown below, cartesian rationalism is not what the CARA argument has in

mind. Besides, it is clear that Campbell was not a cartesian rationalist in any sense. He denied that man has innate ideas, and consistently emphasized that all knowledge of the natural world comes via sense perception (E.g., see *CB*, “Christian Union—*No. II*,” vol. 3, 1 August 1825, 5; *CR*, 109). In other words, Campbell was an empiricist. So, we see that the CARA argument does not mean that Campbell was a *cartesian* rationalist.

Perhaps, then, the CARA argument means that one is a rationalist in another sense. The term *rationalist* has also been used to refer to those during the Enlightenment period (also known as the Age of Reason) who believed human reason to be the arbiter of all truth. I think this is exactly what the CARA argument has in mind. This is David Little’s point when he discusses Descartes in relation to inductive hermeneutics. Little comments, “In inductive hermeneutics, the philosophy of Descartes comes through in his perspective of individual, personal reason as the final judgment and standard for all authority” (“Inductive Hermeneutics,” 12). So, the second premise of the CARA argument should really read thus:

“One who uses the inductive method of biblical interpretation is one who makes individual, personal reason as the final judgment and standard for all authority.”

But why would one believe this to be true? A person can certainly use the inductive method without believing that individual, personal reason is the standard of all authority. One particular example is John Mark Hicks, who is in fact postmodern in his critique of human reason (see his series on “Created for Hermeneutics,” <http://johnmarkhicks.wordpress.com/serial-index/>) and condones the use of the inductive method of biblical interpretation (as shown above).

Interestingly, those who put forth the CARA argument use the inductive method, and they do not believe reason to be the final arbiter of truth. Olbricht comments that the inductive approach ignores the overarching themes in Scripture, and so “before these bits of information are of any value, the prior question, concerning the overruling [*sic*] themes in Scripture in which these bits are couched, must be raised.” In like manner, Little comments that “postmodernist thought has stressed the narrative nature of the Bible. . . . A subtleness of phrase often overlooked by the mechanistic inductive method is now the object of primary concern” (“Inductive Hermeneutics,” 17). Now how do Olbricht and Little know that Scripture has “overruling” (overarching) themes and that Scripture is narrative in nature? My guess is that they read through Scripture and noticed that particular ideas (or should I say “bits of information”?) consistently made their appearance, and thus they *inductively* reasoned that Scripture had particular themes and a narrative nature.

So, in the end, it does not follow that one who uses the inductive method of biblical interpretation makes “individual, personal reason as the final judgment and standard for all authority.” Moreover, the CARA argument here is self-defeating; those who argue against the inductive method of hermeneutics employ the same method.

The question ought to be, did Campbell (who happened to support using the inductive method) make reason “individual, personal reason as the final judgment and standard for all authority?” And this, of course, is an entirely different question. As for premise (2) of the CARA argument, then, it is false.



Conclusion and Final Thoughts:

The answer to the question “Was Campbell a rationalist in regard to his view of Scripture and hermeneutics” is a resounding “no.” This is because the CARA argument was found to be false. Both premises of the argument were found to be false and thus the conclusion is also.

Some final thoughts on relevance: Why is answering the question of whether Campbell was a rationalist important? So what if he was not a rationalist?

First, we need to recognize that the CARA argument (from a purely philosophical perspective) is really about the inductive method of biblical interpretation, not Alexander Campbell *per se*. Campbell is merely brought into the argument because he is viewed as the most influential figure in Restoration history.

What is it about the inductive method that is problematic for some who espouse the CARA argument? I personally believe it may have to do with the fact that the inductive approach assumes the unity and self-consistency of Scripture, i.e., that Scripture has a unity of doctrine and teaches that doctrine consistently. In turn this is based upon the idea that Scripture is ultimately a divine “product” (this is what gives Scripture unity and self-consistency; God does not lie or contradict himself). The relevance here, then, is that a shift has taken place in the understanding of the nature of Scripture. Scripture has gone from being viewed as a unity and self-consistent to being more fragmented and occasional. For example, instead of Paul’s teaching (say, on the atonement, men/women’s roles, baptism, etc.) being consistent with Peter’s (or even Paul’s own teaching), it is viewed to be dependent upon the historical occasion and circumstances of when he wrote. If this is true, then Scripture is not a unity and self-consistent, and therefore, it will be necessary to ask whether Scripture is divinely inspired and if so what that exactly means.

Another relevant aspect is theological method, i.e., how theology is to be done. Systematic Theology has traditionally used the inductive method of interpretation to understand the great doctrines of Christianity. If the issue is really the inductive method, then the enterprise of systematic theology must be questioned.

I have a suspicion, however, that the issue is not really the inductive method at all (even though the arguments state is as such). Afterall, those who put forth the CARA argument use the inductive method themselves. And if this is the case, it appears that something else is going on. What exactly this is will require further investigation. For now, let it suffice to say that Alexander Campbell was no rationalist.