

10-1-1987

Thomas Campbell's Ministry at Ahorey

Alfred R. Scott

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Recommended Citation

Scott, Alfred R. (1987) "Thomas Campbell's Ministry at Ahorey," *Restoration Quarterly*. Vol. 29 : No. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/restorationquarterly/vol29/iss4/1>

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VOLUME 29/NUMBER 4 FOURTH QUARTER 1987

ISSN 0486-5642

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Thomas Campbell's Ministry at Ahorey

ALFRED RUSSELL SCOTT
Richhill, Northern Ireland

Introduction

The following account of Thomas Campbell's ministry at the Ahorey Church in Northern Ireland is taken from a longer history of the Ahorey Church written by Dr. Alfred Russell Scott of Richhill, Northern Ireland. Founded in 1786, the Ahorey Church celebrated its bicentennial in 1986. Thomas Campbell was the second minister at Ahorey, serving from 1798 until he left Northern Ireland for America in 1807. Dr. Scott, who received his PhD in church history from Trinity College, Dublin, was the thirteenth minister at Ahorey and retired recently after serving the church for thirty-three years. Dr. Scott visited Abilene Christian University in the summer of 1985 and, at a history conference, delivered two addresses about Campbell's life. The genial Dr. Scott has kindly consented for us to publish in *Restoration Quarterly* this section of his *History of Ahorey Congregation*, which deals with the years of Campbell's ministry at Ahorey. Though not written with an American audience in mind, Dr. Scott's history contains information of interest to Americans who feel a sense of debt to Thomas Campbell for his leadership in the American restoration movement.—Bill J. Humble

Family Background

The second minister of Ahorey congregation was a certain Thomas Campbell, born near Newry, in County Down, on February 1, 1763. Five generations of his father Archibald's immediate family have been traced in Ireland, and as they were of the Romanist persuasion, there is no truth in the statement of a Virginia publication put out in 1962 that Bethany College, West Virginia, was founded by a Scottish born Alexander Campbell, for there was not Scots blood in Thomas' son Alexander save what he obtained by his birth near Ballymena, County Antrim, Northern Ireland.

Thomas Campbell's father was Archibald, and his grandfather was another Thomas who lived to the great age of 105 years. Archibald, who lived to be 88, was for a time a British soldier like many Roman Catholic Irish of those days. It will be remembered that Romanists were not allowed to serve in the British Army from the settlement of King William in 1690; hence many of them took military service in continental armies, especially France and Spain. However, in 1757 they were allowed to serve as soldiers in the British army. So Archibald Campbell could at most have served but half a dozen years before he retired in 1762. During his service, he fought in Canada in General Wolfe's campaign around Quebec, and it is claimed

that Wolfe died in Archibald Campbell's arms. At the time of his marriage Archibald left the Roman Church and joined the Church of Ireland, worshipping God, as he said, "according to act of Parliament."

The four sons of the marriage, Thomas, James, Archibald, and Enos all grew up to manhood; but none of the four girls, all called Mary, lived longer than infancy. Of the brothers, James eventually went to Canada, while Archibald and Enos conducted a small school in Newry, continuing their interest in the Antiburgher Secession Church, which they joined in their youth. This congregation eventually became "Downshire Road, Newry" when in 1782 Mr. Laing, the minister, got a suitable site in the town.

Education

Thomas Campbell, born February 1, 1763, near Newry, is said to have attended a military regimental school, an army establishment, not far from his home, where he studied English grammar and reading, Latin and Greek, writing and arithmetic. He was for a time a schoolmaster near Newry, then taught in Connought. But Thomas was preemptorily ordered home by his father. He then found a teaching position in a good school at Sheepbridge, Newry, through the influence of a certain John Kinley, who lived in the village and was an elder in the Antiburgher Secession Church. This gentleman later financed Thomas through Glasgow University, after his father refused to do so. It would appear that he graduated M.A. of Glasgow in 1786 and went to teach school near or in Ballymena immediately afterwards. Here he met and married a Miss Jane Corneigle in June 1787, and their first child, the famous Alexander, was born at Broughshane on September 12, 1788. Shortly afterwards he removed to Markethill, County Armagh, where he taught private classes for quite a time.

In 1792 he joined the Antiburgher Divinity classes, which were held at the meeting-house of their Professor of Divinity, the Rev. Archibald Bruce, of Whitburn, West Lothian. Bruce was the Synod's professor from 1787 till 1804. It should be explained that the course lasted five years, but that each year's classes only occupied about eight weeks in August and September of each year, so enabling the students to hold a teaching post during the rest of the year to take care of expenses. Thomas Campbell continued to live in Markethill during these years, and also indeed when he was minister of Ahorey in the earlier part of his ministry. For a time before he set up his own home, it is claimed he boarded with a Mr. Gillis, a merchant in the town.

Antiburgher Minister

The Antiburgher Synod was appointed to meet in Aghoghill in 1798, but the melancholy state of the country owing to the 1798 Rebellion, particularly in the neighborhood of that place, prevented them from assembling. This explains why we read that Mr. Campbell was ordained in Ahorey "since Last Meeting" according to the Synod Minutes for 1799. So the actual date of his ordination remains indefinite, between 1797-99, but likely in 1797. Sometime after this date the Campbells moved from Markethill to Hamilton's Bawn, where they resided in what is now part of Gildea's public house. Later still they moved to Richhill in 1804, for the simple reason that as the stipend he received in Ahorey was very little more than his predecessor's, £50 per year, made up of £20 stipend and £30 from the royal Bounty, he had to consider ways and means of raising it to meet the needs of a growing family. This he was able to do by moving house to the large house in the Square in Richhill, where the late Dr. Hemmingway lived for a time. Here Campbell conducted a classical school, which it has been reckoned brought in some £200 per year. His son Alexander, now about 16 years old, aided him in his teaching work in this Richhill school.

When Campbell came to Ahorey, the times were troublous, what with the Rebellion in 1798, a large measure of spiritual apathy, and much desecration of the Lord's day. It was no wonder that serious-minded men began to take a hard look at things and try to make some efforts towards the promotion of spiritual life. This took the form of the establishing in Armagh city of the Ulster Evangelical Society on October 10, 1798. It was a society fashioned on the General Evangelical Society set up in Dublin in 1792, one of the very first evangelical societies on an interdenominational basis for evangelism. The neighbouring Burgher minister of Richhill, the Rev. John Gibson, formerly of Sligo town, where he was much helped by the General Evangelical Society of Dublin, is thought to have brought forward this idea of an Ulster Evangelical Society. Indeed, all the men who signed the letter of invitation to others to join were all Burgher Seceder Presbyterian ministers, Messrs. Wm. Henry (Tassagh), David Holmes (Ballymagrane), Lewis Browne (Sixmilecross), John Lowry (Upper Clenanees) and Geo. Hamilton (Armagh), who was Moderator of the Burgher Synod that year.

Thomas Campbell joined the society and paid dues of 11/4½ sh. a year. That he created a stir in so doing is seen in the fact that the Antiburgher Synod of 1799 considered it their principal business to ask "Is the Evangelical Society of Ulster constituted on principles consistent with the Secession testimony?"—a fair blow at Campbell, who was one of the original

thirteen ministers amongst others of four denominations who established the movement. As well, he was a member of the committee of the society. As he was the only Antiburgher attached to the society, it can easily be seen that he was the Synod's chief concern. After a long discussion and a private consultation with three members of Synod specially appointed, these three returned with the following written paper to the Synod:

I am willing to receive the advice of the Synod respecting my connection with the Evangelical Society of Ulster, and to endeavour to see eye to eye with the Reverend Synod, and in the meantime to desist from any official intercourse with the said Society, only remaining a simple subscriber.

Thomas Camble [*sic*]

This shows us the strict manner of the Synod, for they had compelled him to practically sever his connection, but the ordinary members would hardly be so tractable as a minister might be made to be. Gibson was not so easily persuaded by his Burgher Synod somewhat later on and eventually left the body to join with the Independents and take the most of his church in Richhill with him the very next year.

Independent Influence

Here we come to the place in the Campbell story of the influence of the famous Scottish evangelists and philanthropists, the Haldane brothers, whose estates were near Stirling in Perthshire. Both brothers were graduates of Edinburgh University, both rose to be captains in the Royal Navy, and both were very dedicated Christian men. Robert was a first-rate theologian whose lectures on Romans are still prized, and he was an able business man who in fifteen years distributed some £100,000 of his personal fortune for Christian work. His brother James visited Richhill in September 1801, in support of Gibson, the Independent minister, and Thomas Campbell heard him gladly and profitably. Another who spoke in Richhill and who was heard by Campbell was the celebrated Rowland Hill, graduate of Cambridge, onetime candidate for the Anglican ministry, but who became pastor of the Independent Surrey Chapel, London, and an itinerant evangelist.

Besides these there also preached in Richhill, the famous Alexander Carson, D.D. as a member of the Ulster Evangelical Society, onetime member of the Synod of Ulster, who then first became an Independent and eventually founded Tobermore Baptist Church. Another renowned character who spoke was the eccentric Rev. John Walker, Professor in Trinity College, Dublin, where he was also a Fellow of the College, but

who resigned his preferments, even his being minister of the very influential Church of Ireland congregation Bethesda Chapel. These all Walker resigned in 1804 and formed an independent society, a kind of forerunner of the later Brethren Movement. Campbell, with one of his elders, had several hours of conversation with the scholarly John Walker and was very much influenced by him, and indeed by all the others, only perhaps to a lesser extent. Campbell was a member of the Haldene tract society called the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at Home."

Attempts at Unity

A modern writer on Campbell, Dr. Lester G. McAllister, who has preached here in Ahorey, thinks there was a very pronounced sectarian spirit in Ireland at that time. Does this describe the situation? We think not. There was a lot done to remove sectarian spirit, and union was in the air in some degree. That Campbell's father, Archibald, was able to move from Romanism to Anglicanism so easily shows us the easy manner of the Gallican outlook of the Roman Church. Also, Dr. James Warren Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, was able to carry on a stiff contest with the Protestant Archbishop Wm. Magee of Dublin and also propose a union with the Established Anglican Church, by the Church of Rome, stating that the times were favourable for "the government was powerful and at peace, while the Pope is powerless and anxious to conciliate."

Among Presbyterians, the Antiburgher Synod ordered praying societies in their congregations in 1802. Though union was debated as early as 1770 between the Burghers and Antiburghers, it was the Scottish Synod that crushed the idea. A further attempt was made in 1784, but it again failed. In 1779 the Burghers got their own Irish Synod, but not till 1788 was a provincial Antiburgher Synod granted. Union came in 1818. Meantime in the Antiburgher Synod, Thomas Campbell began to play his part in the thorny matter of the Act and Testimony of these Antiburghers in Ulster at the supreme Scottish Synod. Campbell raised all manner of objections to this in 1802, so that chapters 18 and 23 had to be sent to Presbyteries for their consideration, showing us the stature of Campbell. The Burghers were striving for union with the Antiburghers, and in 1803 Campbell, together with Arrot and Laing, was appointed a deputation to meet the Burgher's representatives, Moorhead Steen and Edgar. Again the Scottish parent Antiburgher Synod refused the Irish desire for union, but Campbell lost nothing in stature for he was appointed Moderator of the Antiburgher Synod in 1805-6.

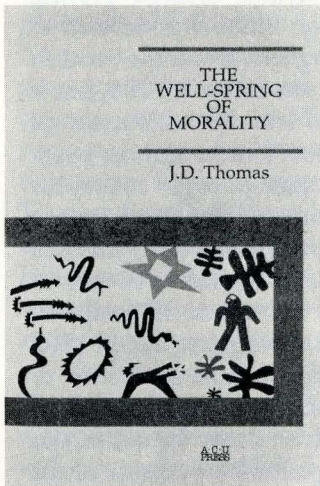
The long-desired union came about in 1818, but meantime Thomas Campbell had resigned his charge of Aforey in 1807 and emigrated to America at age 45. He died on January 4, 1854, aged 91, having lived half his life in Ireland and half in America. While in Bethany, West Virginia, he helped to establish the Disciples of Christ, the first indigenous church in the U.S.A. in which he was much helped by his son Alexander. At the age of 77 he saw the Charter granted for the establishment of Bethany College in 1840.

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