The Interrelationship Between the Oral and the Written in the Work of Alexander Campbell

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Various studies have looked at the interrelationship between oral and written language within different historical periods. Some of these studies concern the changing relationships between the oral and the written when a society moves from a primarily oral culture with a limited use of writing to a "document-minded" culture (Thomas 1989:36)[1] that has a "literate mentality" (Clanchy 1979). Other studies concern the changes imposed by the increased use of printing technology (e.g., Eisenstein 1979; Kernan 1987; McLuhan 1962). All of these studies concern societal changes, even though representative historical figures may be emphasized as a description of these social changes (e.g., Samuel Johnson in Kernan 1987).

Rather than studying the societal changes involved in the transition from a primarily oral culture to a document-minded culture or from a document-minded culture to a print-oriented culture, this study concerns the tension between document-mindedness and the persistence of oral dimensions within a single historical figure, Alexander Campbell. Campbell, a principal founder of a nineteenth-century reformation movement on the American frontier, had his own printing office that he effectively used to further his cause of Christian unity; he thus clearly participated within a document-minded society and developed further the use of printing technology within his community. However, his use of scripture in his writings betrays strong oral features—for example, he seems to rely on his own memory when quoting the Bible rather than referring to a printed text. Thus, Campbell's use of scripture illustrates one way in which oral modes may remain dominant within certain domains even within a highly literate, print-oriented society.

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[1] Although Thomas states that she borrowed the term "document-minded" from Clanchy (1979), I have not found the term in Clanchy's work. On the contrary, Clanchy used "The Literate Mentality" for the title of his Part II, a term that Thomas describes as having "misleading connotations" (1989:36).

I. Clarification of Terms

Before beginning the discussion of Campbell, some clarification of terms is necessary. First, what constitutes a "document-minded" society, that is, one that possesses a "literate mentality"? This study proceeds from the characteristics identified in Michael Clanchy's work, *From Memory to Written Record* (1979).[2] Clanchy attributed the following six elements to a culture with a "literate mentality." Documents and writing technology must be (1) sufficiently *available* to political leaders and merchants and (2) *necessary* for their business purposes (57; Troll 1990:107). (3) Written records must become as *trusted* as oral records, if not more so, to faithfully preserve the "truth" (211; Thomas 1989:34-45). (4) Written texts must no longer function simply as mnemonic aids, but become a reliable *record* that can be stored for future reference (147; Stock 1983:3; Thomas 1989:51, 55). Finally, the processes of reading and writing become removed further from their close oral connections so that reading aloud and voicing while writing are replaced by (5) *silent reading* (183; Graham 1987:31-33; Troll 1990:108) and (6) *silent writing* (218; Ong, 1982:95; Graham 1987:31-33; Troll 1990:113).

A document-minded society could exist without printing technology; however, a document-minded society that has been influenced by "print logic" (Kernan 1987:48-55) contains additional characteristics. Drawing upon the work of McLuhan (1962) and Eisenstein (1979), Kernan identifies the three leading characteristics of print logic as multiplicity, systematization, and fixity. Multiplicity refers to the variety of books available and the reproduction of numerous copies of the same book, systematization to the systematic production and organization of a book that likewise structures knowledge, and fixity to the objective permanence a book seems to preserve.

From the characteristics of a document-minded society, we can infer some characteristics found within primarily oral contexts, including the use of limited written texts primarily as mnemonic aids rather than as reference works. Possibly related to this inference is the observation that oral and written language have different effects upon human memory (Hildyard and Olson 1982:20):

> In oral language, the point, intention or significance of the language, the "speaker's meaning" is preserved in the mind of the listener; as the actual

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[2] Clanchy's work has been generally well received; see Ong 1982, Stock 1983, Graham 1987, Thomas 1989, Troll 1990.

words, syntax, and intonation are ephemeral, they are rapidly exchanged for those interpreted meanings which can be preserved. In written language, the words and syntax, the "sentence meaning," is preserved by the artifact of writing, and mental recall becomes the precise reproduction of that artifact.

That is, in a primarily oral culture, written documents function as mnemonic aids to the "speaker's meaning" or, to use the terminology of speech-act theory, the performative or perlocutionary act *represented* in the document (e.g., promise); these mnemonic aids may never be referred to because the emphasis is upon the oral testimony of the witnesses to the speech-act. In contrast, in a document-minded culture written documents function as an enduring reference to the "actual" words themselves, a reference that is trusted as preserving the "true" meaning of the interaction.

In what follows, details of Campbell's life and his use of scripture will be presented as an example of a tension between his document-mindedness and the persistence of oral dimensions in his use of scripture. The first section will present biographical information demonstrating his document-mindedness and orientation to printing technology. In the second section, the relationship between his understanding and use of scripture will illustrate the continuing prominence of oral language within a document-minded, print-influenced society.

II. Alexander Campbell: Written Documents and Oral Tradition

Biographical Information

Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) was one of the principal founders of the nineteenth-century reformation movement to which three present North American denominations—Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church the Christ, and the independent Christian Churches—trace their beginnings.[3] He lived in a document-minded society influenced significantly by printing technology, as his own life clearly demonstrates. His environment not only meets all of the characteristics of a document-minded society, but his own use of printing technology enhanced the availability and necessity of written documents for his readership. In addition, Campbell's document-mindedness will be demonstrated in a

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[3] For further historical background to the movement, see the standard history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) used in its denominational seminaries (Tucker and McAllister 1975).

discussion of his personal library and his work as an author/publisher.

At the time of his death, Campbell's personal library included 655 volumes (Anon. 1947:33). It was described in a letter from his daughter, Decima Campbell Barclay, to the librarian at Bethany College, which he founded and to which he bequeathed his collection (34): "His Library was not as extensive as it was select, and his books, in various languages, especially Hebrew, Greek, Latin and French, were many of them on religious and educational subjects." In this same letter, his daughter described how Campbell risked his own life to save some of his "beloved" books when he was shipwrecked on his arrival to America from his native Scotland.

Realizing the power of the printed word, in 1823 Campbell purchased a printing press, the necessary type, and built an outbuilding for his print shop in order to begin publishing the monthly *The Christian Baptist*, which continued until 1830 (Richardson 1870:49-51; Tucker and McAllister 1975:127). Thus he launched his career as an author and publisher and in the first seven years of his business "no less that forty-six thousand volumes sold" (Richardson 1870:51). A partial list of works authored/edited/ published by Campbell includes the following with the date of original publication given in parentheses: the monthly journals, *The Christian Baptist* (1823-30) and *The Millennial Harbinger* (1830-62); his own translation of the New Testament, *The Living Oracles* (1826); his magnum opus on hermeneutics, *The Christian System* (1835); *The Christian Hymnbook* (1835); and a biography of his father, *Memoirs of Elder Thomas Campbell* (1861). Most of his books came out in different editions. For example, *The Christian System* was itself a revision of an earlier work entitled *Christianity Restored*, and yet still went through various editions.

Campbell was also well known as a debater; he had prominent, public debates with other clergy (e.g., Presbyterian, Roman Catholic) and the "skeptic" Robert Owen.[4] Although these debates certainly involved oral presentation, his involvement during and after these debates further demonstrates his document-mindedness. The participants in the debates, especially Campbell, often read prepared statements, which followed an agreed-upon printed format and program for the issues to be discussed within the debate. They also often referred to printed documents, including works supporting their own position as well as those refuting their opponent's position, and their own publications as well as the publications

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[4] See Campbell and Maccalla 1948, Campbell and Owen 1829, Campbell and Purcell 1837, Campbell and Rice 1844.

of their opponents. Hence, even the "oral" debates were heavily influenced by written documents. In addition, stenographers were hired and the debates, including background material (e.g., letters concerning the agreements preceding the debates), were published; the earlier debates were published by Campbell himself (Campbell and Maccalla 1948; Campbell and Owen 1829). Thus his skills as a debater became widely known primarily because of the publication of these debates.

In this section we have seen clear evidence that Campbell not only lived in a document-minded culture, but fully and directly participated within this culture in his utilization of printing technology. Not only were written documents available and necessary for his business purposes but his work included making more documents available to his readership. His own writings and speeches (preserved in written form) demonstrate that he, his followers, and his opponents referred to printed documents as reliable records. Thus Campbell clearly deserves the description "document-minded" in that he participated in a print-influenced society.

In the following section, we will look at the tension within Campbell concerning scripture, for, on the one hand, he greatly emphasized the importance of the literal written text of the Bible for faith and practice, but, on the other hand, his own use of scripture betrays a dependence upon his memory that can be seen as representative of an oral dimension of his culture.

Campbell's Use of Scripture[5]

Campbell saw his life's mission as restoring the "New Testament church" based upon biblical study without the "prejudiced" influence of the various creeds. This mission, which became the guiding force behind the movement he helped found, is succinctly expressed in the slogan "No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible." Although this theme permeates all of his writings, it is especially central to *The Christian System*. In this work, Campbell presents his understanding of the centrality of the Bible for

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[5] My primary research was undertaken when I was a research assistant at Texas Christian University under the direction of M. Eugene Boring. I assisted him with an article on Campbell's principles for biblical interpretation, including the first index to biblical quotes in *The Christian System* (Boring 1987). However, it was not until later, after having studied oral and written discourse during my doctoral program, that I realized the implications of the tensions in Campbell's use of scripture. For a fuller discussion of Campbell's hermeneutics, see Boring 1987.

knowledge of Christ and Christian faith and outlines his principles for interpretation. This emphasis was not simply upon an English translation of the Bible either, for "Campbell considered it essential for ministers to know the biblical languages" (Boring 1987:28).

Campbell himself knew the biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek) and the content of the Bible well. His writing typically included biblical quotations, and his "own style was so steeped in the biblical idiom that hundreds of allusions to New Testament language are used in expressing his own ideas" (Boring 1987:8). Not only did he know the Bible well, but he expected the same of his readers. For example, *The Christian System* is saturated with biblical quotes, but rarely is a notation to the book, chapter, and verse given; rather, the reader was presumed to recognize the quotes and know their location.

For Campbell, the Bible was definitely a written document, divinely inspired, to which all Christians must refer for matters of faith and practice. It was an object of necessary, intense study that must be interpreted by paying close attention to its content and language. Given this orientation, it is ironic that he sometimes presumes to quote scripture but either harmonizes different texts as if he is quoting only one or introduces his quote incorrectly by attributing it to the wrong biblical writer. In the following paragraphs, I discuss some of these instances, which are found in *The Christian System* (1901). These quotations, which do not refer to any one particular text accurately, as would be expected in today's print-oriented society, include three different types of departures: grammatical/syntactical changes, the harmonizing of synoptic parallels, and the combination of texts.

In each case, the biblical material is demarcated by the use of quotation marks in Campbell's text. With the use of various concordances, the closest biblical passages were identified and compared to Campbell's translation of the New Testament (1951), the Authorized Version (the "King James"), and the Hebrew or Greek texts. The form used for each of the quotations is as follows: the quotation from *The Christian System* is given first, followed by the English translation from Campbell's translation for all New Testament texts (abbreviated LO for *The Living Oracles*), or from the Authorized Version (abbreviated AV) for all Old Testament texts. Only changes that were probably not the result of different translation techniques are discussed.

1. *Grammatical/syntactical changes*. In the following example, Campbell has made two changes: (1) the use of a proper name "Jesus" rather than a pronoun "me" and (2) the use of a pronoun "him" rather than

the noun "God."

> To Jesus every knee shall bow, and to him every tongue confess
> (1901:209)

> Surely every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God
> (Isa 45:23 as quoted in Rms 14:11; LO)

In each change, he has simply identified Jesus as the speaker of this saying and made necessary changes to explicate this understanding.

The next example consists of a paraphrase of the biblical text:

> I have appeared to you to make you a minister and a witness for me—to
> send you to the Gentiles (1901:20)

> I have appeared to you, to ordain you a minister and a witness, both of the
> things which you have seen, and of those which I will hereafter show you:
> delivering you from the people, and from the Gentiles; to whom I now
> send you. (Acts 26:16-17; LO)

In this paraphrase, he (1) added the phrase "for me," (2) abbreviated the saying, (3) changed the syntax so that the infinitive construction continued ("to send you"), and (4) supplied the now-omitted antecedent "Gentiles" for the pronoun "whom."

In the following, the only substantial change that cannot be explained by different translation strategies is the change from "all men" (which literally follows the Greek πάντας ἀνθρώπους) to "the offspring of Adam":

> by one man sin entered into the world, and death by that one sin; and so
> death, the wages of sin, has fallen upon all the offspring of Adam
> (1901:14)

> Wherefore, as sin entered into the world by one man, in whom all sinned,
> and by sin, death: thus death came upon all men. (Rom 5:12; LO)

This change is consistent with the context—that is, Paul clearly understood the "one man" who brought sin and death into the world as Adam and "all men" as descendants of Adam; Campbell simply made this understanding explicit.

In the above instances, Campbell made various grammatical and syntactical changes that all had the same basic function: to remove possible

ambiguities, thereby making his particular understanding of the texts more explicit.   In other words, although in his own translation of the Greek original he faithfully followed the literal "sentence's meaning" as expected in a document-minded society, he nevertheless recalled the "quotations" in *The Christian System* based upon his memory of the "speaker's meaning" of each verse, thereby making the "speaker's meaning" more explicit by his (unconscious) changes.   Viewed from the standpoint of today's generally accepted standards of quotation and documentation (and Campbell's own standard in his published translation), these instances constitute mistakes that violate the "sentence's meaning."   However, if viewed from the standpoint of the "speaker's meaning" in these verses, one might argue that they are improvements because they remove possible ambiguities.   Hence, here we may have evidence of the oral dimension in Campbell's use of scripture.

2.   *The harmonizing of synoptic parallels.* New Testament scholars now generally assume that the similarities between the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) stem from the use of Mark and another document (denoted as Q for the German *Quelle*) as sources for Matthew and Luke. However, despite these similarities, certain differences remain—differences that are the result of the different viewpoint expressed in the use of these sources (Mark, Q) and the addition of unique materials. Because of these differences, modern scholars carefully refrain from harmonizing the differing, but similar, accounts in the gospels.

Campbell's understanding of the gospels was pre-critical in that he understood each gospel as an independent, accurate account of the life of Jesus and believed that the gospels could be fruitfully harmonized (Boring 1987:24-25).   The following instances of Campbell's quotation of the gospels are examples in which he harmonized the differing accounts in the synoptic gospels, thereby creating a problem for assigning any of the quotations to one specific gospel account.

In this first example, Campbell is clearly drawing most heavily upon the account in Mt 4:12-14; however, he seems to imply that his quotation refers to all of the gospel accounts in that he introduces the biblical quote with the phrase "In this assertion the Evangelists agree:" (1901:138):

> Now Jesus, [after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness,] hearing that John was imprisoned, retired into Galilee; and, having left Nazareth, resided at Capernaum. For thus saith the Prophet, . . (*ibid.*)

> Now Jesus, hearing that John was imprisoned, retired into Galilee, and having left Nazareth, resided at Capernaum, a seaport in the confines of

Zebulun and Naphtali, thereby verifying the words of Isaiah the Prophet; (Mt 4:12-14; LO)

But after John's imprisonment, Jesus went to Galilee, proclaiming the good tiding of the Reign of God. The time, said he, is accomplished, the Reign of God approaches; reform, and believe the good tidings. (Mk 1:14-15; LO)

Then Jesus, by the impulse of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and his renown spread throughout the whole country, and he taught in their synagogues with univeral applause. (Lk 4:14-15; LO)

Interestingly, here Campbell demarcates what he clearly saw as an intrusion into the biblical quote—the phrase "after his baptism and temptation in the wilderness"—by the use of brackets. However, he does not use any other punctuation to suggest to his readers that he has made any other changes.

Campbell's harmonization is easily seen in the following example. Here he begins with the Markan wording and follows up with the Matthean account (which is very similar to the Lukan account).

If a kingdom be torn by factions, that kingdom cannot subsist. And if a family be torn by factions, that family cannot subsist. By civil dissensions any kingdom may be desolated; and no city or family, where such dissensions are, can subsist. (1901:85)

By intestine dissensions any kingdom may be desolated; and no city or family, where such dissensions are, can subsist. (Mt 12:25; LO)

If a kingdom be torn by factions, that kingdom can not subsist. And if a family be torn by factions, that family can not subsist. (Mk 3:24-25; LO)

By intestine broils, any kingdom may be desolated, one family falling after another. (Lk 11:17; LO)

In the following example, Campbell not only harmonized the gospel account, but also made grammatical and syntactical changes:

They should believe in him that was to come after him (1901:295)

but he who comes after me, is mightier than I (Mt 3:11; LO)

One mightier than I comes after me (Mk 1:7; LO)

but one mightier than I comes (Lk 3:16; LO)

Here his wording disallows any accurate identification of which gospel account he is quoting, although it is clear that he is referring to one or more of these accounts. The grammatical/syntactical changes he made are consistent with changes made when one makes an indirect quote: he changed the first-person pronouns referring to John the Baptist to third-person, singular pronouns and the implied second-person audience to third-person plural pronouns. Also, he paraphrased the biblical texts by setting his quote within the larger context of John's message—the preparation of the coming of the Christ. Although he made these significant changes, he nevertheless includes all of these changes within quotation marks, suggesting that he possibly understood his quotation as faithful to the biblical text.

Although Campbell understood that each gospel was an independent witness to the life of Jesus, he nevertheless believed that each gospel's message pointed to the same reality; indeed, this belief is sometimes manifested in his harmonization of biblical quotations of the synoptic gospels. This emphasis upon the harmonized message of the gospels recalls the oral emphasis upon "speaker's meaning" rather than the literate emphasis upon the "sentence's (or in this case, sentences') meaning." Hence, these instances provide further evidence of the oral dimension in his use of scripture.

3. *The combination of passages.* In the following two examples, we have clear cases where Campbell combined different biblical passages. Although the combined biblical accounts are related in their content, they are not parallel accounts of the same event or saying; in other words, these instances differ from those in the preceding section because those were harmonizations of parallel, synoptic accounts and these are combinations of non-parallel accounts.

In the first case, Campbell took a phrase from a synoptic account of Jesus's healing of a paralytic (Mt 9:5 // Mk 2:9 // Lk 5:23) and combined it with a phrase from the Johannine account of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:11):

> Your sins . . . are forgiven you: go and sin no more. (1901:214)
> Your sins are forgiven you. (Lk 5:23; LO)
> Your sins are forgiven. (Mt 9:5 // Mk 2:9; see also Lk 7:48; LO)
> Go, and sin no more. (Jn 8:11; LO)

Here he took Jesus' words from one account and augmented them with Jesus' words from another account to create a more explicit message—in other words, he emphasized the "speaker's message" in their combination,

downplaying the "sentences' meaning."

The following example is the clearest case of a mistake in Campbell's quotation of scripture. Here he attributed the quote to "the Apostle John" even though it clearly includes Paul's words as well:

> "Beloved," says the Apostle John, "now are we the sons of God; and what manner of love God has bestowed upon us, that we should be called sons of God! If sons, then we are heirs of God—joint heirs with Christ." (1901:158)

> Behold how great love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God! For this reason, the world does not know us, because it did not know him. Beloved, now we are the children of God; but it does not yet appear what we shall be. (1 Jn 3:1-2; LO)

> We are children of God. And if children, then heirs; heirs, indeed, of God, and joint heirs with Christ. (Rms 8:16b-17; LO)

Not only has he combined the passages from 1 John and Romans, but he has also paraphrased those elements that he took from each of the passages and transposed the words in 1 John 3:1-2.

In this section, we have the strongest evidence that Campbell depended on his own memory of the written texts rather than copying directly from a written text. As a result, he made what today would clearly be called mistakes from the view of generally accepted standards for quotation. These include grammatical and syntactical changes, the harmonizing of synoptic parallels, and the combination of different passages. Although the strongest evidence concerns the combination of different passages, each type of evidence suggests that Campbell's use of scripture was characteristically more "oral" than "literate"; that is, he focused upon the more oral "speaker's meaning" rather than the more literate "sentence's meaning." These instances can only be called "mistakes" when viewed from the perspective of the more "literate" level of the "sentence's meaning" as presumed in the generally accepted standards for quotation. However, from the perspective of the more oral "speaker's meaning" they can be viewed as improvements since his changes remove ambiguities, making his understanding of the "speaker's meaning" more explicit. This emphasis upon the "speaker's meaning" is probably related to an aspect of his hermeneutics, for "it was the authority of the *message* of the Bible as a whole. . ., which concerned Campbell, not the infallibility of 'every jot and tittle'" (Boring 1987:41). That is, Campbell's changes to the "sentence's meaning" were probably not, in his opinion, a change in the

"speaker's meaning" or the "Word of God," but rather a more explicit statement of the "speaker's meaning."

In other ways, Campbell's use of scripture could be understood as in tension with his own mission of careful study of the Bible as a basis of his reformation movement—that is, he made some errors in his own use of scripture. These few mistakes, however, point to the effectiveness of Campbell's memory, an effectiveness even from the standpoint of the "sentence's meaning," for Campbell's quotation of scripture is, on the whole, quite literally correct.[6] These errors, then, simply suggest the probability that Campbell generally depended upon his own memory for biblical quotes rather than referring directly to a printed text.

III. Conclusions

Whereas many studies concerning orality and literacy have focused on the changes made when a society moves from a primarily oral culture to a literate culture, this study has focused upon a different aspect of the relationship between oral and written dimensions—the oral dimension within the life of a historical figure who certainly has a "literate mentality" and lived in a "document-minded" and print-influenced society. Alexander Campbell's "literate mentality" or "document-mindedness" is illustrated by his devotion to studying written documents and his industriousness as an author and publisher. However, evidence has been presented above suggesting that Campbell depended upon his own memory when referring to scripture rather than upon a printed text. This evidence consists of various types, all concerning his quotation of the Bible— grammatical/syntactical changes, the harmonizing of synoptic parallels, and the combination of passages. This dependence upon memory and the emphasis on the "speaker's meaning" rather than the "sentence's meaning" corresponds more closely to the characteristics of oral language than written language. Therefore, even within the document-minded Campbell there is a significant domain of what might be called "*oral*"-mindedness.

Although this study has focused upon one particular historical figure, Campbell is certainly not unique in the tension exhibited in his use of scripture. In *Beyond the Written Word* (1987), William Graham surveys various religious traditions to understand the nature and function of

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[6] The examples discussed above are only a small portion of the biblical quotations found in *The Christian System*, most of which can be seen as faithful English references to the Hebrew and Greek texts. See the index compiled in Boring 1987:55-59.

scripture. He begins his preface (1987:ix):

> This is a book about the fundamental orality of scripture; that is, about the significant oral roles of written sacred texts in the history of religion.

This "fundamental orality of scripture" involves the religious practices of recitation, liturgically reading aloud, chanting, and so on. Included in his study are Graham's observations about those religious leaders, especially reformers, who "speak scripture" (144):

> It is remarkable how completely a Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, or John Bunyan speaks a scripturally saturated language—that is, thinks, speaks, and writes in the vocabulary, stylistic modes, thought-world, and imagery of the Bible. . . . Such persons do not so much quote scripture or use it for proof-texting as they simply "speak scripture"—a scripture in which they are literally and spiritually, linguistically and theologically "at home"; one that they can and do recite largely if not wholly by heart, often to the point of mixing its words and phrases almost unconsciously with their own expression, and always to such a degree that their own vocabulary and manner of speech are resonant with the idiom and cadences of the Bible.

Thus, the oral dimension in Campbell's use of scripture is, by no means, unique, but is just one example of this "fundamental orality of scripture."

The observation that scripture maintains strong oral aspects even within a document-minded culture has significant consequences for future studies of the relationships between the oral and written modes. Although religious scribes may provide important influences that lead a specific culture towards document-mindedness (Clanchy 1979:2, 5), the religious realm of that same culture may be the last to be influenced heavily by a "literate mentality." Therefore, religious literature and life should be studied more carefully on its own terms rather than simply as one aspect of a particular culture, for, as demonstrated above, Alexander Campbell participated fully in a document-minded culture heavily influenced by printing technology even within the realm of religious publications, but nevertheless refers to the written text of scripture by memory, thereby suggesting that for some individuals in certain situations the written text of scripture may become more of a mnemonic aid than a reference text.

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