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Benson's "Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: 19th century restorationists" (book review)

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Book Review



Benson, R. (2017). *Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith: 19th century restorationists*. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press. 396 pp. \$24.99. ISBN 9781944394288

As first glance, it might seem a bit odd to see a book focused on these two religious' figures, Alexander Campbell and Joseph Smith, and finding commonalities between them. Campbell was a devout Christian and a key leader in the Restoration Movement, while Smith was the founder of what became the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet, they both lived in the same nineteenth century American period, one where much change was taking place in the country as a whole and in religious life. They both were part of a larger movement of religious reform, where Christians, churches and other Christian organizations sensed that authentic and vibrant faith had been mitigated or lost and needed again to be restored. This movement was associated with Second Great Awakening (1790–1840), with its emphasis on returning to the church as represented in the first century and when there was unity among those holding to a common Christian faith.

Campbell was part of a movement that had two strands, the first being led by Barton Stone and the second guided originally both by Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander Campbell. These two strands combined to be the Stone-Campbell movement, and its focus was on patterning the church on the faith and practices of the New Testament. The first-century church shared a common core of shared beliefs and focused on the mission of God. Over time, with the shift to denominationalism and creedalism, Christians had become divided and lost the earlier cohesiveness and power.

Smith wanted to return the church to authenticity as well, but while he was guided to a return to the New Testament faith based on the authority of scripture, even more than that he was guided by new revelations he claimed to have received through the prophet Moroni who pointing him to a set of divinely inspired golden plates. He transcribed the message found in these golden plates into the Book of Mormon, and this work, along with ongoing revelations he received, became the key authoritative sources guiding his restoration movement. He was shown that the church no longer represented the true faith of the first century and he was commissioned by God to reestablish it as such.

Benson's book is based on thorough research, but she presents the information in narrative format, telling the fascinating story about Campbell and Smith and

their movements. She gives significant attention to the historical context, and she compares and contrasts these leaders in an effective manner. One weakness, however, is that as a person of Mormon faith, she seems unable to provide a thorough and critical analysis of Smith, though she does give a few hints on occasion along those lines. Yet, her presentation of Campbell is generally positive in nature as well, so one does not sense a strong bias here.

A key strength of this book is that it both makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature and yet also is accessible to readers in general. This book would be an excellent addition to libraries of all kinds, but particularly those of faith-based educational institutions.

Reviewer

John Jaeger, Johnson University