

THE BALANCE
between
RATIONALISM
&
SPIRITUALISM



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The Balance between Rationalism and Spiritualism

Robert Richardson on the Holy Spirit

Steve Singleton

***Synopsis:** Robert Richardson (1806–1876) urged Christians to understand spirituality as the mean between emotionalism and rationalism. This forced him into a debate concerning the Holy Spirit, first with Tolbert Fanning, and then briefly with Alexander Campbell himself. Richardson’s call still resonates: devotion must go deeper than external conformity while avoiding spiritualism’s excesses.*

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FOCUS ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

The history of religion in America is a long tale of action and reaction. This is certainly true with regard to the variety of understandings within the Restoration Movement concerning the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In the years from 1850 to 1900, the Holiness Movement was attempting to reform Methodism, camp meetings were reaching the height of their popularity,¹ and religious thinkers such as Charles G. Finney,² R. A. Torrey³ and others⁴ were laying the theological foundations for the Pentecostal Movement waiting in the wings.⁵

The leaders of this period within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement expended a tremendous amount of energy in studying, preaching, debating, and writing about the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life. Several wrote full-

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length works on the Holy Spirit⁶ while others engaged in debates devoted at least in part to the Holy Spirit.⁷ Articles on the Holy Spirit were frequent in the brotherhood journals of this period.⁸

Robert Richardson (1806–1876) made significant contributions to this brotherhood-wide study of the Holy Spirit, both by his own insights and by stimulating the thinking of others who responded to his writings. Richardson wrote five series for *Millennial Harbinger* devoted primarily to the person and work of the Holy Spirit,⁹ several other single articles,¹⁰ and his *magnum opus* on the Spirit, a 324-page book entitled, [*A Scriptural View of the Office of the Holy Spirit*](#).¹¹



EARLY ASSOCIATION WITH THE CAMPBELLS

While still a child, Richardson formed friendships with both Thomas Campbell and Walter Scott, the former his teacher from ages nine to eleven, the latter his tutor from ages 13 to 17. Scott formed a strong bond with Richardson, teaching

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Walter Scott (1796-1861)

him Greek and Latin, encouraging him to memorize long passages not only from classical authors, but from the Greek New Testament as well.¹²

After Richardson had established his first medical practice, his friendship with Scott magnified his interest in Scott's evangelistic

work and its plea for primitive Christianity. By 1829 Richardson had repudiated his Episcopalian heritage and rode off to seek immersion from Scott.¹³ His two eloquent [letters to his former rector](#), explaining the reasons for his decision, Richardson permitted to be published in *Millennial Harbinger* under the pseudonym "Disciplus"; they showed promise of much fruitful literary labor to come.¹⁴

Alexander Campbell had first met Richardson briefly as his father's pupil, but now he became acquainted with him as a Christian brother and as Scott's friend.



Thomas Campbell
(1763-1854)