**Thomas and Alexander Campbell**

Thomas Campbell (1763-1854) was in Ireland while O’Kelly, Smith, Jones, and Barton W. Stone were leading their unity movement in America. His father, Archibald, was an Anglican, converted from Catholicism. Thomas converted to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, becoming a minister for the Ahorey Church in Rich Hill, Ireland. This congregation was part of the Old Light, Anti-Burgher, Seceder Presbyterian Church. Each of these names denotes a previous church split. Campbell became dissatisfied with this as he longed for the unity that the early Church enjoyed and that Christ prayed for in John 17. Campbell made several unsuccessful attempts to unite the factions in the Irish Seceder Presbyterian Church. In 1807, he comes to America, leaving his family to join him later. Assigned to preach in Western PA, he soon found himself in trouble for allowing Presbyterians of all doctrinal persuasions to share Communion. After being censured by his presbytery and synod, he starts an inter-denominational Bible study group called the Christian Association of Washington, PA.

In 1809, he writes “The Declaration and Address” (a reference to the freedom proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence), outlining the purpose of the CAWP and its plan for unity among Christians. It was a clear call back to the freedom found in the NT as a basis for Christian unity. It has six main points.

One, a fervent call to Christian unity. A lot of references to John 17, and the idea that the “constitution” that makes the Church one is the NT. Second, strong condemnation of division. “That division among Christians is a horrid evil, fraught with many other evils…” There should “be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them.” Three, Doctrinal differences not based on the express teachings of the NT are the cause of division. Where the Bible is unclear or silent, no disagreement should divide Christians. Campbell didn’t spell out exactly what the “express teachings” are. Four, a simple confession of faith in Jesus, not an agreement with an elaborate creed, is all that is necessary for admission to the Church. Fifth, a desire to return to the purity of the first century Church. This meant removing items that have divided Christians (robes, candles, altars, etc.). Lastly, an appeal for love and understanding among Christians. Those who confess faith in Christ “should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as brethren, children of the same family and Father, temples of the same Spirit, members of the same body…”

Thomas Campbell never intended this document to be the basis of a new religious group. Instead, it was a call to unity among Christians of all denominations. “The cause that we advocate is not our own particular cause,…it is a common cause, the cause of Christ and our brethren of all denominations.”

Things changed when the CAWP eventually formed the nucleus of a new congregation. Unity is easier to achieve in a Bible study group, but becomes much harder in a congregation. Even today, if a Bible study group was hosted in a person’s home and included friends from a few different denominations, those disciples would feel as if they had a lot in common. We all love God, we all love one another, we all want to be morally pure. However, if they became a church, they would have to make certain decisions that would highlight their differences. How do we worship? Who is our leadership? These and other questions would inevitably come up. Unity is easy to discuss, but hard to achieve on a grand scale. So churches of Christ, Christian churches, and Disciples of Christ churches eventually neglected this unity identity. We are now a movement that criticizes and corrects denominations, rather than one that attempts to unite them.

Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) was Thomas’ eldest son. He and the rest of Thomas’ family boarded a ship from Ireland destined for America, but it wrecked off the coast of Scotland. From 1808-1809, they lived in Glasgow, where Alexander attended classes at the university. He was influenced by friends there who had broken away from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and formed independent churches. Although they did not agree on every doctrine, these friends wished to unify Christians and return to the practices of the NT Church. These practices included local congregation leadership by elders, weekly Lord’s Supper, Love Feasts with foot washing and holy kisses, believer baptism by immersion, opposition to ministerial abuses of power and titles such as “Reverend”, and separation of church and state. Alexander didn’t break from the Presbyterian Church himself, but he became increasingly dissatisfied with the Seceder Presbyterians, and eventually quietly refused Communion with them.

When Alexander and the family arrived in America, he began to study for the ministry under his father. When they started the Brush Run Church together in 1811, both Father and son did their share of preaching. That same year, Alexander married Margaret Brown. He and his wife lived on property deeded to them by his wife’s father in What is now Bethany, WV. It was the center of the movement until his death. A year after their marriage, Alexander and Margaret had their first daughter, Jane. Some of the members of the Brush Run Church had questioned the validity of their infant baptisms and requested immersion as adults. Should the Campbell’s baptize their infant daughter? Should they be immersed themselves? In June 1812, Matthias Luce, a Baptist minister, baptized Thomas, Alexander, their wives, and some other members of Brush Run. Soon most of the adult members were immersed.