



Bicentennial of the Brush Run Church  
1811-2011



# Church Governance, Polity, Ecclesiology and Alexander Campbell

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**By Dr. Richard L. Hamm**

To understand the driving forces behind the strong congregationalism of the Stone-Campbell Movement, one must remember that we began in the decades immediately after the American Revolution. American democracy rejected the British Empire that had ruled the colonies; and the ethos of the American frontier likewise resisted religious authority that emanated from Europe, or the East coast, or even from a county seat. A populist tide had swept the nation resulting in what has been called the “democratization of American Christianity”, entrusting authority to the people” on the ground”.<sup>1</sup>

It was in this spirit that Thomas Campbell and a few others organized the “Christian Association of Washington (PA)” and published the “Declaration and Address” which begins with the words, “...we are persuaded that is it high time for us not only to think, but also to act for ourselves.” In this same Declaration, Thomas Campbell wrote nine propositions including the first: “That the church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and give obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else, as none else can be truly and properly called christians.” This

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<sup>1</sup> As a quintessential American religious movement, we still confuse democracy with discernment. “What is God’s will on this matter? We’re not sure so let’s vote on it and see!”

proposition implied that any true definition of church is rooted in the scriptures rather than by any definitions that might be concocted by any denominational authorities (near or far).

Soon after the appearance of the Declaration and Address, with Alexander's arrival from Ireland, the Christian Association of Washington became a congregation: the Brush Run Church. In its formation (1811), Thomas and Alexander were made elders, Alexander was licensed to preach, and four deacons were elected. A few months later, the congregation ordained Alexander as a minister. Thus radical congregationalism became the earliest governing model of the "Disciples".<sup>2</sup>

I have always been fascinated by the fact that all three streams of the Stone-Campbell Movement (Churches of Christ, Disciples, and Independents) have each appealed to Alexander Campbell for rationales for their various ecclesiologies and polities. I used to think: the Churches of Christ base their ecclesiology and polity on the early Alexander Campbell (he began eschewing any organization beyond the congregation but ended serving as president of the American Christian Missionary Society); the Disciples based theirs on the later Alexander Campbell (who saw the importance of cooperative work); the Independents based theirs on a distrust of the Disciples' approach (especially the fear of the excesses of institutional modernism as it developed in the 20th century). What I think now: while there is truth in the above description, our differences are also a reflection of Alexander Campbell's own conflicted feelings and thoughts regarding the nature of the church and how it should be organized – conflicted feelings and thoughts that were found in his personality and thinking from the beginning of his ministry to the end of his life. Ever since, his own ambiguity and ambivalence has fed the ideology of each of the three streams.

Campbell appears to have been endowed with a naturally bombastic personality. Accounts of his debates suggest a rough and tumble, winner-take-all approach. This was no doubt partly a reflection of rugged individualism and debate-as-entertainment on the American frontier, but I believe it goes deeper into Campbell's own person. Not that he could not be kind and gregarious on occasion, but he was a fearsome competitor. And, some of his excessively emotional expressions in debates, sermons and writings, often seem to me to be covering up inner ambiguities and ambivalences.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, sometimes he sounded like Churches of Christ, sometimes like Disciples, sometimes like an Independent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A few years before, Barton Stone, a Presbyterian minister at Cane Ridge Kentucky, arrived at a similar conclusion in a separate journey that shaped the Cane Ridge congregation and was formative for the "Christians" (though Stone preferred that ordination of ministers be authorized by a group of minister colleagues from beyond the individual congregation, though the congregation had the right to select its own preacher).

<sup>3</sup> One is reminded of the old preacher joke about the pastor who wrote this note in his sermon manuscript: "Weak point – pound pulpit!"

<sup>4</sup> In terms of ecclesiology (the nature of the church) and polity (day to day organization), Churches of Christ and the Independent Christian Churches understand the congregation to be the ultimate expression of church. Thus, for Independent Christians, conventions are conventions of *churches*, not a convention of a *church* comprised of many congregations. For Churches of Christ, there are not even conventions of churches per se, but gatherings that are often convened by colleges. In contrast, for the Disciples, "church" is a collective term that refers to all of the congregations that identify with the collective body *plus* the cooperative structures and agencies that are created to facilitate the work of the whole (including regions and general units and structures such as the general assembly). Each Disciples congregation is an expression of church, but is not considered to be an expression of

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One definition of genius is “the ability to hold opposing ideas together in creative tension”. This is one measure of Campbell’s genius, the ability to hold these opposing ideas together within his intellect and person (though they occasionally squirted out here and there in excessive statements or intemperate flashes of personality). The founding lights of various kinds of reform movements are often exactly these kinds of intellectually and emotionally conflicted personalities. Unfortunately, those who follow are seldom able to comprehend and hold together the *whole* scope of the founder’s thinking and thus choose various elements of his or her thought over against other elements. Thus, the seeds of excess are sown in each resulting “stream” and, being increasingly isolated from one another, are no longer exposed to the important critique inherent in each of the other streams.<sup>5</sup> Thus, each stream becomes a caricature of *part* of the founder’s thought and impetus and becomes blind to its own excesses and to the partial cures which are lodged in each of the other two streams. Isolation breeds hostility and growing ideological inflexibility. In the absence of an appreciation of the *whole* picture, I am convinced each stream will ultimately succumb to its own excesses. Thus, the Stone Campbell Dialogue must be more than a mere intellectual pursuit or a merely a matter of being “nicer” to each other. What is actually at stake is being able to reconstruct together the fuller picture of Campbell’s vision. We don’t have to reunite (even if possible or desirable), but we do have to see the inherent critique present in each stream in order for any of us to come to greater wholeness.

Each of these ways of being church is, in part, a function of a partial understanding of Alexander Campbell and, in part, an expression of local conditions and cultural factors. The Churches of Christ, arising primarily in the south, were more drawn to confederation than to centralization. Independents, arising in large measure in Appalachia, were distrustful of decision making that was not driven locally. Disciples were increasingly drawn toward a sense of collective church through the influence of regular contact with mainline communions. But again, the seeds of all these differences lay in the fertile mind and personality of Alexander Campbell himself.

Though I had intuited these insights during my time as regional minister of Tennessee and then as general minister and president, they were confirmed for me existentially when I served as the Disciples’ ecumenical delegate to the General Assembly of the Scottish

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“church” in its entirety by itself. Likewise, the general assembly and other regional and general expressions are an expression of the church, but cannot be considered “church” in its entirety by themselves. Thus, regions are not churches in and of themselves and the general assembly speaks **to** the church, not **for** the church (thus resolutions are non-binding upon congregations).

<sup>5</sup> This is one of the main reasons why, as general minister and president, I encouraged the development of the Stone-Campbell Dialogue which has been ongoing for the past decade: each of the Stone-Campbell “streams” need a place of relationship and trust-building that will enable us to hear and understand the inherent and important critique within each stream.

Presbyterian Church in 2009. This was my first visit to Edinburgh and I was very excited to experience the denomination of origin for the Campbells and Barton Stone.

As the old saying goes, “acorns don’t fall far from the tree”. The Scottish General Assembly seemed to me to be an embodiment of the person of Alexander Campbell (though, of course, it is actually the other way around). The debate was lively and spirited, sometimes heated even, though the “moderator” in fact helped to moderate the discussion in a way that kept even the most passionate discussions and individuals from getting out of hand. The same tension between distrust of organization on the one hand and the recognition of the need for organization on the other hand felt like home. Whatever else it felt like, it felt like church and it felt *alive!*

I admire the Church of Scotland for holding together as they have over the centuries, holding their tensions together as well. To me, it is a sign of their collective intelligence and a key to why Scotland has contributed so much culturally to the world at large, contributions far disproportionate to its size. Would that the Stone Campbell Movement, having sprung from those loins, would have held itself together in creative tension, rather than allowing itself to so fragment into three ideological camps, each dumber than the 19<sup>th</sup> century founder each claims to emulate.

It is not too late for each stream to see and appreciate the critiques inherent in the others, to learn from them, and to engage in correctives. But it is getting very late.

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