



Bicentennial of the Brush Run Church 1811-2011



Unity and Brush Run: The Declaration and Address

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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 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.

While not at the beginning of Thomas Campbell's 1809 *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington*, these words are at the heart of the Stone-Campbell Movement's reason for being. Deeply embedded in the soul of the churches of this global movement is the vision of this founding document, a vision for the visible unity of Christ's church on earth. Born out of Campbell's burden to end the fighting and division among professed followers of the Prince of Peace, the *Declaration and Address* (D&A) is a call and a rationale for Christians to live out the truth that "there is one body."

Thomas Campbell wrote the D&A as an explanation of the nature and purpose of the newly formed Christian Association in late summer 1809. The creation of the Association was in response to his expulsion from the Associate Synod of North America, the Presbyterian denomination he had served since arriving in the United States two years earlier.¹ His dismissal was sparked by his violation of the rules of the Associate Synod to exclude from the Lord's Supper anyone not part of their order.

¹ Thomas Campbell was ordained by the Anti-Burgher Synod of Ulster, part of the General Associate Synod of the Church of Scotland, itself part of the Church of Scotland that seceded in 1733 over the issue of patronage. Members of this body who immigrated to the United States formed the Associate Synod of North America. See William Stephen, *History of the Scottish Church*, vol. II (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1896) 521; and Peter Brooke, *Controversies in Ulster Presbyterianism, 1790-1836* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Belfast, 1980).

This event was actually the third in a series of attempts Campbell made to act on the truth that there is one body and thereby effect visible unity among Christians. The first two had been back in Ireland, his native country. Very soon after the failed United Irishmen's rebellion in 1798, Thomas Campbell had joined with other Christians to form the Evangelical Society of Ulster (ESU), an interdenominational alliance to send ministers to spread Evangelical Christianity.² Though Campbell had explicitly opposed membership in the United Irishmen and all other "secret societies," he readily took a leading role in the Evangelical Society of Ulster, seeing in its goals the promotion of peace and harmony among rival Protestant groups. In fact, as a founding officer, he was the Society's only Anti-burgher member.

However, the July 1799 assembly of his Anti-Burgher Synod questioned the legitimacy of Campbell's participation. "Is the Evangelical Society of Ulster constituted on principles consistent with the Secession Testimony?" After considerable discussion, the Synod voted that it was not. After a conference with three elders, Thomas Campbell submitted to the verdict, promising in a letter to "try to see eye to eye" with the Synod on this issue and to withdraw from any leadership role, though he would be allowed to remain as a member.³ Campbell apparently left the ESU in 1800, and by 1803 his Synod had forbidden any connection with it altogether.

The second incident focused on struggles within his own anti-Burgher Synod of Ulster. The issues behind the separation of the Burghers and Anti-Burghers were bound up in political matters unique to the Scottish political situation. The dispute was over whether one supported or opposed an oath required of burghesses (city officials) in Scottish cities where Jacobitism (support of the return of the Catholic line of kings ousted in 1688) had been strong—Edinburgh, Glasgow and Perth. The magistrates had to swear loyalty to King George II and a long list of other authorities after they affirmed that they held to "the true religion presently professed within this realm, and authorized by the laws thereof," and that they would abide in and defend that faith to their life's end, "renouncing the Roman Religion called Papistry."⁴

The burghess oaths had never been required in Ireland so the question was irrelevant. Yet the two parties rigidly excluded one another in Ireland just as they did in Scotland. In 1790 the Seceder Presbyterians in northern Ireland consisted of the Anti-Burgher Synod of Ulster with twenty-five congregations and the Burgher Synod with forty-two.⁵

Thomas Campbell and other leaders in the two Irish bodies had felt for some time that there was no reason to be separated. In October 1804 Campbell participated in a consultation meeting at Rich

² David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890* (London: Routledge, 1992) 15-16.

³ Hiram J. Lester. "The Form and Function of the Declaration and Address. pp. 173-192 In *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace and Purity in Thomas Campbell's "Declaration and Address:"* Texts and Studies. Eds., Thomas H. Olbricht and Hans Rollmann. ATLA Monograph Series, No. 46 (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2000) 184-185.

⁴ Thomas Sommers, *Observations on the Meaning and Extent of the Oath Taken at the Admission of Every Burgess in the City of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: William Turnbull, 1794) 7-8.

⁵ Peter Brooke, *Controversies in Ulster Presbyterianism, 1790-1836* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Belfast, 1980).

Hill designed to draw up a formal proposal for the union of the Burghers and Anti-burghers in Ireland. The proposal was presented to the Synod of Ulster at its meeting in Belfast later that year and was “favorably received.”⁶

However, when the General Associate Synod—the Scottish body over all the Antiburgher churches—heard of a subsequent meeting at Lurgan in March 1805 in which the union resolution was passed by a unanimous vote, it squelched any formal proposal being brought to its assembly by expressing its strong opposition. Nevertheless, in 1806 the Synod of Ulster sent Thomas Campbell to the Scottish Synod meeting in Glasgow, with a formal application to allow the Irish churches to make their own decision about the matter. He was allowed to argue his case this time, and according to some who heard him, he did it with force.⁷ The Synod, however, refused to allow the proposition to come to a vote, so Campbell was defeated once again in his efforts to bring unity to the separated factions in his Irish church.

Thomas came to America soon after that defeat, with great hopes that things would be different in this “new land.” It was not to be. Campbell’s serving of communion to non-Associate Synod Presbyterians at a gathering near Pittsburgh in 1807 led to a series of trials and his eventual separation from his church. That event led to the creation of the Christian Association of Washington, Pennsylvania, the immediate predecessor to the Brush Run Church.

In a very real sense, the Brush Run church was the first attempt made by Thomas and Alexander Campbell to embody the principles laid down in the *Declaration and Address* (D&A). The vision described in that founding document of the Stone-Campbell Movement pictured all who sought to follow Christ in every hamlet, village, city or neighborhood coming together to work and worship as one—regardless of (and in some sense because of) their dissimilarities in doctrine and worship practices.

The D&A did not demand rejection of beliefs and practices not held by everyone. The document did not regard such differences as inherently divisive. Campbell himself praised the Westminster Confession in the D&A as “eminently useful” for understanding the truths of scripture, and near the end of his life declared “I am a Calvinist.”⁸ Yet he embodied the principle set forth in the D&A that all those who say they are Christians and show that they are by the life they lead,

should consider each other as the precious saints of God, should love each other as [brothers and sisters], children of the same family and father, temples of the same spirit, members of the same body, subjects of the same grace, objects of the same divine love, bought with the same price, and joint heirs of the same inheritance. Whom God hath thus joined together no [one] should dare to put asunder.

⁶ Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 1, p. 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pages 57-58.

⁸ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, First edition, page 42, at https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/tcampbell/da/DA-1ST.HTM#Page43; Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, volume 2, page 245.

Thomas's son Alexander would reflect this idea so deeply embedded in the D&A in his famous Lunenburg Letter articles of 1837 and following. "It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves, and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known."⁹

On May 4, 1811, the Christian Association of Washington, which had declared itself in the D&A **not** to be a church, organized itself as a worshipping community, identified on Alexander Campbell's ordination certificate the following January as "the First Church of the Christian Association of Washington." It became known as the Brush Run Church named after the stream next to which the group constructed their meetinghouse.

Yet Thomas Campbell felt deeply the need to be connected with other Christians. He could not effectively work to bring Christians together if he and his own Christian community were isolated from other disciples of Christ. He had already tried to connect the Christian Association to and to receive ministerial standing in the Synod of Pittsburg, part of the Presbyterian Church in the USA. Thomas had been urged by his friend Joseph Anderson to seek ministerial credentials in the local Presbytery, and he applied. His former colleagues in the Associate Synod of North America, however, must have informed leaders of the Synod of Pittsburgh about their experience with Thomas Campbell. In May the Synod of Pittsburgh responded that they viewed the Christian Association's agenda as "specious" and destructive of religion, "promoting divisions instead of union, degrading the ministerial character, providing free admission to any errors in doctrine, and to any corruptions in discipline, whilst a nominal approbation of the Scriptures as the only standard of truth may be professed."¹⁰

Though Campbell continued to seek connection with the American Presbyterians, returning to the Synod the following October, they would not change their minds. Still, Campbell was not deterred. He believed that the reforms laid out in the D&A that he and Alexander were trying to advance should not be carried out in isolation. That was at the very heart of the D&A's goal of visible Christian unity. After Alexander's marriage in March 1811, and the birth of his first child the next year, he concluded that immersion of believers was New Testament baptism. Local Baptists approached the Campbells and urged them to bring the Brush Run church into the Redstone Association. Though with considerable trepidation toward many of the Baptist leaders they had encountered, they brought Brush Run into the Association because of the cause of unity—they could not see themselves existing in isolation from other followers of Christ who were also pursuing a purer and stronger Christianity.

And so, Brush Run embodied from the beginning the deeply embedded impulse—we might say today "core value"—of unity; it was in the very marrow of the bones of the Brush Run Church. This commitment would continue to echo throughout the movement's history in every era. Despite discouraging setbacks and even wrenching divisions, the call for followers of Christ to acknowledge and act on the reality that there is one body could not be suppressed.

⁹ Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger* (1837), p. 412.

¹⁰ Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, vol. 1, pp. 326-8.

The echo from Brush Run was heard loud and clear in the message of the first generation leaders. Barton Stone made the unity of Christians his “polar star” guiding all he did. “The union of Christians is the will of God, the prayer of Jesus, and the means of bringing the world to believe in Jesus, therefore it must be right. That [one] is then engaged in a righteous work, who labors to promote this union, by removing every obstacle to it.”¹¹ Alexander Campbell was convinced that what he called “the ancient order of things” was key to bringing unity, yet he strongly rejected the idea that only those who saw things as he did could be Christians. In the first of the Lunenburg Letter articles mentioned above he asserted that “should I see a sectarian Baptist or a Pedobaptist (one who practices infant baptism) more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisitions of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian.”¹²

The echo would continue in subsequent generations with leaders like Isaac Errett. While urging Christians to unite on what he believed all held in common, Errett proclaimed in an 1871 sermon, “. . . let a true Christian life rather than soundness in orthodox doctrine be the term of fellowship in the church, and all other questions will soon adjust themselves.”¹³ J. H. Garrison would urge members of the movement “as pioneers in the cause of Christian union” to encourage and promote the unity efforts begun by several American denominations in the late 1800s “in every practicable way, and show ourselves ready to make any concessions as to method which may be done without surrendering truth or principle.”¹⁴

No one in the late 19th and early 20th centuries heard the echo of unity more clearly than T. B. Larimore. Deeply hurt by the impending division, Larimore tried to model the “image of Christ” in his life to show what was most important—what the Christian life was really all about. When pushed to take a stand on the issues then dividing the movement, he replied:

While thousands have stood before me, hand in mine, and made the “good confession,” I have never questioned one of them about these “matters.” Shall I now renounce and disfellowship all of those who do not understand these things exactly as I understand them? They may refuse to recognize or fellowship or affiliate with ME; but I will NEVER refuse to recognize or fellowship or affiliate with THEM—NEVER.¹⁵

The list goes on and on.¹⁶ John B. Cowden worked and wrote extensively to bring reconciliation in the churches of the Stone-Campbell Movement in the early 20th century. In 1933 Ernest Beam of Churches of Christ and William Jessup of Christian Churches began unity meetings in California that continued through the 1950s. In 1936 James DeForest Murch of Christian Churches and Claude F. Witty

¹¹ Barton W. Stone, “To the Editors of the *Baptist Recorder*,” *Christian Messenger* 1 (August 25, 1827): 225.

¹² Alexander Campbell, “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” *Millennial Harbinger* (1837): 412.

¹³ Isaac Errett, *The True Basis of Union* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1877), 31-32.

¹⁴ J. H. Garrison, “Prospects for Christian Union Today,” *The Christian-Evangelist* (6 August 1891):498.

¹⁵ T. B. Larimore, “Reply to O.P. Spiegel’s Open Letter,” *Christian Standard* (24 July 1897): 965.

¹⁶ For details on all the people and institutions mentioned in this last section, refer to chapter 18, “The Quest for Unity,” in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (Chalice Press, 2013).

of Churches of Christ began unity meetings in the eastern United States that continued until the late 1940s.

Reflecting J. H. Garrison's urging, Disciples were charter members of the Federal Council of Churches in America when it began in 1908. Peter Ainslie formed the Council on Christian Union (today the Council on Christian Unity) in 1910 as a way of keeping this commitment before the eyes of the churches. This unit of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has had a major role in supporting the Stone-Campbell Dialogue begun in 1999 between members of the three major North American streams of the movement. In 1930 Jesse Bader formed the World Convention of Churches of Christ to provide a place for members of Stone-Campbell churches globally to network, worship and maintain unity with one another and with other believers. The 2012 World Convention was held in Goiania, Brazil, with thousands of Christians from that country and around the world.

The echo of unity that still resounds from Brush Run seems stronger than ever today. The work of scholars from all parts of the movement around the world resulted in two major works telling the stories of this unity effort: *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Eerdmans, 2004) and *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (Chalice, 2013).

But perhaps the most amazing event where the echo has been heard in the current generation was the Great Communion of October 2009. To celebrate the bicentennial of Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, a team of leaders from the North American streams, supported by the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, provided materials and resources for Christians to invite fellow believers—from the Stone-Campbell Movement and beyond—to come together in their own localities to celebrate the Lord's Supper and hear the call to unity once again. Hundreds of communities and thousands of Christians around the world did so, and many continue to do so each year. This happening may reflect Thomas Campbell's plea better than anything else, as Christians came together in cities, villages, neighborhoods and towns in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, Australia and New Zealand, simply to worship and adore our God and Savior in unity.

The echoes emanating from Brush Run, the call to unity from Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*, are gaining strength as they reverberate through the hearts of those committed to Christ and to his prayer "that they may be one."

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