



## Bicentennial of the Brush Run Church 1811-2011



# Echoes from Brush Run/Worship

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Listen carefully and you may hear the echoes of praise, prayer and preaching reverberating down two hundred years from a little band of pioneer Christians called Brush Run Church. Their simple meetinghouse, built in 1811, was located in the Alleghany foothills of Pennsylvania abutting the border of the northern panhandle of old Virginia. From those foothills came the sweet sounds of devotion which continue to enrich our prayer.

We have no old bulletins. We have no videotapes. We have no detailed descriptions of a Sunday service. Still the echoes persist. The “sounds” are from the pens of the little congregation’s two principal leaders, Thomas and Alexander Campbell. The facts are few. The Campbells’ early writings, which grew out of their Brush Run experiences, are rich and enriching.

The facts are few. The congregation was small, about thirty members. They were poor. They had difficulties meeting their financial obligation of paying for their modest meetinghouse. They could not afford to finish the building’s interior, nor could they afford a stove to heat it. They largely came from Scots-Irish Presbyterian stock, but were alienated from that Presbyterian ecclesial body. They shared a passion to live faithfully the God-given unity of God’s people and to call others into a movement of reconciliation. They had evolved to a church from a nascent unity movement, the Christian Association of Washington. We assume their worship was guided by the axiom, “Go with what you know.” What they knew was the common Presbyterian liturgical practices of their day: a stress on God’s word accompanied by preaching, prayer and praise traditionally from the Psalter. They were led by deacons and elders and a preaching minister. Their inaugural sermon was by Alexander Campbell from Job 8:7, *Though your beginning was small, your latter days will be great*. They held an ordination, that of young Campbell on January 1, 1812. They were a pious people. Dr. Robert Richardson wrote, “They

were in the habit of visiting often in each other's houses and spending whole nights in social prayer; searching the scriptures, asking and answering questions, and singing hymns. (in *Religious Denominations in the United States*. Charles DeSilver, Philadelphia, 1861, pp. 223-236) Their searching the scriptures led them quickly to reform their worship, most notably to the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper and to the baptism of believers by immersion. They had a relatively short history, 1811-c1828. The facts about worship in the Brush Run Church are few, but the congregations in its lineage are where we see the fulfillment of Alexander Campbell's prophetic inaugural words, "Your latter days will be great."

Thomas and Alexander Campbell's early writings on worship are rich and enriching. We will listen for their "sounds," which by inference are their reflections on their Brush Run experiences. Our listening will be limited to their teachings up until 1830, within two years of the closing of the Brush Run Church. Then we will listen for a few of today's echoes from Brush Run, primarily, but not solely, in *Chalice Hymnal (CH)*, the current hymnal of the Disciples of Christ.

## Today's Echoes: A Congregational People, in Freedom, Engaging God's Word

We begin listening to the Campbells by offering Alexander's first words in the first sermon in the Brush Run Church.

We commence our career as a church under the banner of "the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible" as the standard of our religious faith and practice...Our inferences and opinions are our own...Christians are the sons of liberty, the Lord's free men. The right to choose and to refuse the opinions of men is the essence of liberty...We are a weak band, a humble beginning; but so were they of Galilee...(cited in Duane Cummins, *The Disciples/A Struggle for Reformation*. Chalice, St. Louis, 2009, p. 54f)

The first sentences the Brush Run congregation heard from their young preacher identified three characteristics which continue to echo two centuries later among Disciples congregations. Our worship is congregationally based. It engages the Bible. That engagement celebrates the freedom to hold and express differing ideas. It all began with a congregation opening God's word and, in freedom and unity, engaging that word.

Disciples worship is the prayer of God's people freely responding to God's word. It is congregationally based. At a meeting of the Christian Association of Washington seven months before the Brush Run inaugural worship service, Alexander Campbell spoke of the importance of the ministry of all the people. They recognized no distinction between clergy

and laity. Let people's gifts be cultivated and offered not by class, rank or title but by ability. (Cummins, p. 54) Campbell celebrated their need to assemble for edifying and devotional purposes.

Man is a social animal. As the thirsty hind pants for the brooks of water so man pants for society congenial to his mind. He feels a relish for the social hearth and the social table; because the feast of sentimental and congenial minds is the feast of reason. Man, alone and solitary, is but half blessed in any circumstances. Alone and solitary, he is like the owl in the desert, a pelican in the wilderness. The social feast is the native offspring of social minds. (Christian Baptist. revised by D. S. Burnett, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, Christian Publishing Company, St. Louis, n.d., p.175)

Today we hear echoes of Brush Run in our celebration of God's gift of ministry to all people who assemble in congregations for edification and worship.

**Claim us, O God, for your service and direct us toward your will.**

You have graced all members of Christ's body, one by one, with gifts of the Spirit to fulfill their vocation:

to lead lives worthy of your calling,  
to be workers who have no reason to be ashamed,  
to shine as lights to your glory.

**You have granted each of us the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**

(from a Litany of Ministry in Chalice Hymnal, #451)

Echoes of Alexander Campbell's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers can be heard in elders' prayers at the Lord's Tables of the congregations descended from Brush Run. Those elders are described in *Disciples Eldership/A Quest for Identity and Ministry*.

Disciples elders as "folk priests" represent a full expression of the cherished notion of the priesthood of all believers. They are called from the congregation as mature Christian leaders. They are not paid for church services. They do not live in their community because they were given a call to serve the church in that location. Few have specialized formal education in ministry or are set apart by rites of ordination. Rather, from a gathered congregation, men and women of godly character are called and set apart by that congregation to perform the priestly functions for that congregation. Hence, Disciples elders are in fact "folk priests." (Peter M. Morgan. Christian Board of Publication, St. Louis, 2003, p. 61)

This environment of hospitality toward varied gifts has contributed in our own generation to the cultivation and reception of women's gifts by the church.

One of the needs of today is a vision that looks beyond the superficial and the extraneous and sees the secret springs that are moving women in their united efforts for the betterment of our land, and of all the world. (Ida Withers Harrison, twentieth-century Disciples mission executive, CH #674)

Disciples congregations, when faithful to the teachings of our Brush Run ancestors, are liberally and freely engaged with the Scriptures.

Disciples worship is clearly and distinctly rooted in the free church tradition. No authorized creeds limit our theological expressions. No ecclesial authority or prayer books dictate our words or thoughts in worship. Yet, we are not an "anything goes" church. Rather our theology and our worship are based in a dynamic engagement with Scripture. Those who are uncomfortable with the diversity of opinion freely expressed are often uncomfortable among us.

Thomas Campbell pointed out the vital and dynamic relationship between God's word and God's people assembled for worship:

This dutiful and religious use of the Bible (that most precious, sacred record of the wonderful works of God, the only authentic source of all religious information) is inseparably connected with, and indispensably necessary to, the blissful and all-important exercise of prayer and praise. Without this, those exercises must dwindle away to a trite form—must degenerate into lifeless formality. It is from this dutiful and religious use of the divine word, that we derive the proper materials for those holy exercises. (Christian Baptist, p. 101)

Disciples today are well served when their services have substantial readings from both testaments. Their prayers are richer when the Bible is quoted in worship materials throughout their services. Preachers are seen as the people's steward of the people's book who is humbled by the sacred trust to open for the people the rich treasury of its many diverse messages for their edification and devotion.

Ronald Osborn, beloved historian and church leader, echoes Thomas Campbell when he speaks of our approaching the Scriptures with reverent intelligence.

What do we mean by the Disciples mind? It is a way of approaching the Scriptures with a reverent intelligence. This style of professing Christian faith has accepted the reproach of advocating a “head religion” hurled by those who profess a “heart religion.” Emphasizing faith with understanding, the Disciples mind puts the highest premium on rationality and faithfulness in action. (CH # 553)

### Today’s Echoes: “God is Author and Object of our Holy Religion” Thomas Campbell

Scripture is crucial, but only as a means, never an end. When Disciples listen to the sounds of Thomas Campbell there is no bibliolatry among us. He was very clear about the center of our devotional focus in worship while, at the same time, lifting up God’s gift of Scripture. “The author and ultimate object of our holy religion, is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by his Spirit, speaking in Christ and his Holy Apostles.” The appropriate human response is “a correspondent faith. Thus, we worship the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, relying on his teachings in and by the word, to lead us into all the truth which he has testified for our edification and salvation.” (Christian Baptist. p. 99)

Colbert Cartwright both reports this essential teaching of Thomas Campbell and echoes it for our time.

The best word I have found to characterize this kind of worship is *reflexive*. It is worship that is objectively directed toward God, but has profound subjective meaning for the worshipping community. It is reflexive in the sense that it is in giving that you receive; it is through opening oneself toward God that God comes afresh into your life...

Worship is “reflexive” in the sense that as Christians glorify God, known in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, the glory of God’s countenance shines back into the Christians’ lives to imprint God’s image upon their hearts...

Worship is reflexive; God mirrors back to us that love we send forth toward him. (*Candles of Grace/Disciples Worship in Perspective*. Chalice, St. Louis, 1992, pp. 17f)

In Scripture God, the author and object of our religion, gave us “ordinances” as means of grace by which God reaches out to embrace us. (Alexander Campbell didn’t like the term sacrament because it wasn’t in Scripture. Ironically, he replaced it with “ordinances,” another term not in Scripture.) He defines ordinances: “The traditions of the Holy Apostles who were commanded

to teach the disciples to observe all things which the King in his own person had commanded them.” (Christian Baptist. p. 656)

Campbell’s “ordinances” of grace are not limited, like the sacraments, to two or even seven. He amazingly expands the abundance of God’s gracious acts to include any worshipful observance instructed by the New Testament.

That sacramental abundance has been echoed by Disciples twentieth-century pastor/scholar G. Edwin Osborn.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name,” declared Jesus,  
“there I am in the midst of them.”  
Whenever baptismal waters cover a sincere believer  
who emerges to the risen life,  
the risen Lord is present.  
Whenever preaching faithfully proclaims the word,  
the living Word is there.  
Whenever prayer rises from a trusting heart,  
the Hearer of prayer is at hand.  
Whenever a devoted offering is made to God,  
the true Offering of God is present.  
Whenever the bread is broken in faith,  
the living Bread, come down from heaven, is there. (CH #219)

Not all ordinances are equal. Two of Campbell’s monumental ordinances are baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The first baptism at Brush Run is one of the few worship events recorded in detail. In the story, theology linked intimately to life—the life of a young couple, Alexander and Margaret Campbell. On March 13, 1812 baby Jane arrived, named after Alexander Campbell’s mother. Abstract theological discussion became a flesh and blood issue. Their study of Scripture was moving them toward immersion of believers. Their family tradition and the pressures of custom moved them toward baptizing baby Jane by sprinkling. The decision was made. Not only would they not baptize Jane, but Alexander and Margaret, as believers, would be immersed. On June 12, 1812, Alexander, Margaret, his sister Dorothea, his parents, and three others from the Brush Run Church were immersed in Buffalo Creek by Baptist preacher, Mathias Luce. Never ones to pass up a teaching moment, Thomas and Alexander spoke for

seven hours on that occasion. A few days later the remainder of the Brush Run congregation waded into Buffalo Creek to be obedient recipients of this watery means of grace.

Chalice Hymnal celebrates the Disciples sacramental legacy of those raised up in newness of life from their watery grave of baptism.

We rose from the water to manifest the presence of Christ. We are the laos, the people of God born from the water of baptism into a sacramental ministry, manifesting the presence of Christ. (Peter Morgan, twentieth-century Disciples executive CH #372)

More importantly, the sounds of splashing water dripping from those who make their way to new life from our baptistries echo the splashing water from the newly baptized saints of Brush Run.

The Lord's Supper, the heart and soul of Disciples liturgical belief and practice, comes to us more decisively than baptism came from Brush Run. In their first year, Thomas Campbell taught the young congregation, "New Testament worship ceases when the Lord's Supper is not observed every Lord's Day." (Cited in Cartwright, p. 5)

The Lord's Supper was celebrated by the Washington Association when they voted to become a church on May 4, 1811. The precedent of a weekly gathering at the table was maintained throughout the history of the congregation. The "breaking of bread," Alexander Campbell's preferred biblical terminology, was the "primary intention of the meeting of the Disciples on the first day of the week." (Christian Baptist, p. 55)

Alexander amplifies the breaking of bread in worship as the heart of Disciples worship.

It was the design of the Savior that his disciples should not be deprived of this joyful festival when they meet in one place to worship God...(T)he New Testament teaches that every time they met in honor of the resurrection of the Prince of Life, or, when they assembled in one place, it was a principal part of their entertainment in his liberal house to eat and drink with him. He keeps no dry lodgings for the saints—no empty house for his friends. He never made his house assemble but to eat and drink with him....

As bread and wine to the body, so it strengthens his faith and cheers his heart with the love of God. It is a religious feast; a feast of joy and gladness. (Christian Baptist, p. 175)

One of the Disciples saints of the twentieth century was Rosa Page Welch, African American singer and Disciples “ambassador.” She echoes Campbell’s description of the “feast of joy and gladness.”

The miracle of communion means the rich bowing down with the poor, the learned with the unlearned, the clean with the filthy, the master with the slave, the privileged with the deprived, the white with the black, and the black with the white. (CH #412)

## Today’s Echoes: Persistent Catholicity

Perry Gresham for nineteen years served as president of Bethany College, founded by Alexander Campbell. His 1961 keynote address to the International Convention of Disciples reverberated like a bell with the witness of the sounds of Brush Run and the words of Thomas Campbell.

There was no spire on the Brush Run church and no bell. The assembly of farmers, patriots, and immigrants of 1811 who came to worship and pray were themselves spires pointing up to God. Each beating heart was a bell calling all men to become Christians and all Christians to unite in the Church of Christ on earth which is “essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one!” (*Spire and Tower*. Unpublished, located at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville, first page)

Gresham was, of course, quoting the Christian Association’s 1809 classical ecumenical document written by Thomas Campbell, the *Declaration and Address*.

We submit 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 obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and of none else, as none else can be truly and properly called Christians. (Proposition One)

That document inaugurated a movement with a catholic consciousness that has persisted among Disciples for two centuries. It has not been easy. The Brush Run Church sought connection with the Redstone Baptist Association as a way to expand their movement for wholeness and healing. That connection, after twelve years, came apart and eventually led to the dismantling of the little congregation. Yet they persisted. They became aligned with the Mahoning Baptist Association and in the late 1820s once again were thwarted in their ecumenical mission. Yet the Disciples persisted. On January 1, 1832, twenty years to the day

from when Alexander Campbell was ordained by the Brush Run Church, his Disciples were successfully united with followers of Barton W. Stone, the Christians.

Today the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) banners its identity and distinctive calling in words which echo the catholic persistence of their Brush Run ancestors.

We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us.

(Statement of Identity)

Catholic Christians are both intimately and locally involved in a life of prayer and service as well as transcending a specific moment in time and a specific location on the planet. Catholic Christians also are historically aware and globally engaged. They maintain a high identity of church as local and universal.

Catholic persistence is echoed and freshly expressed in Disciples worship which is both local and representative of the universal church. That persistence comes from the healing, hospitable presence of Christ most intimately known at the Lord's Table.

Thomas Campbell put into words the spirit of the presence of Christ in our lives when he wrote the *Declaration and Address* for the Association that was to become Brush Run Church.

(In our freedom to be different we are to) consider each other as the precious saints of God. (We) should love each other as brethren, 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 has joined together no man should dare to put asunder.

(Proposition nine)

William Barnett Blakemore gets to the heart of the matter in this echo of Brush Run for our time.

Ideas of reform, of restoration, of union, and of merger have had their place, but we are fundamentally a Christian movement and not a restoration movement nor a merger movement, and it is precisely because we are a Christian movement that we are concerned about Christian unity. But it is Jesus Christ who has been passed on from age to age and whom we receive in the teachings of our parents. (CH #704)

Our catholicity is expressed in our abundant use of the Bible, the common book accepted by all Christians. That ecumenical connection has been enhanced in recent decades by the increasing use of the common lectionary and, later, the revised common lectionary. With lectionary use, Christians of many traditions hear the same Bible readings on the same Sunday. In many congregations, discussions have occurred in Sunday school classes using special materials for study of the lectionary lessons.

Our catholicity is further expressed in our weekly celebration of the full liturgy. We are a people of both word and table. Alexander Campbell would not dictate an order of service because he found none prescribed in scripture. Yet he would insist on including the Supper in each Sunday's celebration. He would later show his catholic consciousness by commending an order of service with apostolic roots as described by Justin Martyr (c150), a service of word and table, in that order.

Today among Disciples we echo Brush Run by being a people of the table whose order of service most frequently follows the order commended by Campbell. Our worship further echoes the catholic persistence of Brush Run in such signs as ecumenical representation in our ordinations, our shared standing for clergy with the United Church of Christ and our leadership in community ecumenical services.

The pioneer Christians of Brush Run had no spire and no bell in their modest meetinghouse. Yet their witness continues to ring out in the persistent catholicity of their descendents in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). That persistent catholicity is expressed in our worship.

No spire, no bell, yet, we still hear sounds of old Brush Run reverberating across two hundred years. We hear the old patriarch Thomas Campbell setting a solid theological foundation for our worship. "God is the author and object for our holy religion." We hear them reading the Scriptures and we hear twenty-two-year-old Alexander Campbell preaching on "humble beginnings" like those "of Galilee." We hear the splash of the baptismal waters of Buffalo Creek. We hear Christ's hospitality in the invitation to their "feast of joy and gladness." No bell in the spire, but great reverberating sounds put a song in our hearts.

We call ourselves Disciples,  
as pilgrims on the way,  
We seek the truth in wisdom  
and beauty in each day....

From quiet meditation

and joyous hymns of praise,  
We go to do God's mission!  
Christ leads us all our days!  
(We Call Ourselves Disciples, by Jim Miller. CH #357)

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