

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Did Alexander Campbell Establish the Church of Christ?

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A Preceptor reader from Texas has submitted a list of questions which request a statement of what Alexander Campbell actually did. Since members of the church are often asked such questions as “The church of Christ began with Alexander Campbell, didn't it?” and “Wasn't Campbell the founder of your denomination?”, it is of paramount importance that every member of the church understand exactly what Campbell did and what he did not do. The questions asked were:

Was Campbell a Baptist?

At one period in Campbell's career he was affiliated with the Baptist denomination and even earlier he was a Presbyterian. After he and his father, Thomas Campbell, had both renounced the Presbyterian church, they began to study the question of baptism and were persuaded by their own investigations that immersion alone constituted Scriptural baptism. After they and several others had been immersed by Elder Luce of the Baptist Church (June 12, 1812), the Baptists of western Pennsylvania were jubilant at the “conversion” of these former Presbyterians and invited the Brush Run church, which the Campbells had organized, to join the Redstone Baptist Association.

After lengthy discussions the Campbells affiliated with the Redstone Association but only with a written understanding that they would be allowed to teach whatever they “learned from the Holy Scriptures, regardless of any human creed.” Alexander Campbell remained a nominal Baptist for seventeen years (1813 - 1830), during which an ever increasing number of Baptists realized that he was “*among them*,” but not “*of them*.” Within three years following the admission of the Brush Run church to the Redstone Association, Campbell delivered an address before the annual meeting of that association, the famous “Sermon on the Law,” in which he expressed sentiments which were hardly compatible with orthodox Baptist theology. When he debated MacCalla in 1823, Campbell maintained that baptism was essential to salvation: and though Campbell was supposedly defending the Baptist cause, baptism for the remission of sins was unacceptable and heretical to Baptists as to Presbyterians.

During Campbell's seventeen years as a nominal Baptist his prestige and influence increased enormously in spite of his heterodox views. The process of separation was slow and often painful; but by 1830 the “*Christians*” or “*Disciples*” had been ousted from the Baptist denomination, and the Baptists counted their losses in the tens of thousands. Campbell was no longer a Baptist, even in name.

Did Alexander Campbell Establish the Church Of Christ?

The answer to this question is a most emphatic NO! Before one can be said to be the founder of any institution, it is essential that the institution in question never have existed prior to the period of its alleged founder. The church of Christ did exist long before the time of Alexander Campbell. Its establishment occurred in Jerusalem on that memorable Pentecost morning; its early history forms the theme of the Book of Acts; its needs for instruction were satisfied by the Epistles of the New Testament.

Campbell's enemies utilized every means at their command to criticize, ridicule, and undermine, his work. One of their favorite tactics was to accuse Campbell of being the founder of a new religious denomination; for they believed that if he could be branded a factionist, the founder of a new sect, his plea for religious unity would appear absurd to the religious community.

As often as Campbell encountered this charge that he had founded a new denomination, he carefully pointed to the true character of his work and disclaimed all pretenses at being the founder of a new sect. For example, when Campbell visited New Orleans, the Commercial Bulletin announced his visit to the city and referred to him as the “founder” of a religious denomination Campbell immediately addressed a letter to the editors of the paper; and after thanking them for the complementary notice of his visit, he continued:

“You have done me, gentlemen, too much honor in saying that I am the ‘founder’ of the denomination, quite numerous and respectable in many portions of the West, technically known as ‘Christians,’ but more commonly as ‘Campbellites.’

I have always repudiated all human heads and human names for the people of the Lord, and shall feel very thankful if you will correct the erroneous impression which your article may have made in thus representing me as the founder of a religious denomination.” (Richardson, *Memoirs of Campbell*, II, 441)

Neither the facts of history nor the statement of Campbell himself give any support to the charge that he founded a new denomination. It follows, therefore, that when someone asks a Christian, “Didn’t Alexander Campbell found your denomination?” he reveals either an ignorance of the basic facts involved or a malicious design. If it be a case of insufficient information, he can be persuaded that the church of Christ is not a denomination and that Campbell was not its founder. If the question proceeds from malicious intent, the questioner illustrates again the power of religious prejudice!

Did Alexander Campbell Restore the Original Church of Christ?

It would be incorrect to imply that Campbell alone succeeded in restoring the primitive church of Christ, but it is accurate to state that Campbell was one leader in a great movement whose goal was the restoration of the New Testament church. It will be observed that two things are implied when one uses the term “restoration.”

1. It is implied that the church of Christ did not originate with Campbell or even during the period of his life; rather it originated and flourished before Alexander Campbell lived.
2. Campbell believed in returning to the original standard, for this is the meaning of the term “restore.” When one restores something which has existed earlier, he does not create or originate; he attempts to reproduce an earlier work.

“A restoration of the ancient order of things, it appears, is all that is contemplated by the wise disciples of the Lord; as it is agreed that this is all that is wanting to the perfection, happiness and glory of the Christian community...Now, in attempting to accomplish this, it must be observed, that it belongs to every individual and to every congregation of individuals to discard from their faith and their practice everything that is not found written in the New Testament of the Lord and Savior, and to believe and practice whatever is there enjoined. This done, and everything is done which ought to be done” (*Christian Baptist*, March 7, 1825). — *La Vista Church of Christ Articles*. ■

“13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. 18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:13-19).

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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