



Did Alexander Campbell Begin The Church Of Christ?

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Did Alexander Campbell begin the church of Christ? This charge has often been levied against the church of Christ and members of the church for many years (often from individuals in denominational “Christianity”). In fact, members of the church of Christ are often referred to by the term, “Campbellites.” Therefore, let’s examine this charge by the pages of Scripture – and determine whether it can be sustained. If Alexander Campbell *did* begin the church of Christ, then it is just another denomination and we should not seek to be members of it. However, if the church of Christ is the one true church which has been established by Jesus Christ, we should all seek to be part of it!

Who Was Alexander Campbell?

Alexander Campbell lived from 1788 to 1866. He was born in Northern Ireland to Thomas and Jane Campbell. Thomas Campbell came to America in 1807 – and his family joined him in 1809 (when Alexander Campbell was 20 years old).

Thomas and Alexander Campbell were both diligent Bible students – and began reaching some conclusions that challenged their own personal religious practices. Alexander Campbell, specifically, had been previously associated with the Presbyterian and Baptist Churches. However, his Bible study led Him to conclusions which put him in opposition with the doctrines of those denominations (i.e. his belief that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins).

As a result of their study, both Thomas and Alexander Campbell sought to restore New Testament Christianity. They were not seeking to establish a new denomination (among the many that already existed). Instead, their plea was to speak where the Bible speaks, be silent where the Bible is silent, to call Bible things by Bible names, and do Bible things in Bible ways. So, rather than establishing a new denomination, these two individuals were part of a movement to return to the original faith and practice that is outlined within the pages of the New Testament Scriptures – rejecting all other man-made creeds as a guide for their religious doctrine and practice!

Thomas and Alexander Campbell joined others who were living around the same time to publicly proclaim the need to return to New Testament Christianity. Some of the other notable individuals involved in the “Restoration Movement” of the 18th and 19th centuries included James O’Kelley, Elias Smith, Abner Jones, and Barton W. Stone.

Alexander Campbell, and the men like him, were certainly noble in their desire to return to pure, New Testament Christianity. The “Reformation Movement” had not gone far enough to return to the doctrines of the New Testament only. Instead, the “Reformation Movement” only reformed the Catholic Church – and brought about many new denominations. Men like Alexander Campbell saw the error of this – and sought to use the Bible as their only guide in religion – and reject all man-made titles, simply to be called “Christian.” Yet, while Alexander Campbell and the others often had many noble goals, they were not perfect in returning to pure New Testament Christianity (i.e. Alexander Campbell was closely connected with the unscriptural missionary society arrangement).

Examining Some Facts

In order for Alexander Campbell to have begun the church of Christ, it would have to have been non-existent prior to him. However, upon an examination of the Scriptures, we can see that this is not the case! Let’s examine a few outstanding facts to help us answer the question, “Did Alexander Campbell begin the church of Christ?”

1. Alexander Campbell was not born until 1788 – approximately 1,755 years after the church of Christ began (in Acts 2).
2. Alexander Campbell did not die for anyone to establish a church. Jesus Christ is the only one who died to establish His church (Acts 20:28).
3. Churches of Christ were in existence prior to Alexander Campbell. One clear reference to this is in Romans 16:16, which says, “...the churches of Christ greet you.” However, there is also evidence from secular history that churches of Christ were in existence prior to Alexander Campbell’s association with them.
4. True churches of Christ today do not follow the teachings of Alexander Campbell. Instead, true churches of Christ look to the Bible as the source of authority for everything that is done (Colossians 3:17). Many similarities can be seen between true churches of Christ today and Alexander Campbell’s teachings simply because Campbell also appealed to the Bible for authority in his teaching.

Therefore, as you consider these basic facts, it is impossible for Alexander Campbell to have established the church of Christ – and he simply did not do so.

A Brief History Of The Church Of Christ

Now, having established these basic facts, let’s consider a brief history of the church of Christ in a little more detail. As we do this, we will discover that Alexander Campbell lived in the wrong place and at the wrong time to establish the church of Christ.

The church of Christ (the kingdom of God) was prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. Daniel chapter 2 prophesied that this kingdom would begin during the days of the Roman Empire. Micah 4:1-5 prophesied that the church would be established in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Jesus gave a time indicator about His coming kingdom in Luke 9:27. He said, “But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God.” So, the church would be established during the reign of the Roman Empire, in Jerusalem, within the lifetime of some who were living at the same time Jesus was living.

In Acts chapter 2, we read about the establishment of this church. And, as we think about this fact, it is important to realize that prior to Acts 2, the church is never referenced as being in existence. For instance, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, “I will build My church.” However, from Acts 2 forward (through the remainder of the New Testament), the church/kingdom is always referenced as being in existence. Acts 2:47 says, “praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Colossians 1:13 says, “He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”

Now, Acts 2 can also be identified as the beginning point for the church of Christ because it fulfilled all of the prophecies that were made concerning its origin. For instance, the events of Acts 2 took place during the reign of the Roman Empire – in fulfillment of the prophecy in Daniel 2. They took place in the city of Jerusalem – in fulfillment of the prophecy in Micah 4. And, they took place within the lifetime of many who had lived during the time of Jesus – in fulfillment of the prophecy in Luke 9:27.

This church which came into existence on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 was established by Jesus Christ. He is the one who promised that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). He is the one who shed His blood to purchase this church (Acts 20:28). Therefore, it is His church (Matthew 16:18) – and local congregations are then accurately identified as being “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16).

Alexander Campbell simply could not establish something in the early 1800s which had already been in existence for over 1,700 years! In addition, much of his work was done in the regions of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia – not in Jerusalem. So, Alexander was in the wrong place at the wrong time – and simply did not establish the church of Christ!

Why Churches Of Christ Believe And Practice What They Do

Often, the claim that churches of Christ were begun by Alexander Campbell comes from individuals who have become acquainted with the beliefs and practices of the churches of Christ today – and refuse to accept their teaching as truth. Therefore, they claim that churches of Christ must have originated with a man (i.e. Alexander Campbell) – and simply follow his teachings and traditions.

However, true churches of Christ today do not practice or preach **one thing** because of Alexander Campbell! The only reason for any similarities that exist is because of the common standard – the Bible. Just as Alexander Campbell desired to go back to the Bible and restore true New Testament Christianity, true churches of Christ desire to do that same thing today!

Colossians 3:17 says, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” 2 Timothy 1:13 instructs us to “Hold fast the pattern of sound words....” Numerous other Scriptures warn against twisting or perverting the gospel’s message in any way (i.e. Galatians 1:6-9; 2 Peter 2:1-3; 2 John 1:9-11).

Therefore, true churches of Christ today believe and practice the things they do simply because they can establish Bible authority for those things. Consider just a few examples to demonstrate this.

1. True churches of Christ believe in and practice baptism as immersion in water because the word “baptism” always indicated a full immersion in the New Testament – in its Greek meaning and also in Scriptural examples (i.e. Acts 8:38-39 and Romans 6:3-4).
2. True churches of Christ believe in and practice baptism for the remission of sins because it is according to the instructions in the New Testament (i.e. Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; and others).
3. True churches of Christ believe in and practice taking the Lord’s Supper on the first day of every week because that is what New Testament churches of Christ did (i.e. Acts 20:7).
4. True churches of Christ refuse to use mechanical instruments in their worship to God because there is no New Testament authority for them. Instead, they believe in and practice only singing because it is what the Bible authorizes (i.e. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16).

While we could discuss many points concerning the characteristics of true churches of Christ today, I hope you are impressed with the fact that true churches of Christ believe and practice the things they do simply because that is what the New Testament authorizes.

Conclusion

Similarities between Alexander Campbell’s beliefs and the beliefs of churches of Christ today simply do not prove that he started the church of Christ. In fact, we have observed Biblical evidence that demonstrates Alexander Campbell did **not** begin the church of Christ! Instead, the church of Christ was established by Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, around the year 33 A.D.! True churches of Christ today follow only Jesus – and do not follow **any** man

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