

Alexander Campbell

Twenty-one-year-old Alexander Campbell joined his father, Thomas, in America in October 1809, just as the *Declaration and Address* went to press. Like his father, Alexander had become increasingly dissatisfied with the sectarianism he saw dividing the church. Under his father's guidance, he plunged into an intensive study and pledged himself to the unifying principles set forth in his father's document. The *Declaration and Address* would become the driving force of his life's work.

Licensed to preach by the Brush Run church in Pennsylvania, Alexander had already become a recognized leader of the reform movement by 1815. His work centered on the foundational principles initiated by his father: 1) that the church ought to be without sectarian divisions, and 2) that the church was divided because “human opinions” had been added to the practice of the early church as revealed in the New Testament. Like his father, Alexander believed that the restoration of simple New Testament Christianity (primitive Christianity) was the only means to unify all Christians. Wanting to abandon denominational labels, they used biblical names for followers of Jesus that they found in the Bible. Among these names, Campbell preferred to call his group the “Disciples of Christ.”

Both father and son, as did many in colonial America, accepted the thinking of John Locke and other philosophers, who championed empirical reason and the scientific method. Thus Campbell believed that by applying this method to the Bible, religion could be “reduced to a set of essentials upon which all reasonable persons might agree.” “The Bible,” he argued, “is a book of facts, not opinions, theories or abstract generalities.” In his view, the young Campbell saw the Bible as a kind of scientific manual or technical blueprint, laying out in precise, factual detail the structure of church order. History shows how problematic this approach is, but it was Campbell’s starting point.

Because he focused on the *order* and *worship* of the primitive church (the “ancient order of things,” as he called it), Campbell did not center his study on Jesus and the Gospels. Instead he majored in the latter part of the New Testament, the Book of Acts and especially Paul’s letters as these seem to provide more information useful to the reconstitution of the New Testament Church. Over time, the “gospel” began to be defined in terms of law and pattern for the organization and worship of the church. Not everyone within the movement agreed. Campbell's close friend Robert Richardson lamented that “people confuse trust in a living savior with belief in certain doctrines.” Robertson's words still ring true today as he reminds us that “Christ is not a doctrine, but a person, and at its heart, Christian faith centers on a person, not a body of doctrines.”

As the pivotal leader of the movement his father started, Alexander Campbell never lost sight of the hope that the restoration of primitive Christianity would bring Christian unity, which, in turn, would hasten the return of Christ. By the end of his life, he had shifted his direction and embraced an even broader vision of unity, seeking “a common Christianity...in which all good men of all denominations agreed.”

