

When Did the church of Christ Begin?

Part I: Did Alexander Campbell start the church of Christ?

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Alexander Campbell moved from Scotland to America in 1807. He was a well-known religious leader, a man of influence in his day, associating with such men as Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Garfield. He was a member of the church of Christ who preached widely and wrote prolifically; he is sometimes erroneously credited with establishing the church of Christ.

Did Campbell found the church of Christ? If the church of Christ is of recent origin, would not older churches have more right to exist than it? These are good questions. Let's look for good answers based on the Scriptures, church history, and common sense.

First, we observe that one can read of churches of Christ in New Testament times. Campbell could not have established the church of Christ because it was in existence nearly 2,000 years before he was born! Early in His ministry, Jesus promised to build His church (Matthew 16:18). Which church was this? What else could it have been other than the church of Christ? Jesus fulfilled this promise in A.D. 33 (see the record in Acts 2:1–47). Paul confirmed the existence of such congregations in A.D. 57: “The churches of Christ salute you” (Romans 16:16).

Second, we observe that the same church exists today. Churches of Christ are in communities throughout the world and continue to be established each year. These churches seek to practice Christianity the same way it was practiced in the New Testament without addition, subtraction, or modification (Revelation 22:18–19; Galatians 1:6–10).

Is the church of Christ the same church today that the church of Christ was then?

▶ The same conditions for salvation are taught today as then: faith in the deity of Jesus (John 3:16; 8:24), repentance of sin (Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 2:38), confession of Christ (Matthew 10:32; Acts 8:37; Romans 10:9–10), and baptism for the remission of sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

▶ Worship is conducted today as it was then. The historian recorded this: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). This is how the church of Christ conducts worship today: preaching from the Scriptures (the apostles’ doctrine; 2 Timothy 4:2), financial giving (included in the meaning of the word *fellowship*; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 9:6–7), partaking of the Lord’s supper (“breaking bread”; Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–29), praying (Acts 12:12), and singing praises to God (Hebrews 2:12; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

▶ The same organization is used today as then: bishops, deacons, evangelists, and members (Philippians 1:1). Jesus Christ is still the only head of His church (Matthew 28:18; Colossians 1:18). He delegated authority to the apostles (Matthew 28:19–20; Ephesians 2:20; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:8), who exercise government through their written documents collected in the New Testament (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:3). On the local level, elders (also called shepherds, presbyters, and bishops) see that the apostles’ doctrine is taught and practiced (Titus 1:10–11). These men have no legislative authority—they cannot make laws for God. They only have delegated authority to implement God’s law (Hebrews 13:7, 17) and to make decisions in matters of expediency (carrying out God’s will). Each local church is autonomous—that is, it has no higher body legislating for it: no board, conference, synod, or other hierarchy.

▶ The same holy lifestyle that was required for members then is taught for members today (Romans 12:1–2). Just as Christians were to live soberly, righteously, and godly then (Titus 2:11–12), so Christians today must remain separated from the world (James 4:4).

Third, a historical line of succession back to the first century is unnecessary. The Bible predicted that there would come a departing “from the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1) and a great “falling away” (2 Thessalonians 2:1–10). It would come through the leadership (Acts 20:28–32). It would be characterized by wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:3) and binding things which were not required by the apostles (1 Timothy 4:2–3). This apostasy began during the third century and developed into the Roman Catholic Church by the seventh century.

History does not record if any churches of Christ remained during the Dark Ages that followed. This is not unexpected, since those writing the history books were those in control and would not have known of groups that were hiding from them. It is possible that the church continued underground during those years. Remember that Jesus promised: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Toward the end of the Dark Ages, Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Huldreich Zwingli led a popular movement to reform the corruptions of the Roman Church. Their reformation efforts did some good but fell short of restoring the original church. The end result was that many different churches—the mainline Protestant denominations—were established. Each was separate from the other, and each taught different doctrines, contradicting each other, and more important, differing from the Bible’s teaching (cf. John 17:20–21; 1 Corinthians 1:10).

A Restoration Movement followed the *Reformation Movement*. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, men arose, both in Europe and America, determined to go back to the Bible, leaving all human doctrines, creeds, and man-made organizations. It was never their purpose to establish a new religion, but to restore an old one—New Testament Christianity. In our country, Alexander Campbell was one of these restorers, along with Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and many others.

These men approached their task differently from the reformers. Instead of correcting what they saw as mistakes in existing churches, they decided to start

over. They recognized that the Bible was the only sufficient guide for religion (2 Timothy 3:16–17). They believed that the Word was the seed of the kingdom (Luke 8:11). Therefore, since they had the same seed, God’s Word (1 Peter 1:22–25), and the same soil, the human heart (Matthew 13:19–23), and since a seed always produces after its kind (Genesis 1:11), they expected the same results: Christians (Acts 11:26).

Groups of Christians make up churches. What kind of church would result? Since Christ purchased the church with His blood (Acts 20:28), is head of the church (Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:15), receives glory through the church (Ephesians 3:21; Colossians 1:18), and will one day come to claim the church as His bride (1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 5:25–33; Revelation 19), it made sense that these local groups be called “churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16).

Someone might say, “We should be able to trace a succession through history back to the first century.” Think a little more about the seed principle. If we wanted to plant Kentucky Bluegrass in Alabama, would it be necessary to plant a row of grass from one state to the other? No. Wherever the seed was planted, it would grow. It could be stored for many years, and then planted, and it would still produce the same kind of plant. With Christianity, when we plant the same teaching, it will produce the same plant. If we plant any other seed (a different doctrine), a different crop (church) will grow (cf. Matthew 15:13). A farmer cannot harvest beans from watermelon seed.

Consider another example. Suppose that football became unpopular and was not played for a thousand years. Then men began to play what they called “football,” except they used a round ball, five players on a team, and shot the ball through a round hoop. They played this “football” for a hundred years. Then an archaeologist discovered the “Rules of American Football,” and informed the world that they are not really playing football. To do so, they would need to use an oblong ball, eleven players, and cross a goal line to score. Only if they followed the rules could true football be restored.

Part II: A Brief Look at the Beginning of the church of Christ (Acts 2)

The beginning of the church is recorded in the Bible in Acts 2. In this chapter, the church is spoken of for the first time in the present tense (Acts 2:47). It was established with divine power, as was earlier promised to the apostles (Mark 9:1; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1–4). The power was made known as the Holy Spirit was poured from heaven. It was undeniably a divine event. The power was

- ▶ audible—as a rushing wind.
- ▶ visible—cloven tongues like as of fire.
- ▶ linguistic—speaking in the people’s languages.

No other church has ever been established with such power and under such remarkable conditions. It had been prophesied that God would establish His church in the city of Jerusalem (Zion) during the days of the Roman kings (Isaiah 2:1–4; Daniel 2:44). Jesus promised that it would be set up during the lifetime of some who heard Him preach (Mark 9:1). Only one church fits these characteristics. It is the church of Christ. All others were built at later times and in other places. Their founders were men, and their doctrine differed to various degrees from the New Testament Christ gave to be followed. Consult a history book and see if the churches in your community began in Jerusalem only a few days after the resurrection of Jesus. If not, they fail this important scriptural test.

The church of Christ began about 2000 years ago in the city of Jerusalem by God’s power. It remains on the earth today by His grace and to His glory. Why not further investigate the church of Christ and become a member of the church you can read about in your own Bible?

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