

*Editor's note: May 4, 2011 marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic Brush Run Church. We asked Calvin Warpula to write this special article for One Body.*

# **THE BRUSH RUN CHURCH**

## **A Small Beginning (30 Members) Grows into a Worldwide Movement of Millions**

**By Calvin Warpula**

In 1809 when Thomas Campbell wrote the *Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* [Washington, Pennsylvania – Editor], he had no idea of starting a separate church. He strongly opposed sectarianism and all human creeds and promoted unity among all believers in Christ on the basis of the Scriptures only. Later that year his son, Alexander, arrived from Ireland and agreed with and supported his father's views.

### **BIRTH OF BRUSH RUN CHURCH**

On Saturday, May 4, 1811, at their semi-annual meeting the Christian Association decided to transform themselves into a local church because their calls for unity based on the Scriptures only had been rejected by the denominations. Thomas Campbell was elected elder, four deacons were chosen, and Alexander Campbell was licensed to preach. They called the new church “The First Christian Church of the Christian Association of Washington.” They agreed to observe weekly communion, a practice they believed went back to New Testament times and that the Campbells had observed in the Haldane churches in Scotland. The next day, Sunday, they met for worship in a log cabin at Crossroads and Brush Run in Washington County, Pennsylvania.

The congregation decided to build their own meeting house in a brush run on the farm of William Gilchrist, about two miles from where that stream joined Buffalo Creek. This was two miles southwest of West Middleton, Pennsylvania and twelve miles east of what was later the Campbell Homestead in Bethany, Virginia (now West Virginia). Gilchrist, one of the four deacons, transferred two acres of land to the church for a one dollar bill-of-sale. John Boyd, who ran a saw mill nearby, was hired to construct a simple frame building with clap boarding that was eighteen feet wide and thirty-six feet long. It had rough seats and no means of heat. The building was a post and beam structure pinned together with wooden pins, which meant that it could be taken down and moved.

On June 16, 1811, the church of about thirty members held its first service in the still unfinished Brush Run building. Alexander preached that day from Job 8:7, *“Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase.”* Prophetic words those!

### **THE QUESTION OF BAPTISM**

On July 4, 1811, three people who had never been baptized requested that Thomas Campbell immerse them. Although Thomas had not been immersed, he agreed with the request and baptized them in the deep water of Buffalo Creek near Bethany. Campbell did not advocate the immersion of pedobaptists because he believed that would discredit their infant baptism and “de-christianize” them.

On March 13, 1812, when Alexander and his wife, Margaret, welcomed the birth of their first child, Jane, they faced the question of whether or not they should “baptize”

her. Alexander devoted two months of serious study to the question and came to the conclusion that New Testament baptism was an immersion of believers.

Alexander contacted his friend, Matthias Luce, a Baptist preacher of Amity, Pennsylvania and requested that he immerse him on a simple confession of faith in Jesus without mention of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith or any confession of religious experience that the Baptists usually required. Luce agreed to the unusual request and the date was set for Wednesday, June 11, 1812, in the Buffalo Creek at the same site Thomas had immersed three people the previous year. By this time, Thomas Campbell and his wife, Jane, also desired immersion. At the baptismal site, Thomas and Alexander preached for a total of seven hours on the meaning of baptism. Luce then immersed Thomas and Jane Campbell, Alexander and Margaret Campbell, Dorothea Campbell and James and Sarah Hanen on the basis of faith in Jesus.

At the next meeting of the Brush Run church on Sunday, June 16, thirteen other members requested immersion. Before long, nearly all the Brush Run worshipers were immersed, although a few individuals deserted the church because of this new emphasis on immersion.

### **AFFILIATING WITH THE BAPTISTS**

In the fall of 1815, the Redstone Baptist Association, at the urging of Matthias Luce and others, invited the Brush Run church to join them. After much discussion, the church accepted the invitation although the only practice in common with the Baptists was immersion. The Campbells prepared an eight to ten page letter stating their views and “that we should be allowed to teach and preach whatever we learned from the Holy Scriptures, regardless of any creed or formula in Christendom.” After some discussion

and objections, the Redstone Association agreed by “a considerable majority” to accept them into membership.

In 1815, Alexander Campbell raised \$1,000 to build the Regular Baptist Church, the first church building of any denomination in Wellsburg (formerly Charlestown), Virginia. (now West Virginia). In 1823, this congregation became the second church of the reform movement when Alexander Campbell and thirty others from the Brush Run church transferred their membership here. Under Campbell’s leadership, the congregation began to commune weekly and by 1830 had dropped the Baptist name. This congregation is still meeting today and is known as the Wellsburg Christian Church.

In 1816, Campbell in his “Sermon on the Law” preached that the law and its authority are not binding in the Messianic kingdom. This sermon produced uproar in the association and raised a storm of persecution against Campbell because the Baptists believed that the entire Bible, except the ceremonial parts, was binding on Christians.

In June 19-20, 1820, in Mount Pleasant, Ohio, Alexander gained favor with the Baptists of Ohio when he debated the John Walker, Presbyterian, on the subjects and actions of baptism. Two months later, on August 30, Sidney Rigdon and Adamson Bentley, Baptist preachers in the Western Reserve (Ohio), led in the formation of the Mahoning Baptist Association.

From 1823 to 1830, Campbell published the iconoclastic journal, The Christian Baptist. He proposed calling his paper The Christian but Walter Scott encouraged him to add the word “Baptist” so that he could have more influence among Baptist Churches.

The uneasy, conflictive alliance of Brush Run with the Redstone Baptist Association continued until September 1823, when influential leaders in the association

conspired together to dispel Campbell from the association. Campbell outmaneuvered them by announcing that he was no longer a member of the Brush Run church and thus not under the jurisdiction of the association. A few weeks before, on August 31, having foreseen the coming storm, he and about thirty others from Brush Run had transferred their membership to the Wellsburg church. By 1824, Brush Run was expelled from the association.

In 1824, the Wellsburg church accepted the invitation of Rigdon and Bentley to join the Mahoning Baptist Association. The Mahoning Association's positions were freer of dogmatism than Redstone's and more in line with Campbell's views. Most of the Brush Run congregation had transferred their membership to the Wellsburg church, although services continued to be held at Brush Run until 1828.

#### **UNITING WITH THE CHRISTIANS MOVEMENT**

In 1830, under the influence of Campbell who had come to view all associations as sectarian, the Mahoning Baptist Association dissolved. The churches aligned with Campbell through the preaching influence of Walter Scott who had been the association's evangelist for the previous three years. Campbell never was a traditional Baptist and by 1830 he had dropped use of that name since the Baptists had largely disowned him. In 1829, Campbell founded the church in Bethany with the name "Church of Christ." He preferred the members being called "Disciples of Christ" because "disciples" was used throughout the gospels and the book of Acts and it was not used by any other group.

The dissolution of the Mahoning Baptist Association left Thomas and Alexander Campbell and their twelve thousand followers free to join with the ten thousand

“Christians” in the movement of Barton Warren Stone of Kentucky. This historic union was culminated on Sunday, January 1, 1832, in Lexington, Kentucky.

In 1842, the Brush Run building was sold, torn down and re-erected in West Middletown, Pennsylvania where it was used successively as a blacksmith shop, a post office, a barn and a stable. In 1909, the Centennial Commission of the Disciples of Christ meeting thirty miles away in Pittsburgh instituted a program to reconstruct the remaining timbers into the old meeting house on the Campbell Homestead in Bethany. The building deteriorated and its remains were finally removed. A small stone marker has been placed at the site of the Brush Run church. Presently, a committee is leading an effort to rebuild the Brush Run building on its original foundation at the site.

Today, the reformatory movement initiated by the Campbells and Stone has spread across the world. The “three sisters” of the movement (the Disciples of Christ, the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ) number approximately twenty-two thousand congregations and three million members in the United States. In July, 2010, at the World Convention of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ it was announced that there are fourteen million members worldwide. The Campbells’ vision of non-sectarian, non-creedal Christianity has grown from one small beginning of thirty members to a worldwide fellowship numbering in the millions. Campbell’s first Brush Run sermon proved to be prophetic: *“Though thy beginning was small, yet thy latter end should greatly increase.”*

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