

I AM the Vine
John 15:1-8
September 27, 2009

This morning I'd like to turn the calendar pages back a few hundred years to tell a piece of the life-story of a man named Thomas Campbell.*

He was born on February 1, 1763 in County Down, Ireland. Before he was born, his family had left the Roman Catholic Church to join the Anglican Church of Ireland, but as Thomas grew into young adulthood, he left that more formal tradition to join the more energetic and evangelistic Seceder branch of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. The church of the Seceders had been created by Presbyterian congregations who wanted to select their own ministers rather than have them appointed by the Presbytery, and so they seceded from the main body of Presbyterians to start their own church.

He was encouraged by those in the church to pursue ministry, so after graduating from Glasgow University, he attended a theological school in Scotland maintained by the Anti-burgher branch of the Seceder church. The Anti-burghers opposed the policy that political officials (called burgesses in Scotland) had to swear allegiance to the state religion. After he had graduated from seminary, one of Thomas' professors, a man named Archibald Bruce, led a campaign that split the Anti-burgher Seceder church in two over the issue of how much power the civil magistrates had in the life of the church. Bruce's group of churches became known as the Old Lights.

So, when Thomas Campbell began his ministry, he was a part of the Old Light, Anti-burgher, seceder Presbyterian Church. (Say that 10 times fast!)

Thomas was a good pastor to his little congregation in Armagh on the outskirts of Belfast, but was disgusted with the bickering that was rife in the church of Ireland. When the Scotch-Irish began their migration to the new world, Thomas joined them in the hopes that he might find a more kind-spirited parish in which to serve. He left his wife and family behind in Ireland until he knew what the colony of Pennsylvania was really like. He found a colony that was open to the settlement of people of all denominations, but especially welcoming to Scotch-Irish Presbyterians so that it was called 'the American Ulster.'" (pg 105)

Still, what Campbell found there disappointed him further. “The church in the western wilderness had become more exclusive and intolerant than were the churches in either Scotland or Ireland.” (pg 106)

For example, when Campbell traveled to some of the small communities where the Old light Anti-burgher Seceder churches had formed, he ran into Presbyterians of all branches, as well as members of other denominations—most of whom had not had the Lord’s Supper offered to them in a long time. When the citizens of those small communities heard he was in town, they came to see him, hoping that they might receive communion from him.

At first, he held the hard line. No one but old light anti-burgher seceder church members were given the token that would admit them to the communion table. But his heart broke as he saw the line of people yearning to partake of the Lord’s Supper.

Finally, Campbell stepped over the hard line in a small community named Cannamaugh, Pennsylvania. He proclaimed that all persons present were free to partake of the elements—regardless of their church affiliation. On that occasion, Campbell was accompanied by a student minister, William Wilson, who was horrified by Campbell’s liberal act. Mr. Wilson immediately rode back and told the presbytery of the heretical actions of Thomas Campbell.

It wasn’t long after that Thomas was charged with heresy and brought to trial in a church court hearing.

He defended his perspective vehemently—that the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed an open table for all.

He was denounced by church leaders who rigidly took the stance that only those who believed exactly like the old light anti-burgher seceders were allowed communion.

Campbell countered by saying that the issues out of which the church was formed in the old country did not apply in the new world.

Still, the church leadership rigidly decried his stance.

Campbell tried again, reading from the Bible about how the Lord’s Table should not be a place for dividing the body of Christ.

No movement or leniency on the side of the synod judges.

Campbell was suspended from his standing as minister. In response, he then offered his letter of resignation from the old light, anti-burgher seceder Presbyterian tradition.

But he didn't quit ministry. He continued to fervently preach Christian unity and offer communion to friends and neighbors who agreed with his stance. A Christian Association grew as others heard his fiery rhetoric about how the church of Jesus Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one.

On Sept. 7th, 1809, he delivered his Declaration and Address, which was like a declaration of independence from denominationalism which divides.

In this document, he reported the story of a missionary to the Seneca Indians, a who in the summer of 1805 invited the native Americans to become Christians. The Seneca chief replied in a way that made Thomas Campbell cringe:

"Brother, we understand that your religion is written in a book. You say that there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there be but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agree, as you can all read the book? Brother, we do not understand these things. We are told your religion was given to your forefathers; we also have a religion which was given to our forefathers. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favors we receive—to love one another, and to be united. We never quarrel about religion. We are told you have been preaching to the white people in this place. Those people are our neighbors; we are acquainted with them. We will wait a little to see what effect your preaching has upon them. If we find it does them good, makes them honest, and less disposed to cheat Indians; we will then consider again of what you have said.'

Campbell continued,

"Alas! Poor people! How do our divisions and corruptions stand in your way. What a pity that you find us not upon original ground, such as the Apostles left the primitive churches! Had we but exhibited to you their unity and charity, their humble, honest and affectionate deportment towards each other, towards all men; you would not have had those evil

and shameful things to object to our holy religion, and to prejudice your minds against it. But your conversion, it seems, awaits our reformation—awaits our return to primitive unity and love. To this may the God of mercy speedily restore us, both for your sakes and our own; that his way may be known upon earth, and his saving health among all nations.” (Declaration and Address, pp 107-109).

Campbell read the New Testament—and especially the gospels—seeking a common denominator around which all Christians could unite in agreement—and found it in the Good Confession. It is belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God, Lord and Savior, that connects us.

“I am the Vine,” Jesus said. “I am the Vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them, they it is that bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

For Campbell, Christ was the vine that connected all Christians—that nourished our life of faith and brought to fruition the love of God in our world. Jesus Christ is the unifying power of love, and we should focus on him rather than the divisive power of rigid, legalistic doctrine. We hear Jesus say it himself in the section immediately following the one we read this morning, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

This final text in our “I Am” series seemed to come at an appropriate time for EDCC and the CC (DoC). We’ve just passed the 200th anniversary of the day Thomas Campbell first delivered his Declaration and Address to a community of people who were drawn to his vision—a community made up of people from all different parts of the Christian witness. They were the first fruits of what would be called the Restoration movement led by Thomas, his son Alexander, and two southern leaders--Barton W. Stone and Walter Scott.

Their movement of Christian unity was a strong force in the early days of this nation—especially as the nation began to divide again into Civil War. Even as other denominations were splitting into southern Baptist and northern Baptist, Southern Methodist and Northern Methodist, the Stone-Campbell churches clung to the vine together.

However, even we fell prey to the power of disagreement and division over biblical interpretation, and in the late 1800's/early 1900's, we divided twice. Thomas Campbell was probably turning in his grave as he saw the antagonistic separation of the non-instrumental Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches Churches of Christ—Independent—and, of course, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), of which this congregation is a part.

Next Sunday afternoon at 5:00 pm, on World Communion Sunday—the three strands of the movement Thomas Campbell started on the American frontier will come together in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Declaration and Address.

We will join together by sharing the Lord's Supper, remembering that Jesus said "I Am the Bread of Life," and "I Am the True Vine." We will reaffirm our faith in the statement to which we all proclaimed at sometime in our lives—that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and our Lord and Savior. I hope we have many East Dallas Christian Church representatives at that event.

Our tradition has gathered around the figure of Christ as central for who we are, but sometimes we take our belief for granted, and so these past seven weeks, we have reminded ourselves about whom Jesus said he was.

- When he said: "I am the bread of life"—we learned that our hopes and spirits are fed and nourished by his presence
- When he said: "I am the light of the world"—we learned our direction is made clear by his word
- When he said: "I am the door for the sheep"—we learned the door to understanding God more clearly is open because of Jesus
- When he said: "I am the Good Shepherd"—we are protected and guided by one who knows us and loves us.
- When he said: "I am the resurrection and the life"—through him we are introduced to the concept of eternal life
- When he said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life"—through him we understand how God wants us to live.

Finally—he said in this morning’s scripture—“I am the Vine through which all things are connected.” We are reminded that all Christians are united through him—the source of life. When we forget the key ingredient of our faith—when we forget the joy of Jesus—then we fall away from the vine and eventually dry up, we can’t move forward anymore.

Many years ago at the Tournament of Roses parade, the Standard Oil Company, now known as Chevron, had a beautiful float. In the middle of the parade the oil company's float came to a grinding halt and the rest of the parade with it. What had happened? The Standard Oil Company float had run out of gas.

The directors of the Chevron float had done everything well but they neglected to avail themselves of their companies vast resources of oil. The parade waited while someone ran to get a gallon of gas.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "God has designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other."

You know, for the past 7 weeks, as I prayed over and studied Jesus’ “I AM” statements, I kept hearing the scratchy voice of the cartoon Popeye the sailor man, “I yam what I yam.”

Thank God Jesus is who he is—the son of the Great I AM—and our reason for being church together this morning.

*Much of the Campbell history was paraphrased from McAllister/Tucker’s Journey in Faith, a recent lecture I heard given by Dr. Doug Skinner, and from memory.