



A Crumbled Dream

Does the name Alexander Campbell mean anything to you? If you grew up in any kind of Church of Christ or Christian Church, you need to know about him. He was the founder of our American denomination.

Let me confess that, although I did grow up in such a church, I knew little about the man until I was invited to join a host of church leaders at his home in Bethany, West Virginia—way back in 1966—to mark the one hundredth anniversary of Mr. Campbell's death.

During that memorable week I learned that Alexander Campbell did more than found churches. In the college he built, he educated the sons of U.S. presidents.

Few people noticed when Campbell boosted American wool trade by importing new breeds of sheep. Nor were many folks impressed when he was elected to West Virginia's legislature. But his star was slowly rising.

Even founding hundreds of congregations across our young, growing country didn't catapult Campbell to fame. He became a household name after debating—while befriending—the famous atheist Robert Owen.

At his prime, this school-founding, sheep-raising, church-planting country parson was invited to address the combined houses of the U.S. Congress. In many ways he had become the Billy Graham of his day.

During that 1966 gathering in Bethany, however, we also focused on the Civil War years right before Campbell's death. The halls of Bethany College were quiet—almost deserted—while that brutal war was raging not far away. Most of the students were on the battle lines.

Campbell's heart was broken. His own family was split, with favorite nephews wearing uniforms both blue and gray. Still worse, from his view, Christian brothers from churches he had planted and nurtured now were slaughtering each other.

The young nation that Campbell had mistaken for the eve of Christ's thousand-year reign had morphed into a hell on earth. Campbell's dream had become a nightmare. As Will Durant would later write: "From barbarism to civilization requires a century; from civilization to barbarism needs but a day." Campbell saw barbarism in his final days, and it made him mourn.

With July 4th just ahead, I rehearse this sad but true story to remind us that the peace and freedom and prosperity we cherish can dissolve over night into blood and hate and tears. It did once. It can again.

By Gene Shelburne