

Three Forms of Freedom

BY KRISTINE A. CULP¹

President Caridi, students, faculty, staff, trustees, alumni and alumnae, special guests. It is my honor to join you to celebrate the 186th anniversary of the founding of Bethany College and to commemorate the 160th anniversary of the death of Alexander Campbell.²

Although I am not a Bethanian by diploma and degree, it is not too much of a stretch to claim something of this Founder's Day as my own. As a lifelong Disciple whose life and vocation have been shaped profoundly by Disciples higher and theological education, I am indebted to the educational legacy of Alexander Campbell and this proud school. Some of you here today almost have Bethany College degrees in hand, and I celebrate your achievements. Regardless of whether we who are gathered this morning are full Bethanians or only by association, or whether we ourselves are also members of Disciples of Christ or any Stone-Campbell churches, we participate in this legacy. As Alexander Campbell exemplified, we are students, teachers, debaters, interpreters, learners. We are life-long, lower-case "d," disciples.

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² This lecture was delivered as the Founder's Day address at Bethany College, Bethany, West Virginia, on Thursday, March 5, 2026. I bring greetings and congratulations from the University of Chicago Divinity School and the Disciples Divinity House of the University of Chicago, and from Tamara Nichols Rodenberg and the Higher Education and Leadership Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Special thanks to Arthur Keys for his gracious welcome and help. Thanks also to Joel Brown, Erin James-Brown, Thad Allen, and Debra Hull for their welcome. It was a special delight to be greeted by Jeanne Cobb. Finally, I am grateful for the response of my colleagues, William Schweiker and Cynthia Lindner, as I prepared this lecture.

“THAT AIR OF GOING ON, FOREVER FREE”

Call to mind, if you will, an image of Alexander Campbell, perhaps one on a bronze plaque here on campus or a likeness from a painting or photograph. Those remarkable eyebrows. Broad forehead anchored above them and surrounded by thick hair. A firm chin or, late in his seventy-seven years of life, an unmissable beard. One such likeness is at the heart of a poem titled “Alexander Campbell.” It was written in 1919 by Vachel Lindsay, a well-known poet of his day who traveled the US giving public readings of his work. In the poem, the portrait hangs on the wall of his grandmother’s home, where it is “looking down” upon a young Vachel and his cousins. They sit on the floor in front of the fire, building pretend houses while their grandmother traces the family tree and recounts “the proverbs of Campbell again” to the older generations gathered there. Campbell, he writes, has “...the face of age, and the flush of youth, and that air of going on, forever free.”³

The poem, written in rhyme, has three parts which begin with Lindsay’s own self-reflection and remembrance and move to others’ memories, future hopes, and millennial dreams. It takes place across several generations and in various settings—Lindsay’s own hometown of Springfield, Illinois, his grandmother’s Kentucky cabin, the forests by the Daniel Boone trail, woods held sacred to native people, and outside the Brush Run church. Lindsay was known for his commitment to poetry as performance. Relatedly, he was interested in the new phenomenon of talking movies, which he studied and wrote a book about. This three-part poem-portrait flickers across the page, like one of those early moving pictures. It *performs* Alexander Campbell’s “air of going on, forever free.”

It’s not so much the historical Campbell that the poem conveys, but rather the history of Campbell’s effects, how his preaching and teaching have been received and passed on; how they animate our lives today. Campbell’s significance echoes across the countryside and gives birth to dreams and action.

The main section of Lindsay’s poem is titled “A rhymed address to all renegade Campbellites, exhorting them to return.” To gather on Founder’s Day is a way of “returning.” We can pinpoint the founding of a college to one particular place and point in time—March 2, 1840—and mark the end of Campbell’s life with his date of death,

³ Vachel Lindsay, *The Golden Whales of California and Other Rhymes* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 171–81. See also Lindsay’s letter about the poem to his cousin, “161. To Ethelind S. Coblin, February 23, 1927,” in *Letters of Vachel Lindsay*, ed. Marc Chénétier (New York: Burt Franklin, 1979), 385–88.

but a college and a life are more than beginnings and endings. They are about how we go on from there.

My topic today is freedom. What is it that we rely upon from our ancestors and bring forward as necessary in our own challenging and complicated times? How do we go on in freedom in our own flickering times—in times that are rapidly changing, filled with many voices, and often ambiguous? I begin with some well-known ways in which Alexander Campbell is associated with religious freedom. Next, I invite you to think with me more generally about how freedom goes on or about how we humans might go on in freedom. Through this, I reflect on three forms of freedom.

CAMPBELL AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: BEGINNING POINTS

One. Freedom is an irreplaceable element in Campbell’s legacy of learning. The goals articulated for Bethany College from its founding in 1840 figure education as a certain kind of liberation, necessary for public life and the common good. According to the college’s website,

Campbell set the purpose of Bethany College to prepare students to become useful and responsible members of society by liberating them from superstition and ignorance, the tyranny of others, and “vulgar prejudices.”

The euphemism, “vulgar prejudices,” is published with quotation marks. There’s a whiff of elitism—an appeal to an education that will allow one to rise above the superstition and ignorance of the so-called common masses—perhaps with a trace of coded anti-Catholicism as well.⁴ Yet Campbell came to fight for education that was broad, rigorous, and publicly accessible.⁵ He didn’t take education for granted, and neither should we in our own day.

⁴ Given the virulent anti-Catholicism that was transplanted to the US and continued to flourish into the twentieth century, these goals may have functioned implicitly to code white Euro-American Protestantism as a religion of freedom and enlightenment over against the perceived superstitions and dogmatic imperialism of eighteenth-century Roman Catholicism. There are “vulgar prejudices” in every era—often unchosen distortions and phobias that alter and affect us and the world. As I say in the conclusion below, such all-too-common distortions constrict our consciences and inhibit our regard and care for neighbors and strangers.

⁵ See Harold L. Lunger, *The Political Ethics of Alexander Campbell* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1954), 167–78.

Two. Freedom is alive in the documents that call the Stone-Campbell movement into being. *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* bequeaths the hope “that the oppressed may go free and taste the sweets of gospel liberty.” Thomas Campbell’s 1809 *Declaration and Address* instructs: “Resume that precious, that dear bought liberty wherewith Christ has made his people free; a liberty from subjection to any authority but his own in matters of religion.” For Alexander Campbell as well, the new democracy provided a powerful impetus and analogy for religious freedom. I want to underscore the analogical relation of political/civil freedom and religious freedom here. Without equating political and religious freedom, the founding Disciples declared freedom from *religious* tyranny and freedom for *religious* self-determination among the people of God. The analogy assumes a separation of religious and civil order, something other than triumphalism or sectarianism, while also assuming relevant similarity across that distinction, so that equity and democracy or freedom and tyranny apply in both orders.

Three. Freedom and liberty are not only English-language “key words,” but they are Bible words—more so, in fact, than many other Stone-Campbell words, including “unity” and “restoration.” The pathos of human enslavement, bondage, and a flight to freedom, of exile and migration to liberation is the orienting story of the Hebrew Bible.⁶ For Campbell, the words of the New Testament book of Acts and the Epistles are orienting,⁷ and perhaps no words are more precious than those of Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “Stand fast in the freedom with which Christ has freed us... You have been called into liberty.”⁸

⁶ New Testament narratives surrounding the birth of Jesus riff on the ancient Israelites’ flight to freedom. There is the journey of the three kings who, in a grand, almost kenotic gesture, pour out treasures from their kingdoms to reverence an impoverished child born in a temporary shelter. When they are terrorized by the threat of King Herod’s slaughter of innocents, the holy family embarks on a harrowing migration to Egypt.

⁷ Lunger observed that Campbell rarely turned to the prophetic literature, the Gospels, or the Sermon on the Mount to inform his political ethics. See Lunger, 265, 267.

⁸ Metaphorical language about freedom can be a double-edged sword. It can expand freedom to new realms or it can effectively dilute and subvert freedom. This is more than I can fully elaborate here. I’m thinking of “Bible words” that become detached from actual conditions of enslavement and liberation of captives. These metaphors may have once shocked their hearers with the terror of human bondage or signaled solidarity among the imprisoned and enslaved. However, detached from real suffering or the work of transforming concrete historical conditions, such language may in fact make those conditions seem normal and even serve to recreate them, as when Paul’s letters became texts for preaching obeisance to enslaved persons and women.

Four. Freedom is an apt topic for the 250th anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence, if not actually my own motivation for focusing on freedom this morning. In his Forrest F. Reed Lectures for the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in 1976, the Bicentennial year, historian Ronald Osborn examined the Disciples of Christ as an “experiment in liberty.” He explains, “My selection of the motif of liberty is not a Bicentennial gimmick.”⁹ Rather, he argued, freedom belonged right alongside restoration and unity in the genesis of the Stone-Campbell movement. Osborn used a wide-angle lens. He sampled 175 years of clergy, politicians, social visionaries, and artists, some famous, others infamous, looking at “the ideal of freedom in the experience of the Disciples.”

Five. Osborn identified anti-clericalism, anti-creedalism, and anti-ecclesiasticism as the “mechanisms” by which early Disciples sought “to secure liberty in the church.” Osborn referred to these as “negative positions” that “became a powerful symbolic force in the ethos of Disciples.”¹⁰ In the last fifty years, historians of the Stone-Campbell movement have given greater critical attention to how the founders approached religious freedom. In a very recent article published on the Disciples History website, Joel Brown addresses the prevailing historiography. He finds that, in certain ways, the narrative about religious freedom as a founding conviction has still been assumed more than examined.¹¹ He argues for the need to complicate this vision: “It was also shaped by competing forces of coercion and control—whether in church governance, the rhetoric of its leaders, or the social and racial hierarchies of its time.”

⁹ Ronald E. Osborn, *Experiment in Liberty: The Ideal of Freedom in the Experience of the Disciples of Christ*. The Forrest F. Reed Lectures for 1976 (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1978), 13.

¹⁰ Osborn, 90.

¹¹ Brown summarizes, “[O]ur movement has been told as a story of rejecting creeds, clerics, and established church hierarchies—a bold experiment in religious liberty shaped by the ideals of the early American republic. It is a narrative of egalitarianism and a conviction that ordinary people could return to the simple Christianity of the New Testament, free from institutional constraints.” Joel Brown, “The Historian’s Corner: Democracy or Rule,” February 6, 2026. Accessed February 26, 2026 at <https://discipleshistory.org/the-historians-corner-democracy-or-rule/>. See also Richard Hughes, “Freedom’s Ferment,” *Christian History Magazine*, 106 – Stone-Campbell Movement (2013): 5–8; Douglas A. Foster, *A Life of Alexander Campbell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

THREE FORMS OF FREEDOM

My own aim in this lecture is neither to update Osborn’s Bicentennial report nor to contribute to Campbell historiography, important as that work is. I won’t attempt to measure freedom by what Alexander Campbell thought it was in his day or, for that matter, to continue the historical work on how Campbell met or failed to meet the greatest promises and challenges of freedom in his day. As a theologian, my focus shifts to questions of how freedom appears in the lives that we share with others before God. Anti-clericalism, anti-creedalism, and anti-ecclesiasticism are deeply familiar expressions of freedom among the Stone-Campbell movement. They are all but reflex responses, almost instinctual. This allows us to identify “forms” of freedom, beginning with **freedom from**. This is the experience of freedom as release, of conscience unbound from a sense of guilt and failure. In that sense, it’s a “negative” form—the constraint is removed, released. We feel constrained, hindered, harmed at the core of our person and community and know that is not right. This kind of deeply felt resistance to tyranny over our lives and to presumptions upon God is a vital form of freedom in our own day.

If a sense of freedom as negation—freedom from—takes primary place in Disciples imagination and action, it is accompanied by another form, **freedom in “things indifferent.”** To summarize Campbell’s teaching, later Disciples appropriated a seventeenth-century slogan: “In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity.”¹² They paired this slogan with other catchphrases that indicated “essentials”: “No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.” “Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent.” The Greek word for this free zone of “nonessential” or “things indifferent” is *adiaphora* (which is a great word to roll off one’s tongue). *Adiaphora* indicates a potentially enormous free zone that is responsive to the love of God and neighbor and governed by individual or collective conscience, but not by clerics, creeds, or church institutions.

The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin also used this word, *adiaphora*, tracing it back to both an admonition in the First Letter to the Corinthians to live “as though not,” and to the Stoics for whom *adiaphora* were things that are nonessential to virtue, including health, wealth, and fame. In the Sermon on the Mount, this zone of freedom extends even further: Don’t worry about what you eat or wear, Jesus teaches. Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field—they soar and grow under the providence and mercy of God in a very large *adiaphora* zone.

¹² Rupertus Meldenius (1582–1651).

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT FREEDOM

Let me draw from and add to the preceding points to offer some generalized observations about the experience of freedom. I am not yet discussing a third form of freedom, **freedom for**, and its relation to building unity, justice, and love, but you may have a sense where I’m heading.

1) Freedom is often associated with long-term, collective movement—either away from threat, say, a flight from tyranny and oppression, or towards a goal, say, towards “a land flowing with milk and honey” or “wholeness in a fragmented world.” In his book *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights*, historian Thomas C. Holt writes,

Freedom is a prize won not in a single campaign, but in a long struggle waged by a determined and committed people. And, ultimately, it is not exceptional leaders but ordinary people themselves, conscious of the historical possibilities of their movement and acting collectively, who have the capacity to win that fight and change their world.¹³

Holt reminds us that freedom is not founded for once and for all, that struggle is ongoing, but that change can be won by “ordinary” people through commitment and collective action, savvy and persistence. My broader point is that freedom itself is not only associated with particular religious, political, or social movements, but that it is also tied up with the very idea of moving toward some shared social reality or goal—or against what impedes it.

2) Freedom is often associated with arduousness, determination, and the will. It is called “sweet,” “precious,” or as Holt says, “a prize,” to indicate that it may be hard-won and its achievement to be savored. Although freedom of thought and of conscience are important expressions of freedom, freedom itself is not first a rational operation; rather, it is a power, a drive, a striving.

¹³ Thomas C. Holt, *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 120. For Holt, “The Movement,” in caps with quote marks, indicates the ten years of mass collective action, sustained commitment, and social change from 1955 to 1965 that we often refer to as the Civil Rights Movement. He narrates acts of individual resistance, direct action, and collective protest that were crucial antecedents of “The Movement” to underscore his point about the length of the struggle, not to discount the import of action before 1955. Indeed, some of these earlier protests were referred to as “the birth of freedom.”

3) Freedom is substantial, a thing to be laid hold of and struggled for. It’s not a shrug. It’s not a willful sense of doing whatever one wants to do. It’s a matter of survival and life, not to be taken for granted.

This is how Langston Hughes expressed “Freedom” in a 1949 poem by that name:

*I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course for another day.
I do not need my freedom when I’m dead. I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread.
Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here, too.
I want my freedom
Just as you.*¹⁴

A 1962 poem by Robert Hayden depicts freedom as “this beautiful and terrible thing, needful to man as air, usable as earth; ... more than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians...”¹⁵

THE POSITIVE USE OF FREEDOM

The call to freedom reverberates not only in the power of protest and resistance, not only in opening a zone of adiaphora for exercising the freedom of conscience, but also, in this third form, in the positive use of freedom. Historically, this is freedom for the Law as given at the heart of the Hebrew Bible in the Ten Commandments, and summarized by Jesus as the double command to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul [the first table of the Law] and to love your neighbor as yourself [the second table of the Law]. The positive use of freedom impels us toward God and toward neighbors and strangers. The gospels present Jesus both as the one expected by the Hebrew

¹⁴ Langston Hughes, “Freedom” (1949), in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) as reprinted at www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/151031/freedom-5d7a48504dcd5.

¹⁵ Robert Hayden, “Frederick Douglass,” in Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York and London: Liveright Publishing, a Division of W.W. Norton, 2013), 62. “When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful / and terrible thing, needful to man as air, / usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all, / when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole / reflex action; when it is finally won, when it is more / than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians....”

prophets and as one who makes liberation manifest by welcoming strangers and outcasts, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, setting the captives free. We might think of the positive form of freedom as freedom for God, for neighbors and strangers, and for the world. It is freedom to build organizations, educational institutions, and voluntary societies that can mediate transformation, love, and justice.

Oddly, perhaps, this form of freedom is relatively neglected, even rejected, in significant treatments of Christian freedom. Martin Luther, for instance, doesn't discuss the positive use of the Law or positive freedom. John Calvin, however, says that the third use of the Law is the primary use. Relatedly, Calvin taught that the church, the sacraments, and civil order, while always ambiguous and perennially needing to be perfected, were necessary means for knowing the goodness of God and giving it expression. There's a complicated and important story to tell here about the inattention to freedom as a positive form. It's entangled in Christian supersessionism and anti-Judaism, in interpretations of the “Law” and the “Gospel” (Calvin flips the order: Gospel and Law), in concerns about “works righteousness,” and in some of the same suspicions of institutions that mobilize the negative use of freedom to denounce tyranny.

I urge us not to forget the three forms of freedom. They require each other. We need to think and live between them, as well as to build contemporary analogies and so new manifestations of freedom. Where is freedom unbound and freed for “things indifferent”? Where does freedom create new forms of mutual responsibility and love? Freedom calls, not for conformity, not for complacency, but for tenacity, resistance, and generativity.

CONCLUSION: AN EXHORTATION TO RETURN

Friends, “renegade Campbellites,” to gather on Founder's Day is a way of “returning.” Anniversaries afford the opportunity to renew commitments and to reorient ourselves with wider, broader, deeper sympathies, convictions, and aspirations. To go on.

There are “vulgar prejudices” in every era—hatred, fear, distortions, phobias—that alter and affect our own time. Vachel Lindsay wrote his poem “Alexander Campbell” in 1919, just after World War I had ended and left once-bloody trenches of brutal warfare slashed across Northern Europe. Remembrances of bloodshed, loss, and the human potential for brutality would have been in the air. But he wrote a poem about regeneration and freedom. It takes all the forms of freedom to unlearn and undo the crass and dangerous disregard of God and neighbor. Education can help us to recognize the power of implicit biases and to distinguish what is unknown or not-yet known from willful ignorance and unwilling complicity. Such all-too-common distortions

constrict our consciences and inhibit our regard and care for neighbors and strangers and for the world in which we dwell together before God and with each other.

I exhort you: Go on learning, teaching, debating, interpreting, and dreaming. Go on, freely.