



Continuity and Discontinuity: The Lord's Supper in Historical Perspective

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A historical perspective on the Lord's Supper as observed in Scotland shows continuities as well as discontinuities. The discontinuities are more obvious. John Knox acknowledged the important place which the Mass had occupied in religious life:

I know that in the Mass hath not only been esteemed great holiness and honouring of God, but also the ground and foundation of our religion, so that, in the opinion of many, the Mass taken away, there resteth no true worshipping nor honouring of God in the earth.¹

In spite of this Knox declared 'that one Mass [...] was more fearful to him than if ten thousand armed enemies were landed in any part of the realm, of purpose to suppress the whole religion.'² The importance of the Mass derived from the fact that it was thought to occupy 'the place of the last and mystical Supper of our Lord Jesus'; Knox's aim was to prove that instead it was 'idolatry before God, and blasphemous to the death and passion of Christ, and contrary to the Supper of Jesus Christ'.³ One must not conclude from statements like these that Knox undervalued the Lord's Supper. On the contrary it has been pointed out by J. S. McEwen that Knox valued the Sacrament more than either Calvin or Luther: 'None in the Reformed world made the Sacrament basic for the Church itself, as Knox did.'⁴

The observance of the Lord's Supper as envisaged by Knox was very different from the ceremonies and context of the Mass. Bread and wine remained central but in the Reformed observance they were received by all seated at a table. Knox attached great importance to sitting at the Lord's Table rather than kneeling at an altar: 'I much prefer sitting at the Lord's Table either to kneeling, standing or going at the action of that mystical supper.'⁵ Kneeling, he asserted, was the gesture of supplicants and beggars and of those who were doubtful of

receiving the help or remission they needed. But in the Lord's Supper and chiefly in the action of eating and drinking there should be no sign of any misery. Because we are commanded to eat and drink by the Lord Jesus we ought to obey with glad countenance: 'therefore taught by Christ's example at his holy Table, we sit as men placed in quietness and in full possession of our kingdom.'⁶

Alongside the discontinuities there are continuities. The Scottish Protestants like the Catholics continued to see the Eucharist as the most important act of Christian worship. Though they defined the nature of Christ's presence differently they believed that Christ was present in the Eucharist and that the bread and wine were not 'naked and bare signs'.⁷ Both prescribed careful preparation before receiving the Sacrament. Fasting followed by feasting was common to both traditions. Fine cloth was used both in the Mass and the Lord's Supper to cover the elements and the place of celebration. The Western emphasis on the redemptive sufferings and death of Christ coloured the devotional writings of both.

The Scottish Reformers attacked not only the Mass but also the context of the Mass. They had no time for holy days such as Pasch, Yule or Good Friday which they regarded as feasts which Papists had invented and the occasion of debauched, idolatrous revelries. Processions with the Host in particular, such as those during the feast of Corpus Christi, were regarded as superstitious misplaced veneration of the Sacrament. They aimed to eliminate these occasions along with the objects that went with them such as pyxes, monstrances and reliquaries. Success in these aims did not come easily, but gradually Kirk Sessions were able to suppress many of the old celebrations. By 1600 the Catholic, holy year was transformed in Scotland into a Reformed one in which there were few, if any, high days apart from the weekly observance of the Sabbath. Religious festivals and processions had all but disappeared. As a result of this, religion became less interwoven with the public community and became almost a private observance within the walls of church and home.

The Five Articles of Perth, adopted under royal pressure by the General Assembly of 1618, permitted the private dispensing of Communion to the infirm, accepted private Baptism, enjoined catechetical instruction of the young which would be capped by confirmation by a bishop, reinstated holy days such as Good Friday, Christmas and Pentecost (Easter had been revived three years earlier) and warned against the superstitious observance of Festival days by the Papists. But the most controversial decree was the requirement that the Lord's Supper should be received kneeling. David Calderwood saw this decretal as undermining the whole edifice of the Scottish Reformation.

In 1619 John Livingstone and a group of his student friends at Glasgow publicly challenged the bishop and refused to kneel at the Sacrament. Not surprisingly Livingstone had difficulty in finding a parish and became an itinerant preacher. In 1630 one of his stops was at the Kirk of Shotts for the celebration of a 'solemn Communion'. There he joined a group of Presbyterian ministers, including Robert Bruce, for 'a series of meetings which went on almost day and night for four or five days'. Livingstone made such a deep impression that he was asked to preach again on the Monday. He did so in the churchyard for two-and-a-half hours. A contemporary chronicler records that nearly five hundred had discernible changes in them, most of whom proved lively Christians afterwards. This Monday gathering is thought to be the origin of the Communion thanksgiving Service.

G. B. Burnet is dismissive about the importance of the great Communion at Shotts: 'It would seem to be an entirely isolated and unexpected event, arising out of a unique set of circumstances.' He also observes that 'mass Communion never received official sanction or encouragement from the Courts of the Church, nor yet the convening of a host of ministers to assist at them.'⁸ L. E. Schmidt on the other hand sees the Shotts Communion as part of a 'rejuvenation and perpetuation of sacramental festivity'; he suggests that the more successful the reformers were in suppressing Catholic superstitious practices the greater the danger that they would create a gap between their own spiritual demands and that what most people were interested

in doing: ‘the Presbyterian communion occasions in many ways paralleled the eucharistic traditions of late medieval Catholicism.’⁹ A biographer of Robert Burns, writing in 1797, remarks ‘The annual celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the rural parishes of Scotland has much in it of those old Popish festivals in which superstition, traffic and amusement used to be strangely intermingled.’¹⁰

Burns himself is credited by Burnet as doing a great service to Scottish religion by his satire *The Holy Fair* published in 1786. The poet’s parody of the preachers does not extend to the Sacrament itself.¹¹

The Sacrament was usually dispensed within the church and communicants would enter at one door, sit at the table and after receiving would leave by another door. This enabled relays to enter and leave more readily. Preaching took place both in the church and in the vicinity. Quite often tables would be set up outside, as at the great gatherings at Cambuslang. When John Wightman was inducted to Kirkmahoe in 1797 his Kirk Session refused to accept his view that the Sacrament should be dispensed only in the church. The elders declared it ‘was most unseemly that the holy Communion should be celebrated in a hole-and-corner way like that.’¹² The elders lost the battle. The Lord’s Supper was brought indoors.

The consequence of this for an urban church like St John’s in Glasgow were described by the minister, Thomas Chalmers:

... the day of a sacrament in St. John’s was a day of discomfort and almost intolerable suffering from the pressure and the stifling almost to suffocation, and the way in which every inch of progress to the tables was fought for by the crowd of competitors who, during the time of seven table services, stood wedged in the long but narrow access that led to them.¹³

Chalmers’ solution was to turn a certain number of pews in the lower part of the church into communion tables and reduce the number of ministerial addresses to communicants. White cloths covered the book boards of the pews which thus became extensions of the main table.

This innovation was quickly copied but also quickly challenged. In 1824 James Begg published a *Treatise on the Use of the Communion Table* in which he contended that to confine the people to their pews was to deny them access to the real Communion Table — that on which the bread and wine are set. Begg pursued the matter in the courts of the Church but eventually the General Assembly of 1827 gave a grudging permission for the change while maintaining that the old ways were best.¹⁴

Chalmers' innovation is still the norm in the Church of Scotland today but there are interesting exceptions. The St John's Chapel in the Kirk of St Nicholas, Aberdeen has a large table in the centre of the chapel so that it is possible for communicants to sit round the Communion Table. While it is usual for communicants to sit, it is sometimes felt appropriate for communicants to go forward to the Communion Table and to receive the Sacrament standing. This is the practice in St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh and Christ's College in Aberdeen.

There are indications that the Lord's Supper is no longer confined to the interiors of parish churches. The Supper is quite often celebrated in secular settings at conferences and especially at devotional retreats. The Church Without Walls movement has gone further and has restored the Sacrament to a festal setting. These occasions could well be described as Holy Fairs and a revival of medieval festivity in connection with the Sacrament.

¹ John Knox, *A Vindication of the Doctrine That the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*, 1550; quoted in Peter Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England: His Work in Her Pulpit and His Influence Upon Her Liturgy, Articles and Parties* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), 54.

- ² William Croft Dickinson, ed., *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland* (2 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), II:12.
- ³ Quoted in Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England*, 54.
- ⁴ James S. McEwen, *The Faith of John Knox* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), 57.
- ⁵ John Knox, *Epistle to the Congregation of Berwick, 1552*; quoted in Jasper Ridley, *John Knox* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), 111.
- ⁶ Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England*, 272.
- ⁷ *Scots Confession, 1560*, XXI.
- ⁸ George B. Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland, 1560–1690* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 126.
- ⁹ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 19 f.
- ¹⁰ Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: printed for T. Brown, 1797), 13.
- ¹¹ Burnet, *Holy Communion*, 253.
- ¹² David Hogg, *Life and Times of the Rev. John Wightman, D.D., (1762–1847) Late Minister of Kirkmahoe* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1873), 48, 50–53.
- ¹³ William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D.* (4 vols; Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox, 1850–2), II:390 f.
- ¹⁴ Burnet, *Holy Communion*, 269 f.