



The Scottish communion season

When we are asked to write about a tradition that is unique to our own church or country, there is always a danger that we might give the impression of a kind of moral or spiritual superiority. Having been asked to write about the Scottish Communion season, especially as it is observed in the Scottish Highlands, I am very concerned to avoid this danger. So, let me be clear, I'm not saying the Scottish way is the only way of remembering the Lord's death. Neither am I saying it is necessarily the best way. However, just as I have learned much from the Dutch Reformed tradition since I arrived here last year, I would hope that there might be something you could learn from the Scottish tradition, something, which you might think worthy of weaving into your own tradition in some way or another.

The history

When I explain the five day Scottish Communion season to you, you might think it is awfully elaborate, lengthy, and complicated. In some ways it is. Of course, it didn't begin like that. How, then, did it develop? Well, one of the major results of the Scottish Reformation was an intense carefulness in the administration of the Lord's Supper. The Reformers inherited a situation where anyone and everyone took communion, and so were extremely anxious to get back to a more biblical position. It was proposed that every member in the congregation be examined by the minister, at least once a year, as to their biblical knowledge and their spirituality.

But, with so many people to get round, this meant that Communion was administered only once or twice a year. Consequently, when Communion did come around, people wanted to make it a special occasion. Thus, a preparation service was added on Saturday. Then a fast was added between the Saturday and the Sabbath morning. Then that fast was moved to the midweek, and a service held. And so it went on, with other services being added over the years. In addition, there were times in Scottish Church history when there was a real shortage of ministers, which limited the opportunities to have Communion. With this limitation again came the desire to make the Communion season a special occasion with extra services, a festival of spiritual food and spiritual experience.

The Practice

Probably the best way to give an understanding of the Scottish Communion season is to be more practical than historical. I will, therefore, take you through the season day by day, from the Thursday to the Monday. And, to simplify matters, I will give you one word by which to remember the significance of each day.

Thursday: Humiliation

Thursday is the day of humiliation. In parts of the Scottish Highlands, almost everything, including schools and shops, closes down on Communion Thursday. This is made possible by the various denominations in an area having their Communion Seasons at the same time. Farms and crofts lie silent, and fishing boats are tied up, sometimes for the whole five days.

This time of quiet and rest from regular work gives people time to search their lives and souls with a view to confession of sin. There are two church services on Thursday – morning and evening – which focus on Psalms and Scriptures related to conviction of sin, contrition and repentance. Sermons usually aim to induce a spiritual sensitivity in the hearers, to bring God's people to see

their spiritual need, and to start the Communion Season low, in the dust the necessary place to be before any spiritual blessing comes to us. God brings us low before He raises us up again.

Thursday is also known as the “Fast Day.” Now of course, some people do fast from food in order to give themselves more time to examine their souls and search out their sins. There is certainly a fairly wide-spread “fasting” from the media. Being from the more “pagan” south of Scotland, I made a real blunder at my first Scottish Communion season in the Scottish Highlands when I asked on the Thursday where the nearest shop was so that I could buy a newspaper. Shock and horror spread all around the room – this “heathen” southerner wanting to read a newspaper on the Communion Thursday! I was soon educated about the need to come apart from the world for one whole day to examine my soul for sin rather than get distracted by the sins of the world. So, the whole of Thursday, in private and in public worship, is focused towards humiliation.

Friday: Examination

Friday is the day of examination. In a way, Thursday involves self examination as well. However, on the Thursday we look for sin to confess, whereas on Friday we look for marks of grace to encourage us. We might say that the Christians are “killed” on a Thursday, and then raised again on the Friday. *“For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole”* (Job 5:18). The painful experience of humiliation is followed, hopefully, by a skillful spiritual physician pouring balm into the soul to encourage the humble soul that despite all the sins that are present in the heart, “There, look, there’s a little mark of grace. And look, you have this mark as well, don’t despair.”

As on the Thursday, there are also two services on the Friday. The evening service is a normal worship service at which the minister preaches on one of the marks of grace love to the brethren, hope, patience in tribulation, prayer, etc. The aim is to encourage God’s trembling people to profess faith by sitting at His table, as well as to discourage the unconverted from taking such an unwarranted privilege to themselves.

The Friday morning service is usually one of the high points of the Communion Season. It is called “The Ceisd” (pronounced Kaysch), and is Gaelic for “The Question.” Why is it called “The Question?” Well, let me begin by explaining that there are usually three ministers in the pulpit the local minister and two visiting ministers who have been invited to assist with the numerous services of the season. At the Question meeting, after singing and prayer the senior visiting minister stands up and asks one of the local elders for a “text.” One of the elders then stands up and reads out a verse of Scripture. The text may be from any part of the Bible but is always related to Christian experience. Some examples might be, *“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins”* (Ephesians 2:1), or *“Unto you therefore which believe he is precious”* (1 Peter 2:7). The elder then asks a question along these lines: “Would the brethren explain how they have experienced this verse either in their conversion or in their Christian life?” More specifically, he might say, “Would the brethren give a testimony as to how they were brought alive spiritually?” or, “Would the brethren explain how Christ is precious to them?” The question is really targeted at bringing out the marks of true Christian experience, and of conversion especially.

When the elder sits down, the senior minister, without any prior notice or preparation, “Opens the Question,” that is he gives an explanation of the text in its context. This is a real test for a minister, and a time of much silent prayer! It was not unknown for “mischievous” elders to pick a text from an obscure minor prophet in order to “test” the minister! Usually the minister speaks about the text for about 10 to 15 minutes and then sits down usually greatly relieved. At that point, the local minister asks one of the older Christian men in the congregation, or one of the men visiting from other congregations, to stand up and, “Speak to the question.” He then speaks for about five minutes, and ideally no more than 10 minutes, and tells of how the Lord brought him spiritually alive, or how the Lord was precious to him, etc. Then another person would be asked in the same way. Depending on how long each man spoke, you would normally hear maybe 6 to 10 men speak, one after another.

I have been present at many emotion charged Friday mornings when godly men wept openly as they described, again without any preparation, of how the Lord had dealt with them and brought

them to a knowledge of themselves and of the Saviour. And the aim of it all is to help and encourage those who are present and wondering, "Am I a Christian or not?" The men are usually incredibly honest. It is not a time to "show off." It is a time to bare the soul and speak of the struggles and the difficulties of Christian experience as well as the blessings and privileges. And many, many Christians can point back to a Friday morning of a Communion Season as a time when they received assurance of faith through listening to these testimonies.

In the old days, in the 1800s, these meetings went on for three and four hours, with sometimes up to 40 men being called. We don't have that stamina today! Our meetings usually last about two hours, but the time usually flies by as it does when you experience the foretaste of heaven that is present in true Christian fellowship.

At the end, the visiting minister "Closes the Question" by summing up what had been said, and if necessary, gently and diplomatically correct anything said amiss that might discourage or mislead.

Saturday: Preparation

Saturday is the day of Preparation. Of course, Thursday and Friday are preparatory as well. However, these two days look within, for sin to confess and grace to encourage. Saturday prepares Christians for the Lord's Supper by turning their attention outwards, usually to the person of Christ. The morning service might be on one of the Gospel accounts of Christ graciously dealing with sinners. There is a twofold purpose in this. Firstly, the devotional tone of the sermons seeks to excite the affections of those who are preparing to sit at the Lord's Table. Secondly, tender words of encouragement are directed towards those who may be considering sitting at the Lord's Table for the first time.

After the Saturday morning service, those intending to sit at the Lord's Table are asked to remain behind. The minister of the congregation then comes to the front pew to lead the congregation in prayer. This is often a sweet time for the Shepherd and his sheep as they reflect with thankfulness on the Great Shepherd's faithful keeping of them since they last sat together at the Lord's Table. Thoughts often turn to dear friends whose place at the table below is now empty.

After this prayer, each member of the congregation comes forward to shake the minister's hand and receive from him a "token" giving them a warrant to sit at the Lord's Table the next day. These small tokens are made of laminated card or even, if very old, of lead. Usually, the name of the congregation is on the token together with a phrase or verse of Scripture. The distribution of tokens to members of the congregation, and visiting members from other congregations, seeks to "protect" the Lord's Table from those who have no right to be there. On the Sabbath morning, elders stand beside the Communion table and collect these tokens from the communicants as they come forward to sit down.

The Kirk Session (Consistory)

At this point it would be helpful, perhaps, to explain how a person becomes entitled to receive a Communion "token," as it is a bit different from the Dutch tradition.

No one can sit at the Lord's table in our Scottish Highland Presbyterian churches without first of all going before the Kirk Session, the equivalent of the Consistory, and giving a credible profession of faith.

After each Communion Season service, the minister intimates that the Kirk Session is willing to meet with anyone wishing to profess faith in the Saviour for the first time. And so, after each service, the elders gather with the minister to see if anyone will come to profess faith and seek permission to sit at the Lord's Table. This is always a time of great expectation and anxious anticipation, as the minister and elders wait to see if all their labours of past months have borne any visible fruit. Sometimes no one comes, and we have to submit to the Lord and patiently labour on. At other times O! such blessed times two, three, or even more might come trembling, one after another, to the Session room, to profess faith and seek admission to the Lord's table.

Although some are able to give eloquent testimony of their conversion, that is the exception. Usually, at this emotionally charged time, people are very nervous and often tearful. It is obviously difficult for people to sit in front of the elders and describe their spiritual journey. A sensitive pastor and his elders will ask appropriate questions to help the person describe their experience of God's grace. Sometimes even that fails to produce many words. However, usually the person is well known to the elders. They know his or her life and have seen the evidence of God's sovereign grace in their lives. Although it is sometimes a bit of an ordeal, many can testify to the blessing and freedom they experienced when witnessing to God's grace in this loving and supportive environment. This practice also has a sifting effect by deterring those who have no experience of God's saving grace in their lives.

After hearing the person's testimony, the Kirk Session briefly reviews what was said while the applicant waits in another room. When the Kirk Session is satisfied that the person has a credible profession of faith that their walk matches their words he or she is called in and the minister intimates the Kirk Session's acceptance. A senior elder is asked to pray, the person is given a token, and receives the right hand of fellowship from the elders, together with a few whispered words of encouragement. I count it one of the greatest privileges in the world to listen to trembling souls speak publicly for the first time of the Lord's goodness and mercy towards them.

Word soon spreads that someone has "come forward" and this heightens the joy of the Communion Sabbath when the new communicant member will sit with God's people for the first time. This is also a time of many tears and much love as the new member is embraced and welcomed into the family of God.

Prayer Meeting

But, let us return to the Saturday of Preparation. We've noted that there is a morning service. Early Saturday evening there is usually a Prayer Meeting led by one of the elders. As is the common practice in Scotland, the names of several male communicant members are selected and called out to lead the congregation in prayer. The prayers look back with thankfulness for the Communion Season thus far, and seek blessing on the ministers and the coming Sabbath services. Prayer is also made for those who might be under particular attack of the devil and especially for those who may be sitting at the Lord's Table for the first time.

After the Prayer Meeting, the minister and elders set out the Communion table and prepare the bread and wine. Then they gather around the table to pray for the flock and beseech heaven for the Lord's presence on the morrow.

Sabbath: Commemoration

"At last!" you might say, the Sabbath, the day of Commemoration. The morning service is divided into three parts. First of all, there is the main sermon. As the Saturday sermon expounded Christ's person, this sermon expounds an aspect of Christ's atoning work. Secondly, there is the "fencing" of the Lord's Table. The minister will speak briefly, from a discriminating text in order to encourage the poor in spirit to take their places at the Lord's Table and to dissuade the ungodly from sitting at the table and bringing judgment on themselves. Like a fence, the aim is to keep out those who shouldn't be there and keep in those who should. It is concluded by reading from Galatians 5:16-26. Thirdly, there is the Lord's Supper itself. As the congregation sings Psalm 118:15-26, the table is prepared and the communicants come forward, give their tokens to the elders, and sit down. The minister reads the warrant in 1 Corinthians 11:23-28, gives thanks, and then gives a brief Christ-centred address based on, say, the Song of Solomon or the Psalms, which describe the communion between the Lord and His people. The elements are then distributed by the elders in total silence. What a sacred time this is! After everyone is served, the minister gives one last brief address to encourage the believer to go out and live for Christ, and to impress on those who stayed away from the table their need and the Lord's provision for them. We then rise from the table singing Psalm 103:1-5.

The Sabbath evening service is characterized by unashamed evangelistic preaching to the unconverted you must be born again, repent and believe the Gospel, death and judgment, hell, or

other such themes. There is usually a great air of excitement and anticipation of God being present to save souls. God's people have been brought close to the Lord through the Communion Season, their spirits are revived, and they are anxious for their loved ones to enjoy what they've enjoyed. Many unconverted people come to these services and, throughout the years, many have been converted on such occasions.

After the evening service, the young people are invited to the manse where they are fed with many goodies, and then gather to hear the visiting ministers give their testimonies or speak about a spiritual experience they have had. The young people love these evenings. My sons call them, "The Children's Communion!" In fact the whole Communion Season is suffused with fellowship. After every service, morning and evening, God's people gather in various houses in small and large groups to discuss the sermons and share their Christian experiences.

Monday: Thanksgiving

On Monday, there is sometimes a service in the morning, but certainly one in the evening, when God's people gather to give thanks to God for all His mercies over the Communion Season. The minister will preach on themes of thanksgiving and the appropriate response to God's goodness.

Tuesday: Revival

The Communion Season officially ends on the Monday evening. However, the effects continue on to the Tuesday. And the effect is usually that of reviving the spirits of God's people. They have enjoyed a spiritual feast, and are ready to face the world again with renewed faith and rekindled longing for the everlasting heavenly communion table and season. Also the minister is revived. He has enjoyed the fellowship and ministry of fellow ministers, and, hopefully, he has seen some of his beloved flock profess faith for the first time. Finally, such Communion seasons have, in the past, been associated with widespread outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon communities leading to the revival of true Christianity. O, when will we see such days again?

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