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EDITORIAL

Within the structure of Scottish piety, the celebration of communion was a highlight, not only for those who took the elements, but also for the hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of hearers who often attended several sacramental festivals during the summer months.¹ The connection between the sacrament and spiritual awakening, where the communion season became a 'converting ordinance' in the experience of many who attended, can be traced back to the 1630s and is best exemplified in the revival at Shotts.² Thomas Boston spoke of such occasions as 'sweet gospel day[s]', 'great days[s] of the gospel', or 'sweet time[s] of the gospel'.³ Robert Wodrow speaks of the 'fair-days of the Gospel'⁴ indicating that through the drama of the word and sacrament, many people were reborn and revived, as sinners were converted and believers were renewed in their faith.⁵ The Supper was so important to Calvin that he attempted to institute a weekly celebration in Geneva because he believed the Supper was spiritual nourishment for the life of the church.

The Lord's Supper stood out in thinking of pastoral ministers in Scotland as one of the chief means of grace which God provided to the

¹ See Leigh Schmidt, *Holy Fairs*; George B. Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland 1560-1960* (Edinburgh, 1960); Gwen Kennedy Neville, *Kinship and Pilgrimage: Rituals of Reunion in American Protestant Culture* (Oxford, 1987) pp. 35-9.

² John Livingston speaks of how 'the night before I had been with some Christians, who spent the night in conference and prayer... and enjoyed... such liberty and melting of heart as I never had the like in publick all my life.' *Select Biographies* (Edinburgh, 1845), vol. 1, pp. 138-9. Robert Fleming recalls, 'near five hundred had at that time a discernible change wrought on them, of whom most proved lively Christians afterward.' *Fulfilling of Scripture* (Edinburgh, 1850), vol. 1, p. 355.

³ Thomas Boston, *A General Account of my Life*, edited by G. Low (London, 1908), p. 46.

⁴ Robert Wodrow, *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow* (Edinburgh, 1842-43), vol. 1, p. 55.

⁵ George Wemyss in his Preface to John Spalding, *Synaxis Sacra* (Glasgow, 1750) speaks of 'Communion is Scotland' as being 'for the most part very solemn, and... many hundreds, yea thousands in this land, have dated their conversion from some of these occasions' (p. viii).

believer so that his faith, love and hope might deepen. During a communion season in Dunfermline in 1747, Thomas Gillespie encouraged his congregation to believe that God gave this ordinance 'for his honour and the conversion of sinners' as well as 'the edification of His Body mystical in faith, holiness and comfort'.⁶ It was an event where the Christian could anticipate eternity where believers would 'constantly enjoy Christ's presence and see Him', for in heaven they 'will not be deprived of His sensible, ravishing presence a single moment'.⁷

It is doubtful if the Lord's Supper is so central in the corporate worship and spirituality of Scottish Evangelicals in 2002. We appear to have moved some distance from the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper in the early days of the church.⁸ Even among the Christian Brethren that expressed its worship and devotion in the weekly breaking of bread service,⁹ there are some indications that the split between the earlier communion service and an evangelistic family service has undermined the importance of the 'breaking of bread' service. In most Scottish Baptist congregations, although communion is often integrated within a morning service, there is still a sense of it being viewed as an 'add-on' rather than a central act of devotion. Within Scottish Presbyterianism, Calvin's vision of a weekly communion service was never realised. Eleanor Kreider has commented that 'Churches will be renewed when the Lord's Supper, graced by God's presence and Word, oriented to the living Lord and empowered by the Spirit, is fully restored to the place it had in the early centuries – as the central communal Christian act of worship.'¹⁰

There is a need to remind ourselves that the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, a sacrament, a moment of special encounter with the Triune God of grace and mercy who meets his people in all their need to refresh and renew their spiritual vitality. The stress, within some strands of Scottish piety, overly to 'fence the tables' and inhibit believers from 'examining themselves, so as to eat' has hindered many from experiencing the welcoming love of God that Rabbi Duncan spoke of when he said 'tak' it woman, it's for sinners!' The emphasis of the solemnity of the occasion, remembering the death of our Saviour, must never take away that note of

⁶ Thomas Gillespie, *Dunfermline Sermons for 1747*, f42r. (The sermons are located in the Dunfermline Public library.)

⁷ *Ibid.*, f51r-52v.

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Exeter, 1980), p. 108.

⁹ See Neil Dickson, *The History of Open Brethren in Scotland 1838-1999* (Stirling University, PhD, 2000).

¹⁰ Eleanor Kreider, *Given for You: A Fresh Look at Communion* (Leicester, 1998), pp. 12-13.

rejoicing in the presence of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming glory. A variety of tones and moods for a communion service will often depend upon the season of the year as well as the pastoral concerns for a particular community of believers. Frequency of communion enables congregations to vary the note that is sounded. Finally, we must never forget that the Lord's Supper was intended to be a powerful means of 'proclaiming the Lord's death' as a converting ordinance to young and old.

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
 Let every soul be Jesu's guest;
 Ye need not one be left behind,
 For God hath bidden all mankind.

Come, and partake the gospel feast,
 Be saved from sin, in Jesus rest;
 O taste the goodness of your God;
 And eat his flesh, and drink his blood.

See him set before your eyes,
 That precious, bleeding sacrifice!
 His offered benefits embrace,
 And freely now be saved by grace!¹¹

A renewal of the 'breaking of bread', 'communion seasons' and the celebration of the 'Lord's Supper' would undoubtedly impact the spiritual pilgrimage of Christians today as it did in previous periods of our spiritual history.

¹¹ A hymn by Charles Wesley in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, edited by Franz Hilderbrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford, 1983), pp. 81-2.