

On Behalf of the Chancel

PHOTOGRAPHS of the new church at Glenrothes have been before us several times in recent months. The building has the appearance of a bold experiment. It immediately makes one think of the other St Columba's erected in 1592 at Burntisland. Mr Ian Lindsay has written of the Burntisland church: "the experiment was not repeated in quite that form, for in general new churches were to carry on the pre-Reformation tradition, so far as the structure was concerned, and were gradually to develop from that."⁽¹⁾

Mr Lindsay seems, however, to favour particularly the T-shaped churches of late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Writing of the work of the seventeenth century he says on p. 54: "A significant plan was evolved which suited the worship of either party (Presbyterian and Episcopalian) and though it is often misunderstood today by the Church which gave birth to it, there is still time for careful reflection." The T-shaped church is like a medieval church with the chancel cut off, as happened at St Mary's, Haddington. Seemly and well-proportioned as they are, with the pulpit central and prominent on the long wall, yet the minister in the pulpit can hardly be aware of confronting all the congregation. The congregation is separated off into three parts, hardly aware of each other. Now the emphasis seems to be on "gathering round" as at St Columba's, Glenrothes, probably having in mind the gathering round the long tables which was the practice in post-Reformation churches until the nineteenth century. It was with this practice as a basis that the builders of churches in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries went to work. For practical reasons as well as established use and wont that would not be the basis for building now, and we should not be influenced by sentimental grounds.

From the practical point of view the people "gathered round" will mean that in fact people will be looking at people. One knows how distracting this can be from experience in English Free churches, where often the choir in a long row on a platform confronts the congregation. Something should focus the attention of everybody, and the central table in the chancel can do this.

⁽¹⁾ *The Scottish Parish Kirk*, p. 41.

The chancel helps to get the right emphasis. Of course in thinking of the chancel it need not be of the crowded one with parallel rows of seats for the choir, and the organ at the side. The essentials are the central table, elders' stalls, the lectern and pulpit forward of it, and perhaps the font suitably placed. In the medieval church one might say that worship consisted of word and SACRAMENT. In Reformed theory it was certainly WORD and SACRAMENT. In later practice it was WORD and sacrament. Now we may be seeing again that it must be WORD and SACRAMENT, with due emphasis on both, but with a movement in the whole act of worship towards the finality or fulfilment of the Sacrament, which brings us into union and communion with our Lord, crucified, risen and ascended, and with each other in the Communion of Saints. The Lectern confronts us with the Word, creating, redeeming, coming to us, made flesh. From the pulpit we know He dwells among us, and we enter into His new creation. But these point us on, and usher us, as it were, to the Holy Table and the Sacrament; the Word brings us to its own fulfilment as the Bread of Life.

We could say, of course, that the table forward among the people stresses the dwelling of the Word in our midst. That is the movement prior to our gathering round. He comes so that we may come to Him. But we may be taking away the "mystery" of it, making Christ ours, one of us, taking Him out of heaven, bringing Him to our level, relying on what is so emphasized nowadays, the "compassion of Christ", who worked alongside us men, rather than on the Judgement and Mercy of God that are in Him for us. It is by the Holy Love of God that we are redeemed and restored and re-created. There is the Holiness and Majesty of God, over us and beyond us and making demands upon us. There is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the "only begotten of the Father", who is yet "bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh." There is His difference from us; "I and the Father are one" as we cannot be. He is "the living bread which came down from heaven."⁽¹⁾ He confronts us who are creatures of the Father, but who need to be redeemed and re-created. In Christ is the boundary⁽²⁾ between heaven and earth, God and men, and in the church this boundary is symbolized in the chancel with the lectern,

(¹) John vi. 51.

(²) Cf. Lewis and Short *A Latin Dictionary*, for *cancelli*, figuratively used by Cicero as "boundaries."

pulpit and table before us. They, and in particular the Holy Table, confront us with the awful event on the boundary between heaven and earth at the Cross, where He was lifted up to "draw all men unto" Himself;⁽¹⁾ and with the glory of the Cross, for through it we are redeemed and come to God and eat of the Bread of life. "We behold His glory."⁽²⁾ He confronts us and we "look unto Him." We are, in Luke's words, the "multitude who assembled to see the sight."⁽³⁾ Of course we can only penetrate to the glory of Christ with the eye of faith. Yet our ordinary eyes must have objects to rest on that bring us beyond themselves to the majesty of the Word of Life that came to us, and was made flesh, and is our fullest satisfaction as the Bread of Life.

According to Dr Maxwell the chancel is "the basic design common to Christendom."⁽⁴⁾ It makes for the Majesty of the Word of God, "who comes to us" from beyond, and this aspect must not be sacrificed to the cosy and the "couthie". J. M. Creed was not altogether wrong in saying that there is an absence of the *theologia crucis* in St Luke.⁽⁵⁾ C. K. Barrett points out that "'the happy ending' never disappears even at the worst moment."⁽⁶⁾ A kind of "happy ending" atmosphere, a kind of easiness, must not overtake us so that we forget the Majesty of God's Holy Love and the cost of our redeeming. The Word still reaches out to us, not only in the reading and preaching, but in the elements brought to us from the Holy Table. When that Table is central, focussing the attention of all of us, we cannot fail to grasp what is central in our worship and faith.

Certainly the attractiveness of the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, and the obverse of that, the family gathering round, is great. There seems indeed to be a tussle going on between those aspects and confrontation. Perhaps confrontation is being lost sight of. But we must not be tied to seventeenth-eighteenth century churches, T-shaped or otherwise, but to the greater and wider heritage to which we in Scotland also fall heirs. In that connection the chancel has a place, for it gives due emphasis to what is "surely believed among us."

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(1) John xii. 32.

(2) John i. 14.

(3) Luke xxiii. 48. (RSV).

(4) *Concerning Worship*, p. 95.

(5) *The Gospel according to St Luke*, p. lxxii.

(6) *Luke the Historian in Recent Study*, p. 59.