

NOTES ON THE FREQUENCY OF CELEBRATION OF HOLY COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

In the Report to the General Assembly of 1970 by the Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, on the Doctrine and Practice of Public Worship in the Reformed Churches, the Committee suggested that the opinion of Presbyteries might be obtained on certain questions, and by a deliverance dated 27 May 1970 the General Assembly remitted the report to Presbyteries. These notes are compiled arising out of a consideration of question number 6 which reads as follows:

‘The Communion, or Supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated’ (Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God). How do we interpret this, and how far are we being faithful to apostolic teaching and practice?

It is proper at the outset to enter a caveat. I am neither a theologian nor a scholar and the sources which I have consulted are limited to those which are available generally in public libraries, and within that compass to such material as I have personally selected. It is within this limiting context that these notes must be read.

It seems to me that before the questions raised can be considered at all it is necessary to know how frequently Holy Communion is celebrated in the Church of Scotland. This information used to be included in the *Church of Scotland Year-Book* but this has not been done since 1968. In view of the impossibility of addressing such an enquiry to some two thousand congregations I have utilized the information available from the 1967 year-book (the 1968 edition being unavailable to me) and it is likely that there is not any marked change within the past four years. The figures refer to actual congregations or places of worship where Communion is shown as being celebrated rather than to charges and consequently the total figures will be in excess of the actual number of charges existing as at that period.

FREQUENCY OF CELEBRATION PER ANNUM							
<i>No information</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>More than 5</i>	<i>Total</i>
35	34	932	417	619	74	82	2193

This table accordingly discloses that out of 2158 congregations for which figures are available, in 932, representing a little over

43% of the total, there were only two celebrations of Holy Communion in the year, and congregations having 2, 3 or 4 celebrations make up a total of 1968 or close on 91% of the total. In only 82 congregations or a little less than 4% of the total was Communion celebrated more than 5 times in the year. In 36 out of these 82 Communion was celebrated on 12 or more occasions throughout the year and this represents a figure of a little over 1½%.

A table completed by me shows that it is possible to discern a certain geographical pattern. Apart from the Presbyteries of Aberdeen and Garioch, all the Presbyteries where Communion was celebrated more than five times in the year lie in the southern part of the country and very largely in the central belt. The north and west and to a considerable extent the south-west and the Borders do not appear in the list of areas of congregations having five or more celebrations of Communion in the year. Of the thirty-six shown as having twelve or more celebrations in the year, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee account for eighteen, with another eleven in large burghs, so that even within a limited geographical area the practice of frequent Communion is an urban, and not a rural, one.

The first question as to how we interpret the injunction contained in the Westminster Directory may be considered in two senses. The first is on the assumption that we are following out this injunction, how we interpret the word 'frequently' and this would produce the somewhat astonishing result that for the majority of congregations the word 'frequently' means two, three, or four times in a year. The other way of looking at this question is on the basis that the word 'frequently' has a fairly clear and well-established meaning and the question put to us is whether we are honestly fulfilling the rule given in the Westminster Directory. I think this is the more likely sense in which the question is to be regarded and quite obviously the answer to the question is that the majority of congregations are failing badly in their interpretation. If we disregard the second service on a Sunday and special services, then taken on the lowest possible basis, the Church is a body which congregationally meets for worship on fifty-two occasions throughout the year and taking the most modest interpretation of the word the adjective, 'frequent' could hardly be used of anything which takes place on less than twelve occasions throughout the year. Applying this very modest criterion then, only thirty-six congregations or 1½% of the total could be said to be interpreting the injunction in the Westminster Directory properly.

The second question assumes a familiarity on the part of Presbyters with apostolic teaching and practice. In the case of one member of the Presbytery of Perth this assumption is unfortunately unwarranted and I have therefore had to conduct my own researches into this

matter. On the basis of Acts 2:42 and 20:7 and I Corinthians 11:26 it would seem that weekly or possibly more frequent celebrations were the rule in the early Church. In *An Outline of Christian Worship* Dr. W. D. Maxwell traces the origin of the Lord's Supper to the Jewish Kiddush which was observed weekly, rather than to the feast of the Passover and adduces what appear to be cogent arguments in support of this theory. Although this could be consistent with the account of the institution given in the fourth Gospel, Professor Barclay in his book *The Lord's Supper* rejects this theory and supports the accounts given in the synoptic Gospels that the Lord's Supper had its origin in the feast of the Passover. Be that as it may, both Dr. Maxwell and Professor Barclay, as well as other writers, seem agreed that the practice and teaching of the early Church was a weekly celebration. If this is accepted, it is clear that on the basis of the figures which I have already quoted we are far from being faithful to apostolic teaching and practice.

What has been said above accordingly disposes of the question number 6 sent down by the Committee – or does it? On reconsideration of the whole matter it is clear that, differing from the other five questions, question 6 is not one on which an 'opinion' can be given. The matters raised are purely matters of fact and the answers are available for anyone who cares to seek them. Indeed I should think that answers to this question must have been known in general, if not in specific, terms to the Committee when the question was formulated. If this be so, it would be reasonable to assume that question 6 was prepared, not in order to obtain information or an opinion, but rather to stimulate consideration of further questions which must necessarily arise from the answers. Such questions would seem to me to be:

1. How has this situation arisen?
2. Should action be taken to remedy such a situation?
3. If so, how can this be done?

The most superficial consideration of the first question serves to make it clear that this subject alone would involve lengthy and far-ranging study and research and provide material for a thesis far beyond my ability and the scope of these notes. It seems clear that at the outset the reformers envisaged a return to the practice of weekly celebrations. This was Calvin's aim, in which he was frustrated by the magistrates of Geneva, and later in Strasbourg where he celebrated the sacrament according to the German rite he was still limited to monthly celebrations. Knox also favoured weekly celebrations, but the initial set-back in the Scottish Church seems to have risen entirely from a shortage of ordained ministers to celebrate the sacrament. There followed in later years in the

seventeenth century the internecine strife between the Protesters and the Resolutioners, and the unsettled state of the country in the first half of the eighteenth century militated against the possibility of frequent celebrations, by which time there had arisen the mass Communion and the tent preachings, which satisfied on the one hand the not inconsiderable body of members whose interest was in sermon tasting rather than in the sacrament, and on the other hand the apparently more numerous body who had no genuine interest in either the preaching or the sacrament but whose main, if not indeed sole, concern was the social aspect of the Communion seasons with visiting of neighbouring parishes and all the other trappings of the Holy Fairs. By the time steps were taken to discountenance the Holy Fairs and the mass Communion, the practice of irregular celebration had become established and it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that the first tentative steps were taken to secure more frequent celebrations.

At the risk of being accused of over-simplifying the issue – and I am only too conscious that I am over-simplifying it – I would be prepared to say that the Church of Scotland has in part drifted into the practice of infrequent celebration and in part had this forced upon her rather than that she has voluntarily and actively pursued a practice of infrequent celebration.

As to the question of whether we should seek to remedy the situation of infrequent celebration, in my view there can be no question but that we should. Apart from the fact that by so doing we should be following the practice of the early Church and adopting the principles laid down by the Reformers to whom we pay at least lip service, the proposition that all church members should have frequent opportunities of receiving the central sacrament of the Church seems to me to admit of no question or discussion.

How then is this to be accomplished? The simple answer is that congregations where celebrations are infrequent should introduce more frequent celebrations, but this simple, theoretical answer will necessarily be hedged about by practical considerations. It would be unrealistic to suppose that what would be acceptable and profitable in an urban congregation of say 2,000 members would be appropriate in a scattered country parish with a membership of 20 or 30 and 80 to 100 adherents.

I wrote to the ministers of the thirty-six congregations shown in the 1967 Year-book as celebrating Holy Communion on twelve or more occasions in the year, and I appreciate greatly the kindness of all those ministers who have not only completed the little form which I sent to them, but in many cases where this did not supply the complete information, have supplemented this by notes or by personal letters. The celebrations in these congregations varied from

twelve in the year to over fifty and there is no universal pattern. Clearly the arrangements had been made to suit the needs of individual congregations, but certain general observations may be made. In practically all there are what I call for the purposes of these notes (though I accept that the term is inappropriate and I do not myself care for it) 'statutory' celebrations which are held two, three or four times per annum and preceded by visitation by elders to their districts distributing Communion cards which are collected at these celebrations and attendances recorded. The other celebrations I shall refer to (again simply as a distinguishing mark for the purposes of these notes) as 'additional' celebrations. In general at the additional celebrations no cards are issued. In many cases, however, where members are unable to attend the statutory celebrations, cards may be handed in at one of these additional celebrations and attendances are recorded. In other cases visitation by elders is not related to the statutory celebrations but is made on a different basis and on the occasion of these calls the elders hand out to members a number of cards which may be returned on the occasion of any celebration. Again, while the statutory celebrations follow the normal pattern of being an integral part of a morning, afternoon, or in some cases an evening service, the time and place of the additional celebrations varies quite considerably. In one case some of these celebrations are at 8.15 A.M. and in another case immediately prior to morning service, but the commoner practice seems to be to hold these immediately after morning or evening worship. In some cases these celebrations take place in the church where those who wish to receive Communion remain behind after the service, and in other cases the celebration takes place in a small chapel or some other part of the church building. The pattern, as I have said, varies widely and it is not possible to show in a table even any broad outlines since there are variations between individual congregations. The wealth of information which I have received as a result of these enquiries is most instructive and most helpful and I readily acknowledge my indebtedness to all those ministers who have so kindly taken the time and trouble to provide me with it.

It is for the kirk session to appoint and intimate the time and place for the observance of the Lord's Supper and make provision therefor (Cox, 5th edition, p. 116), but it would be naïve to suppose that in a congregation where the normal practice has been to have two, three or four celebrations throughout the year the introduction of even monthly celebrations would in all cases meet with universal acceptance. As with most innovations in kirk life there would be those who would approve and support the change and secondly there would be those who would be indifferent. It would almost certainly be true to say, however, that those who are indifferent

to the frequency of celebration of Holy Communion would be indifferent to much else in church life and the problem of breaking through this indifference is not within the scope of these present notes. There remains the third class who would be opposed to the innovation and these could probably be considered as falling into four groups.

First of all, I do not think it is being uncharitable but merely recognizing one of the facts of life to say that there would be those who would be opposed to the practice simply because it does represent a change. This is not an attitude against which one can advance any arguments; it is simply a matter of patience and the hope that when a change, whatever it may be, is seen to be for the good of the Church, it will come to be accepted.

Secondly, there are those who would be averse to the change on the basis that it is following the Roman Catholic or Anglican Churches. On this matter I would again quote Dr. Maxwell from *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland*:

To encourage frequent Communion is now thought by many to be an exclusively Roman or Anglican practice. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and within modern times it was not until 1910 that the papacy began directly to advocate frequent communion of the people – 400 years after the Reformers had urgently advocated it.

In the Anglican Church also, frequent communion is a recent innovation within the last century, but entirely consonant with Reformed teaching and desired by the first English Reformers. It can hardly be too much emphasized that the duty of frequent communion was a paramount part of the Reformers' teaching.

I should think that there would be a third ground of opposition that frequency of celebration would lower the value of the sacrament to those receiving it. To this it can be said that this does not appear to be the case in other communions and this argument is answered by John Willison in *A Sacramental Catechism* where he says:

The same thing may be alleged with respect to other duties, which yet is no good argument for the infrequent practice of them. . . . Let none think that the frequency of the Administration would expose it to contempt, for I am sure no worthy communicant would undervalue this Ordinance because of the frequent repetition, but rather prize it the more.

Finally, there would be a body of opinion which would hold that frequent celebration was, in some way, foreign to the tradition of the Church of Scotland. In so far as infrequent celebration can be said to be a tradition I have already suggested that it is one into

which the Church has drifted or had forced upon her rather than one actively sought. It is the case that practically all the Reformers, including John Knox, favoured a weekly celebration and the normal form of service as prepared by John Knox and appearing in his Liturgy is a eucharistic concept and regards the celebration of the sacrament as the norm in public worship. On those occasions when Holy Communion is not celebrated it is simply a case of omitting part of the service and not of substituting some other and different service. Again, there can be cited the quotation from the Westminster Directory which poses the question on which these notes are written. Of the same period there can be cited the answers to questions 175 and 177 in the Larger Catechism:

175. The Duty of Christians . . . is . . . to . . . encourage themselves to a frequent attendance on that Ordinance.

177. The Lord's Supper is to be administered often.

I have often thought that it would be helpful to church members to be told from time to time more of the history of the Church and the meaning and purpose of worship and the significance of religious symbols and, while this could properly be done at congregational meetings or within the framework of some one or more of existing church organizations, I feel that it could be done most effectively if these talks were given occasionally in place of the sermon at morning worship. Dealing specifically with the sacrament of Holy Communion, the late Professor Donald M. Baillie in the book *The Theology of the Sacraments and other Papers*, published after his death by his brother, says something on very similar lines which I quote:

And as regards the Lord's Supper, I have long been of opinion that we ought at communion seasons to preach much more *directly* about the sacrament. At the preparatory service and at the actual communion service it has been a common thing to preach on any more or less central topic of the Christian Gospel. But why don't we more often preach directly on some aspect of the sacrament itself? Surely our people need it. Surely there is a widespread confusion and ignorance even within the Church about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Of course we give our young communicants careful teaching about it; but we cannot be so naïve as to imagine that that is more than a tiny beginning, on which they could not stand an examination a month later. The thing needs to be done over and over again with both repetition and variety, and surely it is best done at sacramental seasons – not in the form of a theological lecture, but with all the simplicity and vividness that we can command – if only we make sure that we are giving the truly Christian interpretation.

I, myself, have no doubt in my own mind that we should move towards a more frequent celebration of Holy Communion but it is a matter in which we should probably do well to make haste slowly, bearing in mind that arguments against it, albeit theologically unsound and, to a large extent historically indefensible, are none the less deeply felt and sincerely held.

These notes have strayed somewhat from the original, simple, factual questions but it seemed to me unprofitable to examine the facts and to reach simple but negative answers without moving further along the road pointed out by these answers.

ADDENDUM

This Addendum was prompted by a question raised during discussion on the notes previously prepared on this subject, as to what changes, if any, there had been in the practice of frequent celebrations of Holy Communion over the past thirty years.

The information used in the previous notes was obtained from the *Church of Scotland Year-book* for 1967. While I could have access to a copy of the Year-book for 1937 at those places where it was kept as part of the permanent records, I was unable to borrow a copy for a sufficiently long time to compile the necessary information. I did, however, obtain a copy of the Year-book for 1939 and accordingly the figures now given, when set alongside those previously given, show a comparison over a period of twenty-eight years rather than over a period of thirty years.

The following table shows the frequency of celebration of Holy Communion as obtained from 1939 Year-book and, as on the previous occasion, the figures refer to actual congregations or places of worship where Communion is shown as being celebrated, rather than to actual charges.

FREQUENCY OF CELEBRATION PER ANNUM							
<i>No information</i>	1	2	3	4	5	<i>More than 5</i>	<i>Total</i>
17	112	1377	454	671	20	21	2672

In eleven out of the twenty-one in the penultimate column, Communion is celebrated on twelve or more occasions in the year.

Since the earlier notes were prepared it has occurred to me that it would be useful to have an indication of the actual numbers of communicants concerned and at Appendix I is a note showing the total numbers of communicants as appearing in the two Year-books and the total numbers of communicants in the congregations where Holy Communion is frequently celebrated. Appendix II is a table prepared on the same lines as the table appended to the

previous notes showing details by presbyteries. There were, in 1939, sixty-six presbyteries as compared with fifty-nine in 1967.*

For the purpose of the Addendum I have adopted the same interpretation of 'frequent' as in the previous notes, i.e. twelve or more times per year, and using this standard the following facts are disclosed:

1. The number of congregations having frequent celebrations has increased during the period from 11 to 36.

2. The proportion of congregations having frequent celebrations has increased from 0.41% to 1.64%.

3. The number of communicants to whom frequent celebration is available within their own congregations has increased from 18,546 to 40,689.

4. The proportion of such communicant members has increased from 1.44% to 3.26%.

5. The number of presbyteries in which congregations are to be found where there are frequent celebrations has increased from 4 to 14.

While it is notorious that statistics alone can be misleading and comparative statistics even more so; it would, I think, be a fair summing-up to say that the practice of frequent celebration has advanced, albeit slowly, over the period of twenty-eight years under review. Without figures at intervals throughout the period, it cannot be indicated whether the advance is accelerating, or in the absence of records of attendance, or some indication of attendance, to what extent members avail themselves of the opportunities offered.

APPENDIX I

	1939 Year-book	1967 Year-book
Total number of communicants	1,284,450	1,247,972
Number of communicants in congregations in which Holy Communion is celebrated on twelve or more occasions per annum.	18,546	40,689

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* Tables not included. They can be consulted through the contributor or through myself.