

# THOMAS CHALMERS AND THE LORD'S TABLE

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In his biography of Thomas Chalmers, William Hanna suggests that the Communion Table controversy was a matter which perplexed Chalmers by its triviality. But it was a matter which had greatly concerned earlier generations and which has had a considerable influence on the practice of later generations.

For John Knox, sitting at the Lord's Table was essential. During his ministry at Berwick, Knox was left to his own discretion as to his mode of conducting worship and administering the Sacraments. This was because the first Book of Common Prayer authorised in 1549 had not been introduced to the North of England largely because of the hostility to reform of the Bishop of Durham, Cuthbert Tunstall. Knox made use of the lacuna in regulations to establish in Berwick what he considered to be the appropriate posture at the Lord's Table. In a letter written to his congregation after his departure from Berwick he wrote:

I signify unto you that as I was neither repent nor recant that my former doctrine, so do I (for divers causes long to rehearse) much prefer sitting at the Lord's Table either to kneeling, standing or going at the action of that mystical supper.<sup>1</sup>

Knox particularly objected to kneeling at the Communion Table. In his comments on the draft of the 42 Articles he wrote:

Finally, as kneeling is not gesture meet at the Table, so doth it obscure the joyful significations of that holy mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Kneeling, he asserted, was the gesture of suppliants 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. We eat and drink not as beggars (for by grace we are made rich in Christ) but as sons and inheritors whom that victorious king has placed at his Table - ought we not most gladly to receive the honour and dignity that is offered to us?

Therefore aught by Christ's example at his holy table we sit as men placed in quietness and in full possession of our kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

As is well known, Knox did not succeed in persuading the Church of Scotland to adopt the practice of sitting at the Lord's Table. But the Church of Scotland was to be more responsive. The First Book of Discipline states:

But plain it is that at that Supper Christ Jesus sat with his disciples and therefore do we judge that sitting at a table is most convenient to that holy action.

This probably meant that even the minister sat to dispense the Sacrament. Churches were fitted up with a long table or tables, sometimes placed in the choir or chancel or in "ye communion yle", but frequently in the nave or body of the church.

At first these tables were temporary structures of boards and trestles which were erected for the observance of the Sacrament and then dismantled. There are many references to the provision of such tables. In 1573 the treasurer of Canongate Kirk mentions in his accounts "one dail to one tabill to the Communion". The Edinburgh Dean of Guild accounts show payments to workmen who were employed to set up the tables for the Communion. In 1624 £11.4s.0d. was paid for mending "the buirds and fumes" and the following year a certain David Weir was paid 8s.0d. "for caryeing the communion"

bairdis fra the ald kirk to the gray freir kirk". Most Kirk Sessions seem to have discouraged seats at ordinary church services, though cutty stools might be brought in or hired from the beadle. At Stirling in 1603 the Session prohibited seats or "desks" in the nave as they would encroach on space needed for the tables. At Communion long forms were provided to seat the worshippers at the tables and these were removed after the service.

The space containing tables and forms was railed off by a kind of paling or "travess: resembling a sheep pen. This was to separate the communicants from the non-communicants but was low enough to enable the observers to witness the celebration. The Dean of Guild accounts for 1561-2 at Edinburgh refer to "one traviss for holding forth of ye non-communicants". At South Leith in 1644 two elders were appointed "to attend at each end of the tables who the people entereth the tables." Their duty was to collect the Communion tokens at the entry to the enclosure.

During the period of the first Episcopate active opposition was not aroused until the first of the Five Articles of Perth enjoined kneeling at the reception of the Sacrament. It is therefore not surprising that the seating of communicants was one of the most keenly discussed issues in the preparation of the Directory for the Public Worship of God by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in 1644.

During the committee stage of the debate on the Directory about three weeks was spent in a protracted argument between those favouring Independent views and the Scots commissioners. Among the Independents one might receive the Sacrament sitting, standing or even kneeling, though the first was the most common. In England it was then customary to consecrate the elements at a small table in view of all and thereafter for the minister or deacons to carry them to wherever the worshippers might be sitting in church. This was entirely different from the Scotland practice which provided long tables to which relays of people came and sat down with the minister to receive the Bread and Wine.

Neither side was willing to give way. The Independents considered that the Scottish practice disrupted the Congregation and departed from Christ's original method. They refused to come out of their seats to a table and denied the necessity of it. The Scots considered that the Independent's way of "carrying the elements to all in their seats" was very irreverent and lay "one the outermost edge of Christianity". In fact it seemed to them to be typical of the self-satisfied and slipshod attitude of Independency to everything sacramental. Robert Baillie, George Gillespie and Alexander Henderson were all firmly resolved to maintain the Scotland practice. Gillespie even argued that a long table was a *sine qua non* of the Sacrament. "We, sent from the Church of Scotland," said Henderson, "are all of one mind on this point ..... we may not possibly pass from it."

But a compromise was reached and the rubric in the Directory reads:

"The Table being decently covered and so conveniently placed that the communicants may orderly sit about it or at it ...."

Robert Baillies' comment on this was:

"After we were overtoiled with debate we were forced to leave all these things and take us to general expressions, which by a benign exposition would infer our church practices."<sup>4</sup>

But the General Assembly was far from pleased with this ambiguity. After very careful revision and scrutiny of the Directory, the Assembly of 1645 passed an Act for the Establishing and putting in execution of the Directory for the Publick Worship of God. It was to be carefully followed by all ministers and a copy was to be made available for the use of every kirk in the Kingdom. But an important exception was made in respect of the clause in the Directory which mentioned the communicants sitting about the Table or at it. This was not to be interpreted as if, in the judgement of the Kirk, it were indifferent or free for any of the communicants not to come to and receive at the Table or as if the General Assembly approved the distributing of the elements by the minister to each communicant and not by the communicants themselves.

During the 18th century when fixed seating was generally adopted in the churches long communion table pews became a central feature in the lay-out of the buildings. In the larger churches at least it was usual to have in addition to the main table or tables a small head table at which the minister and his assistants communicated. This feature was noted by John Wesley when he attended a Communion Service at St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, in 1764:

"Two long tables were set on the sides of one aisle, covered with table cloths. On each side of

them a bench was placed for the people. Each table held four or five and thirty. Three ministers sat at the top behind a cross table ....."<sup>5</sup>

John Wesley was not impressed by the Scottish Communion service.

"I did not admire the manner of administration.... I was informed the service usually lasted till five in the evening. How much more simple, as well as more solemn, is the service of the Church of England."<sup>5</sup>

The practice of receiving Communion in the ordinary pews which was introduced by Thomas Chalmers and others during the first quarter of the 19th century was a consequence of the large congregations attending the infrequent celebrations of the Sacrament and listening to the sermons of the preachers assisting at the Communion season. Rural parishes coped with such congestion by using the kirkyard as a preaching auditorium and the kirk itself for administering the Sacrament. The *quoad sacra* churches and chapels of ease in the towns had usually no kirkyards or convenient open spaces around them and so it was felt that something had to be done to ease the congestion and shorten the services.

William Hanna thus describes the situation which Chalmers faced at St John's in Glasgow:

The large number of communicants and the small number of those who could be accommodated at tables of communion, running as they then usually did in single lines along the aisles, prolonged the services of a sacramental Sabbath in St John's to a wearisome and unprofitable length.

Chalmers himself gave this description of a sacramental Sunday in St John's:

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 a crowd of competitors who, during the time of seven table services, stood wedged in the long but narrow access that led to them.

Hanna's account of the reaction to the changes in the administration of Communion at St John's are marked by a heavy facetiousness:

It reached the ears of more than one reverend stickler for the good old way of sitting in the aisles, upon whose ecclesiastical consciences such grievous injury was inflicted, that they could not rest till they had dragged the daring innovator before the tribunals of the Church for judgement."

One of those who opposed the innovation was Dr James Begg, a minister of New Monkland who published in 1824 *A Treatise on the Use of the Communion Table*. Begg contended that the Communion Table was the one place at which communicants might validly partake; to confine the people to their pews was to deny them access to the only real Communion Table - that on which the bread and wine were set. Begg also persuaded the Presbytery of Hamilton to overture the General Assembly of 1825 on the subject. After heading Begg speak "at great length" in support of the overture the deliverance of the General Assembly was that it was still the law of the Church of Scotland, as it had been its traditional usage, to "dispense the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the people seated at or around the Communion table or tables". The Assembly also added a rider that presbyteries within whose bounds churches were to be built or re-seated by enjoined to "use their best endeavours to have a suitable table or tables provided for the solemn service of the Lord's Supper."

I would seem that the Presbytery of Edinburgh at least took this injunction seriously for when St Stephen's was built in 1828 it was designed to have six long communion tables in the centre space. At times other than the Communion seasons the tables were removed and seating facing the pulpit put in their place.

By 1825 Chalmers had departed from St John's to become Professor of Moral Philosophy at the United College in St Andrews but it would appear that his successor at St John's continued the new arrangements at Communion as did two other churches in Glasgow, the Tron and St George's. This was duly noted and the matter was raised by overture in the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. The Synod reiterated the judgement of the Assembly and enjoined the Presbytery of Glasgow "to take all prudent steps to provide one or more suitable Communion tables in the said Churches and to report to next meeting of the Synod".

William Hanna gives a full account of a speech made by Chalmers before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, in which Chalmers answered some of the criticisms made against the new procedure:

There is no exclusion of the poor - there is no indiscriminate admittance of the qualified and unqualified - there is no disappearance of the table on which our sacramental elements are placed in full view of the communicants, and, above all, there is nothing to confound our sacramental Sabbath with an ordinary Sabbath.

Many features of the Communion service remained unchanged, he assured the Synod:

There is the same table for the accommodation of the elements, and at which the minister presides in the view of all the congregation, as there is in the other churches of the city. There is the same decent covering of white extended before all the communicants.

Chalmers conceded that the partakers were not so placed as to look one to another but, said he, "what is of more importance, and carries in it a greater propriety, they are all so placed as to look to the minister who addresses them."

He then turned to the directions given in the Directory for the Public Worship of God and pointed out that it provides for communicants sitting at or about the Table. Under the new arrangements they did sit about the Table but they did sit at it and so the provisions required by the Directory were fulfilled.

Chalmers was not in the least apologetic. The changes were entirely beneficial in his view:

There is not a sinner present, and I believe not a minister who ever witnessed the ceremonial, that will not vouch for it as being far more impressive and far more characteristic of a day of sacredness than were the crush, and the bustle, and the irritation, and the whole tribe both of moral and physical discomforts that were attendant on the old style of administration.

The old arrangements, according to Chalmers, were such a squeeze that one could not venture into it without the powers of a robust constitution. Now, he said "It is a service to which many delicate and infirm can repair."

One curious feature of the speech is the insistence by Chalmers on his aversion to controversy. He tells the Synod:

The element of debate is one in which I breathe with the utmost discomfort: and to be surrounded with uncongenial minds and uncongenial feelings, is a thing of as great dread and desolation to me as to be placed in the midst of a vast howling wilderness.

It is a remarkable statement from the future leader of the Disruption.

This particular controversy, he says, has aggravated his general dislike to controversy:

I declare, that on the question whether the communicants should look at each other, or should all look in one way to the minister, I would be positively ashamed to appear as a combatant even on the right side of it ... The country has higher demands upon us than to waste out strength or our time upon such puny altercations.<sup>3</sup>

But in another part of the speech he says: "I cannot give up without a struggle the substantial advantage of my present arrangement".

His successor at St John's, Patrick Macfarlan, felt the same way and appealed from the Synod to the General Assembly of 1827. That Assembly re-affirmed the deliverance of the Assembly of 1825 but reversed the finding of the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr "in so far as they propose alterations upon the arrangements made in certain churches within their bounds". That is to say a dispensation was granted to these Glasgow churches to allow them to continue to infringe the law, while the Assembly upheld the law in principle for the Church as a whole.

Some years later Chalmers used this episode as an example when lecturing to his students at Edinburgh about zeal for circumstantialia and the magnifying of small matters in religion. He suggested to his students that "the interesting relics of the olden pertinaciousness and the olden zeal for little things are to

be found more abundantly in the west [of Scotland]." In an oblique reference to Dr Begg and the Presbytery of Hamilton, he remarked:

Accordingly, it is not within the limits of the Bothwell region - that land of sturdy principle, signalized by the exploits and the martyrdoms of our covenanting forefathers - where I would attempt the slightest innovation on their ancient forms, however harmless, or even to a certain extent beneficial; seeing there are many there who, on the proposition of any change, however insignificant, will resist you by saying they will never consent to let down even the smallest pin of the tabernacle.

Chalmers' view of the west of Scotland was very much as the General Assembly looked at the question which broke out about the tables:

When our venerable mother, sitting in her collective wisdom, was called on to decide the quarrel that had broken out among her children, she allowed me, the one party, to continue the table-service in the way I had found to be most convenient; but instead of laying aught like severity or rebuke upon the other, she, while disappointing them of their plea, dismissed them at the same time with a look of the most benignant complacency.

It is clear that the Assembly of 1827 considered that the old ways were best and that the new ways should be followed only in exceptional circumstances. Despite this Chalmers example came to be followed in almost all the parishes of the Church of Scotland long before the end of the 19th century, perhaps as early as the 1860s. The Free Church never used the long tables except occasionally for open-air services. Thus the Scottish churches came into line with the English dissenters some two hundred years after the Westminster Assembly.

I know of only two parishes where the Sacrament is dispensed regularly to communicants sitting around a table - St John's Oxfords in Edinburgh and Cults East in Aberdeen.

- 1 Lorimer - *John Knox and the Church of England* p.261
- 2 Lorimer p.271
- 3 Lorimer p.272
- 4 Letters II p 204
- 5 Maxwell *History of Worship in the Church of Scotland* p 173
- 6 William Hanna *Biography of Thomas Chalmers* page 389
- 7 William Hanna p.390+
- 8 William Hanna p.392