

THE MINISTRY OF JAMES COOPER AT ABERDEEN

* * * * *

Douglas M Murray

* * * * *

On the day of his induction to the East Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen, in 1881 James Cooper went to the church before the service and found that nothing had been done to provide, as he put it, "for the proper fulfilment of the sacred rite."

In particular he was disturbed to discover that there was no sign of a communion table. The church officer told him that it was kept in the west lobby where the gentlemen of the choir used it to place their hats during the service. He and the church officer moved it into the church. Cooper's father also arrived at that point and was disappointed to see that there was neither organ nor lectern, font nor altar, such as there had been at Cooper's first charge of St Stephen's Broughty Ferry. His father remarked that this would mean a sacrifice to him, to which Cooper replied: "We just must have it rectified". Cooper, however, proceeded to "rectify" matters at the East Church without taking into account the opposition of some of the elders and without taking sufficient care to explain his views in a way which would not be open to misunderstanding. As a result eleven of his twenty-seven elders presented a petition to the presbytery of Aberdeen in May 1882 complaining of his "High Church" doctrine and practices.²

The East Church Case ended with a vindication of Cooper's position as being within the tradition of the Church of Scotland, but with a criticism of the way in which Cooper had expounded his doctrine and introduced his practices. During the remainder of his ministry at East St Nicholas, Cooper was much more careful to consult his elders over any changes that he proposed.

Later controversies

One change which Cooper desired was the installation of an organ. The Kirk Session twice rejected this proposal before a congregational meeting

approved of the acquisition of an instrument in 1885.³ For Cooper, however, the position of the organ was also important. He did not wish it to be placed at the east end of the church yet he did not want to cause division in the session or congregation over the issue. His attitude is seen in a letter that he wrote to his friend Dr George W Sprott in February 1886:⁴

My organ is more than a possibility now. I am engaged in what I think will be a successful effort to keep it out of the apse. I shall keep it out, but I hope to do so without an open rupture with anyone.

The Kirk Session were equally divided on the issue but Cooper refused to use his casting vote.⁵ In response to a petition from 30 members, however, Cooper called a congregational meeting where it was decided by a large majority that the organ should be positioned in the west gallery of the church and not at the east end.⁶ Ten elders who disagreed with this decision sent a memorial to the organ committee of the town council but this was rejected. In this matter Cooper had shown tact in not using his casting vote at the session and in obtaining the consent of the congregation.

The subject which aroused the greatest controversy in the session during the latter half of Cooper's ministry was the celebration of communion on Easter Day instead of on the traditional Sunday in April. Any change in the date of communion was a matter for the Kirk Session to decide and thus Cooper could only proceed with the consent of a majority of the elders. The change was first made in 1889 when three elders dissented from the decision. Cooper published the sermon he gave on that occasion.⁷ In the preface Cooper explained that the abolition of the old fast days in Aberdeen meant that each Kirk Session could appoint which Sunday seemed to them "most expedient" for the celebration of communion. In the sermon he said that there were many reasons for holding the sacrament on Easter Day, but above all it was appropriate since at the Lord's table we are assured of Christ's risen presence.⁸ In the following year the session was unanimous in deciding that communion should be celebrated on Easter Day, but in 1891 the session decided by sixteen votes to six that the sacrament should be held at the same time as at the other churches in Aberdeen.⁹ In view of the opinions of some of the elders which had been expressed to him privately, Cooper did not press the matter in the following year but instead waited until 1893 when the session voted by fourteen votes to eight in favour of an Easter celebration.¹⁰ It is worth noting that the composition of the session had changed during the previous year with the addition of eight new elders, one of whom was David M M Milligan, the eldest son of Cooper's mentor,

Professor William Milligan. Five of the elders dissented from this decision but they did not appeal to the presbytery. Communion was held on Easter Day for the remainder of Cooper's ministry in Aberdeen. Cooper had waited until he could be sure that a majority of the session was in favour before he had reintroduced the proposal.

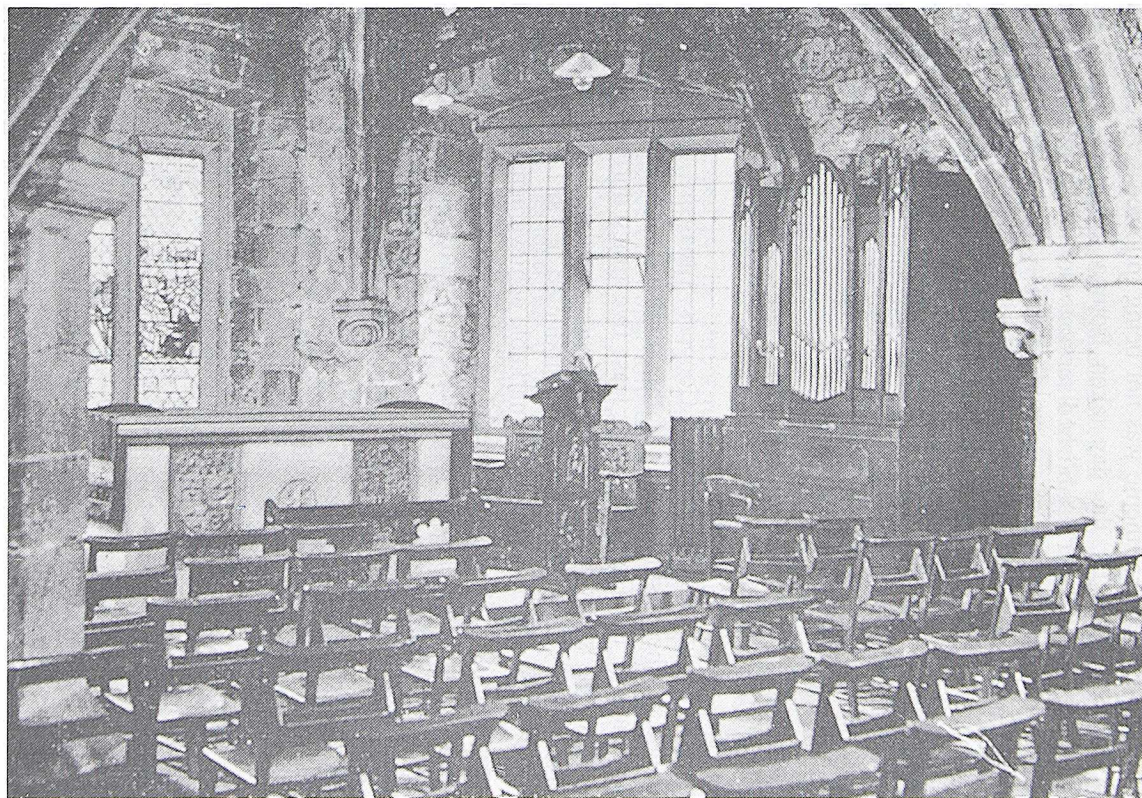
Preaching

According to J M Kirkpatrick the only parallel to Cooper's ministry at the East Church of St Nicholas in Aberdeen in terms of "creative impulse" was the contemporaneous ministry of John Macleod at Govan.¹¹ Both men considered preaching and teaching the Christian faith to be of the greatest importance. Cooper, said Wallace Williamson, was primarily a teacher of the faith.¹² Judging by his published sermons it must be said, however, that Cooper did not give such a profound or prolonged treatment of theological themes as did John Macleod. He tended to state doctrinal truths rather than give a discussion or explanation of them.¹³ According to his biographer, H J Wotherspoon, Cooper was a historian rather than a philosopher.¹⁴ During his ministry in Aberdeen he often preached series of sermons on a common theme. As George Milligan pointed out, Cooper's preaching was largely expository in character and he gave great importance to following the Christian Year.¹⁵

Cooper delivered several series of Advent sermons, including one that was later published as *Bethlehem* in which he stressed the importance of relating the incarnation to the atonement.¹⁶ Other series of Advent sermons were entitled 'The Incarnation as meeting the Needs of Man', 'The Kingdoms of the World and the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ', 'The Second Coming of our Lord', and 'The Preparation of the World for the First Coming of our Saviour'.¹⁷ One year Cooper also gave a series of midweek sermons on the hymns which had been inspired by the incarnation, the *Magnificat*, the *Benedictus*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*.¹⁸ The seasons of Lent and Easter also called for special series of sermons, such as one entitled 'Antidotes from the Passion' which included, for example, the antidote to disobedience as Christ's obedience unto death.¹⁹ Cooper instituted Holy Week services at the East Church, having been the first minister in the Church of Scotland to hold such services when he introduced them at St Stephen's Broughty Ferry in 1878.²⁰

Cooper also gave series of expository sermons on books of the bible and on doctrinal themes. For example, series were preached on the book of Genesis

St Mary's Chapel



(Photograph copyright of Aberdeen Journals Ltd. and is reproduced by permission)

and on the Gospel of St Mark. A series on the Acts of the Apostles was given on Sunday evenings over two years.²¹ Examples of the doctrinal sermons were a series on the Creed and one on worship, of which the final sermon was entitled 'The Eucharist as the Crown of the Church's Worship'.²² If a special theme was not being followed sermons would be given on the lesson for the day taken from a lectionary based on the Christian Year.²³ Cooper's published sermons do not give a fair picture of his regular preaching since they were largely delivered on special occasions to mark anniversaries or they addressed subjects which were under discussion in the Church at the time. In his preaching at the East Church of St Nicholas Cooper sought to give systematic teaching from the Bible on the central doctrines of the Christian faith. It was partly because he gave such an important place to preaching that his high church views and practices came to be accepted by the congregation.

Pastoral work

Another factor in the acceptance of Cooper's 'ritualism' was his energetic fulfilment of the pastoral task of the ministry. He visited the entire congregation of the East Church at least five times during the seventeen years which he spent in Aberdeen. Considering that the communion roll increased from 1,535 when Cooper was inducted in 1881 to 2,280 in 1890, then to 1,792 by 1897, this was a remarkable achievement. Cooper told the congregation in 1885 that his week was divided between three days for visiting the congregation, and three days for visiting the sick and afflicted, for pulpit preparation and for rest.²⁴ During his ministry Cooper had the services of an assistant minister, and a presbytery visitation in 1897 concluded that an additional assistant was required for the work of this 'immense congregation'.²⁵ Cooper had earlier spoken to the Kirk Session about his need in 1894.²⁶

Cooper also saw the importance of outreach to the parish through the activities of the organisations and the holding of a special mission week. Cooper was himself involved in the work of the Sunday School, an activity that was criticised during the East Church case. He also led the way in the Church of Scotland in setting up an organisation for women in the congregation. The Guild of St Margaret was formed during Cooper's first year in Aberdeen and thus anticipated the formation of the Woman's Guild at the national level by six years.²⁷ As with the later activities of other branches, the Guild in the East Church provided practical forms of service in the parish for the young, the sick, and the poor. Its members were also

linked together by the bond of daily scripture reading and prayer. A mission week was held in the congregation in 1895 by a team of ministers led by H J Wotherspoon. Cooper told the congregation that it would be the aim of the mission team²⁸

by God's help, to reach every inhabitant of the Parish and every Member of the Congregation, to arouse the careless, to lead sinners to repentance, to comfort the penitent, and guide the anxious, to invigorate every organisation that we have, and to meet the special difficulties besetting every different section of our community.

The week began and ended with the celebration of holy communion and there were special meetings for each organisation and for business and professional men. Open air services were held in Castle Street and in some of the closes of the parish.²⁹ After the mission Cooper was disappointed that more members of the congregation had not taken part. Wotherspoon, however, thought that the attendance had been large and he had been particularly impressed by the 'intent responsiveness of the after meetings, the helpfulness of the Daily Devotional Services, and the prevailing presence and influence of Cooper himself.³⁰ Cooper had been struck by the open air preaching of one of the missionaries and he considered holding such services on a regular basis as an effective way of reaching a large section of parishioners.³¹ He decided that if he were to have the services of another assistant he would engage in this method of outreach.

It did not prove possible, however, to obtain further ministerial assistance and the enormous task of serving the congregation continued to be carried out by Cooper and his one assistant. As Wotherspoon remarked, the parish work had so increased towards the end of his ministry that he wondered how Cooper lived through his weeks.³² It is noticeable that during his later years in Aberdeen, Cooper's diaries contain very few entries apart from the notices of engagements and that these crowd the 'pages.³³ Cooper's active involvement in, and commitment to, pastoral work did mean that the changes he made in worship were perceived in relation to the priority he gave to his traditional area of ministry.

Worship

It was in the sphere of worship that Cooper's ministry proved to be the most innovative. As we have already seen from an examination of Cooper's preaching, the worship of the congregation was structured around the observance of the main festivals of the Christian Year. Cooper had followed

this pattern from the beginning of his ministry at Aberdeen and this observance had been one of the complaints made against him by the eleven elders in the East Church case.³⁴ Christmas services usually included a service for children and a watchnight service on Christmas Eve.³⁵ Holy Week services were held from 1883 and Cooper spoke of them as opportunities for mission. In 1890 they consisted of both morning and evening services and in 1898 the total attendance during the week had been 1,104.³⁶ Ascension Day was observed from 1891 and there was also an Eve of Pentecost service that year. In announcing the Ascension Day service in 1892 in the *Parish Magazine*, Cooper quoted an extract from William Milligan's Book on *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord*.³⁷

Daily services were held from the first year of Cooper's ministry and had also been mentioned in the petition of the eleven elders in 1882. There was a need, said Cooper, for the church to be open during the day and for the opportunity for prayer and meditation to be given to people whose homes were over-crowded.³⁸ The busier he was himself, he said, the more helpful he found the daily service. Two services were held each day from 1894 and Cooper urged each member to be present at least once during the week. He thought that the Saturday afternoon service made an excellent preparation for the worship of the Lord's Day.³⁹ Cooper, however, agreed with John Macleod that numbers were not the most important consideration with regard to the daily service.⁴⁰ The only reference in the attendance is for a day in January 1883 when eighteen were present.⁴¹

Cooper sought to encourage congregational participation in worship as much as possible. In addition to the singing of metrical psalms and hymns, accompanied by an organ from 1886, Cooper wished to increase participation by the singing of canticles and prose psalms and by the saying of the Nicene Creed. Singing practices were held to familiarise the congregation with the prose psalms but Cooper remained disappointed that many did not participate and stood 'listless and silent' when 'they should be confessing Christ before men in the Creed and singing in psalm and hymn to the praise of the Most High.'⁴² Cooper encouraged the practice of family devotions and asked for the prayers of his people, not just in the home, but each Sunday before the service began.⁴³ Cooper was also disappointed that the increase in the membership of the congregation had not resulted in any significant increase in attendance at worship.⁴⁴

One of the principal changes which Cooper wished to make was with regard to the celebration of holy communion. He had gone to the East Church on

condition that the frequency of communion be increased from twice yearly to quarterly. The Kirk Session instituted celebrations in January and June, in addition to those in April and October, in 1882, but the attendance at the extra communions was a great disappointment to Cooper. Only 356 were present at the first January communion in 1882 compared to 1,408 at the April celebration.⁴⁵ Attendance at the January and June communions never rose much above 400 during the remainder of his ministry in spite of pleas from the minister in the pages of the *Parish Magazine*.⁴⁶ Nevertheless Cooper tried to increase the frequency of communion in other ways. When Christmas Day fell on a Sunday in 1887 and in 1892, the Kirk Session agreed to celebrations of the sacrament, and from 1893 onwards there was always a celebration of communion on a Sunday during the Christmas season.⁴⁷ Cooper, however, was unable to increase the level of frequency beyond five times a year. The possibility of an early morning monthly communion was raised with the Kirk Session in 1893 but the Committee on Communion Arrangements later reported that it was not in favour of the proposal.⁴⁸ Cooper raised the issue again in 1898 but having heard the views of the elders, said he would postpone the matter for future consideration.⁴⁹ Later that year, however, Cooper would be saying farewell to the congregation on his appointment to the Regius Chair of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Glasgow. He left the East Church having made many changes in worship, but having failed to achieve the frequency of communion that he desired.

Conclusion

On his leaving Aberdeen in 1898, James Cooper was presented with a costly chalice, and a stained glass window was later erected in St Mary's Chapel in the crypt of the church in gratitude for his ministry.⁵⁰ A local newspaper spoke of him as an efficient pastor, a ripe scholar, and a public spirited citizen who was esteemed by all classes and conditions of people.⁵¹ It also said that the clouds of the East Church Case had soon rolled by and that differences had been forgotten when the depth of his devotion and practical Christianity came to light. Cooper had certainly proceeded more cautiously and had sought the consent of the Kirk Session in the changes that had been proposed. In addition he had not been successful in introducing all the measures that he had wished, such as the greater frequency of communion. Above all, the place which Cooper gave to preaching and teaching the Christian faith and to pastoral work ensured that his high church principles and practices were accepted by the congregation as standing within the reformed tradition of the Church of Scotland.



THE COOPER CHALICE

Abbreviations

- DJC The Diaries of James Cooper, Aberdeen University Library, MS 2283/1-44 and Box.
 JC H J Wotherspoon, *James Cooper: A Memoir* (London 1926)
 KS The Minutes of the Kirk Session of East St Nicholas, Aberdeen, Scottish Record Office, CH2/741/3-5
 PM *The Parish Magazine of East Nicholas Parish Church, Aberdeen*, New College Library, Edinburgh

References

- 1 JC, p 119 Cf Norman Maclean, *The Years of Fulfilment* (London 1953) p 10
- 2 D M Murray, 'James Cooper and the East Church Case at Aberdeen, 1882-3. The High Church Movement Vindicated' *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 19 (1977) pp 217-33
- 3 KS, 7 December 1885
- 4 JC, p 145
- 5 KS, 5 April 1886
- 6 KS, 24 April and 3 May 1886
- 7 James Cooper, *Easter Communion*s (Aberdeen, 1889)

8 *Ibid.*, pp.9-10
 9 KS, 3 March 1890 and 5 January 1891
 10 KS, 13 February 1893
 11 J M Kirkpatrick, 'James Cooper, 1846-1922'
Church Service Society Annual 17 (1947) p.5
 12 A Wallace Williamson, in 'A Man Greatly Beloved'
Transactions of the Scottish Ecclesiological Society 7.2,p.23
 13 D M Murray, 'The Scottish Church Society, 1892-1914:
 a study of the high church movement in the Church of Scotland'
 (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1975),p.78
 14 *JC*, p.281
 15 George Milligan, in 'A Man Greatly Beloved', p.6
 16 (Aberdeen, 1889)
 17 *PM*, November and December 1892,
 November and December 1893, November 1896 and November 1897
 18 *PM*, November and December 1893
 19 *PM*, April 1895
 20 D M Murray, 'Disruption to Union' in D B Forrester and
 D M Murray, eds., *Studies in History of Worship in Scotland* (Edinburgh 1984),p.91
 21 *PM*, November and December 1895, November 1892
 and October 1894
 22 *PM*, December 1896 and May 1892
 23 *PM*, February 1893 and January-March 1897
 24 *PM*, August 1885
 25 Minutes of the Presbytery of Aberdeen, 17 February 1897;
 KS,10 May 1897
 26 KS, 30 April 1894
 27 *JC*, p.125
 28 *PM*, September 1895
 29 *PM*, October and November 1895
 30 *PM*, December 1895; *JC*, p.178
 31 *JC*, p.179
 32 *Ibid.*
 33 *JC*, p.181
 34 Murray, 'James Cooper and the East Church Case',
 p.223, cf.*JC*, pp.125-6
 35 *PM*, December 1893, December 1894 and December 1895
 36 DJC,10 and 11 April 1884,p.34: *PM*,March 1890 and May 1898
 37 (Edinburgh,1893); *PM*, May 1892
 38 *PM*, August 1885
 39 *PM*, January 1896
 40 D M Murray, 'The Worship of Govan Parish Church during the Ministry of Dr John
 Macleod' in John Harvey, ed., *Govan Old Parish Church 1888-1988* (Glasgow,1988),pp.201
 41 DJC, 15 January 1883,p.5
 42 'Pastoral Letter to the Parishioners of the East Church
 and the Congregation of the East Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen'
 16 February 1898,p.1
 43 *PM*, December 1893, February 1894 and January 1895
 44 'Pastoral Letter',p.1
 45 KS, 5 February and 1 May 1882
 46 *PM*, January 1890, October 1891, June 1895, June 1896 and June 1897
 47 *PM*, December 1893
 48 KS, 11 September and 6 November 1893
 49 KS, 7 February 1898
 50 *Life and Work*, February 1900
 51 *Aberdeen Journal*, 28 July 1898



Details of the Cooper Chalice