

The Communion Token: An Aid in Discipline, An Enticement for Growth

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce the Communion Token, and then to trace the use and development of the Communion Token from its inception after the Reformation until the present.

What is a Communion Token?

A Communion Token is a token of admission to the Lord's Supper, found in its early days in the form of a piece of metal variously inscribed (and occasionally blank), and in its later days in the form of a card. The metal token, referred to in this paper as the Communion Token, came into use within Protestant communions in approximately 1560 and continued in use in most places until the late 1800s. The card token, hereafter called the Communion Card, has been in use from the early 1800s until today.

How did the Communion Token come into being?

The origins of the token can be traced back well before the Reformation. Greek and Roman civilizations used signs or tokens called *tesserae* or *meralli* for entry into celebrations, or as evidence of membership in secret societies. The Christian fish symbol may be seen to have a similar use. Tokens of various styles and taking various forms were in use over the centuries as souvenirs, passwords, introductions, and passes into special events.

The beginning of the Communion Token, known generally in the French-speaking world as the *marreau* or *méreau*, is placed at the feet of John Calvin himself. In a letter to the Council of Geneva, dated 1560, Calvin wrote:

[II] serait bon que pour éviter le danger de ceux qui profanent la cène, lesquels on ne peut tout connaître, il serait bon de faire des marreaux et que, advenant le jour de la cène, chacun allât prendre des marreaux pour ceux de sa maison qui seraient instruits et les étrangers qui viennent ayant rendu témoignage de leur foi en pourront aussi prendre et ce qui n'en auront point n'y seront pas admis.”¹ (It would be good to avoid the danger of those who profane the Lord's Supper, of which one cannot know everyone, it would be good to make tokens and when the day of the

¹ Charles Delormeau, *Les méreaux de communion des églises protestantes de France et du Refuge* (Mialet en Cévennes: Musée du Desert, 1999) 5.

Lord's Supper comes, each [member] would go and get tokens for those in their households that have received instruction, and the strangers who come, having given witness to their faith, would receive them as well, and that those who have no token should not be admitted to the Supper.²⁾

The Geneva Council itself did not adopt Calvin's idea immediately, noting "some great and unimpeachable difficulties, and decided that they would restrain themselves by warning the people from the pulpit that no one might approach the Lord's Supper who was not fit."³ However, in France the idea caught on quickly; the earliest recorded use of the *méreau* was in the church at Nîmes in 1562, and "by the end of the 16th century most of the churches of the [French Protestant] communion had adopted it."⁴

John Knox, a student of Calvin's and the Father of the Scottish Reformation, was almost certainly the one who introduced the Communion Token to Scotland. The earliest dated Scottish Communion Token on record is one from Glasgow dated 1588, but all examples of this token seem to have been lost. While the token was used extensively in France, the Scots were far more enthusiastic; my research indicates that today over 80% of the known Communion Tokens are of Scottish origin.

What do Communion Tokens look like?

Communion Tokens are of two basic types: the European and the Scottish. Among the European tokens, the major motif appears to be the Communion chalice. Scandinavian, German, and French tokens have this as a primary symbol. The Dutch tokens from the eighteenth century feature a goose, believed to represent Jan Hus, the early reformer. There is a secondary motif among the French tokens, that of a shepherd and sheep. Dutch, German, and Scandinavian examples normally feature a Latin text, while the tokens of the Calvinist Protestant Churches of France feature primarily the French language. The texts in Latin are often ones that would be acceptable in both Roman and Protestant worship, such as "Signo calicis et crucis" ("a sign [or token] of the chalice and the cross"), presumably to prevent problems in an era of suspicion and persecution. The tokens of France identified their congregation of origin with initials. For example AP or EP often appear for *Assemblée Protestante* or *Église Protestante*, followed by the initials of the church itself. Initials were also used for messages to the token user. One example is the letters RGAD&LSF, which stands for "*Rendez Grâce À Dieu Et Le Servez Fidèlement*" ("Return thanks to God and serve Him faithfully") which appears on a token of Vançais, in Poitou. European tokens are mostly round, though a very small number of other shapes are known. Most are made of lead, but a very few in white metal or silver are known.

Early inscriptions on the Scottish type often involved the initials of the minister or of the parish stamped onto the piece of lead, either incuse or in relief. In many cases the

² There is some debate among scholars as to whether Calvin was proposing a new idea or encouraging a practice that had already begun. There is in existence what appears in every way to be a Communion Token of France dated 1553, which contributes some uncertainty to the question.

³ Henri Gélin, *Communion Tokens in the Reformed Churches of France and More Particularly in Those of Poitou*, trans. M. B. Orr ([Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 1977]) 7.

⁴ Gélin 7.

token was understood to be the property of the minister and went with him when he moved from one congregation to another. As time went on, the tokens were manufactured with more artistic appeal and with refinements. Scripture was the focus of messages to the bearer. Most often the Scripture passages were either “This do in remembrance of me” accompanied by either the reference to I Corinthians 11:24 or Luke 22:19, or “But let a man examine himself” (I Corinthians 11:28). Many other passages appear, though less often, either written out in full or simply by the Scripture reference. The languages known on the Scottish type include Gaelic, Dutch, Afrikaans, and the languages of the islands of Aneiteum and Efate in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides). Later tokens sometimes included devices referring to the Communion services, chalice, bread, and table. Occasionally there were representations of the burning bush or the church building.

Communion Tokens vary greatly in size, measuring from a tiny ten to a large fifty millimetres, and in thickness, ranging from less than a millimetre to over four millimetres. The tokens of the Scottish type have a whole myriad of shapes. Most are rectangular with clipped corners, oval, round, or square, though there are some with triangular, hexagonal, octagonal, trefoil, and heart shapes. The early metal token was generally of the cheapest metal available, primarily lead. Later tokens are of lead with alloys, such as white metal and pewter, and also brass, copper, bronze, nickel, and, when it became useable, aluminium. A few examples are known in silver and wood, and even leather and ivory.

Who used the Communion Token?

European Communion tokens were used primarily by Calvinist churches in Eastern Europe, particularly France and the Netherlands, but also by Lutherans in Germany and Scandinavia.

The Scottish type, which is the primary subject of this paper, is almost exclusively a Presbyterian phenomenon, though a few examples of Scottish Episcopalian and Methodist tokens exist. One Scottish Baptist congregation is known to have used a metal token. Two Dutch Reformed congregations are known to have used the Scottish type. One such congregation, St. Stephen’s Dutch Reformed Church in Cape Town, South Africa, had originally been founded as a Presbyterian congregation, and the “Reformed Dutch” congregation on the island of St. Thomas in the U. S. Virgin Islands used a token during the time when the congregation was served by Presbyterian ministers by the names of John Knox, an American, and William Allan, a Scot, between 1846 and 1878.

Some experts have speculated that perhaps there have been examples of a Roman Catholic Communion Token. Some tokens of Roman Catholic churches are known, but rather than being tokens for admission to the Sacrament, they are rather known as “pew tokens,” and were taken by members who moved from one parish as introduction into a new parish church. Father Bernard O’Connor, a member of the Pope’s Curia living at the Vatican, and also a collector of Nova Scotia Communion Tokens, writes,

I have never heard of Communion Tokens in the RC tradition. Given the style of distributing the Mass elements which we have followed from time immemorial, there would have never been the need to prepare a specific number of the elements for any given Mass celebration. Again, this would

refer to the fact that Communion under one species (unleavened bread or host) was the norm until recent times for us. As for pew tokens, these were used in many parishes I am told, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This related to the fact that most families had a reserved pew in the local parish church. By showing the token to a new pastor or to an usher, this verified their family's membership in that parish. Also, families actually paid each year for the rental of their pew in church, and at which time it is likely that they were given the token as a kind of receipt and as proof of good standing to new pastors, church wardens (think Parish Council or equivalent, e.g. Session) and other concerned parties. The pew token therefore had diverse functions.”⁵

The Scottish type of the Communion Token is, in fact, international. During the years of European expansion, the Highland Clearances, and the resulting emigrations, the tradition of the token was taken by Scots as they left their native soil and settled in other countries. Thus the Scottish type is known to have been used throughout the British Isles, and also in Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Caribbean, and Argentina. In Canada the token arrived with immigrants on the east coast and then travelled with the people as settlements expanded westwards. The farthest west congregation known to have used the Communion Token is Kildonan Church in Winnipeg.

Missionaries from the various colonies also took the tradition of the token to their fields of work. In some places the use of the metal token was impractical, but Canadian missionaries did use Communion Tokens in British Guiana (now Guyana) and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).

Scottish military regiments, mindful of their faith, were responsible for the use of tokens in places like Gibraltar, Malta, Madeira, Greece, India, and South Africa. There is one purely regimental token, that of the 72nd regiment, Seaforth Highlanders; the others were used by churches that stemmed from Scottish regimental presence.

How was the Communion Token used?

In Scotland and in early Canadian churches, the sacrament was generally observed once a year, and often in July or August. Typical of the practice is this description of the seventeenth-century kirk in Brechin, Scotland:

Before the Communion season there was quite a lengthy period of preliminary preparation, for everybody in the congregation, both young and old, had to be tested in their scriptural knowledge. Sometimes the Ministers intimated that they would visit and examine the families resident in a given quarter on certain days of the coming week. More usually a time-table of the examination was announced from the pulpit, by which certain days were set aside weekly for the various elders' districts, and the people were expected to come and be examined in the church. For the

⁵ Bernard O'Connor, letter to the author, 20 May 2007.

town members of the congregation this form of examination lasted three or four weeks, but for the landward area of the parish it might easily be spread over two or three months. [. . .] When the Ministers and elders were satisfied with the fitness of the congregation to communicate, there came the distribution of the Communion tokens, small coin-shaped pieces of lead, known in Brechin at this time as “tickets.” [. . .] Communion was spread over two or three successive Sundays. During the Covenanting period there were usually two Sundays for the landward and one for the townspeople. [. . .] For the actual service, two long tables were set up on trestles in the length of the nave.⁶

The minister celebrated the Supper from a small table at the front, and the elements would be carried by the elders to the communicants who had surrendered their tokens as they came to the table.

In Canada, the practice was very similar. For example, in St. Andrew’s Guelph, “the practice of the Communion season, still common in some of the Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, was followed, consisting of preparatory services on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, at which services the Communion Tokens would be distributed permitting those in attendance to come to the Lord’s table.”⁷ Concerning the Communion services held at Kenyon Presbyterian Church in Dunvegan, Glengarry County, we read about

the English services in the church and the Gaelic in the grove near the location of the present manse because the log church would not hold the crowd; the preparatory services; the giving out of the tokens; then the services of the Sabbath; the ministers standing in the tent; the people sitting on logs and benches among the trees; the sweet yet strong singing as the voices blended with nature’s music of the rustle of the leaves; the powerful evangelistic sermons; the stillness as the tables were fenced and the elements dispensed; and the deep feeling that Christ himself was present among the communicants.⁸

It might also be noted that the sermons were preached for two hours in Gaelic, and only one hour in English since it was believed that language did not lend itself to good preaching. However, the Rev. William Proudfoot of London Ontario had no problem with English preaching. He wrote that, after the Communion tokens were collected and the people gathered for Communion, “I fenced the tables, also out of doors. After the fencing we went into the meeting house. There were four table services. I gave

⁶ David Boath Thoms, *The Kirk of Brechin in the Seventeenth Century* ([Brechin]: The Society of Friends of Brechin Cathedral, 1972) 75, 77, 78.

⁷ W. Stanford Reid, *A Century and a Half of Witness 1828-197: The Story of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Guelph, Ontario* (Mississauga: Moyers and Smart, 1980) 7.

⁸ Donald N. MacMillan, *Historical Sketch of Kenyon Presbyterian Church Dunvegan* (Cornwall: O’Neill, 1993) 5.

an address after the service was over. I did not give an evening sermon lest I weary the people. I had already spoken for six hours.”⁹

The Communion Token was essential to the worship of the Scottish Church from the Reformation until the early 1800s. The creation of the Free Church of Scotland in 1843 saw a revival of the use of the Communion Token as hundreds of new tokens were made for church use.

Over the years of use, the Communion Token has had a variety of purposes in its use. The four primary uses, which overlap through history, are education, discipline, evangelism, and membership.

Education

As noted above, Calvin promoted the use of the token among believers and stated that those without one would not be received at the Lord’s table—amounting to excommunication. But there was a concern in the church as people misunderstood being barred from participation in the Lord’s Supper as a permanent condition. In a letter of 1561, addressed to the faithful in France, Calvin clarifies this “excommunication,” writing, “When someone is forbidden Communion, he is not excluded forever nor is it to make him desperate, but to humble him and to instruct others.”¹⁰ Thus the primary use of the token in early Calvinist teaching was instruction.

The practice continued in Scotland where the use of the token was long associated with the encouragement to learn what was considered the basics of the faith. In 1657, for example, the Kirk Session at Brechin

ordered that “ilk family within this congregation, where there is any who can read, shall have a Shorter Catechism for instructing the children and servants on the Lord’s Day after sermon.” But above all it was necessary at the examination to be able to repeat the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Ten Commandments. This seems to have been regarded as an essential minimum of knowledge.¹¹

The standards applied to members seeking admission to Communion, couples seeking to be married, and parents of children to be baptised.

The result of this instruction is the deep faith and conviction of the Scots that appears in many circumstances. Even where there was no preacher, the desire to express their love for God was evident. Although Communion Tokens are not specifically mentioned, the effect of the education associated with the tokens may be seen in a story from Cape Town, South Africa. In 1806 the 1st battalion of the 93rd Sutherland Fencibles formed The Calvinist Society for “worship and mutual edification:”

⁹ Leslie Robb Grey, *Proudfoot to Pepperbox to Posterity 1833-1983: The 150 Year History of New St. James Presbyterian Church* (London: New St. James Presbyterian Church, 1983) 8.

¹⁰ Gélín 7.

¹¹ Thoms 76.

The Sutherland men were so well grounded in moral duties and religious principles, that when stationed at the Cape of Good Hope [. . .] the men of the 93rd regiment formed themselves into a congregation, appointed elders of their own number, engaged and paid a stipend, collected from the soldiers, to a clergyman of the Church of Scotland, [. . .] and had divine services performed comfortably to the ritual of the established Church.”¹²

Out of this expression of faith came the congregation of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Cape Town, and their Communion Token.

Discipline

Discipline is perhaps the best known use of the Communion Token. Those who are aware of the token and its uses tend to believe that they were the tools of heavy-handed Sessions dealing with the excesses and errors of their congregants. While this was certainly the case in most congregations at one time or another, it is just one of the purposes of the Communion Token. However,

it was the elders’ duty, as Communion drew near, to seek to mend quarrels and remove the causes of dispute and strife among members in their districts, and if their efforts at reconciliation proved unavailing, to bring such cases before the Session. Indeed, to withhold Communion from various types of offenders was not unknown, and sometimes it was quite an effective threat to those who refused to comply with the requirements of Church discipline.¹³

John Moir, in his article on John Waldie’s essay on the influence of the Kirk Session in Victorian Canada, mentions “the three most important purposes of church discipline—to vindicate God’s glory, to keep the church pure, and to reclaim the sinner.”¹⁴ He further notes: “Discipline, whatever its form, should however be followed by reconciliation and since, in the Reformed tradition, only God can forgive, Church censures are not punishments, but a means of grace to be used to recover the erring souls from sin and error.”¹⁵

Sessions were called upon to make judgements, primarily in connection with the service of Communion, in many kinds of complaints and disputes, including, “church attendance, neglect of ordinances, Sabbath breaking, intemperance, dishonesty, profanity, forgery and an imaginative variety of sexual sins, [. . .] ‘gambling or gaming for money, card playing, attending theatres, public balls, horse racing, circus, bowling alleys,’ [. . .]

¹² James Browne, *History of the Highlands and of the Highland Clans*, vol. 4 (Glasgow: Fullerton, 1888) 366-67.

¹³ Thoms 77.

¹⁴ John S. Moir, *Early Presbyterianism in Canada*, ed. Paul Laverdure (Gravelbourg, SK: Gravelbooks, 2003) 73.

¹⁵ Moir 74.

gossiping, dishonesty, nonpayment of debts [. . .].”¹⁶ For any one of these reasons the Session could choose to withhold the token, and therefore keep the “sinner” from Communion, until the penitence of the offender was offered and believed.

In the context of modern ways of looking at discipline, it seems ironic that some Sessions would take often take stringent actions of examination and then hand out a token that had the inscription, “Let a man examine himself.” Perhaps this explains the “great and unimpeachable difficulties” quoted earlier and expressed in response to Calvin’s suggestion of the token by the Council at Geneva, and their decision only to have the tables fenced by warnings from the pulpit.

The practice was not universally strict, however. Forgiveness and encouragement to reform was also part of the discipline of Session. Moir recounts this example: “One member who had been under the influence of liquor at the Hamilton Exhibition in 1868 expressed his penitence to a committee of two elders, but when he did not come forward to get a Communion token, the Session directed the Moderator to ‘encourage him and offer him one.’”¹⁷

Evangelism

With roots in the growing Presbyterian and Episcopalian struggles of post-Reformation Scotland, sacramental occasions burgeoned in the 1620s into great evangelistic events. In a climate of marked religious and political unrest, communions among the most fervent Presbyterians were transformed from parochial events into massive evangelistic gatherings.¹⁸

Early Scottish evangelism found its roots in, and was built around, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

Such things as preparatory services, sitting to receive the elements, self-examination, careful fencing of the tables, and communion tokens were all evident in one form or another from the early years of the Reformation in Scotland. What separated the festal communions from earlier sacraments were such characteristics as outdoor preaching, great concourses of people from an extensive region, long vigils of prayer, powerful experiences of conversion and confirmation, a number of popular ministers co-operating for extended services over three days or more, a seasonal focus on summer, and unusually large numbers of communicants at successive tables.¹⁹

The same practices of examination and handing out Communion Tokens were prevalent in these evangelistic events. The people who received tokens sat at tables, and

¹⁶ Moir 77.

¹⁷ Moir 79.

¹⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) 22.

¹⁹ Schmidt 24.

those who did not gathered on the hillsides around about to hear the messages. They were encouraged and prodded through the preaching to come to know the Saviour so that when the next Communion season came, they too might receive the token, sit at table, and come closer to the Lord.

The practice of the Communion season continued in Scotland, finding a new upsurge in the time of the Covenanters. The call to faith was as strong as ever in a time of persecution. An account of a Covenanter Communion service recalls the communions of a century before: “The Communion tables were spread on the green by the water, and around them the people had arranged themselves in decent order. But the far greater multitude sat on the brae face, which was crowded from top to bottom.”²⁰

The practice of the Communion season, or the Holy Fair, continued for many years. As anything else, the yearly communion gathering had its good points and its problems. The event in the late 1700s is described and ridiculed by Robert Burns in his poem, “The Holy Fair.” However, the place of the Communion token as a means of evangelism was clear. Those who responded to the preaching and yearned to sit at the table and receive the means of grace learned the basics of faith in order to receive the token.

One lovely story tells how the true meaning was understood. The story is of a young lad in Scotland, not blessed with full mental faculties, who was on his way to Communion. He met another on the same journey and was asked if he had the token. He responded that he didn’t have the lead thing; but the token was in his heart.²¹

Membership

The most familiar use of the Communion token in the past century and a half, is simply as a means of identifying those who are members in good standing of a congregation. As times changed, the days of the examination were eventually left behind. Tokens were given to congregational members before the Communion service was celebrated. In some places, the tokens were handed out at the preparatory service, and in others the tokens were delivered to the congregants by the elders. By the late 1800s metal tokens were being replaced by Communion cards for two major reasons: for one, paper was less expensive than metal, and for another, it was an advantage to be able to write the name of the member on the card so that the person’s attendance could be noted.

The transition was abrupt in many congregations as the token was dropped without ceremony and the card was adopted. A few, however, made the transition more interesting. St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Kingston, for example, placed their tokens in small envelopes on which were written the names of the members. Others used the cards and tokens in conjunction. St. John’s Presbyterian Church in Cornwall is the only congregation of the Presbyterian Church in Canada still using metal Communion tokens. The elders deliver cards to their districts, and when the people enter the church on Communion Sunday, they exchange the cards at the door for metal tokens. At the table, the tokens are turned in and the sacrament received.

²⁰ Alexander Smellie, *Men of the Covenant: The Story of the Scottish Church in the Years of the Persecution* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975) 216.

²¹ A. A. Milne, *Communion Tokens of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (Glasgow: Fraser, Asher & Co, 1920) 7.

The Communion card has given way in many congregations to a simple invitation that the elder delivers to all people, whether members or adherents. Some congregations, such as Knox Presbyterian Church in Woodstock, give out a fridge magnet with the dates of yearly communion services. Though there have been many changes in use, the idea of the Communion token continues in other forms.

Conclusion

Whether the student of the history surrounding the Communion token considers the idea to be well-advised or not, it is abundantly clear that those who made use of the token had one goal in mind, the drawing of the heart of the worshipper into the presence of Jesus Christ at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For Presbyterians over almost five centuries, the Communion Token and its kin have been aids to the means of grace.