

THE TOKEN

Alexander knew in his heart that he couldn't do it. Yet this indecision was making him upset; he was getting nervous. He was feeling guilty! How in the world would he ever tell his father? But as he sat in the back of the sanctuary at the communion service, brooding over his decision, he started to feel angry once again. "Only Christ can invite us to the communion table," Alexander muttered to himself. "Not men and their rules."

There were about 800 people at this semi-annual communion service. Eight tables were being served at one time. Alexander Campbell moved forward to the tables with the last group of people, but he still did not know what to do. Should he follow his heart?

As he slowly moved forward to be seated at a table, he recalled his experience of last Thursday at the service that began the Communion Season. The elders had asked him for his credentials as a member in good standing of the Old-Light Anti-Burgher Seceder Presbyterian Church. He replied that his membership was in the church, but in the church in Ireland. He was in their country because his family had been shipwrecked and delayed for the winter. He was using this time to attend classes at the University of Glasgow. No, he had no letter of recommendation with him.

The elders said that to be admitted to the Communion Service, he would have to be tested in front of the Presbyterian Session. If he passed, then he would receive a metallic token that would admit him into the communion service on Sunday.

Doing as he was instructed, Alexander appeared before the Session. He was asked to recite the Lord's Prayer. He was asked to recite the Apostle's Creed. He was also asked to discuss the Ten Commandments. Alexander answered all their questions to their satisfaction. He was "deemed worthy" and given the little metal token.

The token looked like a small, rectangle-shaped coin. It was his ticket into the communion service. Alexander knew that many Seceder Presbyterians felt that this was a special time to seriously think about what communion meant to them. They looked forward to the Communion Season. They felt that their tokens were symbols of their love for God. Others, however, felt that no person should judge another's worthiness to be allowed to go to the Lord's Table or to be barred from it.

The tray for the metallic tokens was being passed around the table now and it was coming closer to where Alexander was sitting. As it was handed to him, he asked himself for the last time, "Can the elders claim me worthy because I can answer their questions? No, only Christ knows whether or not I am worthy. I cannot take communion this way."

He took the tray and threw in the token. It landed with a resounding clang. He had made his decision. Not only would he not take part in the Communion Service, but he would no longer be a member of the Seceder Presbyterian Church. He left the table without sharing in the Lord's Supper.

The sound of that token hitting the tray was unnoticed by others sitting around him. But to Alexander, it pealed as loudly as a cathedral bell. It rang, proclaiming that Alexander Campbell was starting a search for new religious meaning.

Background Material for "The Token"

Throwing a metal token into a plate does not hold much dramatic action for children. But for Alexander Campbell it was a move full of drama. This story is an important church family story for older elementary children as they discuss the Lord's Supper.

For Disciples today, communion is central to the act of worship and no tests of "worthiness" are given. Yet it was this act of ~~"deeming one worthy" that finally convinced Alexander Campbell to~~ leave the Seceder Presbyterian Church. To Campbell the token was a symbol of the church in need of reformation.

The token symbolized Campbell's change in the religious direction he experienced while at the University of Glasgow in 1808. Congregationalists and their independent thinking were very influential. James A. Haldane and Greville Ewing, for example, from the Church of Scotland, advocated a simple and non-creedal Christianity. Campbell was also well acquainted with John Locke and his defense of a rational and tolerant religion.¹ Campbell's thinking about tests of worthiness for admittance to the Lord's Supper was influenced by John Locke's suggestion that:

...the Church of Christ make the conditions of her communion consist in such things, and such things only, as the Holy Spirit has in the Holy Scriptures declared, in express words, to be necessary to salvation.²

Tokens were issued to those who wished to be included in the annual observance of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Sacramental Season was a special time in the life of the church. The intent of issuing tokens as admittance tickets for these services was two-fold: keeping out the unworthy and to be a time of self-examination. To keep out the unworthy was a responsibility not only limited to the clergy. In 1560, the Council of Geneva stated:

To prevent the profanation of the table, it would be well if each took lead tokens for each of the eligible ones of their household. Strangers giving witness of their faith could also take these, but those not provided with tokens would not be admitted to the table.

Each "master and mistress" was responsible for the examination of those in their household. And if these stubbornly continue, and suffer their children and servants to continue in wilful

ignorance, the discipline of the Church must proceed against them unto excommunication; and then must the matter be referred to the Civil Magistrate.³

In the 1800's, the Scottish Seceder Presbyterians had services of communion twice a year. For persons to receive a token, the following was necessary:

They had to prove proficiency in the scriptures and be recognized by the Session as persons of faith and Christian thought.⁴

Preparatory services would start on Thursday. A day of fasting came before Sunday. Prior to the Sunday communion service, tokens were given by the clergy to those deemed worthy of the privilege. One resource states that one early Session demanded:

...nane get tickets but those that has bidden tryal and are fund weill instructict in the Belief, Lord's Prayer and Ten Commands.⁵

The Presbyterian Record writes of a wooden paling, or fencing, surrounding the communion area and that "closest scrutiny was exercised as to who was allowed to pass the barrier and join the sacramental feast."⁶

The Scots took this examination seriously, but often abused the system, as did many communicants, by using counterfeit tokens.⁷

The use of tokens was not invented by the Presbyterians. Greek and Roman mystery religions often used disks. Sixteenth century Roman Catholics used communion tokens as did the Episcopalian Church of Scotland, the Church of England, and later the Methodists.⁸ The Scottish Reform churches, however, did seem to most widely use tokens.⁹

Barring the unworthy from the communion service was not the only reason to issue tokens. William Woodside in Communion Tokens writes that at one time tokens protected participants from persecution by the Crown:

This persecution had its origin in the high-handed determination of the Stuart Kings to impose royal controls upon religious and secular institutions alike. Although the Scottish Reformation was effected by action of Parliament in 1560, James VI, upon his accession to the English throne, began a long series of attempts to restore the episcopalian system, initially by interfering with the rights of the clergy.

In Scotland, Presbyterians had always stood for the rights of the middle and lower classes against the Crown