Dispensing Tokens: A Practice Long Gone?

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Before leaving Scotland in 1809, Alexander Campbell agonized over the Church of Scotland law ordering communicants to acquire proof of worthiness to take the Lord’s Supper, which, according to John’s Knox’s calendar, was commonly observed four times a year. A small, usually metallic object called a token was conferred on those deemed worthy.

Generally about the size of a quarter and fashioned into square, circular, and oval figurations, tokens were the authorized stamp of approval of a holder’s good standing. Congregations molded their own distinctive tokens: often with a date (e.g., 1805), name (e.g., Dunfermline), appropriate biblical quote (e.g., “Do this in remembrance of me”), and (from the beginning of the seventeenth century) clergymen’s initials.

Without the allocated emblem of approval, members were barred from the Lord’s table at other congregations of the same denomination. During the preparatory Thursday through Sunday before the anticipated Supper, members dutifully trotted up to the Kirk-Session to procure the metallic table-ticket. Unsuccessful applicants were expunged. In fact, the Dalgety Kirk-Session Records of 5th April 1645 state, This day, the minister did intimate from the pulpit, that, the Lord’s day following, the communion of the bodie and blood of Christ, was to be celebrate; and exhorted the people to be cairfull, in preparation this week, befoire, as also to be present the Setterday next, about two hours in the afternoon, at the sermon of preparatione.

Each postulant would be scrutinized by church authorities with worthiness vouchsafed as kosher only by reciting well-worn tenets (Shorter Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, Ten Commandments) and affirming continuance in the faith.
Through bestowing tokens congregations acquired their own private “Book of Life” because the token, as well as safeguarding the right to take communion, also endorsed a member as a bone fide Christian (“in good standing”). Consequently tokens were highly revered, achieving for some the status of quasi-sacred objects. The catchphrase about money goes: “You cannot take it with you”—but some communicants, undoubtedly in agreement with that sentiment, tried to with tokens, having them sealed with them in their coffins at death. Whether according to legend St. Peter would be sufficiently impressed after being slipped a metallic entrance fee to open the Pearly Gates we can only imagine. At any rate, burying owners with their tokens confirmed the hallowed status of the metallic fetish.

For Alexander Campbell tokens publicly accented the man-made splits in the Scottish Church. In Louis Cochran’s fictional account of Campbell’s life (The Fool of God) he states,

As the occasion approached (for taking the Lord’s Supper), the officiating elders of the Seceder Church visited and catechized all members of the parish, ascertaining their worthiness to partake of the sacred emblems. . . . Each was given a leaden token, attesting to his worthiness. As a family attended the two services on Thursday and Friday held in the churchyard of Pastor Montre’s church, the three services on Saturday, and the daylong communion service beginning at nine o’clock on Sunday morning, the devout, as well as the sinners, Alexander noted, were put into a fearful dilemma. They were warned that if they partook of the emblems unworthily they “would be made seven times more fit for the devil than before,” yet they were also told it was a sin to withdraw. “Dare ye bide away,” warned Pastor Montre in his Action Sermon, “and give that affront to His Supper and frustrate the grace of God, ye take His wrath upon thee from this holy place!”

Campbell sat at the communion table but refused to take communion. But in the instant when the leaden token rang dully upon the pewter plate before him, in that instant Alexander Campbell in his heart renounced all allegiance to the Seceder Church of Scotland, or any other ecclesiastical body by whatever name that proclaimed itself the only doorway to the throne of God. (50-52)

According to Cochran tokens epitomized church disunity for Campbell, a fact which certainly preoccupied him in years to come. If Christians had to guard the Lord’s table jealously and scrutinize other congregations
of the same church—then what future has the church, indeed any church?

First, giving out tokens abhorred Campbell because it exemplified man-made judgments fostering divisions among Christians, and with that we agree. What determines who sits at the Lord’s table is a living faith in Jesus Christ, which can be settled only by the individual concerned. Therefore, an open-fellowship policy must be the mainstay of our weekly gathering around the Lord’s Table. The prospect of weekly and not quarterly communion preparation services would have daunted the most ardent token advocate among Scottish ministers and elders. In 1727 the Ettrick Kirk-Session recorded, “The session met to distribute tokens, but finding that a horse race was to come off before Communion Sunday, forbade any member to attend, and decided to hold over the tokens till after the race.” Apparently preparation was so lapse that the required holiness for acquiring a token could not be vouchsafed—except by edict from the grim invigilators who wanted to preserve any member from soiling his holiness by cheering for a horse at the Ettrick race meeting with a token in his pocket. The Roman Emperor Constantine, mindful of the same problem, put off his baptism until shortly before his death, certainly a practice not recommended since death tends to creep up when least expected. Similarly Christians today earnestly pray for Jesus to come, but fear of being found wanting adds the silent rejoinder: “Come, Lord Jesus, certainly on the first day of the week and preferably after morning worship.”

Weekly gatherings procure consistent commitment by eliminating any so-called special times (Knox’s four a year) when Christians have to prove their spiritual fitness to commune with Christ. In fact, our weekly eating the Lord’s supper must strengthen our daily commitment to Christ because faithfulness cannot be vouchsafed by clutching a token or any external badge of bestowed value. Craving eternal security, some Christians find help from memorizing acronyms such as TULIP or constructing FIVE-FINGERED schemas. Such silliness betrays our tendency to look for anything other than Jesus Christ to give us security. Where the point of truth lies between obedience (how much is a “safe theology?”) and safety (am I completely protected against myself?) can only be decided by the individual. In the short term relying on others to map the boundaries is easiest, and tokens seem especially attractive for giving us our craved certainty (Col 2:20-21), but all such devices are external—whether reassurance given by a metallic token clenched at the Lord’s supper or as a quasi-sacred object placed in the coffin at burial, or a preacher’s comforting word, or a friend’s timely remarks. Smacking of immaturity they witness to what they want to alleviate, that is insecurity, by making us rely on
others to say all is well. We must all grapple with our own identity as Christians walking the line (at times uncomfortable) between grace and responsibility. Sometimes the knowledge that we are firmly grasped by the hand of God (Rom 8:38-39) is what we need; at other times we need the jolt of truth that salvation lies within the grasp of our own hands (Col 3:5). A reliance on external aids like tokens for reassurance of salvation belongs to the infancy of faith.

Second, we must not think that token dispensing was confined to the Church of Scotland and is now a practice long gone. As Scottish ministers would take their own bag of tokens with them as they journeyed on for new employment, so there is a tendency in all of us to do the same in a sense and assume the right to calculate which Christians are in good standing. Such whimsical fingerprinting frequently bears the marks of the fingerprinter! Our fastidiousness becomes the mark of the righteous—and thus a mental token over the number of communion cups at the Lord’s table or a straightjacketed spirituality cast as evangelism or the date of the earth’s origin: the list is endless. Viler than the old metallic ones, these invisible tokens are passed around by us and work as unseen emblems of control, helping us to identify and ferret out the suspect. Much damage is done: Christians, unable to talk to each other, become wary of speaking about their faith, so starved of spiritual food they lapse into years of stunted growth. Therefore, our security (with its inherent insecurity!) found in trusting in Christ is abandoned for what is ultimately a form of spiritual pride; a right relationship with God is gained at the expense of other Christians.

Instead of dispensing judgment we must accept each other as we are accepted by God (1 John 4:10-11), that is, as individuals with a hotchpotch of right beliefs, half-formulated beliefs, beliefs struggling to come forth, beliefs we would not subscribe to, beliefs not yet mulled over, beliefs picked up from childhood and vaguely heard sermons—in short, a potpourri of truths, half-truths, fanciful stories and muddled ideas, all of which must be sifted through and sorted out through Bible study, prayer and discussion with other Christians. In the process of living the Christian life, we grow in the knowledge of God (1 Pet 1:5-8), and that takes time. We must be patient with each other as God is with us (1 Thess 5:14), and we must help each other to sort out our beliefs in an atmosphere of acceptance (1 Thess 2:6b).