

An Altar or A Table?:

**Comparing the Eucharistic Theology of the Reformed Scottish Clergy and Archbishop
William Laud by Examining Their Different Church Furniture**

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Introduction

The reigns of James I and Charles I were tense, to say the least. Both men sought uniformity and control over the churches of England and Scotland. They wished to enforce their will and vision of Christianity upon the churches in their realm, even if their theology and practice at times contradicted the teachings of Scripture. Assisting James and Charles in enforcing their vision for the churches of England and Scotland was the royal chaplain and eventual Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud.

Archbishop Laud thought that the reform movements of the previous decades had gone too far. They had, in Laud's opinion, robbed the churches of the United Kingdom of the beauty and mystery of the Christian faith. Many of the ritualistic practices that had been cast aside, Laud viewed as indispensable to the life of the Church. He blamed their removal on a faction or movement that had formed within the bounds of the established church, the "Puritans."

The Puritans were called such because of their insistence that the theology and worship of the Churches of England and Scotland ought to be as biblically pure as possible. They evaluated worship practices based on whether or not there was a positive scriptural warrant or command. Suppose there was not any then the practice being evaluated was deemed impermissible in the context of worship. Many of the practices that Archbishop Laud saw value in were deemed unbiblical and thus needed to be stopped. These differences in opinions are what led to the conflict between the "high church" party of Laud and the Puritans.

One example of this difference can be seen in the topic of this essay, the Communion practices of Laudian theology vs Scottish/Puritan theology. Specifically, this essay will deal with whether the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated around an altar or a table, as well as the connected

issue of kneeling vs sitting or standing to receive the elements. Many of the reform-minded Scottish clergy argued for the position that Communion should be received by communicate either sitting or standing around an actual table. Meanwhile, those of the High Church party, fellowship Laud, argued that communicates should receive the elements by kneeling before their elder/priest at an altar.

This essay will seek to answer the question, who was correct, Archbishop Laud or the Scottish Puritans? Was Laud's party correct that the ceremonial and ritualistic practice of kneeling at an altar was the more reverent manner to take Communion? Or were the Scottish ministers correct that the Lord's Supper is just that, a meal meant to be eaten at a table? This essay will outline the position of both parties, and then evaluate each position's practices based on the principles outlined in the next section. This author will argue that the Puritan party's position was the correct and more biblical position. The sacrament of Lord's Supper is a communal meal that symbolizes both a Christian's union with Christ and their unity with the church around them. It is a meal, not a sacrifice, so a table is the appropriate piece of furniture, not an altar.

Evaluating Principles

To fairly judge between the position of Laud and the Scottish Puritans it is necessary to outline the principles this author will use to evaluate these worship practices. There are a few principles that this author has decided to use in order to judge what is or is not biblical worship. First, there is the regulative principle of worship that states that only those practices that are commanded in Scripture are acceptable to do in the context of Christian worship.¹ There must be

¹ Dennis Prutow, *Public Worship 101: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Worship, the Elements, Exclusive Psalmody, and A Cappella Psalmody* (RPTS Press, 2013).

a scriptural command or warrant based on good and necessary consequences for a practice to exist. Next, there is the Holliness-Simplicity principle, coined by Dr. Evert Henes, which states that worship ought to be simple, pure, and unnecessarily adorned.² Biblical Worship also is covenantally faithful, meaning that it is consistent with the principles laid out in Scripture, yet may be diversely expressed.³ The last principle to be used is that worship practices should also be able to find historic and catholic precedence for their existence.

So, to summarize, biblical worship practices are those that arise from and are regulated by the Word of God. They seek to remain holy and simple, not needlessly over-adorned or sensual. They are faithful to the New Covenant's forms of worship, the preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the Sacraments. They ought to find historic and universal expressions. Lastly and most importantly, biblical worship is meant to be God-honoring and done in Spirit and Truth.

While the previous paragraphs outlined useful guidelines for biblical worship practices in general, more principles are needed to deal with the topic of this essay. Since this essay deals with the furniture of a church building some additional principles must be established that deal directly with church furniture and design. In their work on the theology of Church Architecture and design Bruggink and Droppers argue that "To set forth the God-ordained means by which Christ comes to His people, the Reformed must give visual expression to the importance of both word and sacraments."⁴ The theology of a church must be communicated in an "architecturally

² Everett Henes, "Less Outward Glory: A Biblical-Theological and Historical Defense of Simplicity in Worship," January 2019.

³ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002).

⁴ Donald Bruggink and Carl Droppers, *Christ and Architecture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1965), 80.

clear”⁵ way. Bruggink and Droppers helpfully present a theology of the Lord’s Table and guiding principles of design for it. Likewise, David Baker, in his work *Toward a Reformativ Architecture for Worship*, also gives practical guidelines for a reformed and biblical understanding of the table used for the Lord’s Supper. Both of these works, along with others, will be referenced in greater detail later in this essay in the application section. Having laid out the principles by which Laud and the Puritan’s positions will be evaluated, it is now time to look at the actual debate itself.

The Debate

The topic of focus for this essay is the disagreement in communion practices between the High Church party of Archbishop Laud and the Scottish Puritans. The issue up for debate was this: around what kind of furniture should communion be taken and how should the elements be received? Was it to be a stone altar, or should it be a wooden table? Were the communicants meant to kneel before their priest or were they to sit around the table together with their elders? Laud and his party argued for Communion to be celebrated by kneeling before one’s priest at a fenced altar, while the Scottish Puritans argued for the entire congregation to be seated around a table together for the Lord’s Supper.

Before giving a brief overview of the historical context of the debate and comparing the two positions it is necessary to clarify and define some of the terms that will be used throughout this essay. First, Archbishop Laud will be used as the figurehead for the so-called “High church” party. This term is meant to refer to those who generally agreed with Laud on the issues of worship and sacramentalology during this period of history. Laud and his allies tended towards

⁵ Bruggink and Droppers, *Christ and Architecture*, 80.

ceremonialism and were generally Arminian in terms of their soteriology. The terms Puritan and Scottish Puritan will be used in the most general sense of the word. This author is using the terms Puritan and puritanism to mean systems of theology that utilized a generally strict understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship. They desired for all worship practices of the Church to have been expressly laid out in Scripture. The Puritans were also committed Calvinists, which may partially explain why Archbishop Laud disliked them so much. With that settled, now onto a summary of the historical context.

The event that began this issue was the desire of King James of England and Scotland for there to be great uniformity in the worship practices of his two kingdoms. “James [sought to bring] Scottish worship more into line with Anglican worship.”⁶ He hoped to accomplish this goal by pushing for five articles to be added to the Scottish Book of Canon Law. While on a visit to his northern kingdom to present these five articles, James brought his loyal court chaplain, William Laud, “the foremost figure in the High Church movement within Anglicanism”⁷, with him. The articles that James sought to have adopted by the Church of Scotland were not well received. One of these articles would require the practice of kneeling to receive communion, a practice that was more common in the churches of England.

When King James died and his son, Charles I of England, assumed the throne the issues between different parties within the churches of England and Scotland only worsened. William Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury under King Charles. Archbishop Laud had a deep

⁶ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of Religious Conflict*](#), vol. 4 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 380.

⁷ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of Religious Conflict*](#), vol. 4 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 380.

disdain for “puritanism,” which he viewed as having robbed the Church of the beauty of holiness. It was the opinion of Laud that the Puritan emphasis on simplicity would often lead to an attitude of irreverence.⁸ His opinion was not completely unfounded. John Cambel points out that the communion table was sometimes used as a glorified hat rack. A particularly sad event that happened in 1630, when some stray dogs made off with the communion bread. “All things considered, it was easy for people to forget that the communion table was a thing set apart.”⁹

Archbishop Laud found the changes to worship practice brought on by the Reformers unacceptable. So, he “reacted violently against [the] Protestant changes and attempted to restore the medieval arrangement of furnishings, particularly with regard to the location of the altar.”¹⁰ Laud desired to bring all of the churches under the dominion of King Charles back to what he believed were the proper practices of the historic church. “[He] and his followers worked to impose ceremonial and liturgical uniformity, believing that in God’s own time, such outward manifestations of unity would lead to agreements on matters of doctrine among Christians of goodwill.”¹¹ One way he sought to accomplish his aim was by bringing back into the church the stone altars which had been removed by the English and Scottish reformers a generation before.

Altar vs Table

⁸ E. C. E Bourne, *The Anglicanism of William Laud* (London, England: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1947), 51.

⁹ John Campbell, “The Quarrel over the Communion Table,” *Historical Society of the Episcopal Church* Vol. 40, no. Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church, JUNE 1971, No. 2 (June 1971): 175.

¹⁰ Victor Fiddes, *The Architectural Requirements of Protestant Worship* (Toronto, Canada: The Ryerson Press, 1961), 44.

¹¹ Campbell, “The Quarrel over the Communion Table, 175.”

As stated above, when William Laud became Archbishop of Canterbury, he implemented his program to, in his eyes, return the worship of the Church of England to its rightful and former glory. He wanted to “restore the beauty of English churches.”¹² One of the first ways to do this was by returning the stone altars to the “East” end of the Church. In church architecture and design terms, the East end of the church did not necessarily have to point exactly east. Rather it was representative of the rising light of the Sun and of Christ, the light of men, being raised from the dead. The practice of placing the altar at the east end of the church was prominent in the Medieval Church and so when the reformation hit the British Isles many of these altars were removed, and replaced with wooden tables located in the nave (a more central position of the church). This central positioning of a wooden table (as well as the pulpit), showed the Reformed tradition's dual emphasis on the preached Word and right administration of the Sacraments.

These restored stone altars would have railings surrounding them to keep the common folk from venturing too close to it. The Anglican priests would stand behind the rail to the side of the altar and distribute the elements of Communion to each communicate that would approach the rail and kneel before the altar. The act of kneeling will be addressed in the next section, but the fact that a railed-off altar had been restored was a terrifying thing to many theologians in the British Isles.

Theologians who held to Puritan ideals in England and Scotland were appalled by these actions. They viewed Laud’s changes as a return to the popish and medieval form of theology and worship. Laud’s work was viewed as a regression from all the progress that the Reformers of

¹² Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of Religious Conflict*](#), vol. 4 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 230.

England and Scotland had fought so hard to achieve. The Puritans desired for the churches of England and Scotland to continue the process of reformation. They wanted the practices and theology of the churches in the British Isles to be brought into greater conformity with the Word of God. As Jeanne H. Kilde points out in her work, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, “Because the Calvinists understood the Eucharist as a communal sacrament of the Christian community, they reinterpreted the altar as not a place for sacrifice but a table for communion, a place for the Lord’s Supper.”¹³

While the English Puritans and Scottish Puritans were united in their disapproval of Laud and the High Church party’s changes to worship practices, they differed slightly in the expression of their own convictions. Both the Scottish and English Puritans held that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated around a table, but the difference was what this table looked like. For the English, it was typically a shorter table that only the Elder would distribute the elements from, while for many Scottish congregations, communicants would sit around a long table together. This essay will focus on the Scottish Puritans and their practice of using long tables.

J. M. Ross helpfully illustrates in his work, *Four Centuries of Scottish Worship*, what a Communion service during this period was like. He says that if modern Christians were transported back in time to a Communion service held in Scotland during the 1560’s they would be “immediately struck by the fact that a long table, covered with white cloths,”¹⁴ had been erected in the middle of the church. The minister would sit at the head of this long table, speak the words of the institution as he broke the bread and blessed the cup, and then the communicants

¹³ Jeanne Kilde, “Transformation of the Renaissance and the Reformation,” in *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 117.

¹⁴ J.M. Ross, *Four Centuries of Scottish Worship* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrews Press, 1972), 6.

would pass the loaf and cup around the table until it returned to the minister.¹⁵ This practice was still common in Scotland during the time of Archbishop Laud in the 1630's-40's. This practice is also attested in John Barkley's book, *Worship of the Reformed Church*. On page 53 of his work, Barkley writes that a few congregations in Scotland and Ireland still retained this practice during his time, in 1967.¹⁶

Sometimes the table would be a permanent fixture of the Church. The Church building would be purposely designed to show the Reformed emphasis on the ordinary means of grace, the preached Word and two sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. That would mean that the table for the Lord's Supper would be in a central location between two columns of pews, typically dividing the church in half. Other times the table would be set up and torn down depending on whether it was a communion service or not. Again, Jeanne H. Kilde is useful for explaining this when she writes: "When Calvinist and other Reformed groups celebrated the Lord's Supper, they moved the table to the center aisle or another convenient location and placed chairs all around for the participants."¹⁷

The practice of having the congregation sit at one table together to eat the Lord's Supper was consistent with the Scottish Confession of Faith and the First Book of Order. The framers of this confession viewed communion as one of the two sacraments given by Christ to His church. It was an ordinary means of Grace, meant to grow the faithful Christian in Christlikeness. In chapter Twenty-one of the Scots Confession, the terms Lord's Supper or Lord's Table are used

¹⁵ Ross, *Four Centuries of Scottish Worship*, 6.

¹⁶ John Barkley, "The Eucharist Rite," in *Worship of the Reformed Church: An Exposition and Critical Analysis of the Eucharistic, Baptismal, and Confirmation Rites in the Scottish, English-Welsh, and Irish Liturgies*, Ecumenical Studies in Worship 15 (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, n.d.), 53.

¹⁷ Kilde, "Transformation of the Renaissance and the Reformation, 118."

interchangeably, so it is plain to see that the framers of this confession did not view Communion in any way as a sacrifice.¹⁸ Therefore, a table, not an altar, would be the appropriate piece of furniture to eat this Sacramental meal around. In the Book of Common Order, also commonly called Knox's Liturgy, the minister is commanded to come down from the pulpit and take his seat at the table.¹⁹ Likewise, all of the congregants were expected to sit down around the table for the distribution of the elements.

As has been shown, the choice of furniture and its location for communion demonstrated the theology of both the Laudian High Church party and the puritanically-minded Scottish clergy. Each side's practice embodied the theology they held. For the High Churchmen, Communion had a sacrificial aspect to it, so they placed stone altars on the East end of the church to demonstrate this belief. Meanwhile, the Scots believed that Communion was a public communal meal that symbolized unity with Christ and the unity of believers as the body of Christ, so they had a large table in the middle of the sanctuary. Each party's theology can also be seen in the physical posture they expected communicants to receive the elements of communion.

Kneeling vs Sitting

One of the first policies that Archbishop Laud pushed across both England and Scotland was to make the practice of kneeling to receive the elements of communion in a kneeling position. Kneeling was viewed as a more reverent posture of receiving the bread and cup. The

¹⁸ John Knox, "The Scottish Confession of Faith, 1560," in *Reformed Confession of the 16th Century*, ed. Arthur Cochrane (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, n.d.), 181-82.

¹⁹ Thomas McLauchlan, ed., "The Lord's Supper," in *The Book of Common Order: Knox's Liturgy*, trans. John Carswell (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edmonton and Douglas, 1561), 139.

mandating of this practice was again consistent with Laud's High Church theology as well as his conviction that all of the churches on the British Isles should have uniformity in worship.

The practice of kneeling, unsurprisingly, was deeply offensive to the Puritans of England and Scotland. As Nick Needham points out, "Kneeling at communion [in the minds of the Puritans] tended to idolatry—it was too much like the Roman Catholic adoration of the eucharistic bread as Christ's very body."²⁰ The Puritans rightly pointed out that kneeling to receive the elements of Communion is nowhere described or proscribed within Scripture. So according to them, "[forms] of worship not commanded in Scripture should not be imposed."²¹

Evaluating the High Church and Scottish Puritans Positions

Why were the worship practices of the High Church party and the Scottish so different? How could Laud and the Puritans come to conclusions that were so at odds with one another? The differences in worship practices arose from the different principles each part used to interpret the Scriptures and the weight they placed on church tradition. As stated before, Laud and the High Church party wanted to recover the ceremonial beauty that he felt was lost during the Reformation of the English and Scottish churches. The Puritans desired to remove the unnecessary, confusing, and often unbiblical worship practices that had crept into the Church over the centuries. They argued that those practices that were not mandated and outlined in Scripture were not permissible.

²⁰ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of Religious Conflict*, vol. 4 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 381.

²¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: The Age of Religious Conflict*, vol. 4 (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 381.

The Puritan framework is the superior set of governing principles compared to that of Laud and the High Churchmen. God cares about the methods by which His people worship Him and has outlined them within the texts of the Holy Bible. The Puritan desire to find an express command for or example of a worship practice is the better approach for deciding what is a proper act of worship.

While Laud and his fellow High Churchmen would argue that their practice of kneeling at an altar has historical precedence and is the more reverent way to receive Communion, the fact remains that that practice has no basis in Scripture. Both the narrative and didactic portions of the Bible that speak on Communion describe a meal. They do not describe a bloodless resacrifice of Christ. In 1 Cor. 11, the Apostle Paul admonishes the Corinthian Church for abusing the Lord's Supper. Rather than having a communal and commemorative meal that celebrates the Sacrifice of Christ, some in Corinth had been getting drunk. What is pictured here is a meal, meant to be celebrated by the Church around a table, not an altar.

How Should We Celebrate the Supper?

As Dr. Barry York points out in, *Hitting the Marks*, one of the marks of a true church is the right administration of the sacraments, which includes the Lord's Supper.²² Communion is not meant to be some afterthought tacked on to the end of services. It is one of the ordinary means of grace of the New Covenant, that Jesus Christ Himself instituted. It ought to be treated with the utmost care and respect. Despite their differences, both Laud and his High Church party as well as the Puritans understood that fact. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case for many modern-day evangelicals.

²² Barry York, *Hitting the Marks* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, 2018).

The administration of the Lord's Supper does not seem to receive much conscious thought from the average American evangelical church. The elements are typically packaged together in small self-contained, individual portions. Sometimes they are placed on the seats before service, sometimes ushers will walk around and distribute them, or congregants will exit their pews and walk to the front and take a package for themselves. No thought is given to what the meal is meant to symbolize, or how the Bible instructs believers to partake in it. Usually, the only principle that is applied is that of pragmatism. What will be the most logistically easy way to get through Communion? This is an inappropriate question to ask. What should be asked is this: what is the most biblical way to celebrate the Lord's Supper? What will show a proper theology of the Supper as a sanctifying means of grace, and not as a resacrifice of Christ? How can we display our union with Christ and unity as one body of believers?

It is this author's opinion that the Scottish practice of using long tables for communion which communicates are able to sit and eat the Lord's Supper is the answer to all of the questions stated above. Implementing this practice is worthy of consideration in a local congregation. As shown in the previous interaction with the historical data, the Scottish Puritans sought to conform their worship practices with those commanded by Scripture and not exceed them. It was at a real table that the Lord Jesus reclined with his disciples. It was not a railed-off stone altar that was overseen by a priest.

The authors of *Christ and Architecture* and *Towards a Reformatory Architecture for Worship*, all agree that a congregation's theology on paper ought to match their theology in practice. This includes how they design and furnish their church buildings. So, if the Reformed view of Communion is the correct position, that it is a sacrament of the Church, an ordinary means of sanctifying grace to the faithful, a memorial of Christ's once for all sacrifice on the

cross, which signifies our union with Christ and unity as a body of believers, then the manner in which it is celebrated should reflect that belief.

Bruggink and Droppers state this position plainly: “For the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the Table should look like a table!”²³ It also “should be designed to be actually used as a table with communicants seated around it.”²⁴ Baker would likely give his full ascent to the previous statements. He wrote that “the table should not just be a small piece of furniture in the worship room, barely big enough to hold all the cups and plates which are stacked in some unnatural way... Rather, the table should be long and wide and inviting[.]”²⁵

There is a necessity for initially thinking through the design and furnishing of a Church building’s space. One’s practices ought to be in line with one’s stated theology. This is why this author has become convinced of the “Long Table” position and thinks that it deserves to be truly considered as a possible option. However, even if a congregation remains unconvinced of the Long Table position, it would behoove them to faithfully examine their current practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper through the lenses of the Bible and their confessional standards. If this essay does nothing else but cause its readers to think deliberately and to evaluate their current Communion practices by the Scriptures, then it has succeeded.

Conclusion

²³ Bruggink and Droppers, *Christ and Architecture*, 212.

²⁴ Bruggink and Droppers, *Christ and Architecture*, 229.

²⁵ David Baker, “The Furniture of the Ordinances- The Lord’s Supper,” in *Toward a Reformatory Architecture for Worship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2014), 205.

Baker helpfully points out that throughout Church history “[the] ordinance of the Lord’s Supper has probably been the most contentious topic in all of Christendom.”²⁶ Yet today it is not given much thought. The Scottish clergy cared so deeply about the way the Lord’s Supper was celebrated that they denied both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the King. They refused to allow practices and furniture that contradicted what they saw the Bible teach in their churches. Altars and priests were not acceptable. Kneeling, which tended towards veneration and idolatry, could not be tolerated. No, the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated in a way that communicates what it is, a sacramental meal. Their practice of utilizing long tables at which the congregation would sit around was the superior and more biblical position compared to that of Laud and the High Churchmen.

²⁶ Baker, “The Furniture of the Ordinances- The Lord’s Supper,” 200.

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