
The Origins of John Willison's Emphasis on the Lord's Supper

MATTHEW VOGAN

1. Introduction

John Willison of Dundee (1680-1750) is well-known for a significant body of practical and devotional material in relation to the Lord's Supper. His prolific writings on this subject include instruction, advice and devotional exercise. Instruction concerning the nature of the Lord's Supper is particularly contained within *A Sacramental Catechism; Or, a Familiar Instructor for Young Communicants* (Edinburgh, 1720), in which the ordinance is handled in "a doctrinal and casuistic manner".¹ Also didactic is *The Young Communicant's Catechism* (Edinburgh, 1734).

A set of five sermons takes the reader through the various services and spiritual exercises of a communion season: *Five Sermons Preached Before and After the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh, 1722). Another collection of published sermons was *The Nature, Guilt and Danger of Unworthy Communicating, Salvation from Wrath through Jesus Christ, The Heinous Sin and Inevitable Punishment of Slighting the Gospel, Being the Substance of Three Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1743).

Willison also focussed on devotional exercise in preparing for the Lord's Supper and deriving benefit afterwards through meditations: these are particularly found in *Sacramental Meditations and Advices* (Edinburgh, 1747). He also gives directions for communicants in *A Short Christian Directory; Consisting of Forty Scripture Directions* (Edinburgh, 1747). Another work, *A Sacramental Directory* (Edinburgh, 1716), takes the reader

¹ *Sacramental Directory* in W. H. Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison: with an essay on the life and times of Willison* (Edinburgh, 1844), p. 140.

through the whole of a communion Sabbath with detailed directions as to how “to improve every hour and minute with greatest profit”. Willison believed that the Lord’s Supper had been

instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, as a bright representation and compend of the whole Christian religion, and an ordinance nobly adapted for carrying on the ends of God’s glory, and our souls’ salvation, and particularly for clearing up our interest in Christ, and improving our acquaintance with him; it highly concerns every Christian to make conscience of attending in a due and suitable manner.²

It is clear that Willison had a high view of the Lord’s Supper and its benefits. He calls it

a *Representation* and Memorial of Christ crucified, and his Purchase. It is a *Map* of the *Gospel*, and a visible preaching of Jesus Christ. As the *Word* holds forth Christ to the Ear; so this *Sacrament* represents him to the Eye. It is a monument of Christ’s redeeming Love, and of the glorious Sufferings, and mighty Acts which he had performed for us. It is also a publick Monument of his glorious Victories and Triumphs, as the *Captain of our Salvation*, and of his *spoiling Principalities and Powers*, and obtaining Peace for us.³

The origin of this emphasis on the Lord’s Supper can be traced back to the beginning of his ministry. Willison was first ordained at Brechin and his ministry there faced significant and sustained Episcopalian opposition. He needed to engage in a great deal of patient, practical instruction and discipline. It was in this context that he developed both a pastoral concern for those who lacked practical help and instruction and an irenic but resolute approach to controversy.

2. Willison’s Ordination at Brechin

John Willison was ordained at Brechin on Friday 3rd December 1703. A sermon was preached by “Mr. William Arnot, Minister of the Gospel at Montrose, upon the last clause of the twentieth verse of the twenty-eight chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: And lo, I am with you always even unto

² *ibid.*, p. 140. This section was inserted in editions subsequent to the 1716 edition.

³ J. Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord’s Day, and Particularly the right improvement of a Communion Sabbath* (Edinburgh, 1716), p. 244.

the end of the world". The choice of text was very apt for the situation into which Willison was being ordained. It was something of a missionary situation where the Church needed to be re-established at grass roots and faithful instruction was required. Indeed, to use the language of the time with only a little anachronism in meaning, he was involved in church "planting". Above all, the promise of the constant assistance and blessing of the Head of the Church must have been helpful to him. The Presbytery minute goes on to record: "Mr. John Willison was by solemn prayer and the imposition of the hands of the Presbytery in conjunction with the Committee of the Synod appointed for that end ordained and set apart to be Minister of the Gospel at Brechin."⁴

The mention of a special Committee of the Provincial Synod of Angus and Mearns indicates that this was an unusual induction. It was this Committee in fact that had given a call to Willison (then a probationer in the Mearns) in September 1703. This had been necessary because the local magistrate and heritors had refused to comply with the Presbytery in calling a minister. The case had been running for some years and came to the attention of the Commission of the General Assembly at the end of December 1702.

It was part of a concerted effort, a mission, throughout the 1690s to establish Presbyterianism entirely across the nation at a local level by supplying and planting vacant charges. The Commissions for Visitation operated north and south of the Tay. In 1697 the General Assembly noted that despite the good progress in planting churches in the north, many vacant charges remained, with few men available in the north to fill them. Where there had originally been six Presbyteries there was now just one – the United Presbyteries within the Province of Angus and Mearns. Gradually, as manpower increased, the original Presbyteries could function once more. In November 1698, the United Presbyteries divided into two – the Presbytery of Dundee, Forfar, and Meigle, and the Presbytery of Fordoun, Brechin, and Aberbrothock.⁵

The Commission for Visitation visited Montrose and Dundee in 1698. They were strengthened by an Act of Parliament passed in 1698 for preventing disorders in the supply and planting of churches. This was designed to prohibit Episcopalian landowners from sponsoring mob violence to hinder or prevent vacant charges from being filled by Presby-

⁴ D. B. Thoms, *The Kirk of Brechin in the Seventeenth Century* (Brechin, 1972), pp. 130-31.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

terians. This came on the back of an Act in 1695 against Episcopalian ministers intruding into churches without a legal call.⁶

The 1698 Assembly ordered twelve ministers from southern Presbyteries to move permanently to charges in the north: three to the Synod of Angus and the Mearns. Twenty probationers were to be sent for a year. Since Willison came from Stirling and studied in Glasgow, it seems likely that he was in the north due to a similar initiative.⁷ We know that he had been licensed in Stirling in 1701.⁸

3. Episcopalian intrusion in Brechin

There were sixteen parishes in the original Presbytery of Brechin; some of them were still occupied illegally by Episcopalians who were not prepared to conform. Gradually, through the death of these incumbents or other events, it became possible to “plant” the vacancies.⁹ There were two charges in Brechin: the first covered the town, and the second the landward or rural area. There was a service for the first in the morning and for the second in the afternoon.

Brechin had been long vacant and the Presbytery had been supplying the pulpit for the past fourteen years. There was, however, an Episcopalian minister who had persisted with local support. His name was John Skinner, son of the previous minister Laurence Skinner, who had conformed to Episcopalianism in 1661. The latter was married to the sister of the famous minister, William Guthrie, who was local to the area and, indeed, died in Skinner’s manse in 1665. John Skinner was therefore a nephew to William Guthrie.¹⁰

John Skinner had been ordained by Bishop James Drummond in 1685 and admitted an assistant minister in April 1687 rather than filling a vacant charge.¹¹ After 1689, the Kirk Session continued to administer the normal business of the congregation as in the past. Skinner continued

⁶ J. Stephen, *Scottish Presbyterians and the Act of Union, 1707* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 13, 65.

⁷ J. Stephen, “The Commissions for Visitations North and South of the River Tay, 1690-1695”, pp. 97-133, *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, Vol. 4 (2014), pp. 97-133 (p. 131).

⁸ Ian MacLeod, “The sacramental theology and practice of the Reverend John Willison (1680-1750)” (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1994), p. 11, citing the Presbytery of Stirling Minute Book (1701-1712), CH2/722/9, pp. 3-6.

⁹ Thoms, p. 128.

¹⁰ For John Skinner (1662-c. 1725), see D. M. Bertie, *Scottish Episcopal Clergy, 1689-2000* (Edinburgh, 2000), p. 130.

¹¹ Thoms, pp. 126-27.

to act as though he was the legally settled minister, though this was not the case. He refused the Oath of Allegiance offered by Parliament in 1693 and 1695 to all episcopal incumbents.

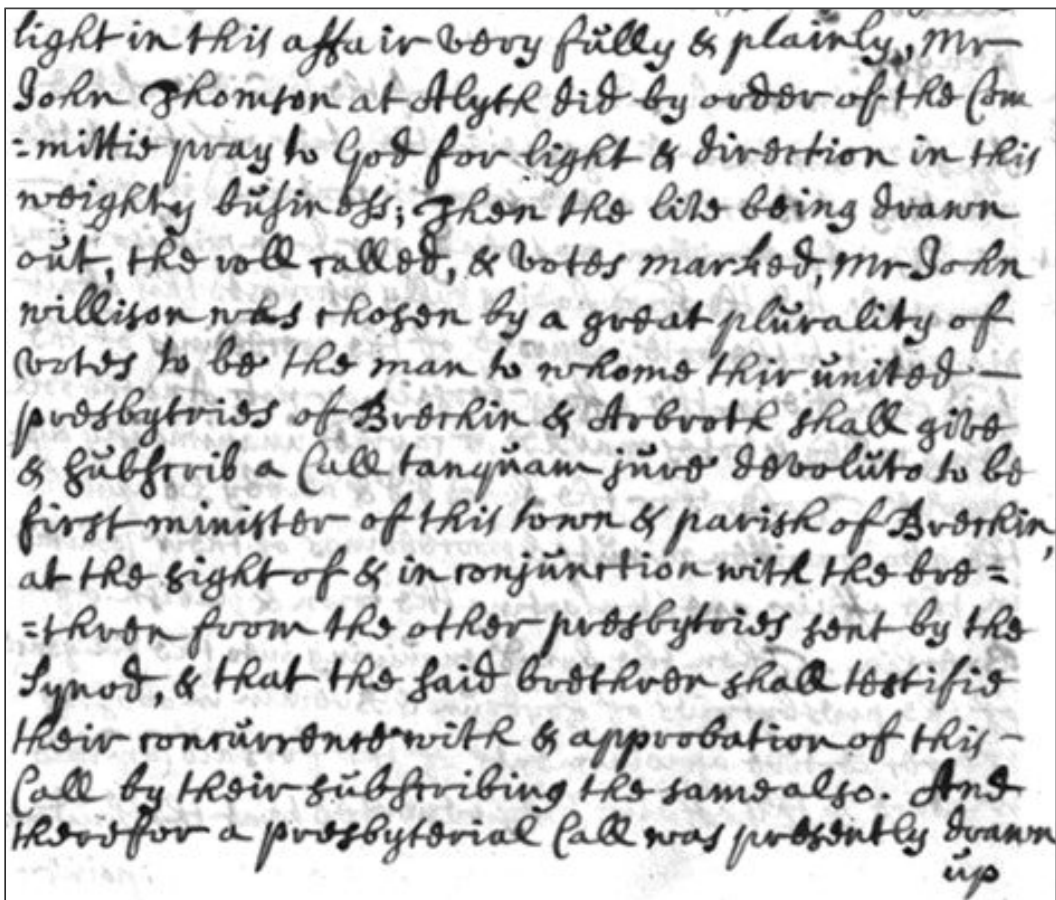
In April 1696, the United Presbyteries received a "petition from those of the Presbyterian persuasion in Brechin subscribed by about eighteen persons craving to supply the vacancy". The following month, a minister was sent to declare the first charge vacant, but he was not given access to the church and made his declaration outside in the kirkyard. The Town Council apologised and promised that this would not happen again. After this, the pulpit was continuously supplied without opposition, mainly by probationers.

In 1697 the United Presbyteries declared "the charge presently served and supplied by John Skinner" to be vacant. John Skinner responded by conducting a third service after the Presbyterian preacher had departed. He continued as moderator of the landward Kirk Session. A committee of the United Presbyteries admitted eight elders to form a new town Kirk Session for the first charge. They also nominated four ministers to the Town Council who could fill the vacancy. The Council and town Kirk Session tried to delay any appointment of a minister.

In 1698, the United Presbyteries proceeded to call a minister. A popular movement arose in the town in support of John Skinner involving the Town Council. It was at this point that the case was referred to the Commission of the General Assembly. Little seems to have happened until July 1701, when the Presbytery, "considering the long desolate condition of the parish of Brechin and being now resolved to take some effectual course", intimated publicly that, if a call was not given to one of a proffered leet of four ministers, they would take the choice into their own hands. This was duly disregarded. The Presbytery tried very hard, but unsuccessfully, to persuade the Town Council to co-operate.¹²

In December 1702, the Commission of the General Assembly recommended that the Presbytery (now of Brechin and Aberbrothock) should still pursue negotiations with the heritors and the magistrates. This was fruitless, and the elders on the Kirk Session were also non-compliant. An attempt to enlarge the number of men on the Kirk Session likewise failed. In fact, the Presbytery went as far as setting a date for the ordination of certain men, but they failed to appear on the day owing to

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 127-29.



light in this affair very fully & plainly, Mr John Thomson at Aylth did by order of the Committee pray to God for light & direction in this weighty business; then the list being drawn out, the roll called, & votes marked, Mr John Willison was chosen by a great plurality of votes to be the man to whom the united Presbyteries of Brechin & Arbuth shall give & subscribe a call *tanquam jure devoluto* to be first minister of this town & parish of Brechin at the sight of & in conjunction with the brethren from the other presbyteries sent by the Synod, & that the said brethren shall testify their concurrence with & approbation of this call by their subscribing the same also. And therefore a presbyterial call was presently drawn up

Copy of the Synod minutes recording the call to John Willison.

local intimidation. Perhaps it was no coincidence that John Skinner chose that very day to seek to regain some initiative. It was reported that he “violently intruded upon and at his own hand repossessed himself of the afternoon’s diet in the Church in Brechin, notwithstanding the person appointed by the Presbytery to supply that diet was at Brechin and entering the church in order to preach”. This “illegal encroachment and irregular step taken by Mr. Skinner” was reported to the Commission of General Assembly who in turn complained to the Privy Council.¹³

It was at this stage that the Presbytery reluctantly took the last resort of issuing a call to Willison exercising their power *tanquam jure devoluto* (where a Presbytery or Synod issues a call because the congregation are failing to exercise their right and responsibility). The Synod minutes record the way in which the call to Willison was initially prepared.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 130.

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4. The beginning of Willison's ministry

This was the context of the beginning of Willison's ministry. As MacLeod comments, the situation he faced was certainly "unenviable". He was three weeks short of his twenty-third birthday and opposed by a man who had begun his ministry when Willison was a child.

Arriving as a young incomer, his situation was unenviable, for the people were largely pro-Episcopalian. Herein lay their reluctance to nominate a minister of the Established church, coupled with their sympathy for the residing Episcopalian, John Skinner, a native of the town, the son of, and assistant to, the former and now deceased minister of the second charge, Laurence Skinner.¹⁵

The United Presbytery met again at Brechin on 29th December 1703, "taking under their consideration the many scandals abounding in the parish of Brechin". The necessity of "an eldership in the place, for management of the poor's money, who are now at a great loss . . . as also for exercise of discipline against scandalous persons, and strengthening his [i.e. the minister's] hands in the work of the ministry".¹⁶ A Presbytery committee was established as a temporary Kirk Session in order to handle cases of discipline, manage poor relief, and admit elders.

¹⁴ Minutes of the Synod of Angus and Mearns, 1703, National Records of Scotland, CH2/12/1, p. 159.

¹⁵ MacLeod, p. 21. MacLeod also notes that the town of Stirling had a difficult transition from Episcopacy to Presbyterianism and that Willison had some first-hand experience of these problems (ibid., pp. 4-5).

¹⁶ D. D. Black, *History of Brechin* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 114.

It was now possible to constitute a Session of ten men, even after many had declined or reneged. The new Session first met in February 1704. The manse of the first charge had to be repossessed, together with other essential items. This was only the end of the beginning of the conflict with Skinner.

From the outset, therefore, Willison had to endure the harassment of one who had no legal right to a ministry of the second charge, never having been inducted to it, who spurned the authority of the Established Church, who enjoyed substantial support from the people and who persisted in both intruding the Church to conduct rival services, and in using every means to impede the young minister.¹⁷

Skinner continued to preach, baptize, marry, catechize, and give testimonials as if in the capacity of a lawful minister of the parish. The Presbytery was determined to bring this to an end since it was a great impediment “to the strengthening of Mr. Willison’s hands in the place”.

Thoms alludes enigmatically to “ferment and disorder that swept over Brechin in the spring of 1704”.¹⁸ Presumably this refers to local feeling whipped up by Skinner in specific acts of physical force and violence in defence of his status (see below). The Presbytery met on 21st March at Montrose, and Skinner was cited to compare. Skinner acknowledged that he had continued services even though the charge had been declared vacant. He said that “he always owned himself as Minister of Brechin and therefore had still along exercised the other parts of the ministerial function as much as he was capable”. He added that he “did frankly yield the Session to Mr. Willison”, i.e. for the first charge.

The Presbytery formally declared Skinner an intruder and interdicted him from carrying out any pastoral duties within the parish of Brechin. Skinner responded by “throwing down a paper” declining to acknowledge the competency of the court and giving notice of an appeal to the Privy Council, and then “immediately removed”. Evidently

¹⁷ MacLeod, p. 21.

¹⁸ Thoms, p. 132. The national context is worth remembering, particularly the political events surrounding the accession of Queen Anne in 1703. An “Act for the Security of the Kingdom” was passed in the 1703 and 1704 Scottish Parliamentary sessions by a Country opposition that included many Jacobites. It claimed for Parliament the power of appointing a successor to the throne. There was also agitation for toleration to be granted to Episcopalians at this time.

Skinner had some influential friends and patrons. The Lord Advocate intervened in favour of Skinner as “a person of a favourable disposition and his circumstances not being so gross as many in the kingdom”.¹⁹ The Presbytery responded by demonstrating that Skinner was “a person of an unpeaceable behaviour and disposition, whereby he hath kindled and maintained a flame of division in that place”. They observed that John Willison “to his great grief and discouragement has no access to his ministry there but preaching”.

The Presbytery had to support their decision with action and ministers were instructed to supply the afternoon services. When the Presbytery met on 11th April the ministers reported having been “met with great disturbance and hazard from the violent and unruly mob, occasioned and stirred up by Mr. Skinner and his friends”. The Presbytery had specifically requested the magistrates of Brechin “to suppress all tumult and disorders” on the day of intimating its decision.

They were also met with a more determined response from the Lord Advocate, counselling restraint. The Presbytery decided “to commune with Mr. Skinner anent an accommodation and assumption”. Skinner refused to acknowledge their authority and rejected the proposals. Early in May, Skinner took the initiative, “repossessing himself of the pulpit in a most violent manner”. Willison was now instructed to supply the afternoon service but had to report to the Presbytery:

He could not get the foresaid appointment obeyed, in regard that Mr. Skinner had in a most violent and tumultuous manner invaded the pulpit the Sabbath preceding and repossessed himself of the afternoon's diet at his own hand; and was informed that if he should adventure to retake the same again from him, he would have been actually rabbled by a violent mob, who (as he understood) were resolved to support Mr. Skinner in maintaining his intrusion with all the violence and disorder they could make, to which they were not a little encouraged by the magistrates who refused all concurrence or assistance to him in this matter.²⁰

The matter was escalated to higher civil and ecclesiastical powers while “Willison and Skinner continued for the next five years to hold

¹⁹ The Lord Advocate was Sir James Stewart of Goodtrees (1635-1713) who held the office from 1692 to 1709 and again from 1711 to his death; see G. W. T. Omond, *The Lord Advocates of Scotland* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1883), Vol. 1, pp. 243-280.

²⁰ Thoms, pp. 133-4.

their respective services in the church”. This conflict resulted in only “partial success”, according to Thoms’ assessment:

The Church had incurred great odium, and upon Willison was focussed the personal animosity of the whole parish. Willison during these early years in Brechin had to endure a hostility and a measure of social ostracism that seem incredible to a more tolerant age. . . . There were many who, conservative-minded, resented any innovation within the familiar walls of their church. There was the loyalty felt by many for a fellow-townsmen and a member of a respected local family. . . . It may be surmised too that the rift in Brechin was not without a political element, that the form of government sponsored by the Revolution had here its supporters and its antagonists, and that there was even then a latent and incipient Jacobitism that was to erupt so violently in 1715.²¹

5. The emphasis of Willison's ministry

Although in the midst of much trouble, Willison was not completely inhibited in his ministry. Pomeroy exaggerates when he says that because he was “prevented from performing his ministerial duties as he might have wished by the Episcopal opposition, Willison devoted a large part of his efforts to the instruction of the young”.²²

Willison was able to exercise his ministry in spite of the difficulties, but it is certainly clear that some of his early efforts related to catechising. Hetherington comments: “he devoted himself chiefly to that department of his labours which was not only the most hopeful, but where also the necessity of strenuous exertion was most apparent.”²³ In his *Example of Plain Catechising upon the Assembly's Shorter Catechism: Humbly offer'd as an help for instructing the young and ignorant in the faith*, Willison stressed the following:

In those Places where Catechising is neglected, Ignorance and Error do wofully prevail. It is found by Experience, that there is more Knowledge diffused among the Ignorant and younger Sort

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 134.

²² W. D. Pomeroy, “John Willison of Dundee, 1680-1750” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1953), p. 24.

²³ Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison*, pp. ix-x.

by one Hour's Catechising than by many Hours' preaching: for by the Method of Catechising, the Attention is provoked, as well as the Understanding instructed, and Memory gratified; whilst many excellent Sermons are lost through the Non-attention of the hearers, or the Weakness of their Memories.²⁴

We can see something of the fruits of Willison's labours in the instruction of children and the encouragement of family religion in his earliest publications. The appendix to *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* gives forms of prayer and directions for family prayer and forms of prayer for children to use.²⁵

The appendix also includes "a short Catechism" for children, which is an evident precursor of the *Mother's Catechism*, another early publication.²⁶ The preface to the *Mother's Catechism* contains the following address, which perhaps echoes some of the pastoral language with which Willison exhorted his parishioners:

O parents! the laws of God and nature, and your engagements at baptism, bind you to be faithful in the education of your young ones. Are you careful to provide for the maintenance of their dying bodies, and will you provide nothing for their souls, that must live eternally? parents! pray for, and with them, and let them see how earnest you are for their souls' well-being; curb every evil thing in them as soon as it appears. When they come to years, tell them of the vows you took on you at baptism in their name, and put them to renew them personally.²⁷

Willison also set about establishing poor relief. The Session intimated in February 1704 that a new roll was to be made up and applications for support were invited. This was extended in 1705 when the Presbytery was concerned about "the state of the poor belonging to the landward parish of Brechin which this Presbytery knows to be

²⁴ J. Willison, *An Example of Plain Catechising upon the Assembly's Shorter Catechism: Humbly offer'd as an help for instructing the young and ignorant in the faith* (3rd edition, Glasgow, 1752), p. iii.

²⁵ J. Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), "An Appendix, containing some helps to prayer, and instructions suitable for those that are weak in gifts and knowledge. Particularly masters of families and children".

²⁶ *Mother's Catechism. Being a preparatory help for the young and ignorant, to their easier understanding the Assembly's Shorter Catechism.* The fifteenth edition came out in 1735. It is not known when the earliest edition appeared.

²⁷ Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison*, p. 592.

lamentable and is occasioned by the distinct Sessions”. Willison was to report on the situation.

The difficulty was that people from the landward parish were not contributing because there were no landward elders to collect. They also observed that the lack of a landward Session meant that “discipline and good order are much neglected”. All attempts to remedy the situation by forming a Session or electing elders from the landward locality had been unsuccessful. The best way forward was to unite both parts of the parish under one Session.

We also know that Willison had to contend for the observance of the Sabbath. It was now, as Roderick Grahame observes, “more strictly enforced” by the Kirk Session. Thus in 1705 marriages on Saturdays were banned because of “excessive drinking and parishioners being unfit for worship on the Lord’s Day”.²⁸ In 1710, two soldiers, Joseph Diffins and Richard Mailine were found to be drunk on Sabbath 6th November 1710 and went through the streets “both roaring and crying and swearing aloud to the great surprise and trouble of the inhabitants”. The matter was referred to Presbytery.²⁹ Two years after Willison’s ministry in Brechin concluded, a minute of January 1718 lamented that “a great many of the inhabitants of this place do grossly abuse and profane the Lord’s Day . . . and on this occasion have allowed themselves, their children and servants unlawful recreations on ice”.

It is perhaps no surprise that one of Willison’s first publications was his *Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day*, the first edition appearing about 1713. In the introduction to the 1716 edition he begins with a striking and memorable phrase:

Time is one of the most precious Things in the World, and what can never be enough valued, nor be carefully improven, seeing the eternal Salvation of our precious and immortal Souls doth wholly depend thereupon. . . . But of all Time, Sabbath Time is the most precious and valuable; since, upon the Improvement of it, the Salvation of our Souls dependeth in a special Manner. Time is fitly compared to a Ring of Gold, and the Sabbath to the sparkling Diamond in it. So that we ought to have a peculiar

²⁸ Kirk Session minutes, 6th December 1705, cited by R. J. Grahame, “Shards of Hope: An investigation into the history of Brechin Cathedral from an eschatological perspective” (Doctor of Ministry thesis, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania, 2015), pp. 112-13.

²⁹ Kirk Session minutes, 10th December 1710, cited by Grahame, p. 113.

Esteem for the Sabbath, and reckon every Moment of Sabbath Time precious, as we do the Fyings of Gold, being careful that none of it be lost.

In this introduction, Willison contends against Episcopalians who either “disown the perpetual obligation of the fourth commandment” or “plead for carnal diversions and recreations” after worship. Willison also singles out “one, J.S., who calls himself a Presbyter of the Episcopal church of Scotland”.³⁰ This was James Small, Episcopalian minister at Forfar who sought to defend Sabbath recreations.³¹

Willison gives a very high place to the Sabbath as a “special Fence to all Religion, and a great Bulwark against the prevailing Torrent of Impiety”. He imputes the fact that “Piety is at so low an Ebb in many Places of the land” chiefly to “the great Neglect and Disregard of the Sabbath Day: For common Experience testifies, That where the Sabbath is most strictly observed, there Christian Knowledge, Piety and Morality, do most prosper; And where the Sabbath is disregarded, there, not only Christianity, but even Morality and Civility do decay”.³² Willison is speaking from his experience of the neglect of the Sabbath in Brechin. He also focuses special attention pastorally on families.³³

In later editions, he identifies Sabbath sanctification as the practice whereby the Church stands or falls. If a breach was made in “this hedge of piety, serious godliness will run out at it, and a flood of impiety and looseness rush in upon us”. The frequency of the Sabbath helped to “keep sin and vice under constant rebukes, and put atheism and infidelity to the blush. Take away the observation of the Lord’s day, then the worship of God would be cast off, and atheism, profaneness, and all disorders, like a flood, would break in upon us”.³⁴

6. Willison administers the Lord's Supper

It was vitally important to recover key items from Skinner and his associates in 1704. These included Session records, title deeds, and marriage records. Just as critical were the following:

³⁰ *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), p. 57.

³¹ For James Small (c. 1650-1730), see Bertie, p. 131. Small replied to Willison, and the exchange went on until 1719; see MacLeod, p. 290.

³² *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), pp. 3-4.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁴ Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison*, p. 2.

- three iron stamps for stamping the tickets [tokens] for the Lord's Supper;
- two little barrels;
- four great silver cups for the Communion;³⁵
- two large stoups and a tin basin for the said use;³⁶
- two long table cloths and one short with three napkins for the said use.³⁷

It was common for Episcopal intruders to retain such items and they could be very expensive to replace. By 1707, Willison was ready to make use of these in administering the Lord's Supper for the first time in his ministry. We must assume that a period of instruction, catechising, and discipline was first required, not to mention the absence of significant disorder.

On 18th May 1707, Willison intimated from the pulpit his intention to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is interesting to speculate as to why Willison chose this as the best time to make such a move. Perhaps, as Roderick Grahame notes, national events had their additional influence. "One factor too in Willison's support may have been the Act of Union, which formally came into being in May 1707. Although the Parliament of Scotland was now dissolved, it did mean politically that Protestantism, particularly anti-papal Protestantism, was in the ascendancy."³⁸

The Lord's Supper had not been observed in Brechin for the past fifteen years. Skinner promptly intimated that he would do likewise "on the Sabbath following". "By which factious behaviour of Mr. Skinner there are great heartburnings, strife and disorder created in the place and still like to abound more and more."

The Presbytery regarded it as "a very schismatical and disorderly carriage of Mr. Skinner by opposing Mr. Willison's design in celebrating

³⁵ Assuming these are the four cups described by Thoms (pp. 79-80), two cups are dated 1631 and the other two 1643 and 1648.

³⁶ These are the two pewter pot-bellied flagons, described by Thoms, p. 81, and illustrated in detail in Peter Spencer Davies, *Scottish Pewter, 1600-1850* (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 124-6. They were donated by Walter Jameson in 1680. Perhaps the basin is one of the three pewter patens presented in 1660 for serving the bread at Communion (Thoms, p. 80; Spencer Davies, pp. 108-9).

³⁷ Thoms, p. 135.

³⁸ This quotation was kindly supplied by Dr. Grahame in personal correspondence from his forthcoming book, *Writ in the Stones – a new History of Brechin Cathedral*.

the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper there". Two ministers were dispatched "to go presently and commune with Mr. Skinner anent the affair, and to show him how unchristian and unbecoming the Gospel and precepts of our Saviour his carriage is in this matter and cannot but be constructed to be out of emulation and upon design to impede the work begun by Mr. Willison, Mr. Skinner never having made any attempt this way for twelve or thirteen years bypast". Skinner held himself bound to follow through with his intimation, but then decided to delay, and in December he intimated that the communion would be held in March of the following year.³⁹

Willison continued according to his intimation and held the communion on 3rd August. It seems likely that the intervening period would have been used to provide instruction on how to prepare for the Lord's Supper. This was especially necessary due to its long neglect. This would have provided important material for his *Sacramental Directory* treatise published less than ten years later.

Skinner retaliated by encouraging as many as he could to go to communions at Edzell, Careston, and Kinnaird, where Episcopalians were still intruding. This fact shows that the problems in Brechin were not unique. The Presbytery had ongoing difficulties at Lethnot, Lochlee, Maryton, Naver, and Aberlemno. Thoms notes that a total of £41 12s. 6d. was collected for the poor when all collections from the services of the Communion season are combined. He believes that this compares reasonably favourably with the average of £67 4s. 0d. collected in 1675-89. Skinner's communion in March 1708 raised £38 2s. 6d. This suggests that Willison had gained the upper hand.

It is especially notable because Skinner held the communion over two Sabbaths as had been the practice, one for the town and one for the landward. If the first of these was for the town then the fact that the collection on that date is significantly smaller indicates that Skinner had lost a great deal of support in the town; this despite Skinner's claims that he had "near fifteen hundred communicants".⁴⁰ He also said that "the whole people in the parish come to me to be catechized, baptized, married and receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, whereby Mr. Willison cannot get access to go about any part of the ministry except preaching". Such statements were manifestly untrue.

³⁹ Thoms, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Skinner's successor, Gideon Guthrie, claimed that he had "upwards of twelve hundred communicants" at his Easter communions in 1711, 1712, and 1713; C. E. Guthrie Wright (ed.), *Gideon Guthrie: a monograph written 1712 to 1730* (Edinburgh, 1900), pp. 72-5.



One object that gives its own witness to this momentous event in Brechin is a communion token. It is a virtually square oblong as opposed to the round tokens issued in 1678 (for some reason the latter are among the commonest pre-1690 tokens and were especially favoured by Angus parishes).⁴¹ It is made of lead and bears the date 1707 and the initials of Mr. John Willison. The name Brechin is on the reverse with the same retrograde “N” as the 1678 token. Retrograde letters were not uncommon. The token is stamped rather than created from the lead being poured into a mould. It is possible, though not certain, that the stamps recovered from Skinner were used to create the “Brechin” wording on the reverse side; this is not identical with the 1678 token on comparison.⁴² Those who received the token in 1707

⁴¹ “One of the most common pre-1690 CTs is also round; of course, I am talking about Brechin 1678! All CT collectors eventually get one of these – I have two. Brechin is in Angus, and parishes in Angus like rounds: over a third of all CTs from this shire are round.” This opinion was advanced on a blog called “Collect Communion Tokens” by “Scudzy Coin Dog” on 21st June 2013. See <http://communiontokens.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/squares-rounds-rectangles.html>, accessed on 11th January 2017. The frequent occurrence of this token may owe something to late Victorian forgery. David Powell observes that, “The most frequent targets of such activity was the popular 1678 Brechin piece, concerning which the *Dundee Courier* of 4 Sept 1903 writes: “. . . the fast getting rare Brechin Communion token. They are now mostly in the hands of collectors – Unfortunately there are several clever imitations in circulation and collectors would require to be very careful in seeing they are not imposed upon. The writer had the privilege of seeing two of these fictitious specimens, and so nicely are they produced in every detail that it is only the expert that could discover the difference from the genuine one.” *Leaden Tokens Telegraph*, Issue 112, July/Aug 2016. See also <http://www.mernick.org.uk/leadtokens/>, accessed on 11th January 2017.

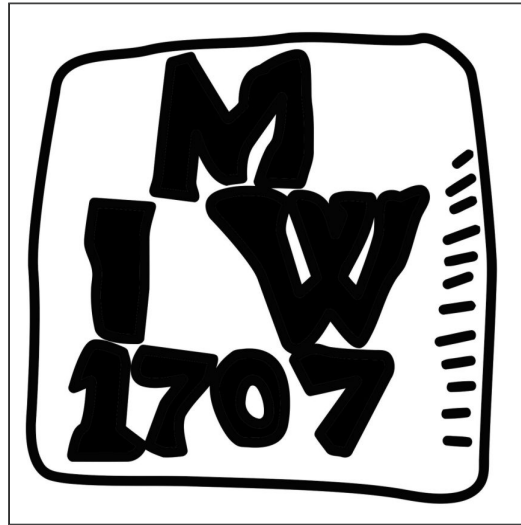
⁴² The communion tokens are catalogued and described in A. S. Brook, *Communion Tokens of the Established Church of Scotland: Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries* (Edinburgh,

were explicitly identified with John Willison and this controversial communion.⁴³

The Presbytery proceeded against Skinner “for this scandalous disorder”. It appears that the Lord Advocate now withdrew his former opposition to discipline against Skinner. Perhaps the Presbytery also felt strengthened by the Privy Council’s “Proclamation against Intruders” issued in 1706. Indeed, the Presbytery applied to the Sheriff-depute of Angus regarding four other cases of intrusion as well.

Skinner was also accused of “entrusting his tokens to some persons grossly immoral and lying under public scandal and distributing them through families at their pleasure”. The Presbytery complained to the General Assembly that Skinner

did employ many unqualified ministers, whereof not one prayed for Her Majesty *nominatim*, at which Communion scandalous persons were admitted to be partakers thereof and disaffected persons were encouraged by the prayers of the ministers, in all which Mr. John Skinner was countenanced and supported by the Magistrates of the place, by reason whereof Mr. Willison and other ministers of this Presbytery, Her Majesty’s most



Facing page: Reverse of the 1678 communion token. Above: Front and reverse of the 1707 token.

1908), p. 39. “Brechin. *Obv.* 16 | BREC- | - HIN | 78, with two horizontal lines between name and date. The N is retrograde. Round, 14. Brechin. *Obv.* BREC | HIN. *Rev.* M | IW | 1707, for Mr. John Willison, minister 1703 to 1716. Oblong, with border, 13 x 12.”

⁴³ The 1707 token is held by the National Museum of Scotland, A.1944.60. It was kindly made available for inspection through the assistance of the Scottish History and Archaeology Department at the Museum.

loyal subjects, have been much discouraged and insulted both in town and country.⁴⁴

Skinner refused to acknowledge the Presbytery and sought to resist their process. He appeared at the Presbytery accompanied by Provost Young and other citizens of Brechin, together with the Lairds of Findowrie and Keithock. It was clear that Skinner had the backing of the country gentry, as Hugh Maxwell, minister of Tealing, observed in a letter to Robert Wodrow.⁴⁵ After a drawn-out process Skinner was deposed on 14th September 1709. He continued to preach in defiance of this sentence until, in January 1710, the Lords of Justiciary at Edinburgh sentenced him “to remove out of the bounds of the Presbytery of Brechin”. It was not until November that he obeyed.⁴⁶

7. The latter years in Brechin: continued opposition

Skinner’s departure did not end Episcopalian influences in the district. It was in 1709 that the Presbytery learned that “the English service and ceremonies were read and performed after the custom of the Church of England in the Church of Careston – a most unaccountable and unheard of and unprecedented innovation in worship”.⁴⁷

Willison’s first published writings involved combating Episcopalianism in the area. His earliest treatise, in 1712, was *Queries to the Scots Innovators in Divine Service and particularly to the Liturgical party in the Shire of Angus, and places adjacent thereto. Being a Compendious Collection of the Choicest Arguments against the present Innovations*. Skinner’s successor, Gideon Guthrie, had started using the English Book of Common Prayer in his services in October 1711.⁴⁸ Willison also indicates that the support

⁴⁴ Thoms, p. 143.

⁴⁵ T. M’Crie (ed.), *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow* (3 vols., Wodrow Society, Edinburgh, 1842-3), Vol. 1, p. 80. At least one of the country gentry, the Laird of Cookston, sought to take advantage of the situation to evade being cited before the town Session to answer a charge of adultery. He claimed to be answerable only to the inactive landward Session. Both Kirk Sessions were united in 1708 by order of General Assembly (Thoms, p. 139).

⁴⁶ See Thoms, pp. 145-47. In the meantime, one of Willison’s supportive elders, John Doig, became Provost but was severely beaten during a riot. Doig’s influence must have been helpful at this time; see Black, *History of Brechin*, pp. 123-24.

⁴⁷ Thoms, p. 145.

⁴⁸ Gideon Guthrie (1663-1732) was Episcopalian incumbent in Fetteresso from 1703-9, and then in Brechin from 1709-16; see Bertie, p. 58. Guthrie says that “the two Presbyterian Preachers [in Brechin] were daily disclaiming and inveighing against [the Book of Common Prayer] from their pulpits”, *Gideon Guthrie*, p. 73.

for such activities was drawn from the country gentry. It may be that strong-arm tactics had been used all along to compel tenants in the landward area to support the Episcopalian cause. Willison speaks of "some who . . . compel their tenants and dependaries to separate from the Established Church and attend their new worship under pain of being ruined or cast out of their houses and possessions".⁴⁹

The Presbytery ensured that the second charge in Brechin was filled. On 18th May 1710 "Mr. John Johnston, in face of the congregation, was set apart and ordained and admitted as one of the ministers of the congregation of Brechin". This shrewd action brought, as Thoms notes, "significant calm to the parish". Thoms also observes "an apparently increasing attendance" at the annual Communion, as witnessed by the collections for the poor. "They rose from £48 17s. 6d. in June 1711 to £57 4s. 2d. in March, 1715."⁵⁰

The year 1715 was to be tumultuous for the parish when the Jacobite rebellion took over the town. Willison was temporarily dispossessed of his pulpit by Skinner and Gideon Guthrie. Worse than this, many of whom better was expected seemed to defect. This included several office-bearers, and it was necessary to discipline many church members for "complying with wicked impositions and base oaths".⁵¹

Even for some time after the Battle of Sheriffmuir in November 1715, conditions were by no means calm in the North, and Church courts could not meet for around six months. The Presbytery minute of 16th February 1716 recorded the first meeting following the rebellion, but spoke of:

parties of the rebels still travelling up and down, a great many ministers being turned out of their churches and others that favoured the rebellion intruding in them, and a great many ministers having been obliged to leave the country, the few that remained being obliged to leave their houses.⁵²

⁴⁹ J. Willison, *Queries to the Scots Innovators in Divine Service and particularly to the Liturgical party in the Shire of Angus, and places adjacent thereto. Being a Compendious Collection of the Choicest Arguments against the present Innovations. By a Lover of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1712), pp. 5-6. On p. 8 he refers to the biblical Gideon and counsels his readers, "Follow not Gideon, nay nor Paul, further than they follow Christ" (an evident veiled reference to Gideon Guthrie).

⁵⁰ Thoms, p. 148.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 151.

In fact, half of the Presbytery's churches had been forcibly taken over during those months. The effect of the rebellion was actually to strengthen Presbyterianism in these parts by deposing a significant number of Episcopalian-leaning ministers who had joined with the rebellion.⁵³ Normality was restored, but perhaps for Willison it had been a bitter experience all too reminiscent of the years of conflict with Skinner. Perhaps he felt that he had consolidated his pioneering work as far as he personally could and that progress could be better made at the hands of another. When a call came to go to Dundee in July 1716 he accepted it. His local unpopularity is notoriously evidenced by the refusal to supply horse and cart on the part of all carters within the town.⁵⁴

Pomeroy commends the courage Willison had shown but does not regard his efforts as having borne fruit in the town. In fact he thinks that the people were more hostile to Presbyterianism when he left than when he arrived.⁵⁵ It does not seem, however, that he weighed all the available evidence. Thoms reflects in a more balanced way on the reasons for Willison's departure:

By 1715, six years after the defeat of Skinner, he could not but have felt discouraged to see so much of the ground gained crumble away during the months of the Rising, even though the apostasy of his parishioners had been short-lived and swiftly renounced and in many cases sincerely regretted. Perhaps he surmised that his continued presence in Brechin would be an obstacle if the bitter memories of the early strife were to be permanently effaced, that the cause of the Presbyterian Church would be advanced, paradoxically enough, by the departure of its own stalwart champion, and that the time had come for some other to take over the charge and reap the harvest of what had been so painfully sown. For the outcome of the long struggle between Presbyterianism and Episcopalianism in Brechin was virtually settled.⁵⁶

⁵³ Willison notes himself: "Until then, there were a good number of Episcopal ministers continued in churches through the North; but they, joining with others in that rebellion, were soon afterwards turned out", *A Fair and Impartial Testimony*, Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison*, p. 905.

⁵⁴ Black, *History of Brechin*, p. 119.

⁵⁵ Pomeroy, *John Willison of Dundee, 1680-1750*, p. 36. Pomeroy remarks: "it would be interesting to know by what means the citizens of Brechin were converted to Presbyterianism, but on this point there is little light to be had from history" (p. 36).

⁵⁶ Thoms, p. 156.

Whether or not Willison could discern it, his departure was more an indication of strength than weakness. Things were stable and embedded enough to give the reins to others who would not have to face the wind consistently in their faces.

It is notable that the following year in November 1717 the Presbytery minutes record that "by the blessing of God, against much opposition, the parishes are planted in these bounds".⁵⁷ Thoms makes the following further observations concerning Willison:

He had come almost thirteen years before as Minister of the first charge and accepted with great spirit and courage the burden of winning over the burgh and parish of Brechin to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. The assignment must have appeared at first a formidable venture against a deeply rooted tradition of Episcopalianism. But resolute in character and uncompromising in his principles, Willison had persisted on his path, undismayed by the tremendous odds against him, by the antipathy and the animosity which, inspired by Presbyterianism itself, had been in time directed to its undaunted protagonist. In the Presbytery he had proved himself a leader and counsellor to his colleagues confronted with the depressingly difficult problems that had to be solved for the progress of Presbyterianism in north-east Angus.⁵⁸

8. The *Sacramental Directory* (1716) and the Brechin experience

Willison's emphasis on the Lord's Supper witnessed throughout his writings and his ministry can be traced to the years of conflict at Brechin.⁵⁹ The suggestion has already been made that the *Sacramental Directory* originated in the very first patient instruction needed to prepare the congregation for the first communion in 1707. After all, it was a congregation that had not observed the Lord's Supper for fifteen years and prior to this had not received Presbyterian instruction for decades.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵⁹ This conclusion had been reached long before accessing H. R. Sefton, *John Willison and His Times* (Society of Friends of Brechin Cathedral, No. 24, Brechin, 1975). Sefton writes: "Another notable feature of Willison's work is the remarkable quantity of writing about the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is possible that this emphasis can be traced back to his ministry in Brechin for when he celebrated the Sacrament in Brechin on 3rd August 1707 this was the first observance for fifteen years," p. 20.

Each subsequent year to 1716 would have consolidated the instruction and guidance given to prepare the congregation. Willison added to and amended *Sacramental Directory* over the years through its various editions.⁶⁰ The 1716 edition retains the direct tone of preaching to a greater extent than later editions, which are much more expanded and smoothed out into a written style. The following excerpt relates to the intimation of a Communion Season and how it should be received spiritually. Bearing in mind that in 1707 Willison first intimated the Communion three months in advance, there was plenty of time for instruction and preparation.

Let me put you in mind with what gladness the Israelites of old welcomed the news of the celebration of their passover, in the room of which Christ instituted to us the Lord's supper.

O what joy did it occasion in Jerusalem, when the trumpet was blown by the priest, to give intimation to the people of the day of the passover! How cheerful was the psalmist's heart, when he saith, Psal. lxxxix. 1, 3, "Make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob: blow up the trumpet in the new-moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day!" This feast was still observed upon the fifteenth day after the first appearance of the new-moon: and not having almanacks, as we have, to forewarn them of it, they used to send men to the top of the hill to watch for the appearance of the new moon, who, as soon as they saw it, hastened to tell the priest, that he might blow the trumpet, and give the welcome notice of it to the people, who received the news with universal joy. And have not we far more Cause to rejoice at the Intimation of our Gospel Passover, in which we have Christ crucified, far more evidently set forth before our Eyes, than the Jews had?

O how much should our hearts be affected, when the *Silver Trumpet* of the Gospel sounds loud and lon& calling us to the Feast of the *Great King*.⁶¹

The *Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day*, with its inclusion of sacramental directions and instruction on family religion,

⁶⁰ In fact, Willison says, "The subject is still very large and copious, after all that hath been said and written upon it; and there is room for much more". The (so-called) second edition was published in 1726 and the third in 1740. This was reprinted regularly after Willison's death in 1750.

⁶¹ *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), pp. 250-1.

A
TREATISE
 CONCERNING
 The SANCTIFYING of the
Lord's Day.

And Particularly,
The right Improvement of a
COMMUNION-SABBATH.

WHEREIN
*The Morality of the Sabbath, and its strict Observa-
 tion under the New Testament Dispensation, is
 maintained against the Adversaries thereof.*

AND ALSO,
*Many special Advices and Directions given, for pro-
 moting the great and comprehensive Duties of
 Sabbath-Sanctification, and Worthy-Communica-
 ting.*

Necessary for FAMILIES.

By a Minister of the Church of SCOTLAND.

REV. I. IO. *I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day.*

EDINBURGH,
 Printed for Mr. JAMES M'EUEN, and sold
 at his Shop over against the Cross-well, North
 Side of the Street. M DCC XVI.

was the legacy of Willison's ministry being bequeathed to Brechin. The volume was published only months before his departure. Willison sets out the connection between the *Sacramental Directory* and his *Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* with which it was combined.

As the *Sabbath Day* is the most excellent of all the Days in the week; so a *Communion Sabbath* is the most desireable of all the *Sabbaths* in the Year; for, that is a *Day in God's Courts*, in an eminent Manner, and is truly *better than a Thousand*. . . . If *ordinary Sabbaths* do require great Care and Diligence in preparing for, and improving them; then much more do *Communion Sabbaths*, being solemn and high Days; wherein we make most near Approaches unto God, and he makes near Approaches unto us: They are Days of Heaven upon Earth, and do most eminently represent the Employments and Enjoyments of the Glorified in Heaven.⁶²

Close consideration of Willison's remarks reveals that he discerned a gap in the practical books that had been written on the Lord's Supper. His *Sacramental Directory* was a collection of practical directions designed to guide the communicant through the whole exercise. It has three parts: I. Directions how to prepare for a communion-sabbath before it come; II. How to spend it when it is come; III. How to behave ourselves when it is over.

The idea of a directory was familiar from the Directory of Family Worship and the Directory of Public Worship. Willison's *Sacramental Directory* leads the communicant patiently by the hand, not leaving him to his own devices but carefully instructing him at each point of a Communion Sabbath as to how he could make best use of it. Willison's purpose is not to explain the nature of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, but to give practical directions as to personal duty.

My Design here is not to treat of the *Sacrament* of the *Lord's Supper* at large, for this hath been done to excellent Purpose by several Hands, such as *Henry, Doolittle*, and others, whose Books upon this subject I do earnestly recommend to the Reader's serious Perusal.

All that I design upon this Head, is to give some few Directions, for the right Improvement of Communion Sabbaths: And in Order thereto, I shall insist at some Length upon the Preparation

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 244.

needful for them before Hand. We must be at great Pains to sanctify our selves before we come to this solemn Ordinance of the *Lord's Supper*, and that for several Days before we come to it.⁶³

8.1 Other authors

Clearly, Willison believed that this preparation was not only essential but that it had not been fully emphasised in material already published. He especially commends a treatise written by the English Puritan Thomas Doolittle (1630-1707). Doolittle's *Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper* (1665) also includes "Three Dialogues For The More Full Information Of The Weak In The Nature And Use Of This Sacrament". It may be the practical element that Willison particularly valued.

And because the best are too slight in their preparation for, and the weak unskilful in, and in some measure come short of living suitably to the sacrament; something is contained herein, to excite thy slothful heart to greater seriousness and diligence in preparation before thou comest, and how it should be done: something for direction, how thou shouldst behave thyself when thou art there; and the manner how particular graces are to be acted for the better improving of this ordinance; and something to direct thee what thou art to do, when thou comest from thence: how thou mightst know whether thou art the better or the worse; and what thou art to do, which of either be thy case.⁶⁴

Doolittle's first dialogue is between "a minister and a Christian who desires to partake of the Lord's Supper"; the second, between "a weak believer that dares not come to and a strong believer that dares not absent himself from the Lord's Supper"; the third, between "one believer that hath assurance, and another that hath hopes, and another that is under doubtings of the love of God, and of good by the sacrament, as they come away from the Lord's table". Doolittle expresses concerns about careless and neglected preparation for the Lord's Supper.

Another book commended by Willison is merely stated as by "Campbell". This was Daniel Campbell (1665-1722), the minister of Kilmichael, Glassary, in Argyll. Daniel Campbell first published his

⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 244.

⁶⁴ Thomas Doolittle, *A Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper: with three dialogues for the more full information of the weak, in the nature and use of this sacrament* (19th edn., Boston, 1700), Epistle to the Reader, pp. A2v-A3r.

Sacramental Meditations on the Sufferings and Death of Christ in 1698. The title of the work indicates that it derives from some sermons preached in the “Irish language” (Gaelic). Campbell laments the widespread lack of preparation. He intends his meditations to be used by communicants in the week preceding the administration of the Lord’s Supper.⁶⁵

It is much to be regreted, that most of Men come to the Lord’s Table for the Fashion only, without due Preparation or Examination, without a deep Consideration of their Sins, the End of their coming; what Engagements they are to lay on themselves there, and without so much as once reflecting on what our dear Lord Jesus suffered for us and therefore, they go away from the Table as empty as they came; yea, they go away with a Curse instead of a Blessing. Assuredly if Men came with a due Sense of Sin, sincere Intentions, with Longings for Christ, Faith in him, Love to him, to his holy Table, to renew their Covenant with him, and to shew forth his Death and, Sufferings, with suitable Frame of Spirit, that then they would be “abundantly satisfied with the Fatness of God’s House, even of his holy Place and with that Feast of Fat Things, that Feast of Wine on the Lees, of Fat Things full of Marrow and of Wine on the Lees, well refined”.

Christian Reader, Come to the Lord’s Table as oft as occasion offers, but come with the Wedding Garment of Knowledge, Faith, Love, Repentance, new Obedience, Thankfulness and Thirsting for Christ. Read these his Sufferings, apply them by Faith; Be thankful to him that endured the Cross despising the Shame. Love him that so dearly loved you. Be grieved for your Sins, which exposed your Lord to such Shame and Sufferings.⁶⁶

The point that Willison particularly seems to value in these authors is the material given and directions for subjects of meditation for communicants. Campbell gathers material together for this purpose:

If Convenience allow, when you approach to the Lord’s Table, set a Day apart, and read the Sufferings of Christ, as here set down in these Sacramental Meditations, and pause, and meditate, marvel,

⁶⁵ Daniel Campbell, *Sacramental Meditations on the Sufferings and Death of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1722), Epistle to the Reader, p. A6v.

⁶⁶ Campbell, *Sacramental Meditations*, Epistle to the Reader, pp. A7r and v.

The CONTENTS!

The second Part of this Treatise, is an
Help for the right Improvement of
Communion Sabbaths.

D irections concerning the Preparation necessary for a Communion Sabbath	243
Concerning the Nature of the Lord's Supper	244
The Necessity of Communicating	247
The Necessity of solemn Preparation	251
The Sin and Hazard of unworthy Communicating	252
The Necessity of Self-Examination	255
The Things we must Examine our selves upon	256
The Way to find out what State we are in	257
Our Ends and Designs in approaching to the Lord's Table	264
What it is to shew forth the Lord's Death	265
The Sacramental Graces which we must have	268
What it is to discern the Lord's Body	ibid.
Marks of true Faith, Love, Repentance and new Obedi- ence	270
Humiliation and Confession necessary before our Ap- proach	272
How to attain a broken Heart	276
How far Tears are necessary	278
Flying to Christ by Faith, absolutely necessary before par- taking; Arguments to persuade to it	279
Objections against coming to Christ answered	288
Arguments to be used in pleading for Mercy	295
Turning from all Sin absolutely necessary	299
Particularly, Tongue Sins, Drunkenness, Sabbath-break- ing, &c.	301
Personal Covenanting necessary, and what it is	304
Directions for the right performing this Duty	312
Advice to young Communicants	314
The Misery of an uncovenanted State	316
Objections against this Duty answered	318
Meditation upon Christ's Death and Sufferings neces- sary	319
Perseverant Prayer necessary before Communicating	324

DIRECTI-

and exercise Faith, Love, Repentance, ejaculatory Prayer, as you read forward, suitable to the various Steps of his Sufferings. And since we, in the Church of *Scotland*, ordinarily keep a Fast on the *Thursday* before the Celebration of the Sacrament, and have the Preparation Sermon on the *Saturday*, I think the *Friday* before the Celebration, may be very profitably spent in reading and meditating, and applying by Faith, the Death and Sufferings of Jesus.⁶⁷

Another English Puritan work commended by Willison is *The True Touchstone which shows both Grace and Nature: A Discourse on Self-Examination* (1681) by Nathaniel Vincent (1639-1697).⁶⁸ This includes a chapter on self-examination prior to the Lord's Supper and a chapter of meditations for the Lord's Supper. Matthew Henry's *The Communicant's Companion or Instructions and Helps for the Right Receiving of the Lord's Supper* is perhaps closest to Willison's purpose since it is most extensive in practical directions. These English examples demonstrate that Willison's emphasis is not a Scottish peculiarity but a key dimension of Puritan piety. Henry has chapters such as the following:

- Helps for Self-examination before we come to this Ordinance;
- Instructions for Renewing our Covenants with God in our Preparation for this Ordinance;
- Helps for Meditation and Prayer in our preparation for this Ordinance;
- Directions in what frame of spirit we should come to, and attend upon this Ordinance;
- Some account of the affecting sights that are to be seen by Faith in this Ordinance;
- Some account of the precious Benefits which are to be received by Faith in this Ordinance;
- Helps for the exciting of those pious and devout affections which should be working in us while we attend this Ordinance;
- Directions concerning the solemn Vows we are to make to God in this Ordinance;

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Sacramental Meditations*, p. 133.

⁶⁸ Reprinted in 2013 by Puritan Publications. MacLeod (p. 60) assumes that Willison's reference to Vincent is to Thomas Vincent's *Explicatory Catechism on the Shorter Catechism*.

The CONTENTS:
DIRECTIONS for right spending a
Communion Sabbath when it is come.

<i>Suitable Meditations for the Morning</i>	325
<i>A view of the matchless Love of Christ</i>	326
<i>And of his manifold sweet Offices and Relations</i>	330
<i>The Frame of Soul which is necessary for this solemn Ap- proach</i>	333
<i>Meditations and Ejaculations in going to the Church this Day</i>	340

DIRECTIONS concerning our Car-
riage at the Table 342

<i>Comfort to discouraged Souls</i>	344
<i>Meditations upon our seeing the Table and Elements</i>	346
<i>And upon the several Sacramental Actions</i>	348

Concerning our Behaviour after our be-
ing at the Table. 359

<i>The Grounds of rejoicing which covenanted Souls have</i>	361
<i>Likewise the Grounds of Humiliation and Fear</i>	365
<i>Concerning our Carriage when we return home</i>	366
<i>Marks of Sincerity in covenanting with God</i>	368
<i>Marks of the gracious Presence of Christ in Ordinances</i>	371

Suitable Advices to Communicants of
all sorts.

1. <i>To those who have Communicated unworthily</i>	373
2. <i>To those who are full of Doubts and Fears</i>	374
3. <i>To</i>	375

- Directions concerning the frame of our spirits when we come away from this Ordinance;
- An Exhortation to order the Conversation aright after this Ordinance;
- Some Words of Comfort which this Ordinance speaks to serious Christians.

It seems likely that some, if not all, of these books were available to Willison in first preparing the congregation at Brechin for the Lord's Supper.⁶⁹ Another author, that Willison does not mention by name, is the Glasgow minister James Clerk or Clark (1660-1723). Clerk emphasised personal covenanting in a similar way to Willison in *The Communicant's Best Token, or, A Practical Treatise of Personal Covenanting With God, Wherein the Nature, Usefulness and Practice of this Spiritual Duty is Explained and Pressed* (Edinburgh, 1702).⁷⁰ Willison uses the phrase "best token" in his *Sacramental Catechism*.⁷¹

8.2 Key themes and expressions in the Sacramental Directory

As we have noted, it is possible to detect the echoes of Willison's preaching in the *Sacramental Directory*. Perhaps also there is some assessment of the spiritual condition of Brechin. When now departing from Brechin, was he leaving behind a solemn witness against those who were neglecting the gospel he had faithfully preached? He gives something of an example of such gospel exhortations later in the treatise, undoubtedly reflecting earnest offers and entreaties to those who were unconcerned.⁷² Did he also have concerns about unworthy communicants and dissemblers, particularly in view of recent defections and false oaths?

⁶⁹ In the preface to the *Sacramental Catechism*, Willison writes: "I frankly acknowledge, I have borrowed many things from others that have written upon the subject."

⁷⁰ This volume was originally communion sermons and first published in 1697 under the title *Personal Calling*. An edition was published in Glasgow in 1707. Clerk wrote over 30 pamphlets, many of which were controversial. The more practical include: *Gospel Cordials, or the perplexed believer relieved from the oracles of God; in ten several cases of conscience, by M.J.C.* (Glasgow, 1722) and *The Christians Pocket-book: or, A Bundle of familiar exhortations on the practice of piety* (Edinburgh, 1741). For more information on Clerk, see Mairianna Birkeland, "Politics and Society of Glasgow, 1680-1740" (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1999), pp. 66, 77-84, and Appendix IV.

⁷¹ "Personal covenanting with God . . . certainly is the communicant's best token to warrant him to approach to the Lord's table," Hetherington (ed.), *The Practical Works of John Willison*, p. 485.

⁷² "Since the Gospel offers Christ to all that hear it, and the *Call* and *Command* to receive and embrace Christ as a *Saviour*, is given to all and every one, even to the vilest of Sinners;

The CONTENTS.

3. <i>To those who are sensible of God's bountiful dealing to them</i>	377
4. <i>To those who are in such a happy Case, but their Sky is over-cast again</i>	384
<i>Marks of Hypocrites Attainments</i>	385
<i>A Word in the close to Communicant in general</i>	387

An APPENDIX containing Helps for Prayer and Instructions to those that are Weak, whether Parents or Children 373

<i>What Use is to be made of Forms of Prayer</i>	394
<i>The true Use of the Lord's Prayer</i>	397
<i>Several Examples of Prayer, for Masters of Families, whether for Week-Days, Sabbath-Days, or Communion Occasions; likewise a Prayer and Graces for Children and a short Catechism for their Instruction, from Page, 401 to the End.</i>	

ERRATA.

It is hoped the candid Reader will easily pardon the smaller Errors of the Press, in Pointing and Spelling, and Words that do not marr the Sense. The grosser are these following,

P Age 21. Line 10. for Creature Read Creator. p. 30. l. 24. f. spiritual r. special. p. 33. l. 1. r. extinguish. p. 48. l. 14. f. fourth r. seventh. p. 73. l. 32. f. Nativity r. Negative. p. 80. l. 14. r. prove. also l. 26. r. Ordinance. p. 81. l. 34. f. their r. there. p. 108. l. 10. f. ther. they. p. 111. l. 5. f. warning, r. warming. p. 134. l. 38. f. live, r. leave, and l. 40. f. him, r. them. p. 143. l. 37. supple, in Christ; p. 165. l. 20. f. Word, r. World, p. 171. l. 14. f. sit, r. set. p. 181. l. 19. f. you, r. them. p. 187. l. 29. f. when, r. where, p. 191. f. live, r. leave, p. 194. l. 6. f. daily, r. duly. p. 210. l. 5. f. Breathing, r. beating, p. 211. f. Soul, r. Son, p. 261. l. 39. f. A. r. O. p. 272. l. 16. f. weary, r. wean, p. 380. l. 9. f. I. r. first, p. 398. l. 21. supple way.

Now, if the Dust of Christ's Ministers Feet will be a Witness against the Slighters of the *Gospel*, and cry for Vengeance on them; then certainly Christ's own Body and Blood will be a more terrible Witness against *unworthy Communicants*. Nay, here you swear an Oath attended with solemn Imprecations: When you seal a Covenant with God in this *Sacrament*, you do on the Matter say, "If we be in League with Sin and Satan, while we are professing to give our selves away to the Lord, then let that Wrath which Christ suffered, fall upon us: and as certainly as we crumble the *Sacramental Bread* betwixt our Teeth, let the Mill-stone of God's Wrath bruise us: And as we drink the *Sacramental Cup*, let us drink the cup of unmixt Wrath eternally, if we deal falsly with God in this covenant". And so *unworthy Communicants and Dissemblers* with God *eat and drink judgment to themselves*.⁷³

The language of the early parts of the *Sacramental Directory* seems to echo pastoral handling of objections to a high view of the Lord's Supper. Was he responding to the sort of objections and opinions he heard expressed during his time in Brechin? He does not accept as valid any excuse from those who are unprepared because they cannot seem to leave their sins or have unresolved quarrels with others.

It is heinous Wickedness to go on wilfully in Sin and then make your Sin your Excuse. Remember, if you be not prepared for this Ordinance, neither are you prepared to die: If you be not fit for the *Lord's Supper* here, you are not fit for *the Marriage Supper of the Lamb above*. And, dare you contentedly live one day in that condition you dare not die in? Or if you die in it, you will be eternally excluded from heaven? Mind, tho' you may sit Christ's Call to come to his Table and remember him, you cannot sit his Call to come to his *Tribunal*.⁷⁴

Willison was also concerned about ignorant opinions concerning the Lord's Supper. No doubt his public preaching and private instruction sought to address these. He spoke of some "ignorant Persons among us"

you have a full *Warrant* to lay hold on him for *Pardon*, and flee to him for *Mercy*, and you heinously sin against God and your own soul if you neglect to do it," *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), p. 279.

⁷³ *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying of the Lord's Day* (1716 edn.), p. 246.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 249.

who “rest upon the bare Ordinance and outward Signs and Elements for Pardon and Justification, without looking to Christ for it”.

Let them have their Communion (as they call it) tho' it really be nothing but a bit of Bread and a sip of Wine, they think all is well, their Sins are pardoned, they are sure of Heaven, they are ready to die, the Devil can have no power over them, and so they use this Sacrament as a *Charm*, being ignorant of the true Ends and Uses of it.⁷⁵

One also wonders if we are hearing echoes of Willison's fencing of the table in some of the expressions used in warning the presumptuous in this treatise:

they are not invited Guests . . . Ignorant Persons cannot examine themselves, nor discern the Lord's Body: Profane Persons mock God, when they pretend to seal a Covenant with him: And if they thrust themselves upon this Table, they Affront Christ, and seal their own Condemnation. We would reckon it a loathsome sight to see some dead Corps, or Men full of plague Sores set down beside us at our Tables: And do you think that a living and holy God can look with pleasure upon dead Sinners, or these with the running Ulcers of Swearing, Drunkenness, &c. sitting at his holy Table. Let all such stand off, for they will find *Poison in the Bread, and Death in the Cup*, and go away worse than they came.⁷⁶

Willison gives serious warnings about carelessness in approaching the Lord's Table. “O Sinner . . . venture not to this holy Table without due preparation. . . . Have not the best of us alas, reason to fear our contracting something of this Guilt? Were never our Hearts hard, our Minds wandring, our Affections dead, our Spirits Carnal, when we sat down at the Lords Table?”⁷⁷ In the concluding directions of the treatise he also speaks in a consoling way to those who have communicated unworthily and to those who are full of doubts and fears. “Your Case is sad,” he says, “yet it is not helpless . . . *for the Blood of Christ cleanseth from all Sin*”. To others he counsels: “we are ready to think nothing a Feast, unless we get Smiles, Joy, Peace, and sensible Manifestations from God,

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 265.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 257.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 254.

but there may be great Bounty shown without these.” He proceeds to ask ten questions about their experience.⁷⁸ He concludes the *Sacramental Directory* with many other items of counsel to communicants.

Conclusion

The experience of Brechin being “planted” must have been replicated across the country in other parishes in the post-Revolution era. Such parishes witnessed the restoration of earnest gospel-preaching, catechising, and Church discipline. Any definition of church-planting in our own day that does not give an emphasis to these is surely wanting.

Despite high-level political struggles, the Established Church was bearing fruit in many cases on a local level. The secessions from the Church of Scotland which increased throughout the eighteenth century benefited from the labours of men such as Willison. They had done the hard work of preaching the gospel and patiently instructing parishes in Presbyterian principles, without which people would not have been sensitive to the concerns of secessionists.

Few readers of the *Sacramental Directory* and Willison’s other voluminous and widely read writings on the Lord’s Supper have perhaps appreciated the turbulent origin of his emphasis on the Lord’s Supper. Willison had required courage to endure persecution, opposition, and ridicule in seeking the Reformation of Brechin. No doubt the aptitude he showed in later controversies for resolute but irenic defence of key principles was also shaped by this early experience.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 376-77.