

Covenanter – Yes; Steelite – No

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Over the years many people have accused me of being a Steelite. Others have asked me why I am not a Steelite. In this brief study, I want to explain my position and give biblical and practical reasons why I am not a Steelite and never will be. The term Steelite is used in this monograph to describe a particular interpretation of Presbyterianism started in the modern era by Jim Dodson around 1990. I am not an expert on David Steele and thus will be interacting with the modern positions that I have read and heard. I agree with the Steelites on many areas (the establishment principle, exclusive psalmody, the Westminster Standards, no musical instruments, close communion, etc.). But, I disagree with them on other topics such as headcoverings (I believe headcoverings are required in public worship but are not required all the time); predictive prophecy (prophecy ended with the close of the canon and there is no such thing as a lesser form of prophecy that continues throughout church history); and, ecclesiology or, to be more specific, what constitutes a lawful or faithful church.¹ According to the Steelite view, there is only one,

¹ The Steelites readily acknowledge that there are many Christian churches as to “being.” By this they mean that: (1) they are professedly Christian as opposed to Muslim or Hindu; (2) there are probably some true Christians in their midst; and, (3) there are some areas of true Christian doctrine. When it comes to the church as to “being,” they argue that Roman Catholic, Arminian, schismatic, covenant breaking and very corrupt churches are Christian churches. In this category they place all Presbyterian communions except their own (e.g., O.P.C.; P.C.A.; R.P.C.N.A.; Free Church; Free Church, Continuing; Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, etc.). Thus they place these conservative (yet corrupt in some areas) Presbyterian bodies in *the same category as the Roman Catholic Church*. Consequently, they reject these Presbyterian denominations as having lawful courts and thus tell people to break their covenant vows (because these bodies are schismatic and unfaithful) and simply walk away. In other words, they do not ask for transfers and do not contact their sessions, etc. Because they believe that there are many Christian churches as to “being,” they accuse those who say that they believe they are the only true Presbyterian Church on earth of misrepresenting their position. When they do this, they are equivocating and using a difficult and confusing theological distinction (the being and well-being of the church) to confuse their critics and fool unknowledgeable Presbyterians. The Steelites believe that they are *the only true Presbyterian church* as to “well-being” because they place themselves in a certain historical institutional line, hold to the covenants and Standards and thus are not a schism. (If I am misrepresenting their position, I ask my Steelite brothers to tell me which other current Presbyterian body or denomination they consider a true and faithful church as to “well-being.”) The Steelites have taken a theological concept that Calvin used to distinguish the Reformed churches from the pre-Council of Trent Roman Catholic Church and have applied it indiscriminately to *all Presbyterian bodies except their own*. By doing this and essentially treating all Presbyterian bodies except their own as apostate, they in practice have denied the Confession of Faith’s statement that “particular churches, which are in members thereof [of the catholic or universal church], are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (25:4). They have abused Calvin’s distinction into an “either-or” or a “black and white” view that places churches which preach the true gospel and are very good in many areas (e.g., F.P.C.S., F.C.C., R.P.C.N.A.) in the same category as Rome, which is apostate and not a true Christian church at all. This is a denial of the biblical teaching on corporate sanctification that cannot even be consistently applied to New Testament churches. There were departures and corruptions during the New Covenant era that had to be dealt with and the less pure churches were not treated as apostate and spurned but were lovingly corrected. Calvin did not regard the Lutherans as unlawfully constituted and as not a true church as to well-being but as *a less pure church*. The same can be said of John Knox and the Episcopal Church *of his day* (he preached in an Episcopal Church for two years). (Although John Knox was never an Anglican or Episcopalian, he worked with Puritans within that body to reform the church [if he had Steelite leanings, he would have simply repudiated it altogether as not a true church as to well-being]. In May 1552, when the Church of England was attempting to formulate articles

and there can be only one, faithful church at a time (at least in each nation) and to be a faithful church one must trace one's denomination institutionally back through history to the line of the last faithful church. For the Steelites, this involves not simply agreement in doctrine, church government and practice but also the idea that we are obligated to adopt all former decisions of a lawful court and we must hold to the *exact same words* made by a lawful court throughout history (at least until the next General Assembly of an established national church, which may be several centuries in our future). To concur or agree 100% is not enough. If one does not act as though there is a literal institutional link and one does not adopt *all the same subordinate standards and decisions word for word*, one cannot be a faithful or true church.

To deal with this issue exegetically, logically and historically effectively, we will be examining a short paper written by a few Steelites which purports to prove that it is necessary for a church body to join historically with the last faithful church or it cannot be a faithful church itself. In other words, it is not enough to be faithful to Scripture or our covenant obligations or our subordinate standards which reflect the teaching of Scripture; one must reconstruct one's own history so that it fits into a certain line in church history (this involves reconstructing an institutional connection). Moreover, if a church does not do this, it must be regarded as an unfaithful, unlawful, unduly constituted church and, according to the Steelites, is constitutionally no different than the Roman Catholic Church (as regards the well-being of the church).

An Examination of the Steelite Arguments from Scripture

In the first section, which sets forth the biblical arguments for their position, their views are not even accurately articulated. Instead, a very general statement is given that no professing Christian would disagree with or object to: "We are required to follow the faithful example of the historic church." Yes, obviously faithful churches make good examples. Whenever a church obeys the Word of God, it should be imitated. But this biblical statement, that is clearly true, is not the same thing that Steelites are advocating. What they are requiring cannot be demonstrated

of religion by order of the Council, the matter was turned over to a committee of six, *including John Knox*. "Discussions seem to have continued in a desultory fashion until at last a final series of articles, now numbering forty two, received the royal assent [from the short-lived Protestant King Edward VI] on 12 June 1553" [A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 251]. These articles would become the 39 Articles that we know today.) Zwingli extended the right hand of fellowship to Martin Luther (who unfortunately did not reciprocate), and Calvin worked hard to bring unity between the Reformed and Lutheran churches. While we must not excuse any defections from the truth or the disregarding of lawful covenants, we must be careful not to embrace an artificial, cult-like concept of particular churches that cannot be supported from Scripture or church history. While we acknowledge that Christians should move from less Reformed and less pure bodies to more Reformed and more pure communions and we acknowledge that a believer should never be a member of the church that violates his conscience or causes him to compromise biblical principles, this does not mean that such churches should be treated as completely false and apostate, which is what the Steelites essentially do. This is one of the main reasons (along with the rejection of headcoverings in public worship, their adoption of Wayne Grudem's concept of predictive prophecy after the close of the canon and their arbitrary-romish use of church power [e.g. the excommunication of church members for refusing to submit to the arbitrary and unbiblical concept of "the supersession"]), why I will never become a Steelite. We should unite around the Westminster Standards and our covenant obligations and leave all the unbiblical and unconfessional rubbish behind.

from Scripture and contradicts church history itself. Note once again that they believe that one cannot be a true faithful Christian church (as to well-being) unless one adopts everything adopted by the previous faithful body word for word. In other words, it is wrong, sinful and schismatic to alter subordinate standards, even if the exact same doctrine, meaning or requirements are maintained but wording is changed for clarification and better accuracy. This we will demonstrate cannot be proven from Scripture; is impossible if consistently applied to all church history; and, has led (at least some circles) to church documents being placed on a par with Scripture. The historical and biblical view is that the church has a right to change the wording, sentence structure and syntax of *subordinate standards* if it desires to make them more accurate; easier to understand; or more faithful to Scripture. The Steelite says that to alter any document is to sever oneself from the true church. According to the Steelite position, apparently, the church's sanctification and advancement in doctrine ended with the Second Reformation in Scotland or perhaps in 1761. To try and improve doctrinal statements, or make anything modern or easier to understand, we are told, is an abandonment of the historical church. Such teaching is implicitly Romanist and dangerous.

Let us look at the Steelite arguments one by one and see if we violate Scripture by not adopting the exact wording of all the subordinate standards of faithful churches from the past (e.g., the six terms of communion). Argument (A) reads, "The Scriptures make it clear that we are to walk in the footsteps of those who came before. (Hebrews 11) We are required to follow the faithful example of the historic church (*i.e.*, the rulers or guardians [*ton egoumenon*], *whose faith we are to follow*, Hebrews 13:7). Hebrews 11 points out the many faithful that were to walk in the paths of the historic church."

The Scriptures indeed do make it crystal clear that we are to walk in the footsteps of those who came before us (Hebrews 11). But what does it mean to walk by faith, or live by faith, or have victory by faith? The faith spoken of refers to belief in God's promises or commands, either through direct revelation or Scripture. There is an emphasis on believing God's promises and obeying God's commands. As Philip Edgcumbe Hughes writes, "This chapter is a sublime and lyrical encomium of faith and of the blessing which comes through trustful confidence in *the promises of God and persevering obedience to his word*.... For the man of faith, however, hope is something sure and substantial precisely because it is founded on *the objective reality of the immutable promises of God*, who cannot lie.... The faith of which our author is speaking is not blind faith, vacuous and unintelligent credulity, but faith that is in the highest sense enlightened and substantial, because *the divine word* to which it is the response is a word not only of power but also light."² Simon J. Kistemaker concurs with these words:

The author of Hebrews recognizes the same aspects of faith featured by other writers of the New Testament. However, his use of the concept *faith* must be understood primarily in the context of the eleventh chapter of his epistle. The heroes of faith have one thing in common:

² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 437, 438, 442, italics added.

they put their undivided confidence in God. In spite of all their trials and difficult circumstances, they triumphed because of their trust in God. For the author, faith is adhering to the promises of God, depending on the Word of God, and remaining faithful to the Son of God.³

Note also F. F. Bruce's comments:

In Old Testament times, he points out, there were many men and women who had nothing but the promises of God to rest upon, without any visible evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled; yet so much did these promises mean to them that they regulated the whole course of their lives in their light. The promises related to a state of affairs belonging to the future; but these people acted as if that state of affairs were already present, so convinced were they that God could and would fulfil what He had promised. In other words, they were men and women of faith. *Their faith consisted simply in taking God at His word and directing their lives accordingly*; things yet future so far as their experience went were thus present to faith, and things outwardly unseen were visible to the inward eye. It is in these terms that our author now describes the faith of which he has been speaking.⁴

According to Hebrews 11, we are faithful Christians if we trust in God's Word and obey or live by it, even in periods of testing or adversity. This is what Paul asks us to imitate. To attempt to turn this passage into a proof text that we are unfaithful and not the true church (as to well-being) if we do not attempt to reconstruct church history and fit ourselves into the true line is ludicrous. This passage teaches *sola Scriptura*; that our faith must be directed to the Word of God. To require Christians to assent to a particular view of church history is not in this passage.

In argument (B) we read, "Phil. 3:15-17 encourages 'walking (*stoichein*) by the same rule according to an example'. (v. 17 *Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample*)." Philippians 3:15-17 reads, "Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. Nevertheless to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind. Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern"? Is Paul advocating the idea that we must attempt to reconstruct a line of faithful documents through church history to be a faithful "true" church? No! He is telling the church to depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to them over disagreements to keep the rule that has been established. "Let our lives be regulated by the consistent application of this principle. It must never be surrendered. True religion, then, is a matter not of precept upon precept but of basic principles. These are few but very important. If by the light of God's special revelation these principles are consistently applied, then all the rest will follow. God will not refuse to give further light to him who walks by the light already

³ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 310.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 277, emphasis added.

given.”⁵ Matthew Henry’s comments on verses 15 and 16 are not even remotely similar to the Steelite/Dodson view:

The apostle, having proposed himself as an example, urges the Philippians to follow it. The same mind be in us which was in blessed Paul. We see here how he was minded; let us be like-minded, and set our hearts upon Christ in heaven, as he did. 1. He shows us that this was the thing wherein all good Christians were agreed, to make Christ all in all, and set their hearts upon another world. This is that whereto we have all attained. However good Christians may differ in their sentiments about other things, this is what they are agreed in, that Christ is a Christian’s all, that to win Christ and to be found in him involve our happiness both here and hereafter. And therefore let us walk by the same rule, and mind the same thing. Having made Christ our all, *to us to live must be Christ*. Let us agree to press towards the mark, and make heaven our end. 2. That this is a good reason why Christians who differ in smaller matters should yet bear with one another, because they are agreed in the main matter: “*If in anything you be otherwise minded—if you differ from one another, and are not of the same judgment as to meats and days, and other matters of the Jewish law—yet you must not judge one another, while you all meet now in Christ as your centre, and hope to meet shortly in heaven as your home. As for other matters of difference, lay no great stress upon them, God shall reveal even this unto you. Whatever it is wherein you differ, you must wait till God give you a better understanding, which he will do in his due time. In the meantime, as far as you have attained, you must go together in the ways of God, join together in all the great things in which you are agreed, and wait for further light in the minor things wherein you differ.*”⁶

Let us look at Matthew Poole’s view. He was an amazing scholar. Note that he defines the rule not as a line of church documents or a particular set of church rulings throughout history but as the canon, “the unerring word of God”:

16 Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. *Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained*; however, let us, or we ought to, walk in obedience to Christ, love to him and each other, according to the light we already have received, trusting he would make known his mind more clearly to us. Our using the light we have well, is the ready way to have more: it behoves us, then, to live suitably to that degree of the knowledge of Christ we have attained, 1 John. ii. 3-5 but still within our lines, with regard to the same rule. *Let us walk by the same rule*: whether in this metaphorical allusion the apostle do borrow his phrase from architects, soldiers, or racers, is not much material. Be sure he had an eye to that *same rule* which was well known to them, by which he regulated himself, and therefore it was such a canon as really had a Divine stamp upon it, that very canon in exact conformity whereunto God’s Israel might be sure of the best peace, Gal. vi. 16; Phil. iv. 7. The unerring word of God, exemplified in the condescending love of Christ, whom he had proposed to their imitation, in whom he was found, and the fellowship of whose suffering he desired to

⁵ William Hendriksen, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962, 64, 67, 68, 79), 2:177.

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald, n.d.), 6:741.

know more perfectly, being heavenly-minded, in opposition to those who became enemies to his cross, ver. 18, 19, with Gal. vi. 14, 15; the rule of faith, love, and a Christian life, or heavenly conversation, which he doth elsewhere call a walking in the Spirit, and according to the Spirit, in opposition to walking in and after the flesh, Rom. viii 1, 5; Gal. v. 16. *Let us mind the same thing*: in like manner, all of us who are spiritual, grown Christians, should be so affected, being of one accord, one mind, and one judgment, in imitation of Christ; so far that the adult, or better grown Christians, should not despise the weak or less grown, neither should they judge the adult; but in the fundamental articles, those main principles of the Christian institution wherein we all agree, in that common salvation towards which we all press, agreeable to the analogy of faith, we should still be perfecting holiness in the fear of God, by the same rule of faith, and loving and mutual condescension, by the unity of our judgments in the main business of religion, the concord of our affections, the concurrence of our ends, our consent and delight in the same truth: we should declare to the church of God, in our differences Christ is not divided, but in the variety of persuasions and lesser matters, (not fundamental,) the purity, holiness, and peace of the church is still preserved chap. ii. 14. The main principles attained wherein dissenting parties agree, being the measure of all other doctrines, to hold nothing inconsistent with the majesty or truth of the foundation; to walk circumspectly, and in order, according to that wherein is a harmony; not to break our rank, or leave our station, contrary to received precepts; wherein every Christian is to exercise a judgment of discerning for himself, Rom. xiv. 23, and not impose on each other, (as that sort of Christian Jews who did compel the Christian Gentiles, Gal. ii. 14, 15, &c.) superadding no preter-evangelical doctrine, Gal. i. 8, 9; to live godly, agreeably to known truths; to serve God soberly and prudently, (with due moderation,) in our places, consonantly to *the measure of the rule God has distributed to us*, 2 Cor. x. 13, holding the truths wherein we agree in love, unity, and constancy. It being more reasonable than the many truths wherein we agree, should cause us to join in love, which is a Christian duty, rather than the few opinions wherein we disagree, should cause a breach and affection, which is a human infirmity.⁷

Peter T. O'Brien agrees with Poole when he writes,

Tō autō stoichein. 'Let us live up to what[ever truth]'. The final admonition (*stoichein*) of this paragraph is set forth by means of an infinitive used as an imperative (cf. Rom. 12:15). This verb, probably derived from *stoichew* (originally a military term for a 'row'), initially meant 'to stand in line, march in line'. Within the NT, where it occurs five times, *stoicheō* is used figuratively to mean 'to be in line with, stand beside, hold to, agree with, follow' (with the dative of the norm or standard). At Acts 21:24 the reference is to living a closely regulated life (in obedience to the law), while at Gal. 6:16 *stoicheō* is used with the expression *tō kanoni toutō* ('all those who follow this rule'). *Tō autō stoichein*, the earliest and shortest reading of this clause in Phil. 3:16, is elliptical (lit. 'let us march by the same'). A number of MSS read *kanoni* with *tō autō* (perhaps due through the influence of Gal. 6:16), and although the weight of evidence favours its omission, it seems to represent the implied meaning, with the notion of a common standard in view (Gal. 5:25 speaks of conducting one's life in conformity with the

⁷ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1685] 1963), 3:699.

Spirit, while Rom. 4:12 in its context suggests constancy in a given direction). Accordingly, it is argued that some kind of ‘rule’ or standard’ is implied in the verb as well as demanded by the context (GNB, ‘according to the same rules’; Bruce, ‘by the same rule’). Paul then urges the Philippians to march by the same rule that they have already followed, that is, in accordance with *the guidelines for Christian living that he had imparted to them when he first came with the gospel*, and which he consistently passed on to his converts, that is, ‘my ways in Christ Jesus that I teach in all the churches everywhere’ (1 Cor. 4:17; cf. Gal. 6:2 with its reference to the law of Christ). So the notion of direction, found in the verb, comes to expression.

By using this particular verb Paul seems to be making two further points: first, if the connotation of marching in step is present, then the Philippians are being urged to move forward in unity. Recognizing that there may be differences of opinion, the apostle desires that the whole community should move forward together. He is not encouraging the presence of ‘spiritual virtuosos’, to use F. W. Beare’s expression; as Christians they need to be united in the contest in which all are engaged, working towards the same goal and ready to help one another, especially by bearing one another’s burdens. Secondly, *stoichein* marks a progression from attitude or orientation (*phronein*, v. 15) to that of practice, which v. 17 takes up with *peripatein*.⁸

Thus, once again, we see that the Steelite proof text does not support their position at all. It teaches that our rule or standard is Paul’s inspired teaching. Steelites twist the Word of God to fit their preconceived notions about the need to establish a continuing link in church history back to the Covenanters. Paul’s concern, once again, is that we believe in God’s Word and obey it. (Note, if you accept the Steelite position that establishing a historical link and requiring the adoption of all church documents back to the Covenanters is necessary to be a true church, then to be *logically consistent* would have to trace yourself back not just to the Covenanters or John Knox but all the way back to Paul which is absurd and impossible. Christians would be required to master a massive multivolume church history with all accompanying lawful church documents, court decisions and symbols. Once again, keep in mind that if one adopts the Steelite perversions of Hebrews 11, or Philippians 3:15-17 or Hebrews 6:10-12, one must start with Paul not John Knox. The New Covenant church has existed for 1,984 years; why do the Steelites stop in the 17th century? According to Steelite presuppositions, an ecclesiastical body cannot be the true church until this is done. Interestingly, only Romanists, high church Episcopalians and radical Anabaptists have attempted to do something akin to this. At least the Romanists are consistent. We should listen to Francis Turretin who says,

The rule of truth given to us by God is his word, not the history of the ages.... Cyprian excellently teaches this. “Whence is this tradition,” says he, “descending from dominical and evangelical authority or coming from the commands and epistles of the apostles? For God testifies that those things must be done which are written and proposes it to Joshua, the son of Nun, saying, the book of this law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it

⁸ Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 441-442, italics added.

day and night, that you may observe to do all that is written in it” (Letter 73, “To Pompey” [ANF 5:386; PL 3.1175]).⁹

Theodore Beza adds these words,

For say they [Romanist sophists], the fathers so dispute, from the succession of bishops against ancient heretics. But again what can be more corrupt than this subtle kind of reasoning?... Therefore I deny, that any of the ancient [church] fathers, were minding to use the recital of Bishops, but to have recourse rather even to the Apostles. And why so? That the authority of doctrine, rather than of persons should be maintained.... Whereupon follows that which *Tertullian* rightly affirms that religion ought to be proved or tried not by the persons, but the persons by religion.... Now, for as much as these things be so, that is, seeing neither the succession of persons, is a sufficient, true and proper mark of the Church.... They [Romanist sophists] will also object unto us that saying: *The Scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses’s chair*. But again, they should remember, the same Christ to have said: *Take heed of the leaven of the Pharisees*: And therefore by that saying of Christ, we are not called back to a succession of persons, but to a succession of doctrine.¹⁰

In argument (C) we read, “The theme of Psalm 78 is reflected in 78:4 *We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he has done*. This presupposes a transmission of the faith from generation to generation. When the Israelites did not instruct their children there was backsliding. (Psalm 106)” Is this Psalm speaking of transmitting extra-biblical church documents? Does it prove that we must adopt every document of the historic faithful church? If we look at it in context, we will see that (like all the passages above), it has nothing to do with the Steelite position. Verses 4 through 8 read,

We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments; and may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

The author is using the facts of Israel’s history to teach a crucial spiritual lesson. Fathers must teach the great truths of Scripture (e.g., the great redemptive works of God; this is referring to the

⁹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3:102-103.

¹⁰ Theodore Beza, *A Discourse of the True and Visible Marks of the Catholic Church* (Pottstown, PA: Covenant Reformed Publishing, 2014), 10, 11, 13, 20.

inspired history in the Bible) to their children so they will obey God's covenant law (v. 7). In W. S. Plummer's work on the Psalms we read,

5. We should not despise truths because they are *old*, vv. 2, 3. Such are often the most important. In religion that which is new is worthless. "Divine doctrine is no new doctrine." *The Bible and its truths are venerable for antiquity.*

6. If in God's mercy we are made acquainted with weighty truths involving the divine glory and human salvation, let us not conceal them, but faithfully transmit them to others; especially to the young committed to our care, vv. 4, 5, 6. Clarke: "Five generations appear to be mentioned in these verses,—1. Fathers; 2. Their children; 3. The generation to come; 4. And their children; 5. And their children. They were never to lose sight of" these things. Morison: "With what scrupulous diligence should the heads of families in every age train their offspring for God." Scott: "To perform this important duty to good purpose, we must enforce our instructions by a consistent example. It is awful to think how many parents, by their negligence and wickedness, become the murderers of the souls of their children."

7. Those great religious truths which suit one generation, are no less applicable to all who come after them, vv. 5, 6. This fact is no mean evidence of the divine origin of Scripture. *The Bible is for all times.* Its author knew what was in man.

8. *The Scriptures are a great blessing.* They are to us God's *testimony*, v. 5. Compare Rom. iii. 2. Oh that the families and nations who have God's word would love it, obey it and spread it according to its infinite value.

9. All religious knowledge and culture which failed to raise us to right affections towards God and communion with him, are of no avail, v. 7. Till we set our hope in God, remember his works, and keep his commandments, we are undone.¹¹

Every Christian: whether Presbyterian, Dutch or German Reformed, or Lutheran would agree that it is crucial that the teachings of the Bible, or the faith once delivered to the saints (cf. Jude 3), must be passed by believing parents or ministers of the gospel from generation to generation. But this is not the only thing the Steelites are advocating. They are saying that each generation must accept all subordinate standards and decisions of the presbytery of the supposedly one true church *exactly word for word* and any church that does not do this is not a church at all but is an unduly constituted false church that must be repudiated.¹² Once again we see that the Steelites are not honestly or objectively applying the Scriptures for one of their central teachings, but rather are finding a unique application in these passages that cannot be found in any conservative commentaries.

¹¹ W. S. Plummer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1867] 1975), 757-758.

¹² Once again, note that the Steelite will object by saying "We believe that the subordinate standards can be changed." But what do they mean when they say this? According to emails from people in three separate Steelite splinter groups, subordinate standards cannot be changed until there is a national established church's General Assembly. Thus, perhaps three to five hundred years in our future, changes can be made. I would ask the Steelites how they could prove such an assertion from Scripture?

There is a focus on the transmission of *God's Word*, not on an uninspired historical testimony of the supposedly one true church in post-apostolic history. As H. C. Leupold notes,

The writer goes on to develop the practical purpose that he has in mind in treating the problems of history (vv. 3-8). He lays stress chiefly on the fact that the basic lessons involved are to be taught diligently to their children by the fathers lest coming generations continue to make the same mistakes in a wearying and endless round. He admits that the true knowledge of these matters is abroad in the land. What he is indirectly exhorting his generation to do in regard to such important and saving knowledge is to point out the fact that in days of old God "established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel." For him the whole life of the nation is built up on the Mosaic law. Possession of that law puts the fathers under obligation to make these blessed statutes well and thoroughly known to the generations that follow as the Lord Himself had so explicitly commanded Israel to do in the days when He gave His law (Exod. 10:2; 12:26, 27; 13:8, 14; Deut. 4:9; 6:20-25). In fact, a solid tradition of continuous transmission of God's Word is thus established (v. 6) from generation to generation.¹³

We are not saying that a church must not have subordinate standards or that standards cannot accurately reflect the teaching of the Word of God. But because they are not immediately inspired and only derive their authority from Scripture, we are saying that they can be altered, expanded, clarified, improved, put into modern English, etc. as long as they accurately reflect Scripture and do not compromise any previous doctrinal attainments. To say that they cannot be changed *in any way* if we are to be truly connected to the supposed "last faithful church" not only explicitly contradicts what true churches have done throughout church history (obviously, the church of Christ has made great advancements since the adoption of the Apostles' Creed), but also places subordinate standards on a par with Scripture. (Keep in mind, the Steelites affirm that no Presbyterian church can be faithful without adopting the Six Terms of Communion from 1761. This not only cannot be proved from Scripture as we have seen, but contradicts the Westminster Standards, which teach that a repentant life and a competent knowledge of and faith in the fundamentals of the Reformed religion are only what is needed to take communion (e.g., cf. *Confession of Faith* 29:8; *Larger Catechism* 171, 173, 174, 177).

Another proof text is Hebrews 6:10-12¹⁴ especially verse 12: "do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." We are told "the text infers the imitation of faithful historic examples both corporately and individually." Would any Christian say that we should *not* imitate faithful believers from the past whether corporately or individually? But, according to Paul, to what does this imitation refer? Does it mean that we must adopt every uninspired document of a certain institutional church that we deem more faithful than other communions before we can be a faithful church? No. The context, which gives a specific example of Abraham (the apostle fully develops this theme in chapter 11),

¹³ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1959] 1969), 564.

¹⁴ Argument (D) reads, "Also in Hebrews 6:10-12, especially in v. 12 we are encouraged to be *followers (mimetai)* of them (past saints) *who through faith and patience inherit the promises*. The text infers the imitation of faithful historic examples both corporately and individually."

indicates that the examples referred to are “the patriarchs and heroes of the faith of the past, who received the promises and believed them but did not see their fulfillment. Yet *through faith* in God’s word and *patience*, which bore vital nature of their hope, they showed that they belonged to the company of those who *inherit* and make their own *the promises*.”¹⁵

John Brown captures the apostle’s argument:

It was the Apostle’s wish that they should have “the full assurance of hope.” Faith is the belief of what God reveals respecting the way of salvation; hope is the expectation of obtaining that salvation. “The assurance of faith” is a full persuasion of the truth of what God reveals; “the assurance of hope” is a full expectation of obtaining what God has promised. It was the Apostle’s desire that the Hebrews should have “the full assurance of hope.” So far from wishing to cloud their minds with fears of their own apostasy and ultimate ruin, he wished that the continual sunshine of an assured hope of eternal happiness should rest on them; but in order to the possession of this, he was persuaded that they must continue to show the same diligence by which they had formerly been distinguished. *To the end* seems to be connected with the phrase, “the same diligence.” The Apostle’s desire was, that they should use diligently every means fitted to produce “the full assurance of hope,” and persevere in doing so. The means calculated for this purpose are just the faith of the Gospel, and living under the influence of the faith of the Gospel. Our faith and our hope will just be in proportion to each other, and our holiness will be in proportion to both.¹⁶

Now I ask my Steelite brothers, how do we get from a passage dealing with faith in God’s Word and perseverance in the gospel to the doctrine that if I do not adopt the exact uninspired documents of an institutional church and assert some sort of institutional connection, I cannot be part of the true church? How can I be expected to enforce a doctrine that I cannot prove from Scripture? This is simply another example of Steelite conclusions that do not logically follow the premises. Repeatedly, we have seen a passage quoted with a simple interpretation that every Christian would agree with, with no subsequent argumentation or proof from commentators that the simple agreed-upon interpretation leads to the highly unusual Steelite ecclesiology. This is dishonest scholarship that is intended to mislead and arrive at a presupposed conclusion. One must be very careful not to take an obvious general biblical principle (e.g., the need to imitate the patriarch’s faith in the Word of God and persevere in hope and obedience) and use it as a springboard for one’s own unique doctrine that actually has nothing to do with the passage.

Another Steelite proof text is Psalm 122:3, 4: “Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, where the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.” This, we are told, tells us that “we must rely on the historical faithful church.” Is that what this passage is teaching? No. This is “a song of degrees of David.” David, by a prophetic vision, saw the city as fully built, as no more a waste, or a mere collection

¹⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 229.

¹⁶ John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1862] 1961), 311.

of tents, or a mere plan in builders' minds, but as fully built and glorious. It is telling us what the church of God is. David Dickson writes,

David commendeth Jerusalem, the figure of the church of God and of the corporation of his people, first, as a city for a community; secondly, as the place of God's public assemblies for religious worship; thirdly, as the place of public judicatories, for governing the Lord's people under David, the type of Christ. Whence learn, 1. The church of God is not without cause compared to a city, and especially to Jerusalem, because of the union, concord, community of laws, mutual commodities, and conjunction of strength, which should be among God's people: *Jerusalem is builded as a city that is compact together.* 2. What commended a place most of any thing, is the erecting of the Lord's banner of love in it, and making it a place for his people to meet together for his worship: *Jerusalem is a city where the tribes go up.* 3. Whatsoever civil distinction God's children have among themselves, and howsoever they dwell scattered in several places of the earth; yet as they are the Lord's people, they should entertain a communion and conjunction among themselves as members of one universal church, as a signification of the people's meeting thrice in the year at Jerusalem taught: *whither the tribes did go up, the tribes of the Lord.* 4. As the tribes, so all particular churches, how far soever scattered, have one Lord, one covenant, one law and scripture, signified by the tribes going up to the testimony of Israel, or to the ark of the covenant or testimony, where the whole ordinances of God were to be exercised. 5. The end of the ordinances of God, of holy covenanting and communion, and joining in public worship, is to acknowledge the grace and goodness of God, and to glorify him; for the tribes went up to *give thanks unto the name of the Lord.* 6. The church of God wanteth not the government and governors, courts and judicatories, belonging to Christ and his church, as the erecting of ecclesiastic judicatories in Jerusalem signified and taught: *for there are set thrones of judgments.* 7. The civil governors, in their civil power, should contribute what their power can, to the furtherance of the church government, and the courts thereof as the thrones of the house of David, joining their assistance in Jerusalem unto the ecclesiastic courts, did signify and teach: *there are set the thrones of the house of David.*¹⁷

Not even the Covenanter David Dickson, who applies the passage in an extensive Puritan style, finds a command to rely on the historical faithful church. If we believe in the Word of God and obey Scripture, we are a faithful church.

When John Knox became a Reformed Protestant and a Reformer, did he consult all the church historians in Scotland or Geneva and ask them to help him reconstruct the faithful line of the true church before him so that he could "join historically with a faithful, or the last faithful church"? No, he most certainly did not. He preached the Word of God and emphasized justification by faith alone and the regulative principle of worship against the papists. Did Luther, or Zwingli, or Calvin make an effort to historically reconstruct the faithful line so they could join the historically faithful church? No, they did not. They preached the truth and adopted *sola Scriptura*. Anyone who believes and preaches the truth of the Word of God is immediately part of the faithful church, whether they know any church history or not. The Steelite view that

¹⁷ David Dickson, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1653-5] 1959), 417.

there must be some direct physical or institutional connection to the last faithful institutional church is not supported by Scripture or by church history. If the Steelite theory were true, we ought to be able to go to Luther, Zwingli or Calvin's writings to see how they traced their church back to the faithful line. No such writings exist. Why is this historical fact so? Because a) they did not think such a procedure was necessary because of their concept of *sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency and perfection of Scripture; and, b) such a task would be impossible given the exceptionally dark state of the papal church for over a thousand years. There were Abigensians, Waldensians and Lollards; but only Anabaptist fanatics have attempted to link themselves to such groups by a *direct historical or institutional line*.

Steelites attempt to overcome this objection by arguing that the early Reformers could not connect themselves institutionally to the last faithful church because of the long dark reign of Romanism. This argument is not exactly true. They could have sought a connection with Peter Waldo (1140-1218), John Wycliffe (1326-1384) Jan Huss (1369-1415), Jerome of Prague (1379-1416), and the Lollards, as well as the better church fathers before the development of Romanism. But they did not; they thought that going back to the Word of God was sufficient. Calvin makes this point crystal clear in his *Institutes*:

It has already been explained how much we ought to value the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and how far our reverence for it should go, that it may be to us a perpetual token by which to distinguish the church. That is, wherever the ministry remains whole and uncorrupted, no moral faults or disease is prevented from bearing the name "church." Secondly, it is not so weakened by trivial errors as not to be esteemed lawful. We have, moreover, shown that the errors which are to be pardoned are those which do not harm the chief doctrine of religion, which do not destroy the articles of religion on which all believers ought to agree; and with regard to the sacraments, those which do not abolish or throw down the lawful institution of the Author. But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of the necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows – just as a man's life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded. "And that is clearly evident from Paul's words when he teaches that the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. If the foundation of the church is *the teaching of the prophets and apostles*, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone – then take away *that teaching*, and how will the building continue to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it."¹⁸

The fact that the first Protestants appeared to be something completely new and formed their creeds and confessions directly from Scripture without citing the fathers as sources of authority caused Roman Catholic authorities to dismiss them as a false church. Papal authorities argued that since the Protestants could not trace their distinctive doctrines, worship practices and forms of government back through the church (i.e. they could not connect themselves historically

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV, II, 1; 2:1041-1042.

with the last faithful church), they could not be a true or faithful church. The Reformers responded by asserting the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*; that one can go directly to the truths of the Bible without a historical line or the tradition of the church. The Steelite theory has more in common with Mr. Newman and the Tractarians than with Paul, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox.¹⁹

¹⁹ William Cunningham makes all this clear in his analysis and refutation of Newman and the Tractarians: “But the more direct and peculiar object of Mr. Newman’s book may be described, in general, as an attempt to explain the historical aspects of Christianity, or the different phases which the history of the Christian church has presented, by means of a particular hypothesis or theory, called the theory of development. The author starts with the principle, that as Christianity has now been eighteen hundred years before the world, much may be learned as to its true nature, constituent elements, and tendency, from a survey of its history. He then very summarily dismisses Protestantism, as having no claim whatever to be the Christianity which the history of the church presents to our favour and acceptance; and thereafter proceeds to propound his theory of development, for the purpose of showing that Romanism is true historical Christianity, or at least—for this is really all that his theory, even if it admitted, establishes—that there is nothing in the history of Christianity which militates seriously against the claims of the Church of Rome. Mr. Newman has an ingenious and subtle, but not a very logical mind, and he has taken no pains to explain the conditions and precise results of his argument, or to point out the exact way in which it stands related to, and bears upon, the general argument between Protestants and Romanists. He does not indeed claim, formally and in words, for his theory, more than, if fairly supported, it is entitled to; but, by failing to mark out its true place and logical relations, and by introducing many collateral topics, he has succeeded, and some extent, in conveying an impression, that he has achieved much more than, even if his theory were admitted, he could be fairly held to have accomplished. It may be proper to explain this point somewhat more fully, as a fair estimate of the real value and importance of the theory depends essentially upon understanding it.

Let us see first what he says about Protestantism, and then what he asserts or insinuates about Romanism, considered historically. In regard to Protestantism, he says, ‘Whatever be historical Christianity, it is not Protestantism. If ever there was a safe truth, it is this. And Protestantism has ever felt it. I do not mean that every Protestant writer has felt it; for it was the fashion at first, at least as a rhetorical argument against Rome, to appeal to past ages, or to some of them; but Protestantism, as a whole, feels it, and has felt it. This is shown in the determination of dispensing with historical Christianity altogether, and of forming a Christianity from the Bible alone: men never would have put it aside unless they had despaired of it.’ The position, that historical Christianity is not Protestantism, is certainly true, if it be understood merely to assert the matter of fact, the Protestantism has not always been the religion of Christendom, and that there was a period of above a thousand years when a religion materially different from it obtained, to a large extent, in the professedly Christian church. But the proper inference from this fact is, that it is necessary to fall back upon the consideration of the question—What is the rule or standard by which we are to judge of what is or is not true or genuine Christianity? It is drawing rather too much upon the ignorance and credulity of men, to expect them to believe that historical Christianity has always presented an uniform aspect, from the time of the apostles to the Reformation. Could this be proved, it would be a strong presumption in favor of the system which generally obtained at the time when Luther and Zuingli [Zwingli] broke the peace of the church. Even, however, if this could be proved, it would not supersede the examination of the question—Is there any authentic standard of genuine Christianity? And if so, what is it? But when the uniformity of historical Christianity not only cannot be proved, but can be disproved, it is plainly indispensable to seek for some authentic standard; and the necessity of seeking for it, and the obligation to apply it if found, cannot be set aside by any plausibilities or probabilities that may be suggested by a survey of the church’s history.

The position, then, that historical Christianity is not Protestantism, insofar as it is true as a statement of fact, is wholly irrelevant as affecting the question, whether it be genuine Christianity or not. We maintain that Protestantism was the Christianity of the apostles—that very soon after their time, corruptions in doctrine and government were introduced into the church—that this corruption continued to increase and extend till the era of the Reformation—and that the Protestantism of that period was, to a large extent at least, a restoration of Christianity to its original apostolic purity. These positions we undertake to establish by the competent and appropriate evidence, *after settling, if necessary, what that evidence is*; and in discussing the subject, we are not afraid to face the fact, that for many centuries Protestantism was not the religion that generally obtained in the professedly Christian church. Protestants have never shrunk from the fullest investigation of the history of the church, being fully persuaded that the claims of the Church of Rome cannot stand before it. They have believed, and largely acted upon, the idea which

Steelite Historical Arguments

Having shown that Steelites essentially read whatever they want into the passages that supposedly deal with this topic and arrive at arbitrary conclusions and applications not found in any Protestant commentaries (I searched dozens of commentaries and could not find any of the specific Steelite applications), let us turn to their historical arguments. The first argument is that it is schismatic not to join historically with the last faithful church. A Steelite writes, “To start a new church/denomination without any historical connections is the very definition (essence) of division and schism within Christ’s Church (and the most egregious expression of division and schism—John 17:20-21) which also enjoins a singleness of confession. (1 Corinthians 1:10) It is contrary to the apostolic command *But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them.* (2 Timothy 3:15)” There are a number of problems with this statement. First, when it speaks of “historical connections” it assumes that the Steelite-Romanist definition of “historical connections” is the only acceptable definition. Whenever a denomination forms out of an unfaithful, seriously disobedient or apostate body, what establishes a historical connection to the apostles, as well as all faithful past communions, is *concurrence in apostolic doctrine and practice* and past applicable subordinate standards. As strict covenanting Presbyterians, we stand on the shoulders of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and many other Reformed theologians and churches. Does this mean that all the subordinate standards of the past must be incorporated into our standards word for word to be Reformed Presbyterians? No. Even the Steelites do not require this. Subordinate standards are not divine or inspired but only reflect the truths of Scripture. Therefore, we can adopt identical language or write our own standards as long as they contain the prior attainments of all past churches and are faithful. To say that a communion cannot be the true church if it does not adopt the exact language of a past subordinate standard is to absolutize uninspired history and implicitly place it on a level with Scripture, which is immediately inspired and nonnegotiable.

is thus expressed by Buddeus:—‘It is not easy to decide whether the severest wounds have been afflicted upon the Romish Church by those who, following Bellarmine and its other champions step by step, have refuted all their arguments and demolished all their errors, or by those who, narrating the history of Popery, have laid open to the eyes and minds of men the abominations of that anti-christian system, and the mysteries of its iniquity.’ Mr. Newman’s insinuation, that Protestants shrink from an investigation of historical Christianity, is untrue, and is contradicted by the whole history of theological literature. Is there not much more probability in the allegation, that Romanists shrink from the Bible, because they are conscious, or half conscious, that they cannot stand before it? Is not Mr. Newman’s whole theory of development based upon a virtual admission, that the old Romish pretense of tracing historically their doctrines and practices to primitive times can no longer be sustained? And do we not owe this virtual abandonment of the old plan of direct historical investigation, partly at least, to the full and searching examinations into the history of doctrines, which have recently been prosecuted, especially in Germany, by men who were not Romanists?’ (*Discussion on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian* [Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, (1863) 1991], 45-48). The only thing that Steelites could do to preserve their theory would be to argue that their principle of historical continuity merely applies to history after the beginning of the Second Reformation in Scotland. The only problem with such an argument is that it is totally arbitrary. Their theory of continuity must apply to *all church history* or it cannot be a universal principle. Theories that are arbitrary and inconsistent can only be held by people who are so blinded by their presuppositions that they welcome irrationality.

We have seen that Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox most certainly did not follow Steelite procedure, yet the Steelites do not accuse them of having false or unduly constituted churches (as to well-being). While there is no question that Calvin built on the work of Luther and Zwingli, he did not demand some documented word for word connection with those communions. Knox highly profited from his stay in Geneva and the church at Geneva preceded the rise of the Reformed church in Scotland by decades, yet Knox and his fellow Scottish Reformers did not incorporate the judicial and doctrinal acts word for word from Geneva. They used what may have been learned but wrote their own standards.

In addition, note that in the revivals that led to covenant renewals in Judah, we see no attempt on the part of the Reformers to find or set forth a historical link of faithful believers directly back through history to the last reformation. They went directly to Scripture and used it as the basis of reformation (2 Chron. 34:30-31; cf. 2 Kgs. 23:2). The last faithful church is not the one who holds to a certain theory of church history or attempts a continued link with an institutional body, but is the one that faithfully follows Scripture. Luther based his reformation on the writings of Paul. Historical documents can be very useful, but they are uninspired and are only useful when they agree with Scripture.

To essentially excommunicate Christians who fully agree with the Westminster Standards and who fully accept the covenants but do not accept the unique view of church history that the Steelites advocate, is to place an uninspired authority that cannot be proved from the Bible alongside of Scripture (see above). That is the very essence of Romanism. Steelites would do well to read Mark 9:38-40: “Now John answered Him saying, ‘Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.’ But Jesus said, ‘Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterwards speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side.’” Concurrence in truth makes a true church, not some physical or institutional connection in church history. R. T. France writes, “The effect of this pericope is to encourage a welcoming openness on the part of Jesus’ disciples which is in stark contrast to the protective exclusiveness more often associated with religious groups, not least within the Christian tradition.”²⁰ Instead of the intolerant pharisaical spirit of the Steelites, who see themselves as the only true Presbyterian church on earth (as to well-being), we should recognize that other conservative Presbyterian bodies, such as the RPCNA and the Free Church, Continuing, are indeed true churches that are guilty of some errors. (We need to acknowledge that the Steelites are guilty of a number of errors as well.) To argue that they are not churches at all but only contain Christians and, thus, to regard them essentially as no different from the Roman Catholic Church is absurd. It is one thing to encourage people to move from a backslidden or less faithful church to a more faithful church, but it is something altogether to proclaim to the world that we are the only true church (as to well-being), which is ludicrous.

Second, the whole Romish-Steelite theory is built on the presupposition that there can be only one true institutional church at a time (at least in each nation) and that there cannot be two

²⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 376.

or three or four lawful, duly constituted churches which are more or less pure. This is an exceptionally serious error which has led them to the absurd and highly offensive notion that they are the only lawful Presbyterian Church on earth (as to well-being). (Of course, this raises the obvious question: which of the Steelite splinter groups [there are at least five or six] is the one and only true Presbyterian Church? These groups, for various reasons, are not connected to each other institutionally and are ecclesiastically isolated from each other. Some demand that women must *not* wear cloth headcoverings in worship or they will be disciplined. Others require women to be covered at all times. Some allow jewelry and makeup, others do not. Some advocate a single cup in communion, others do not. These people who cannot hold a tiny fraction of Christendom together for even a few years lecture us on church unity. What a farce! This shows that when a communion goes beyond the Standards and lawful covenants, they tear each other apart like wolves over trifles. Jesus said, “You shall know them by their fruit” (Mt. 7:16). The Steelite tree, at least in its modern post-1990 incarnation, is fractious and uncharitable, not just to outsiders but to each other.

The idea of only one true institutional church in history (at least in each nation) is based on two passages. One passage is 1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there are no divisions (Greek, *schisma*, lit. schisms) among you, but, that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment.” Paul roots his exhortation in the Corinthians’ love of Jesus Christ. The expression “to say the same thing” (*to auto legein*) means he wants them to agree with each other in mind and thus express this agreement with the tongue. This positive expression is reinforced by the negative “that there be no divisions among you.” The word “divisions” can refer to doctrinal differences or differences of thought about something (cf. Jn. 7:43). It can refer to an emotional alienation or a separation of friendship and fellowship. When it is used in an ecclesiastical sense, it describes unlawful or unauthorized separation from the church. At Corinth it referred *not* to an institutional or literal separation but to the fact that there were groups in the church that had a party spirit and were not getting along with each other. This would be a perfect passage for all the separate Steelite groups to read and study so they could repent and unite around their doctrines (most of which are good) and their peculiar theories (many of which are bad).

While this passage could be applied to situations of actual church schism and, obviously, the Christian ideal would be that every Christian in the world would believe the correct doctrine perfectly and would totally avoid “jealousy and strife” (1 Cor. 3:3), “selfish ambition” (2 Cor. 12:20) and unlawful anger (Eph. 4:26), it does not teach or even imply a *singleness of confession that can be traced back throughout history*. Once again, the Steelite does not establish a specific doctrine from the text, but rather assumes that it is there when it is not. When Jesus preached to the Jews, did He tell them that in order to repent they had to trace the faithful line back through the intertestamental period back to the prophets? No, they had to believe in the Scriptures and Him as the fulfillment of the Scriptures. In addition, when studying the requirements of Scripture, we must note that there is often a great difference between what is required or what

ought to be the case and what actually is. The fact that perfect unity is required does not prove that some institutional unity has existed throughout church history. It obviously has not. The history of the church during the last 2000 years proves that this side of heaven, there will always be conflicts, disagreements and schisms because of sin. That is why there are at least five separate Steelite groups that, for the most part, do not get along. Even Paul and Barnabas had a severe disagreement and parted ways in Acts 15:36-40. None of this, of course, excuses schism but it does prove that the idealized, artificial concept of church history advocated by the Steelites is a pipe dream. Instead of wasting time attempting to trace back the supposedly correct historical line, we should obey the truth and move forward. We connect ourselves with faithful Christians in the past by being faithful to Scripture, not attempting to connect a series of historical dots.

Another passage cited is 2 Timothy 3:14. Let us examine it in context and see if it supports the Steelite teaching: “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (vs. 14-17). Keep in mind as we look at this passage in context that the Steelite says it teaches us that we must go back to the last faithful church and adopt all their subordinate standards if we are to be a true church. But is that really what Paul had in mind? No, not at all!

The apostle admonishes Timothy, *not* to go back to the time of the Maccabees to find the last faithful church, but rather to continue or abide in the doctrines he learned based on sacred Scripture. That is the only logical conclusion based on the context. He learned the Scriptures. He believed the Scriptures or became convinced that the Bible’s doctrines were indeed true. Now he is called upon to continue in these teachings. The passage does not specify exactly when he learned them, but the context indicates that his learning began in early childhood from his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice (cf. 2 Tim. 1:5):

It is clear that Paul, Lois, Eunice, and any others who may have nurtured Timothy, are not viewed as independent authorities, apart from the Word, but as secondary or intermediate sources of knowledge, avenues of instruction, and even this *only because they accepted Scripture!*—Hence, not Tradition *and* Scripture (which really means Tradition *superimposed upon* Scripture) are here viewed as *basically* authoritative. *Scripture alone* (see verses 15 and 16) *is final authority*, and Tradition is important only in the measure in which it adheres to and imparts Scripture. When it does this, then it is of considerable significance, and this especially in the education of children who as yet are not able to read and/or interpret Scripture itself!²¹

Matthew Henry writes,

²¹ William Hendriksen, *Thessalonians, Timothy, and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955, 57, 79), 296.

And for this reason we should continue in the things we have learned from the holy scriptures; not that we ought to continue in any errors and mistakes which we may have been led into, in the time of our childhood and youth (for these, upon impartial inquiry and full conviction, we should forsake); but this makes nothing against our continuing in those things which the holy scriptures plainly assert, and which he that runs may read. If Timothy would adhere to the truth as he had been taught it, this would arm him against the snares and insinuations of seducers. Observe, Timothy must continue in the things which he had learned and been assured of.²²

No Bible believing Christian would disagree with this interpretation. Whatever we have learned about the Bible and its teaching from grandparents, parents, ministers or good books must be placed in our hearts and diligently followed. But to argue that Paul is teaching that we must find an institutional link with a past faithful church and that we are not a true or faithful church without such a link, is not in Paul's mind at all. Only someone who is seeking to justify such a teaching would read it into the text. Using applications that Paul certainly did not have in mind or using a passage as a springboard for preconceived ideas is the same procedure that James Jordan and John Frame use to justify all sorts of unauthorized popish or charismatic worship practices.

But, what about the chief Steelite proof text, John 17:20-21? Does not this passage establish that starting a new church without any historical connections is the very essence of division? Before we take a look at this passage, we need to point out that the question itself *presupposes* that a historical institutional connection with some *past* communion is necessary for genuine unity; that if one does not attempt to reconstruct some form of historical connection, one is divisive, schismatic and unfaithful. Once again, we point out that this is essentially the Roman Catholic position. For Calvin and the Reformers, what established true unity was adhering to the true faith once delivered to the saints, or doctrinal unity. "Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists [cf. Eph. 2:20]."²³ Calvin did not define schism as a refusal to assert a *past institutional connection* to the church that existed hundreds of years ago, but an unlawful departure from a *currently existing* faithful church: "The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished."²⁴ Edmund P. Clowney makes this point clear when he writes,

In response [to the Roman Catholic polemicists of the Counter-Reformation], the Reformers continue to affirm the attributes of the church from the Nicene Creed. They protested, however,

²² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6:846.

²³ John Calvin, (*Institutes*, IV; I; 9; [2:1023]).

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2:1023.

against the external and institutional way in which the Roman Catholic apologists interpreted them. As we have seen, they pressed for a biblical and spiritual understanding of the church's attributes. Above all, the Reformers emphasized the meaning of apostolicity. To be apostolic, the church must be built upon the doctrine of the apostles (1 Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:20; 3:4-5). Not the pretended *chair* of Peter, but the *teaching* of Peter was the real mark of apostolicity.

The Reformation made the gospel, not ecclesiastical organization, the test of the true church. Yet the Reformers, particularly in the Calvinistic churches, sought biblical standards for the organization of the church.

Three marks were defined in distinguishing a true church of Christ: true preaching of the Word; proper observance of the sacraments; and faithful exercise of church discipline.

John Calvin defined only the first two marks in his *Institutes*, but included discipline in the proper observance of the sacraments. He recognized that no church could perfectly match the Lord's pattern in Scripture, but his aim was to describe practical standards, standards necessarily more objective and stringent for the organized church than for individual believers. The ministry of the Word and sacraments is, he says, "a perpetual mark and characteristic of the Church."²⁵

Let us look at John 17:20-21 to see if it tells us that we must find and establish a historical and institutional link with a past faithful church to be a faithful or lawfully constituted church. It reads, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." This section of Jesus' prayer is an expansion of the petition of verse 11 that the disciples may be one as the triune God is one. Our Lord is speaking of *true believers* present as well as those who will believe in the future. The fact that Christ is discussing those who will believe and expresses a unity by an analogy to the unity of the persons of the triune God indicates that this is not a discussion of the church as an institution but as a mystical body united in Christ. The oneness of the trinity is the deepest and highest type of oneness known. The unity of true believers is radical and fundamental: "It is rooted in the being of God, revealed in Christ, and in the redemptive action of God in Christ. The prayer 'that they may be *one*' accordingly is defined as 'that they may be *in us*.'"²⁶ Gordon Clark writes,

What sort of unity was Christ praying for? Unity of organization? John 17 says precious little about ecclesiastical organization, in fact, nothing at all. Who can soberly maintain that the unity of the Father and the Son, with or without the unity of believers in the Father and the Son, is a unity of visible church government? Note clearly that Christ prayed that believers should be one *as* the Father and Son are one, and that believers should be one *in* the Father and the Son. This unity obviously cannot be the trinitarian unity of substance, but it is surely a spiritual and not a political unity.

²⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 101.

²⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 302.

The New Testament clarifies the nature of unity quite well. Romans 12:5 says, “We, being many, are one body in Christ.” 1 Corinthians 10:17 says the same thing. 1 Corinthians 12:13 adds the reason: “For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body.” From these few verses we can see that the unity of the New Testament is not something produced by denominational mergers, but by the baptism of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:4 says, “There is one body, and one spirit.” This unitary body is not something yet to be produced by ecclesiastical politics. It existed in the time of Paul and it exists today.

The unity, of course, is spiritual. Philippians 1:27 reads, “Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel”; and in the next chapter, “Be like-minded...being of one accord, of one mind” (cf. 1 Pet. 3:8). What could be clearer than 1 Corinthians 1:10: “I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Corinth was plagued with divisions, and their unfortunate, indeed sinful, condition is often made an argument for organizational union. But Paul exhorts them to unity of mind, judgment, and speech. It is a unity of proclamation, a unity of message, a doctrinal unity that is uppermost in Paul’s exhortation. When there is doctrinal unity, there may be organizational unity within a city or other convenient geographical area; but without doctrinal unity, organizational union is not unity.²⁷

Herman Bavinck’s comments on this oneness are helpful:

This oneness of all the churches does not just come into being *a posteriori* by the establishment of a creed, a church order, and a synodical system. Neither is the church an association of individual persons who first became believers apart from the church and subsequently united themselves. But it is an organism in which the whole exists prior to the parts; its unity precedes the plurality of local churches and rests in Christ. It is he who, continuing his mediatorial work in the state of exaltation, joins his churches together and builds them up from within himself as the head (Eph. 1:23; 4:16; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19), gathers and governs it (John 10:16; 11:52; 17:20-21; Acts 2:33, 47; 9:3ff.), always remains with it (Matt. 18:20), is most intimately connected with it (John 15:1ff.; 17:21, 23; 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:20-27; Gal. 2:20), and dwells in it by his Spirit (Rom. 6:5; 8:9-11; 1 Cor. 6:15ff.; Eph. 3:17; etc.). The assertion that the universal precedes the local churches is correct in the sense that while it is not historically prior it is logically so. Every local church is the people of God, the body of Christ, built upon the foundation of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11, 16; 12:27), because in our location it is the same as what the church is in its entirety, and Christ is for that local church what he is for the universal church.²⁸

Clearly this unity is to have visible effects, for Jesus prays that from it men are to learn that the Father has sent Him into the world. The spiritual and mystical affects what we believe, and teach and how we live and treat one another. The Christian ideal is that every believer and

²⁷ Gordon Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe? The Westminster Confession: Yesterday and Today* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965), 221.

²⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 4:280-281.

every Christian communion in *the whole world* over the entire period of church history would teach and confess the same thing and have a genuine doctrinal unity. The Steelite takes this text and says that if anyone (at least anyone within the Anglo-sphere) does not accept their historical testimony and all their subordinate documents *word for word*, they are violating this passage. However, this unity is not political or institutional, but doctrinal. The Steelite assumption is that if one violates their exact expression, one is schismatic. But this passage is speaking of the entire world over the whole New Covenant era. If we hold the Steelite application, then every lawful ecclesiastically approved document throughout all of church history that did not contradict Scripture would be binding word for word as well. Moreover, the requirement for tying ourselves to a past institutional church would apply not simply to Presbyterians but to every professing Christian in the whole world. Once again, we see that to be consistent with the Steelite, we would have to go all the way back to Paul, not just the seventeenth century.

The key to true Christian unity is not finding institutional connections in history but in preaching and practicing the truth. If there are differences in doctrine, worship or church government, these differences can only be settled through biblical exegesis. To add a theory of church history into the mix that is primarily Roman Catholic, that cannot be proved from Scripture, only makes true unity more difficult; for one has moved from the sphere of biblical exegesis to post-apostolic history. Consequently, to achieve unity, the Steelite has to first convince others of all the correct biblical doctrines and practices; then, after this is accomplished, one must convince people of the highly unusual Steelite view of church history and the correct institutional line and documents, etc. Therefore, in the end, because of their extra-biblical Romanist concept of institutional continuity, the Steelites are in reality the ones who are schismatic. They obscure the simplicity of the gospel, biblical worship and Presbyterian polity with an unprovable theory.

The Solemn League and Covenant Argument

Another historical argument is based on the idea that asserting an institutional link is required by the Solemn League and Covenant. A Steelite writes,

The purpose of the Solemn League and Covenant was to bring Covenanted uniformity to Christ's Church. The attitude of starting a new work apart from history is the problem with American Presbyterianism. What stops another church from doing the same thing? This attitude only divides the body of Christ; it never unites Christians in covenanted uniformity. It is the view of independent churches. *The only way to avoid this is to connect oneself to the first and/or most faithful church.* The early American Presbyterian Church formed out of nothing and established a schism. It was not based upon any connection at all with a faithful church in Scotland, although they maintained some of the original Confession of Faith and catechisms. Having formed without any historical testimony they only encouraged other Presbyterian churches to do the same thing. It is a recipe for sectarianism, it promotes it. Scripture and the Solemn League and Covenant forbid it. Since we have no new revelation, or apostles, there is

no other way to track the faithfulness of a church, than to research and track the church through its history. We are to receive the historical, faithful church, improve it and pass it on. (Isaiah 8:16) It does not die and be reborn through another church (that has no connection with the faithful church of the past, but is rather the continuation of the same moral person).

This reflects the Steelite understanding of church history and is over-simplistic and inaccurate. While we certainly agree that the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America in 1706 and its subsequent development had serious biblical deficiencies, their problems were not that they did not seek an institutional link but that they violated certain crucial biblical principles. The first presbytery in America came into being before there was any agreement as to the binding nature of the Solemn League and Covenant or a faithful doctrinal standard. (This was to be expected, given the fact that the ministers and Presbyterians who formed this body were from Revolution Settlement churches in Scotland or Northern Ireland.) From 1706 to 1729, the presbytery functioned without any formal commitment to the Westminster Standards at all. The presbytery was “winging it” and consisted of a rather wide variety of strictness when it came to doctrine (although, the presbytery at this time was strictly Calvinist). In 1729, the Confession of Faith was adopted but, due to the diversity among churches in the Presbytery, they did not practice what we would call a full or strict subscription (although it was far better than the OPC and PCA of today). From the very beginning, the American Presbyterian church had corruptions and these corruptions would plague that body, eventually leading to apostasy.

Was their problem that they did not seek an institutional connection to the faithful Presbyterians in Scotland? No! Their problems were unfaithfulness to their covenant obligations and their doctrinal decline. The church in Scotland had forsaken their covenant obligations in 1690. The Covenanters in Scotland did not as yet have a presbytery. If there was a presbytery, the Americans could have sought their advice. But if the Presbyterians in America had adopted the original Westminster Standards and had acknowledged their covenant obligations, they would have been a faithful church irrespective of a theory of tracing one’s *institutional history* back to the apostles. Once again, it is a biblical profession, a lawful administration of the sacraments and biblical worship, as well as a faithful administration of church discipline, that makes a faithful church, not a supposed institutional connection. If there was a faithful Presbyterian church already present at that time and they refused to join that church, they would have been schismatic. But there was not a faithful presbytery. Therefore, they should have organized one, but they did not because of their declined state. Does this make them a false or apostate church? No. They were a corrupt or compromised church. A church must never go from a more faithful and detailed profession to a less detailed and less faithful profession. That is a corporate step backwards, not forwards. A church must honor its covenant obligations because not to do so violates the third and ninth commandments.

The Steelite historical argument assumes what it sets out to prove; that the faithful church is *not* simply established through the pure preaching of the gospel and apostolic doctrine, but that one must also “connect oneself to the first and or most faithful church.” We must “track the church through its history.... We are to receive the historical, faithful church, improve it and pass

it on.” In other words, a church without an uninspired “historical testimony” is a schismatic church. But is this really the position of the Solemn League and Covenant? The best way to understand what the Solemn League and Covenant has in mind is to go to the Westminster Standards, which define the nature of covenanted uniformity. How do the Standards define a true or faithful church? Does it involve a theory of reconstructing church history with a historical testimony? No, it most certainly does not. The Confession of Faith 25:2 says, “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” In section 3 we read, “Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world.” In section 4, we find the Westminster divines’ definition of what constitutes a faithful church: “This catholic church hath been sometimes more and sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” If the covenanted uniformity established during the Second Reformation required an uninspired historical testimony to be connected to a faithful church, this section would have been the place to put it, but it is not there. According to the Confession, the way to measure of the faithfulness or purity of the church is to examine its doctrine or teaching, its administration of the sacraments and the purity of its worship.

This view should not surprise anyone given the 1560 *Scottish Confession of Faith*’s definition of what constitutes a true or faithful church (as to well-being):

The notes, therefore, of the true kirk [church] of God we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, into which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles do declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which must be annexed unto the word and promise of God, to seal and confirm the same in our hearts; last, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed, and virtue nourished. Wheresoever then these former notes are seen, and of anytime continue (be the number [of persons] never so few, about two or three) there, without all doubt, is the true kirk of Christ: who, according to his promise is in the midst of them: not that universal [church] (of which we have before spoken) but particular [churches]; such as were in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, and other places in which the ministry was planted by Paul, and were of himself named the kirks [churches] of God.²⁹

If the Steelite theory were true, would there not be a *fourth mark* identifying the true or faithful church (as to well-being) as the church that *also traces itself back* to the last faithful church in history? Given the Steelite insistence on tracing oneself back to the last faithful church as *necessary to be a faithful church* (as to well-being), I would ask my Steelite brothers why the

²⁹ *The Scottish Confession of Faith*, 1560, chapter 18, (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications), 29.

Presbyterians of both the First and Second reformations completely ignored this qualification? Why also was it ignored by Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Beza, Turretin, Hodge, A Brakel, Bannerman, Berkhof and all the other Reformed theologians? Why is not a fourth mark found in any of the Protestant creeds or confessions?

Even though the Confession and Larger Catechism (cf. Q & A # 62) have nothing to say about a historical testimony, this does not mean that a church cannot write a historical testimony. Such testimonies are good and helpful. It simply means that adherence to an uninspired testimony or making attempts to trace oneself back to the apostles is not what defines the true or faithful church. Faithfulness and obedience to the doctrine, worship, ordinances and discipline of the sacred Scriptures is what matters. The point of the Solemn League and Covenant was to establish a biblical uniformity in all these areas (including church government) in the three kingdoms. If we acknowledge covenant obligations and are faithful in these areas, we are the true, continuing faithful church.

This whole idea of tracking ourselves back to the last faithful church as necessary to be faithful is outside the pale of historic Protestant theology. The basic Protestant view is that the marks of the true church are the pure preaching of the gospel or purity of doctrine; the right administration of the sacraments; and some adding the faithful exercising of church discipline. Regarding the marks of the church in Reformed theology Berkhof writes, “Reformed theologies differed as to the number of the marks of the church. Some spoke of but one, the preaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel (Beza, Alsted, Amesius, Heidanus, Maresius); others, of two, the pure preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments (Calvin, Bullinger, Zanchius, Junius, Gomarus, Mastricht, à Marck) and still others added to these a third, the faithful exercise of discipline (Hyperius, Martyr, Ursinus, Trelactius, Heidegger, Wendelinus).”³⁰ The Confession of Augsburg (article 7), the French Confession (article 28), the Confession of Saxony (article 11) and the confession of Wirtemberg (article 32) all list two marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the right use of the sacraments. The Belgic confession (article 29) and the Scottish confession list three: the pure preaching of the gospel, the lawful administration of the sacraments and the proper use of ecclesiastical discipline. Both of these confessions, however, give the preeminence to the first mark by saying that all things (including the sacraments and discipline) must be done in accordance with God’s Word.

One could say that the primary mark is the pure preaching and profession of the Word with the right administration of the sacraments and proper church discipline being secondary marks because: (1) they are defined and regulated by the Word; and (2) a church can exist for a time without the sacraments under extraordinary conditions, such as Israel in the wilderness (Josh. 5:4-7). As Turretin notes,

Again, if the apostles wished the doctrine of the gospel to be the rule by which true or false teachers are known, how much more today when nothing infallible remains to us except the Scriptures?... Because what always belongs to the church alone and as a whole are to be an

³⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 576.

essential and specific mark of it, by which it is discerned from all these assemblies, not only of unbelievers, but also of heretics. And yet the truth of doctrine, which shines forth in the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments, is such. For the church alone is the house of God, the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Alone, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:19, 20); alone has the seal of the covenant (Mt. 28:20; 26:28; Acts 2:42; Gen. 17); alone possesses the word and by it is distinguished from other assemblies (Ps. 147:19; Dt. 4:6). Nor do these privileges belong to it for a time, but always and for ever even unto the consummation of ages (Eph. 4:11, 12). Thus it is well gathered hence, that where the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments are, there the church is; and in turn where the church is, there is the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.³¹

Bannerman concurs:

We recognize this distinction every day in regard to a Christian man; and it is no less to be recognized in its application to Christian society. There is many a doctrine and truth of revelation, in regard to which a man may err without ceasing on that account to be a Christian man; and there may be many a duty recognized in Scripture as binding upon all, in which he may be totally deficient without forfeiting his Christianity. In other words, there is much in doctrine and duty, and faith and practice, necessary to the perfection of a believer, which is not necessary to the existence of a believer as such; and so it is with a Christian Church. What is essential to its **existence** as a Church is something very different from what is essential to its **perfection** as a church.... This distinction is of considerable value, and not difficult, under the teaching of Scripture, to be applied. We read in Scripture that the Christian Church is, “the pillar and ground of the truth,” and that, “for this cause the Son of God himself came, that he might bear witness to the truth.” In other words, we learn that the very object for which the Church of Christ was established on the earth was to declare and uphold the truth.... Judging then by this first test, we are warranted in saying, that to hold and to preach the true faith or doctrine of Christ is the only sure and infallible note or mark of the Christian Church, because this is the one thing for the sake of which a Church of Christ has been instituted on earth. A *true faith* makes a *true church* and a *corrupt faith* a *corrupt church*: and should it at any time apostatize from the true faith altogether, it would by the very act, cease to be a Church of Christ in any sense at all. The Church was established for the sake of the truth and not the truth for the sake of the church.... For this thing then the Church of Christ was instituted; and this thing, or the declaration of the truth, must therefore be, in its nature and importance, paramount to the church itself.³²

John Dick writes,

The design of the establishment of the church will be explained by the following particulars. First, It is appointed to be the depository of divine truth, in which it should be preserved, and by

³¹ Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:90.

³² James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1960), 1:57-59.

which it should be published to the world. To the Jews were committed the oracles of God in ancient times; but the custody of them is now transferred to the Christian church. Hence it is called, in a passage formally quoted, “the pillar and ground of the truth.” Secondly, It is an important part of its duty, to maintain and observe the ordinances of Christ, that the ends of their institution may be accomplished in the salvation of men, and He may receive due honour, as the exalted Lord to whom every knee should bow of things on earth. Thirdly, It is intended to be the asylum of sinners, who are called upon to leave the society of the world, and to enter into it by faith, that they may escape the destruction which is coming upon the wicked. It is like the cities of refuge in the promised land, into which the man-slayer fled from the pursuit of the avenger of blood. Lastly, It is the nursery of the saints, in which they are trained for the duties of the present life and the happiness of the next, by spiritual instruction and watchful superintendents, by doctrine and discipline.³³

R. C. Sproul essentially concurs when he says,

The sixteenth century witnessed not only the Catholic-Protestant split, but also the disintegration of the Protestant movement. People sought to authenticate particular churches and determine whether they were a cult or a sect. The Reformers said there were three criteria that must be met for a group to be a legitimate church [as to well-being].

The first criterion is the gospel. Every true church proclaims the gospel. The essential elements of the gospel are simply the basic credo formulations of historic Christianity. The essential truths about Jesus are his sinlessness, deity, humanity, atonement, resurrection, and ascension. Not only is the work of Christ essential to the gospel, but also how his benefits are appropriated. As Paul indicates, there is only one gospel and it is the gospel of justification by faith alone. If one believes all the essential truths about Jesus, but denies how the benefits of the objective work of Christ are subjectively appropriated, one does not have the gospel.... Secondly, the administration of the sacraments is the central to a true church....

The third criterion for a church to be authentic is that it has an organized government by which church discipline can be and is exercised. Without discipline, gross and heinous sin or heresy can fester openly, leading to the apostasy of a church.³⁴

Theodore Beza, writing against the papal church, says,

For it is one thing, to dispute of those marks, which they are, and another to dispute, who have them. Notwithstanding, because I have in few words declared, that they have not those marks, this thing also I may now speak, that we have at least, two very weighty conjectures, which make for us against them: to wit, that in discerning and trying of opinions, we stay ourselves, *upon the only written word of God*, that is, the writings of the Prophets and Apostles: and that we require the interpretation of it, by the only conference of places, and proportion [*i.e.*, analogy] of the articles of faith. Neither do we refuse the writings of any, either old or new

³³ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (New York: Robert Carter, 1864), 2:458.

³⁴ R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: a Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and reformed, 2007), 3:58, 59.

author, so that they may be examined, by the rules aforesaid: by God's word, and the proportion of faith. But what these men object against these upright requests, it sufficiently appears.³⁵

When we examined the manner in which Steelites attempted to prove that to be a faithful or true church one must establish an institutional or historical link back to the last faithful church, we saw that they were guilty of Scripture-twisting. They found meanings and applications in passages that were not there; that *not even one commentator* (even Covenanter commentators) could find. But when we consider the historic Protestant (i.e. Lutheran, Continental Reformed, Presbyterian, Congregational and low church Episcopalian) view of what constitutes a true or faithful church, there is abundant and clear biblical evidence. There are numerous passages which prove that the pure preaching and profession of the Word is what defines a true or faithful church. Here are a few examples:

1. Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (Jn. 10:27). What sets the unbelieving Jews apart from Christ's fold? It is their refusal to listen to, believe and obey our Lord's teaching or doctrine. True saving faith in Christ cannot be divorced from a belief in Jesus' teaching. To believe in Christ savingly is to believe in Him "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4).

2. Note how Christ defines a true disciple: "Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.... He who is of God hears God's words'" (Jn. 8:31, 32, 47). How do we know if professing Christians are true disciples? Jesus says that true discipleship manifests itself by perseverance in true doctrine.

3. Real Christians continue in Christ's doctrine and thus live the truth. Sin no longer rules over them. "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words" (Jn. 14:23, 24). The apostolic church was noted for its continuance in the doctrine of the apostles. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Ac. 2:42). "[W]herever the doctrine of the apostles and the legitimate use of the sacraments and of prayers are, there the true church of Christ certainly is."³⁶

4. There are a number of passages that teach that believers are to distinguish between true and false teachers by a biblical examination of their doctrine. False teachers (and by inference false churches) can be discerned by comparing their doctrine to the Word of God or the doctrine of Christ and the apostles. When Jesus said, "You shall know them [false prophets] by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16), He referred not only to immorality of life but also the perversion of doctrine (cf. Lk. 6:45). The apostle John wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits [i.e., the teachers], whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come

³⁵ Theodore Beza, *A Discourse of the True and Visible Marks of the Catholic Church*, 69; emphasis added.

³⁶ Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:89.

in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 Jn. 4:1-3).

In his second epistle John says that anyone who goes outside the boundaries of orthodox Christian doctrine does not have God. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11). The true Christian religion is totally dependent upon an abiding adherence to, and a trust in, the doctrine that Christ taught in His own ministry and that He continued to teach by His Spirit through the apostles. To forsake Christ’s doctrine is to forsake Christ Himself.

Given the strong statements against false doctrine above, one should not be surprised that Paul pronounced an anathema against anyone who perverted the gospel of Christ. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). For Paul, the standard by which true and false teachers are known is not apostolic succession, nor tracing one’s church back to the last faithful church, nor mighty miracles, or even the appearance of angelic beings, but the doctrine of the gospel. The preaching of the true gospel makes a true church and the only way to determine what the genuine gospel of Christ is, is to look to the infallible Word of God—the Scriptures.

5. The church of Christ is built on the foundation of divine revelation given by the New Testament prophets and apostles. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:19-20). That Paul means New Testament prophets is evident from the context (cf. Eph. 3:4-5). The picture that Paul sets before us is that of a completed foundation upon which the church of Jesus Christ rests. But the church, unlike the foundation, continues to grow. The revelation is the definitive, authoritative and final explanation of the person and work of Christ. Thus, the true church can only stand upon true apostolic doctrine. Calvin writes,

But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows—just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded. And this is clearly evident from Paul’s words when he teaches that the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. If the foundation of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone—then take away that teaching, and how will the building continue to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth [1 Tim. 3:15], it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway.³⁷

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:2:1, 2:1041-1042.

It is for this reason that Paul continuously exhorted believers to follow the doctrines that had been given unto them. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.... But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us” (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16). “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing...from such withdraw yourself” (1 Tim. 6:3, 4, 5). “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13). “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). “But you have carefully followed my doctrine...you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (2 Tim. 3:10, 14). “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). “Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). “But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Turretin writes, “Now such is the preached and received word (1 Cor. 4:15; Eph. 2:19, 20; 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:23; Jam. 1:8; Mt. 28:19, 20), which constitutes, conserves and nourishes the church so that, it being posited, the church is posited, and it being removed, the church is removed. Hence the removal of the candlestick or the ministry of the word draws after it the destruction of the church (Rev. 2:5); and the ceasing of prophecy implies the scattering of the people: ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’”³⁸

That the Word of God teaches that a true church can only be founded upon the sacred Scriptures, or more particularly the pure doctrines of Christ, is very clear. But we find nothing at all in the Scriptures, the Reformed symbols or the Westminster Standards about tracing ourselves back through history to the last faithful church. Calvin (as we have repeatedly noted) concurs when he writes, “The pure ministry of the word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as they say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as the church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our

³⁸ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:91.

salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith."³⁹

Note that the very places one would expect the Westminster Standards to endorse the Steelite theory as to what constitutes a faithful church, we find no such teaching but instead a focus on purity of true doctrine and church practice (e.g., worship and the sacraments, etc.). Therefore, their contention that the Solemn League and Covenant endorses the Steelite paradigm of what constitutes a faithful church is totally false. If the Westminster divines believed that they had to trace their churches back to the last faithful church to be true or faithful, then they would have done so somewhere in their documents. They did not do so. They simply replaced false teaching and practices (e.g., prelacy, high church liturgies, Erastianism, independency) with true or biblical counterparts and swore to uphold all these precious doctrinal attainments. We do not need to believe in the Steelite theory to adhere to the Westminster Standards or the Solemn League and Covenant. We must reject the Steelite theory because it cannot be proved from Scripture.

But what about Isaiah 8:16? Does not this Steelite proof text prove that "we are to receive the historical, faithful church, improve it and pass it on"? Let us look at this passage and see what it really says, "Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples." Apparently, the Steelite interprets the word "testimony" as applying to a church's uninspired historical testimony that continues throughout post-apostolic history. But is that what the Holy Spirit speaking through Isaiah has in mind? No, not at all! The word "testimony," when used in conjunction with the word "law" (*tora*, instruction) in the Old Testament, always refers to special revelation. The testimony is divinely inspired history and prophecy designed to encourage obedience to the law. As John N. Oswalt notes, "It is significant that the terms *teuda*, 'testimony,' and *tora*, 'instruction, law,' are terms used elsewhere in conjunction with one another (as well as with 'commandments' and 'statutes') to denote the revelation of God (cf. Deut. 4:44, 45; 1 K. 2:3; Neh. 9:34; Ps. 19:8 [Eng. 7]; 78:5; and 119 throughout). Is it not possible that the binding and sealing is an act of affirmation and attestation? He is evidently including his own oracles in the statement (so v. 18), but the context demands that he not be limiting the ground of his hope merely to his own experience (v. 17). If this is a correct understanding, then Isaiah, in response to God's admonition of vv. 12-15, is reaffirming his dependence upon God as revealed in Scripture and challenging those who follow him to do the same (cf. Josh. 24:14, 15)."⁴⁰ Edward J. Young essentially concurs with these words:

16 It has been a message of utter doom. God now utters a command to the prophet himself. Isaiah is to bind up God's revelation in the sense that he is to close it spiritually in the hearts of his disciples and to leave it there. This revelation may be the inscription mentioned in the first verse, but more likely it is the entire preceding message recorded in this chapter. This testimony then is the revelation which God has given to Isaiah, a revelation in spoken words. How significant and important are these words! They are testimony, not in the sense that they are

³⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:1:12; and 2:1025.

⁴⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 235-236.

pointers or witnesses to some vague, nebulous revelation or Word of God, but in that they themselves are the testimony, the revelation of God. The words which God speaks to man are revelatory words; they are themselves revelation. This testimony is also described as the law, the teaching in words which has been revealed by God. The two words, neither of which has the definite article, describe the content of what Isaiah was to bind up. Perhaps, therefore, it was testimony and law in a general sense which he was to bind up; more likely, it was simply the message or content of the chapter before us... God's truth must be deposited in the hearts of His people.⁴¹

Matthew Henry's commentary could not be clearer:

In these verses we have, I. The unspeakable privilege which the people of God enjoy in having the oracles of God consigned over to them, and being entrusted with the sacred writings. That they may sanctify the Lord of hosts, may make him their fear and find him their sanctuary, *bind up the testimony*, v. 16. Note, It is a great instance of God's care of his church and love to it that he has lodged in it the invaluable treasure of divine revelation. 1. It is a *testimony* and a *law*; not only this prophecy is so, which must therefore be preserved safely for the comfort of God's people in the approaching times of trouble so; God has attested it, and he has enjoined it. As a testimony it directs our faith; as a law it directs our practice; and we ought both to subscribe to the truths of it and to submit to the precepts of it. 2. This testimony and this law are bound up and sealed, for we are not to add to them nor diminish from them; they are a letter from God to man, folded up and sealed, a proclamation under the broad seal.⁴²

But what about the seventeenth century scholar Matthew Poole; does he find the Steelite concept of a post-apostolic historical testimony in this passage? No. He essentially says what all the other commentators say: "These are, by the consent of all [i.e. Old Testament scholars in his day], God's words to the prophet. By *the testimony* and *the law* or *doctrine* (for so this word is frequently taken) he understands one and the same thing, as he doth also ver. 26, to wit, the word of God..."⁴³

The German Hebrew scholar Carl Wilhelm Eduard Nägelsbach writes in his exposition of Isaiah:

I have no doubt that the words ver. 16, are addressed to Jehovah. For only the LORD can do this binding up and sealing. The prophets might seal a book roll, or declare that the meaning of a prophecy is to be shut up till a certain time (*vid.* Dan. viii. 26; xii. 4, 9; Rev. x. 4; xxii. 10; Isa. xxix. 11; Jer. li. 6 sqq. and my comment); but they cannot seal the divine revelation *in the hearts of men*... The mention of binding up and sealing in a spiritual sense was perhaps occasioned by the actions appropriate to the real documents (*vid.* Jer. xxxii. 9 sqq.). Having so disposed of the writing that contained his own will, the Prophet prayed the LORD to do still better, and enclose and seal up his testament *in the hearts* of his disciples. For the propriety of

⁴¹ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1:313-314.

⁴² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 4:54-55.

⁴³ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 2:314.

the metaphor, *vid.* Prov. iii 3; vii. 3; Jer. xxxi. 33. They are the same as “are written to life,” Isa. iv. 3. As primarily “the law” means the Mosaic law, which was the basis and norm of all prophetic announcements (Deut. xiii. 1 sqq.; xxviii. 18 sqq.), and which the Prophets ever and again had to reimpress (Jer. xxix. 19), so Isaiah must mean by “the testimony” all additional prophetic testimony, especially all threatenings and promises that referred to the future.⁴⁴

Such examples could be multiplied. Thus, we see (once again) that when it comes to the Steelite peculiarities, it is not a matter of my own exegesis or interpretation versus the Steelite interpretation. It, rather, is the unique Steelite interpretation versus *all other Protestant interpreters*. If one holds to a view that is universally rejected by Lutheran, Reformed and Presbyterian scholars, it is time to reconsider one’s view in light of Scripture.

In this section, the Steelite also asserts, “It does not die and be reborn through another church (that has no connection with the faithful church of the past, but is rather the continuation of the same moral person).” This assertion is true only if one *presupposes* that the Steelite view, that an institutional connection is necessary, is biblical. But we have already demonstrated that: a) when the godly kings of Judah repented after generations of severe apostasy, they simply went to the Word of God and obeyed it; and, b) none of the Reformers sought to reconstruct their history back to the last faithful church. They not only regarded such a historical link as unnecessary, but such a connection was impossible. Does this mean that the church of Christ died and was “reborn through another church”? No. It most certainly did not, because an institutional connection is not necessary to be a true or faithful church. When Elijah lamented that out of all Israel he was the only true believer left (1 Kgs. 19:10, 14) Jehovah said, “Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kgs. 19:18). “In times of the greatest degeneracy and apostasy God has always had, and will have, a faithful remnant to him, some that keep their integrity and do not go down the stream. The apostle mentions this answer of God to Elijah (Rom. xi. 4) and applies it to his own day, when the Jews generally rejected the gospel. Yet, says he, at this time there is also a remnant, v. 5.... It is God’s work to preserve that remnant, and distinguish them from the rest, for without his grace they could not have distinguished themselves.”⁴⁵ Elijah did not have an institutional connection with the faithful in Israel, for he did not even know that they existed. He did, however, have a spiritual connection and was part of the faithful church.

The “It Is Not Presbyterian” Argument

Steelites also argue that forming a church without connecting historical links to a past faithful church is anti-Presbyterian. A Steelite writes, “Forming a church/denomination without an historical past is sectarian, Anabaptistic, and a Baptist congregationalist view, it certainly is not Presbyterian. It cuts off and divides and begins a new church, which has no connection with

⁴⁴ Carl Wilhelm Eduard Nägelsbach, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 6:137.

⁴⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2:684.

historic Presbyterianism and Covenant practice. It is the very view that the Solemn League and Covenant attempted to uproot and denounce.” There are a number of serious problems with this argument. First, if it were true, then Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox held to a “sectarian, Anabaptistic, congregationalist” view, for they completely ignored the supposed requirement of finding one’s historical or institutional past. Remember, if this historical link that the Steelites are advocating is taught or required by Scripture, then there must be no exceptions to this requirement (in other words, one cannot arbitrarily begin the time clock of church history at the Second Reformation in Scotland).

Second, if a denomination holds *faithfully* to the Westminster Standards (i.e. they do not allow all sorts of exceptions to the Standards for the sake of a pragmatic unbiblical concept of unity and church growth [e.g., today in the OPC and PCA there are diverse and contradictory views on: creation; the abiding validity and sanctity of the Christian Sabbath; the regulative principle of worship; extra-biblical holy days; the nature of church authority; the law of God; justification by faith alone; the sacraments; covenant headship; covenant theology (i.e. the covenant of works and the covenant of grace); ecumenicalism; etc.]; and adheres to their covenant obligations (e.g., the moral and perpetual [non-circumstantial] aspects of the Solemn League and Covenant), then *they are already connected with historic Presbyterianism*. There is no need to seek a historical or institutional link, for *the link is automatically assured by faithfulness to the truth*. This is essentially the same argument that the Reformers and Reformed theologians used against Roman Catholic apologists.

Third, before the Solemn League and Covenant was adopted, England was essentially Erastian and Prelatical (or Episcopalian). The Anglican Church came into being because King Henry wanted to get divorced so he could marry another woman. (In God’s providence, it came to adopt a Protestant understanding of soteriology [i.e. justification by faith alone, the sufficiency and perfection of Christ’s atoning death] even though it retained many corruptions in church government and worship.) Yet, the Westminster Standards and Solemn League and Covenant did not require the Anglican Church to seek their historical or institutional past. It simply required that communion to repent of its errors and adopt the truth. That was enough to make them a faithful or true church. Anyone who holds to the purity of the gospel and doctrine, biblical worship, Presbyterian church government and proper church discipline is a faithful Presbyterian regardless of their history. We join ourselves to the faithful Presbyterian Covenanters of the past by adhering to their doctrinal attainments and covenant obligations, not by seeking a direct institutional link. (Once again, this idea of a direct institutional or historical link raises the question: which of the five or six Steelite splinter groups is the true continuing line of the faithful Covenanters—Edmonton, Idaho, Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Pennsylvania, Virginia, etc.?)

Fourth, if we must seek a direct institutional link, then why would not everyone who wants to be a faithful Presbyterian Covenanter simply join themselves to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America? They are the only communion in North America that actually does have a direct historical and institutional link back to the original Covenanters in Scotland. Anyone who knows their Presbyterian church history cannot deny this. But the Steelite

says, “They have forsaken their covenant obligations. They ordain women as deacons. Their college is full of teachers who are heretics (e.g., Arminian, Dispensational, anti-Reformed, etc.). Most ministers and elders celebrate Christmas. They have ministers and elders who openly have rejected the regulative principle of worship. They have very few ministers who believe in covenanting and the establishment principle. They have mistreated and driven out a number of strict subscriptionists. They have adopted an unbiblical ecumenicalism and have fraternal relations with Reformed communions that have rejected biblical worship and even tolerate ministers and elders who reject justification by faith alone. Their church courts are often arbitrary, pragmatic and unjust. Simply put, they are covenant breakers.” In saying this, the Steelite has really admitted that the crucial issue is *not* a historical or institutional link but faithfulness to the truth. This is the historic Protestant position. Those who depart from the truth or the doctrinal attainments of their spiritual forefathers are being schismatic, not those who hold faithfully to the truth. The Steelite concept of a historical or institutional link is unnecessary and artificial. One must either affirm that we are linked by our faithful adherence to the truth or one must pretend there is a direct institutional link when there really is not. Moreover, we have repeatedly noted that connecting these historical links for much of church history is impossible. Therefore, it cannot be required.

Fifth, once uninspired church history becomes a co-authority with Scripture in determining the true faithful church, then we introduce a number of common problems related to history. There are, for example, many historical gaps, ambiguities and errors that can cause problems in tracing the faithful line. There are often two radically different versions of the same historical events. (This is true of everything from the reign of Cromwell to the Van Til-Clark controversy.) Modern denominational histories often leave out many controversial and inconvenient facts. For example, how many people in the OPC know of Gordon Clark’s role in the formation of their denomination? He has been expunged from their records. How many denominational histories honestly report defections from the truth? There are often two sides to a story that contradict each other. While history is very useful and should be studied extensively to learn from those who were faithful and from the errors and mistakes made by the church, it is not inspired, infallible or authoritative like Scripture. It must not be treated as a kind of co-authority in determining which denomination is the faithful church. If we hold to all the attainments (i.e. the corporate sanctification and growth in doctrine) of all previous faithful churches and our covenant obligations, we are a true and faithful church. We are only schismatic if we *depart* from these precious attainments and accept declension; *reject* our covenant obligations; or, *refuse* to join with other like-minded Christians or churches over minor issues not discussed in our Standards (e.g., women wearing head coverings all the time; wearing jewelry is sinful; etc.). Keep in mind that, because there is no such thing as doctrinal or ethical neutrality, a denomination that has declined in doctrine or practice will mistreat and even persecute those who are faithful to the Westminster Standards. Conservatives in such communions either keep their heads down and mouths shut or they are labeled as unloving, divisive, troublemakers, impractical and dangerous. Our hope and prayer is that the RPCNA will repent of its many serious errors and

declensions and reform so that all faithful Covenanters will have institutional unity rooted in genuine doctrinal agreement.

The Lawful Departures Argument

Another argument for the Steelite theory of history as co-authority is as follows: “Departures must be for the sake of purity and should continue the faithful line, not start a new church.” We agree that the only time a separation from a church communion is lawful is when: (1) The reformational attainments have been abandoned for serious declension. One should not be required by a presbytery to violate Scripture and the Westminster Standards, which is a violation of conscience (e.g., uninspired hymnody, musical instrumentation, extra-biblical holy days, the ordination of women, grape juice in plastic thimbles instead of real wine in a single cup [per table], perversions of Genesis 1-3, etc.); (2) The covenant engagements are openly violated and repudiated. But this argument says nothing about the theory that we cannot be faithful without first connecting the historical dots. The church that separates over the abandonment of reformational attainments and violations of our covenant engagements *is* the true faithful line or continuing church; not because of their attempts to connect certain historical dots but because of their faithfulness to Scripture. Those who violate Scripture by making themselves the opponents of the Covenant and the perverters of doctrine and practice are the true schismatics. They have allowed doctrinal errors, human traditions and covenant unfaithfulness to fracture the peace of Zion. This point was adopted by the Church of Scotland during the Second Reformation period: “Whoever brings in any opinion or practice in this Kirk [Church] contrary to the Confession of Faith, Directory of Worship, or Presbyterianial Government may be justly esteemed to be opening the door to schism and sects.”⁴⁶ John Anderson essentially concurs when he writes,

A church may retain the principal doctrines and ordinances of the Christian religion in her profession, in such a measure, that she may be called a true church; and yet she may as an ecclesiastical body, have such errors in doctrine; such human inventions as integral parts of her worship; such unscriptural officers and usages in her government; or may be chargeable from such defection from reformation, formerly attained, that we cannot be faithful to the cause of Christ, which, in these respects, is opposed; nor to the catholic church, for whose true interest we are bound to use our best endeavours; nor to the souls of men, which are deeply injured by such evils; *without withdrawing from her communion*. A particular church, in this case, though she ceases to be a pure church, may still be called a true church of Christ, on account of the measure, in which she retains the profession of his truths and ordinances.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *The Acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland [1638-1649 inclusive]* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, [1682] 1997), 396.

⁴⁷ John Anderson, *Alexander and Rufus* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, [1862] 1997), 77; emphasis added.

The whole Presbyterian ideal of covenanted uniformity and ecclesiastical unity that grows out of the covenant can only be achieved when all Presbyterians are willing to submit to Scripture in every area of life and to the Westminster Standards, which are the best, most organized, comprehensive summary of what Scripture teaches. They must be fully accepted without all sorts of exceptions and equivocations. The modern Presbyterian concept of unity is based on allowing all sorts of diverse doctrines and worship practices under one ecclesiastical umbrella. This not only violates our covenant obligations but forces the orthodox and faithful to tolerate all sorts of serious doctrinal errors and corruptions, pretending that they are not sins. Modern Presbyterianism functions on the rather modernist American idea that the only thing that must *not* be tolerated is a lack of tolerance for serious doctrinal errors, human traditions and gross perversions of worship. But the result of such a pretended unity is really a great disunity as each Presbyterian schismatic body is filled with many contrary competing schools of thought (e.g., the so-called “truly reformed,” Federal Vision advocates, sacramentalists, theonomists, anti-theonomists, Psalm singers, hymn singers, high church liturgical worship, Arminian Charismatic style worship, six-day creationism, the documentary hypothesis, etc.). Such Presbyterianism is really more Congregational than Presbyterian.

The “Testimony of the Martyrs” Argument

Another argument for the Steelite concept of history is based on the fact that we should follow the example of the faithful martyrs who contended for divine truth against false doctrines and corruptions. Who would disagree with the statement that we should imitate the testimony of faithful martyrs? The fact that we should imitate their testimony for the truth does not prove that we cannot be a faithful church without first reconstructing church history so we can make the claim that we are the direct line of the last faithful church. If we are faithful to the Scriptures, the doctrinal attainments of the Reformation and our covenant obligations, we are a faithful church irrespective of any historical claims. This is another of the many examples where Steelite conclusions either do not logically follow the premises or simply have nothing to do with the premises at all.

The Argument from Authority

The Steelites also appeal to an argument from authority or church history as authority. A Steelite writes,

It is dangerous to exalt private opinion and private judgment. (1 Corinthians 2:13, 14) Reason alone cannot grasp everything, which is why we need authority, i.e. the historic authority of the faithful church. (*cf.* Matthew 8:9, 10) It is Romanism and Liberal Protestantism that works outside of the history of the faithful church and appeals to private reason and private authority – in the first case, that of the Pope; in the second that of each individual. We must interpret the

Bible by our creeds, handed down historically, not privately, otherwise we put our conscience or private interpretation of scripture above the authority of the church. (2 Peter 1:20) What is handed down faithfully from the church comes from the church as a body, not from individuals. (Hebrews 10:23-25) The Church must have authority to hand it down, we have the responsibility of confessing the truth as one body, and handing it down, this is disrupted when we fail to accept previous faithful authority in Christ's church. (Titus 2:15; 2 Timothy 2:2)

Let us examine this statement carefully and see if it supports the idea that we must find or claim an institutional connection with a past faithful church. There are a number of things to note about this statement. First, it assumes that if we do not adopt their concept of church history, we are advocating private opinion and private judgment. This is simply not true. We are not saying that we must ignore history or all the doctrinal symbols of the orthodox throughout history. We are not advocating abolishing subordinate standards in order to tell each Christian to figure out their theology on their own by each person looking at Scripture, as though the last 1944 years or so of theological battles and church councils, and ecclesiastical decisions, do not exist. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We adhere to the lawful covenants and Confessions of Faith (or subordinate standards) *because they agree with the Word of God*. Any statement of faith that is in agreement with the teaching of Scripture is fully authoritative as a secondary rule *precisely because* it does agree with Scripture. This is far different from the Roman Catholic dogma that something is authoritative merely because the church says so or because it is part of the church's tradition. As Presbyterians, we adhere to the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant because these were lawful covenants which were totally agreeable to the Word of God and were so written to be binding on posterity or future generations. We adhere to the Westminster Standards because they are agreeable to the Word of God and happen to be the most biblical and comprehensive statement of faith produced by Protestants thus far. We would be complete fools to cast aside the prior doctrinal and practical attainments of our spiritual forefathers in order to start from scratch.

All of these observations raise a question: how can we use the Word of God to trace back the faithful institutional line in history? Does the Bible fill in the hundreds of gaps? Does it tell us which version of history is accurate? Does it inform us when historians leave out critical information or misrepresent the facts? I hope you are beginning to understand that while it is easy to test covenants and confessions of faith by Scripture to see if they are indeed biblical, lawful and faithful; it is impossible to use the Bible *to reconstruct* and test all of church history. The Roman Catholics dealt with this problem by simply asserting church authority and tradition *independent* of Scripture. Steelites apparently deal with this problem by only applying their theory to the last four centuries when historical records are much more available and much more accurate. (The early histories of the saints and martyrs are filled with embellishments and gross exaggerations in order to exalt the martyrs and past saints.) Thus, we reject the Steelite theory because: (1) it cannot be proved and most history is unknown and thus cannot be tested by Scripture; (2) it cannot be universalized and applied to all of church history; (3) it contradicts the

teaching of all Protestant symbols and theologians and thus does not agree with “the historic authority of the faithful church.”

Second, if we reject the Steelite theory of connecting the historical or institutional dots to the faithful line throughout history, this does not mean that we are exalting autonomous human reason. Obviously, reason alone cannot grasp everything, for reason does not provide axioms and is subject to the effects of the fall. That is why we need *the authority of Scripture* and our use of reason must always be in accord with the teachings of the Bible. We must think God’s thoughts after Him, for the fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom and true knowledge. Whenever the church agrees with the teachings of God’s Word in history, due to the illumination of the Holy Spirit, *we must agree* one hundred percent with the church because it is faithfully teaching *the truths of Scripture*. We are required to do this not because of “the historic authority of the faithful church” but *because the church is accurately teaching the truth*. It stands on the inspired, infallible Word of God. This point is effectively brought out by the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius who says,

Since it [i.e., the apostles Creed] exactly agrees in sense with the Holy Scriptures, and is almost entirely expressed in the words of Scripture, we do not deny that, with regard to its matter, it may be denominated Divine and Authentic.... With respect to its form, however, and the disposition of the several articles, it is merely a human writing; and, in consequence, has a claim to our faith, not independently or of itself, but purely because it is derived from canonical Scripture, and entirely accords with it.⁴⁸

John Owen makes this same point clear in his discussion of preaching:

We may consider how far the word, as preached, is the pure word of God; and so having his name upon it, is the object of our reverence. And, 1. It is his originally, it proceeds from him, and not from the invention of man, as was shewed before. 2. It is his word materially. The same things are preached that are declared in the Scripture, only they are explained and accommodated unto our understanding and use, which is needful for us. 3. The preaching of it is the ordinance of God which his name is upon, in the same kind as on his word, and therein an especial reverence and respect unto the name and authority of God is due thereunto. 4. By virtue of this institution of God, the word preached, which is in itself only materially the word of God, becomes formally so; for it is the application of the word of God unto our souls, by virtue of his command and appointment. Wherefore, there is the same reverence due to God in the word as preached, as in the word as written; and a peculiar advantage attends it, beyond the reading of the word, because God has himself ordained it for our benefit.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Herman Witsius, *Sacred Dissertations, on What Is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*. Trans. Donald Fraser (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823), 1:14.

⁴⁹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews; with Preliminary Exercitations* (Edinburgh: J. Ritchie, [1668-1684] 1813), 4:579-578.

We agree with lawful covenants and confessional documents not because the church has some kind of intrinsic authority, which is the Romanist concept of church authority, but only because the church faithfully acts *ministerially*. It teaches the truth and confesses the truth of the Word of God. It disciplines according to the truths of the Bible. If a church teaches rank heresy and lies or disciplines arbitrarily based only on human opinion, it must be repudiated because we must believe the truth and obey God rather than men. This view is standard Protestant and Reformed doctrine. But I ask my Steelite brothers: how do we get from these obvious truths accepted by all Reformed churches to your peculiar theory of connecting the institutional dots? The conclusion they advocate, once again, does not necessarily follow the premises.

But what about the Steelite statement, “We must interpret the Bible by our creeds, handed down historically, not privately, otherwise we put our conscience or private interpretation of Scripture above the authority of the church (2 Pet. 1:20)?” This statement is implicitly Romanist, very dangerous and misleading. When a Christian adopts a creed as his own, he does so *as an individual*. He must examine a creed or confession and must decide if the creed is biblical. He does not simply say, “Such and such a church has adopted this creed. Therefore, I must accept this creed on an implicit faith *because the church says so*. For if I examine this creed in the light of Scripture to determine if this creed is biblical, I am placing my private interpretation above the authority of the church.” Do you see the serious problem with this kind of thinking? Did Martin Luther accept the Roman Catholic creed of his own day and reject his (at that time) unconfessional interpretation of Paul’s writings which led him to the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone? No. Let us read the account of what happened at the Diet of Worms (April 18, 1521). After being given a day to consider the order by the papal church and emperor to repent and repudiate all his writings at that time, the following events took place:

In defense of his books he could only say in the words of Christ: “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?” If his opponents could convict him of error *by prophetic and evangelical Scriptures*, he would revoke his books, and be the first to commit them to the flames. He concluded with a warning to the young Emperor not to begin his reign by condemning the word of God, and pointed to the judgments over Pharaoh, the king of Babylon, and the ungodly kings of Israel.

He was requested to repeat his speech in Latin. This he did with equal firmness and with eyes upraised to heaven.

The princes held a short consultation. Eck, in the name of the Emperor, sharply reproved him for evading the question; it was useless, he said, to dispute with him about views which were not new, but had been already taught by Hus, Wiclif, and other heretics, and had been condemned for sufficient reasons by the Council of Constance before the Pope, the Emperor, and the assembled fathers. He demanded a round and correct answer “without horns.”

This brought on the crisis.

Luther replied, he would give an answer “with neither horns nor teeth.” From the inmost depths of his conscience educated by the study of the word of God, he made in both languages that memorable declaration which marks an epoch in the history of religious liberty: –

“Unless I am refuted and convicted by *testimonies of the Scriptures* or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), *I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God*: I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience.”

So far the reports are clear and harmonious. What followed immediately after this testimony is somewhat uncertain and of less importance.

Dr. Eck exchanged a few more words with Luther, protesting against his assertion that councils may err and have erred. “You can not prove it,” he said. Luther repeated his assertion, and pledged himself to prove it. Thus pressed and threatened, amidst the excitement and confusion of the audience, he uttered in German, at least in substance, that concluding sentence which has impressed itself most on the memory of men: –

“Here I stand. [I cannot do otherwise.] God help me! Amen.”

The Emperor...was horrified at the disparagement of general councils, as if a German monk could be wiser than the whole Catholic Church.”⁵⁰

We must thank God that Luther did not accept the councils, decrees and creeds of the Roman Catholic Church because of *the authority of the church*, but rather placed those councils, decrees and creeds under the light of Scripture and thus publicly rejected them as contrary to the Word of God. According to the Steelite argument above, Luther was wrong. But the Steelite will respond, “That criticism is unfair, for Luther was criticizing the apostate papal church, the church of antichrist. We are only advocating accepting the authority of *true or faithful churches*.” This raises the obvious question. How do we know which church creeds and confessions are faithful? Why do we not accept the Lutheran statements on the sacraments? Why don’t we accept the creeds of the Methodists or the “evangelical” Arminians or the Baptists or the Quakers? Why do we reject the ecumenical councils that advocated praying to icons and the virgin Mary? The answer to these questions is simple. The Reformed symbols (especially the Westminster Standards, which are not tainted by unbiblical holy days) are biblical and the other symbols are unscriptural in many areas and thus must be repudiated. Because councils and churches can and do err, the final authority for faith (doctrine) and life (ethics, ordinances, worship, etc.) is the Word of God. We subscribe to the Westminster Standards not because of the authority of the church, but because they are faithful to the Word of God. This is historic Protestantism. Wilhelmus à Brakel concurs in his discussion of finding the “true church”:

First, it is necessary to state clearly and succinctly what the church is in her essential nature, in order that everyone may know which congregation he ought to join. They who belong to the true church ought to rejoice, exclaiming, “Christ is here!” for Christ only dwells in the true church. Only there, by His Spirit, is He engaged in the work of conversion, consolation, and sanctification. “For there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore” (Psa. 133:3).

⁵⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans [1910] 1987), 7:303-305, 306.

Therefore *one must search the Word of God to discern which congregation constitutes the church. I repeat, search the Word, for the veracity of God's Word is not determined by the church*, even though she preserves, protects, and proclaims the Word entrusted to her (Rom. 3:2), and thus is called “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). The true church, however, is identified by the Word of God, for she is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20). Scripture also teaches that one must first be instructed before one can be admitted to the sacraments, that is, be admitted into the church community. This is confirmed in the following text: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them” (Mat. 28:19); “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized” (Acts 2:41); “Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus...and the eunuch said...what doth hinder me to be baptized?” (Acts 8:35-36).

Since there are so many churches which call themselves the *Christian church*, we are at present all the more obligated to search the Word of God in order to ascertain which is the true church, and which congregation holds to the truth. He who therefore earnestly searches God's Word by either reading it, hearing it read, or hearing it preached, and who perseveringly, humbly, and heartily prays to be led into the truth, may expect that the Lord will bring him to the true church. If he is already in the true church, he may also expect that the Lord, to his joy, will assure him of this.⁵¹

In the Belgic Confession (1561) we read, “We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the church...the marks by which the true church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in the punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself” (Article 29). Once again, note that the standard Protestant and Reformed view of what constitutes a true church, and how to discern the true church, is not enough for the Steelite. One must find or reconstruct a historical or institutional connection back through time.

In addition, the Steelite view that one must define a true church not simply by its adherence to the truth but according to its institutional history is an implicit denial of the perspicuity and perfection of Scripture. “Protestants hold that the Bible, being addressed to the people, is sufficiently perspicuous to be understood by them, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; and that they are entitled and bound to search the Scripture, and to judge for themselves what is its true meaning. Romanists, on the other hand, teach that the Scriptures are so obscure that they need a visible, present and infallible interpreter; and that the people, being incompetent to understand how, are bounded to believe whatever doctrines the Church, through its official organs, declares to be true and divine.”⁵² As Protestants, we acknowledge that the Bible contains

⁵¹ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 2:3-4; emphasis added.

⁵² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:106.

everything that we are bound to believe and obey. While there are some difficult passages, everything we need for salvation and godliness is clearly revealed therein. With the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, we affirm that the Word of God...is “the only rule to direct us how we may glorify [God] and enjoy Him” (A. #2). Similarly, the Second Helvetic declares that “in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has all things fully expounded which belong to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in the respect it is expressly commanded of God that nothing be either put to or taken from the same (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19)” (I:2).

Church historian Robert Godfrey writes,

The Protestant position, and my position, is that all things *necessary* for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible clearly enough for the ordinary believer to find it there and understand.

The position I am defending certainly is what is taught in the Bible itself. For example, Deuteronomy 31:9 states: “Moses wrote down this law...” Moses instructed the people by writing down the law and then ordering that it be read to them “so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law,” Deuteronomy 31:9, 12. Moses declared to all Israel: “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you, they are your life,” Deuteronomy 32:46-47.

Notice the clear elements in these passages:

1. The Word of which Moses spoke was written.
2. The people can and must listen to it and learn it.
3. In this Word they can find life.

The people do not need any additional institution to interpret the Word. The priests, prophets, and scribes of Israel certainly function to help the people ministerially. But the word alone was sufficient for salvation. The prophets, who were indeed inspired, came very much in the spirit of Micah who said, “He has shown you, O man, what is good,” Micah 6:8. The function of the prophets and priests was not to add to or even clarify the law; rather, they applied it to the people who were sinfully indifferent.

If this principle of the sufficiency and clarity of the Word is true in the Old Testament, we can assume that it is all the more true in the New. The New Testament gloriously fulfills what the Old Testament promises. But we do not have to assume it; rather, the New Testament makes clear that the character of Scripture is to be sufficient and clear. One example of that is found in 2 Timothy 3-4.⁵³

Therefore, although we recognize that there is such a thing as the Protestant tradition, which refers to the common faith of the church as presented in the faithful exegesis, interpretation and theology through the centuries, and we recognize that this historical testimony is useful as a guide in our interpretation of Scripture; nevertheless, we also recognize that this

⁵³ Robert Godfrey, “What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura?” in Don Kistler general editor, *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 3-5.

tradition or historical testimony contains nothing (or at least should contain nothing) that goes beyond what is taught in Scripture. Moreover, we also recognize the fact that *the final authority* by which to judge this common faith, or this Protestant tradition, is *the inspired and infallible word of God. The sacred Scriptures stand above and judge of our common faith or historical tradition and not the other way around.* As the Westminster Standards make clear, “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures” (*Confession of Faith*, 1:10). Robert Shaw writes,

Neither Pope, nor councils, possess the properties requisite to constitute a supreme judge in controversies of religion; for they are fallible, and have often erred, and contradicted one another. Although the Church or her ministers are the official guardians of the Scriptures, and although it belongs to them to explain and enforce the doctrines and laws contained in the Word of God, yet their authority is only ministerial, and their interpretations and decisions are binding on the conscience only insofar as they accord with the mind of the Spirit in the Scriptures. By this test, the decisions of councils, the opinions of ancient writers, and the doctrines of men at the present time, are to be tried, and by this rule all controversies in religion must be determined (Isa. 8:20; Matt. 22:29).⁵⁴

A. A. Hodge concurs with these words:

The Protestant doctrine is, –...That the Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice; ...the Scriptures are the only authoritative voice in the Church; which is to be interpreted and applied by every individual for himself, with the assistance, though not by the authority, of his fellow-Christians. Creeds and confessions, as to form, bind those only who voluntarily profess them; and as to matter, they bind only so far as they affirm truly what the Bible teaches, and because the Bible does so teach.

This must be true—(1.) Because the Scriptures, which profess to teach us the way of salvation, refer us to no standard or judge in matters of religion beyond or above themselves; and because no body of men since the apostles has ever existed with the qualifications or with the authority to act in the office of [infallible] judge for their fellows. (2.) Because, as we have seen, the Scriptures are themselves complete and perspicuous. (3.) Because all Christians are commanded to search the Scriptures, and to judge both doctrines and professed teachers themselves. John v. 39; 1 John ii. 20, 27; iv. 1, 2; Acts xvii. 11; Gal. i. 8; 1 Thess. v. 21. (4.) Because all Christians are promised the Holy Spirit to guide them in the understanding and practical use of the truth. Rom. viii. 9; 1 John ii. 20, 27.⁵⁵

With all this in mind, one must be very careful in how one frames the use of history or the “Protestant tradition.” There is a fine line between a healthy respect for a church’s testimony,

⁵⁴ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Christian Focus [1845] 2008), 58.

⁵⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1958), 43.

using that testimony as a help in understanding Scripture; and, an unhealthy, proto-Romanist appeal to history as if it were authoritative like Scripture. When people refuse to carefully exegete Scripture (using the historical-grammatical-theological method) and instead *only* resort to church documents or quotes from Protestant theologians, they in principle are acting like Roman Catholics. We must be willing and able to defend our Standards and testimony by a direct appeal to sacred Scripture if we are to avoid an implicit faith in the church instead of a hearty faith in God's Word, which is the foundation of our Standards. If there is to be a third Presbyterian Reformation, the truths we confess regarding salvation, worship, the sacraments, church government, etc., must be defended by a clear, thorough interpretation and application of the Word of God. *Corporate* and individual sanctification come when the Holy Spirit applies the Scriptures to the heart (Jn. 17:17). The Westminster Standards affirm, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depend if not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God" (1:4). The Confession continues with these words, "We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverend esteem of the Holy Scripture...yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts" (1:5). The Confession could not be clearer when it adds, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places [in Scripture] that speak more clearly."

We cannot leave this Steelite argument from authority behind without a brief consideration of the proof texts they have offered as the biblical evidence of their position. The first proof text is 1 Corinthians 2:13-14: "These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." The apostle here is not discussing the "faithful church" in *post-apostolic history* but the divinely inspired things revealed through the holy apostles and New Testament prophets. He makes it very clear that the very words used by the writers of Scripture were controlled by the Holy Spirit and thus they were communicating divine truth through direct revelation. "Paul's direct assertion is that the words which he used, were taught by the Holy Ghost."⁵⁶ In verse 14, we learn that the natural man or the person who has not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and, thus, does not possess the Holy Spirit cannot know or understand the truths of the Spirit revealed in the Word of God. This passage teaches us that Scripture is divinely inspired and cannot be understood or believed apart from a supernatural work of God's Spirit.⁵⁷ The mind and heart must be reborn and illuminated by the Spirit. This passage has

⁵⁶ Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians*, 41.

⁵⁷ For John Calvin, the key to understanding the Word of God was not the authority or tradition of the church but the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit. As W. Gary Crampton notes, "According to Calvin, the authority vested in Scripture is derived from its unique origin. The sixty-six books of holy writ are not only the sole authority for the church of Jesus Christ, but they are also the sole authority for every institution (*Institutes* I:7:1, 2; II:7:6-17;

nothing to say about “the historic authority of the faithful church” but does teach us that Scripture is infallible and carries a divine authority. That is one reason why we advocate *sola Scriptura* and assert that the church’s role is purely ministerial.

The second passage cited as proof that we need the historic authority of the faithful church is Matthew 8:9, 10: “For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to this servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!’” In this passage we learn that officers must obey their superiors. I suppose the Steelite interprets this so that it applies to our submission to “mother church.” It is not uncommon to hear Steelites appeal to the fifth commandment as a major reason to adopt their theory of fitting oneself into an institutionally faithful line. With all this in mind, we must consider (once again) the following biblical truths: (1) The church’s job is purely ministerial and thus its foundational authority is the Word of God. (2) We obey “mother church” in non-circumstantial matters when it agrees with the Scriptures, which are inspired, sufficient, perfect and the sole authority for faith and life. (3) The centurion is highly praised by our Lord for his faith in Jesus Christ, not his trust in the church. Jesus can heal even at a distance simply by speaking the word of healing. He believed that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God who had infinite power over the universe and thus over sickness. Whatever He desires will be done. All professing Christians would agree with this assessment.

While we certainly can thank God that it is a historical fact that the church of Christ has greatly advanced over the centuries in doctrinal knowledge and precision and that (in spite of great declension and even apostasy) the attainments of our spiritual forefathers have been preserved by God in a remnant; this fact does not sanction the unique theory of what constitutes a true church advocated by the Steelites. Therefore, we remain unconvinced and will continue to adhere to the biblical definition of what constitutes a true or faithful church as delineated in all the Reformed creeds and confessions, including the Westminster Standards.

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[HOME PAGE](#)

Commentary on Isaiah 30:1). Singer maintains that it was Calvin’s high view of Biblical revelation by which he could ‘with full assurance assert that the Scriptures are the final authority in all areas of human life.’ It is the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit which corroborates this authority (*Institutes* I:7:1-5). ‘Those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture’ (I:7:4). Non-believers can have a certain understanding of Scripture, but because they are not ‘inwardly taught’ by the Spirit, they never have a genuine spiritual grasp of it (*Commentary* on James 2:19 and 1 Corinthians 2:14).

As the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is necessary to confirm the authority of God’s Word and to cause one to spiritually acquiesce to it, Calvin also recognizes our need for the Spirit to further illuminate the Word of God for us. In this process, the Spirit does not reveal new information which causes the reader to believe and or further understand the Scriptures. Rather, the Spirit progressively gives to the Christian a greater and greater understanding of the Scriptures. He sheds more light on the biblical texts so that the believer can more fully grasp the fullness of the message set forth in the Bible. The Christian’s mind is transformed to think and act biblically” (*Commentary* on Romans 12:1, 2; 2 Peter 1:19-21; Hebrews 5:12-14)” (*What Calvin Says* [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1992], 24-25).

