

FORGOTTEN HERO: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DAVID STEELE

by Michael Wagner (Copyright, 1998)

Our age abounds with ministers who are afraid to take public stands that will make people feel uncomfortable. Yet our age is not entirely unique in this respect; throughout history it has usually been easier to compromise than stand for the truth. Nevertheless, God often raises up individuals who will stand for Him regardless of the costs. The martyrs of Jesus Christ are clearly individuals of this sort. Not all of these people – who courageously stand for the truth – end up as martyrs. Sometimes the historical circumstances are such that they live out their lives as irritants to the greater community, boldly proclaiming the Word of God. Rev. David Steele, who ministered in the United States during much of the nineteenth century, was one of these special people. Indeed, as the leading public exponent of the Covenanted Reformation in North America during that period, Steele is yet to receive the close attention he deserves.

He begins his autobiography, "Reminiscences Historical and Biographical of a Ministry in the Reformed Presbyterian Church During Fifty-Three Years," noting that people of his own time would not be interested in the cause he stood for. "It is not expected that the present publication will be popular with the present generation. The topics treated are not adapted to the tastes of many in this age, and to most persons the principles discussed will be as riddles" (p. 3). But he was confident that at some point in the future there would be people interested in his cause. As he puts it, "there is warrantable ground to expect that what is contained in the following pages will be helpful to some in following ages, who may be moved by the Spirit of God to inquire and search for the 'landmarks which the fathers have set'" (pp. 3-4). In particular, he referred to "that grand 'International document,' the Solemn League [and Covenant], ready to be placed in the foundation of the millennial temple" (p. 4). In other words, Rev. David Steele was a dyed-in-the-wool Covenanter; such was he born, and such he died.

The specific personal details of his life are perhaps less important than the cause he

represented and consistently fought for throughout his life. It is of interest to know, however, that he was born in Northern Ireland and came to the United States as a young man in the 1820s. Although he was encouraged by an older brother to take out American citizenship, he refused, since doing so would require swearing an oath to the US Constitution, a document that fails to acknowledge Christ as King and perpetuated the institution of slavery.

The issue of slavery features prominently in the first part of the book, and Steele's response to that issue holds lessons for Christians of the late twentieth century. Slavery is closely analogous to one of the critical issues of our own day, abortion. In both cases, human beings are cruelly treated by other human beings, with the explicit support of the civil government. Before the American Civil War, many Covenanters were very dedicated to eradicating the ungodly practice of slavery. However, in their zeal, many of them joined organizations that included enemies of the gospel. Steele refused to be "unequally yoked" in this way, and was therefore falsely accused of being "pro-slavery." The point is, however, that in spite of his strong opposition to slavery, he held back from unbiblical associations, knowing that obedience to God's explicit commands was the best way to proceed in any situation. To men it may look like joining with our theological opponents in a principled political cause is the only way to stop an ongoing evil. But our ways are not God's ways, and Steele chose faithfulness over pragmatism. This is the same kind of situation we face regarding abortion today. Though we realize that it is an unspeakable evil, and even sympathize with the efforts of those who are diligently trying to stop it, yet we cannot join with those who are enemies of the gospel under any circumstances. Steele's response to the anti-slavery movement in the US thus provides us with a good example to follow with regard to the pro-life movement in our own time.

Much of the book describes conflicts within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), and Steele also compares the decline of that denomination with the decline of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Generally speaking, he notes that the "innovators" who desired to depart from the Covenanted attainments of the past received greater opposition among the Reformed Presbyterians in Scotland than in the US. But there was also an important similarity between the doctrinal decline in the two countries: "As in America, so in Scotland, the first authoritative document that excited hostility in secret was the Auchensaugh Renovation" (p. 137). The Auchensaugh Renovation was a renewal of the Covenants, National and Solemn League, in 1712 by the faithful Christians who refused to compromise with the Church

that had been established after the "Glorious Revolution" of 1689 (i.e., the "Revolution Church"). The Revolution Church rejected the Covenants and the faithful contendings of the Covenanter martyrs who had died for the cause of Christ in Britain during much of the seventeenth century. Anyway, the Reformed Presbyterians in the US and Scotland who began to oppose the Auchensaugh Renovation as part of the doctrinal standards of the Covenanted Church were moving in the direction of the principles of the Revolution Church, i.e., opposition to the attainments of the Covenanted Reformation.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland changed its terms of communion in 1822, its first constitutional move away from the Covenanted attainments. Although a number of people in the church opposed this move, "Mr. J. Reid alone had sufficient fortitude to act upon his convictions by formal separation, in 1822" (p. 160). Readers may already have heard of Rev. James Reid, author of "Memoirs of the Westminster Divines," which is currently kept in print by the well-known publisher, Banner of Truth Trust. I think it is very unlikely that those who own Reid's book realize he was so strongly committed to the Covenanted Reformation.

Like the choice that faced Reid, David Steele would have to face a situation where his church retreated from the full attainments of the Covenanted Reformation. As the RPCNA fell away from a full Covenanted testimony, those who remained faithful, including Steele himself, worked hard to get the church back on track. Unfortunately, they were not successful. By 1840, "They had exhausted all the legitimate and recognized forms of ecclesiastical procedure, to arrest the downward career of the majority; and seven years of contending were surely sufficient to justify other legitimate measures" (pp. 101-102). Thus in June of that year, Steele, along with one other minister, Robert Lusk, and three ruling elders, formed the Reformed Presbytery, independent of the RPCNA. The Reformed Presbytery was the only body to uphold the complete attainments of the Covenanted Reformation in North America from that time forward. Interestingly, however, towards the end of the book Steele makes the following comment: "Let it be distinctly understood that neither I, the Reformed Presbytery, no, nor our worthy and faithful ancestors, ever claimed personal perfection, or perfection for our Testimony" (pp. 206-207). The point of upholding the doctrinal attainments of the past is not to aspire to some sort of "perfection," but to aspire to faithfulness to God. While many Christians understand the sin of personal backsliding from the degree of sanctification they have experienced, they do not understand that it is also a sin for a church to backslide from its biblical doctrinal attainments. Those who

remain faithful to God must contend for the Christ-honouring biblical attainments of the past (Phil. 3:16, 1 Tim. 4:6, Eccl. 3:15), and that is what David Steele did in his generation. Certainly contemporary Christians can learn from his example.

Throughout his life David Steele maintained a faithful testimony to the Covenanted Reformation. He was not willing to draw back from any aspect of the Westminster Standards, even the most controversial documents among the Standards (as adopted by the Church of Scotland), the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant. Indeed, it was his adherence to the Covenants that led to his participation in the formation of the Reformed Presbytery. This did not mean that he viewed Covenanters as the only true Christians: "Yes, unto them which believe Christ is precious; and I never question that he is so to multitudes who never heard of the British Covenants" (p. 262). But for those who live in Britain and the countries that are offshoots of Britain (Canada, the US, etc.), the Covenants are binding, and Christians in these countries need to acknowledge and live up to their Covenanted obligations. This is the real message of Steele's life and ministry.

Although not mentioned in this book, Steele also wrote other materials. His book "Notes on the Apocalypse" is a short, but excellent, commentary on Revelation. Anyone wanting a brief look at Revelation from the perspective of historical Protestant eschatology (i.e., historicism), would do well to consult "Notes on the Apocalypse." Steele also edited a couple of magazines ("The Contending Witness" and the "The Reformation Advocate" which became "The Original Covenanter") much of which he wrote himself. And he was the author of some shorter works among which are the "Declaration and Testimony for the Present Truth," "The Two Witnesses," and "Apostasy in the RPCNA." The modern church will clearly benefit from these materials that are once again being made available by Still Waters Revival Books. Hopefully it won't be long before David Steele receives the attention he rightfully deserves.

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