The Doctrine of the Church And Apostolic Succession in the Scottish Church

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Introduction

At the beginning of the Third Millennium, how can the Scottish doctrine of the church, and particularly the doctrine of apostolic succession assist ministers of Christ’s Church in obtaining a clearer understanding of the character, charge, and challenge of serving Christ’s people through Word, Sacrament and prayer?

At first glance, when one considers the doctrinal and ecclesiastical term apostolic succession, particularly since the Reformation, one thinks of concept and doctrine that the Reformed Church removed out of Christendom during the Reformation of the 16th century; an error of the Roman Catholic Church that was far from Biblical and needed to be changed. However, the Scottish Church has consistently affirmed the biblical doctrine of apostolic succession.

To the Scots, apostolic succession is a biblical doctrine that stresses the importance of the ministry that Christ gave to his Church and it is most important for Presbyterian Churches today to have a better understanding of this doctrine. The doctrine of “apostolicity” as an attribute of Christ’s Church is extremely important and essential for our understanding. It is a term that is concerned with the faithful adherence to the doctrine of the apostles, which was communicated to them by supernatural revelation, and inscripturated through them by supernatural inspiration.[1] For the Scottish Church, as well as for any church to be truly “biblical”, it must be apostolic, which means that there will be a succession of the apostolic teaching deposited in Scripture in the Church of Christ until the Lord of the Church returns.

James Walker wrote in The Theology and Theologians of Scotland: “There is no doubt that Scotch Presbyterians have held what, in some sense, might be called a doctrine of Apostolic Succession.”[2] Usually when Reformed Christians hear of a belief of “apostolic succession” they usually think of the Church of Rome’s doctrine concerning the papacy, or the Episcopal form of church government that is found in the Church of England. However, the true doctrine of apostolic succession was one of the fruits of the Reformation and one of the particular and important doctrines of the Church of Scotland. How is this doctrine of Apostolic Succession in the context of Scottish Theology from the Reformation to the 19th century different than the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession? To define and clarify this doctrine of apostolic succession in the Scottish Church is the purpose of the present study.

From the dawn of the Scottish Reformation, when the Scottish Church published what they believed in The Scots Confession of Faith, they attempted to define the Church of Scotland in strictly biblical terms, founded upon the apostle’s teaching. During the Reformation of the 16th
century, the Scottish Church was established on Presbyterian lines. Presbyterianism is a form of ecclesiastical polity in which the Church is governed by presbyters (Gk. presbuteros).[3] The Scottish Church in the 16th and 17th centuries did not regard this church government ruled by presbyters as an innovation, but as a rediscovery of the apostolic model of polity found in the New Testament. Presbyterianism was permanently established in Scotland in the late 16th century as the biblical form of church government; it was challenged in the 17th century for a season with the conflict with the Stuart monarchs, but re-established permanently by Parliament in 1690. The Scottish Church had not only recovered the New Testament form of church government in Presbyterianism, but wanted to affirm that they succeeded the apostolic foundation in the ministry of the church as well.

In considering this important doctrine of Scottish theology and seeking to understand it more fully for our own Presbyterian churches today, the study will proceed thus: (1) The Doctrine of the Scottish Church: Visible and Invisible; (2) Christ: the Head of the Church; (3) “The One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church”; (4) The Ministry of the Word and Sacrament; (5) Schism and Independency; (6) Scottish doctrine contrasted to the Roman Catholic; (7) Conclusion.

I. The Doctrine of the Scottish Church: Visible and Invisible

In considering the Scottish doctrine of apostolic succession, we want to begin primarily with the Scottish understanding of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church in its visible manifestation was extremely important to Scottish Divines. James MacPherson wrote:

To them [the Scottish Divines] the Church was real and essential, as important as Christ himself. From their point of view Christ and the Church are mutually implicated ideas. We can no more conceive of Christ apart from the Church than we can conceive of the Church apart from Christ.[4]

John Macleod wrote about the relationship between Scottish theology and the doctrine of the church: “There is scarcely any segment of the circle of Christian truth that has had more abundant heed paid to it in the theology of Scotland than that which has to do with the Church of God.”[5] Because of the great importance on Christ’s Church, In the first confession of faith, published in 1560, which was attributed to John Knox, the Scottish church defined and confessed what they believed to be biblical concerning the doctrine of the Church. This was specifically stated in opposition to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church, and particularly of the erroneous teaching of apostolic succession that had been held by the Roman Catholics through the time of the Reformation. In defining the church, the Scots Confession stated:

XVI. As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so do we most constantly believe that from the beginning there has been, and now is, and to the end of the world shall be one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and
embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only head of the same Kirk, which also is
the body and spouse of Christ Jesus, which church is catholic, that is, universal, because it
contains the Elect of all ages, of all realms, nations, and tongues...therefore it is called the
communion…of Saints…who have the fruition of the most inestimable benefits, to wit, one God,
one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism: out of the which Kirk, there is neither life nor eternal
felicity…The Kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and
comprehends as well (as is said) the Elect that be departed, commonly called the Kirk
Triumphant, and they that yet live and fight against sin and Satan as shall live hereafter.

In this chapter 16 of the Scots Confession, the focus is on defining the Church as universal, or
what is known as the visible church, but the emphasis is also upon the perpetuity and unity of the
church which implies that there is not much of a distinction for Knox between the so-called
invisible and visible Church. [6] The Church invisible is known only to God, whereas all eyes
see the Church visible according to its unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity; and these
attributes are manifested in real historical time as Christ’s Kingdom. With regard to this
distinction in the Scottish doctrine of the Church, Burleigh wrote concerning chapter 16 of the
Scottish Confession penned by Knox: “…the visible Church is Knox’s real concern and is never
long absent from his thoughts. There are certain notes by which the true Church can be
discerned from the false Church. ‘These Notes…we affirm are neither antiquity, title usurped,
lineal descent, place appointed, nor multitude of men approving an error’.”[7]

Knox goes on to define the true marks of the church that were established on the teaching of
the apostles. The Scots Confession reveals that for John Knox and the early Scottish Reformers,
the Scottish Church was apostolic in origin, continuous in character. In An Answer to James
Tyrie (1572), Knox countered his Catholic opponent’s claim to apostolic succession, by
describing the Scottish Church extending back to Abraham who believed the same Word of God
and the same promises that were currently believed in Scotland.[8] This implied that his
Catholic opponent, while affirming a doctrine of apostolic succession, could not have been
“apostolic” in reality because the Roman Catholic Church had ceased to teach the pure word of
God and the faith of “believing Abraham”. For Knox and the early reformers, to be apostolic in
character was to be biblical in foundation and confession.

The Scottish Presbyterians, particularly Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie in the 17th
century, also sought to teach the biblical doctrine of the church in contrast to Rome’s excessive
position of the visible church on the one hand, and the independents and sectarians extremist
position of the invisible church on the other.[9] The Scottish doctrine of the Church was to be
biblical and balanced between the extremes taught by both Rome and the Independents. In other
words, the Scottish doctrine of the church was to be founded on Scripture, the teaching of the
apostles, Presbyterian in government, and therefore visible as well as one. MacPherson wrote:
“Our Scottish divines, in opposition to both Romanists and Independents, bring in the distinction
This distinction is one of the central doctrines made by the Scottish divines and helpful for understanding their doctrine of apostolic succession. The Church of Jesus Christ, of which he is the Head, has always existed upon the earth. The Church invisible was all the elect known to God from the foundation of the world, but the Lord had established his visible Kingdom that would be manifested on the earth. The preservation of this visible church was apostolic and was to witness and to glorify the risen Christ, the Head of the Church.

Rome had placed most doctrinal emphasis on the visibility of the church on earth. According to MacPherson, “The only invisible Church according to Romanists was the Church triumphant which had been visible, or the Church of the unborn which would yet be visible.” The Scottish Presbyterians taught that there was truly a visible church on the earth as well as an invisible church known only to God. But this visible church was manifested as Christ’s Kingdom in this world, with a government to rule under the King, and the place where the word is rightly preached, the sacraments administered, and discipline exercised, for Christ had given the sacred ordinances as means of grace for the building up of his church and the gathering of his saints. William Cunningham wrote: “If visibility be an essential property of the church, then it would seem to follow that a public and unbroken succession of a continuous society from the time of the apostles must have existed upon earth, and been distinctly traceable as the true Church of Christ…”

The truth of the doctrine of the visible church led the Scottish divines to insist on the Catholicity or unity of the Church of Christ. Because the church of Christ was unified, or one, they did not teach sectarianism or schism from the Church established by Christ upon the earth. MacPherson wrote: “[The Scottish divines] in no case could tolerate the idea of breaking away from the communion of the Catholic Church.” For there was only One Church and this Church had One Head and King. Therefore visibility and faithfulness to the Head of the Church was to be realized in order to be a true and apostolic church established by Christ.

II. Christ: the Head of the Church

Scottish theology has continuously affirmed that Christ is the Head of the Church. Rather than pope, bishop or king being the authority over the church, the emphasis in Scottish theology has been the biblical teaching that Christ has all authority in heaven and upon the earth. When he commissioned his apostles to declare the word of God and to write Holy Scripture, he did so in order to govern the church, and rule over her by his word. This is the reason that the Word of God is the rule for all of doctrine and life. Stressing the Sole Kingship and Headship of Jesus Christ in the Church, Reformed doctrine has always emphasized the equality of ministers as understood in the Scottish Presbyterian Church. These ministers all serve according to Christ’s word given to the apostles and therefore derive all of their authority from Christ, the Head of the Church. The Presbyterian minister’s service to Christ is “declarative” in declaring
Christ’s will from his Word. Scottish minister David Dickson said that he regarded the calling of the Apostles as proof of the concern of Jesus “to provide ministers for his Church,” and was explicit that ministers “do not derive their power and authority from any under heaven, but from Christ.”[15]

When Christ established his Church during his ministry, he also gave his Spirit to be with his church until the “end of the age” following his resurrection from the dead (Mt. 28:18ff). He gave his Spirit to the apostles that he had chosen himself to write his words and instructions to equip the saints until his return. As Ephesians 4 teaches, upon Christ’s ascension, he gave gifts unto men for the unifying and the building-up of his church. To this universal, visible church, with the oracles and institutions committed to it, Christ has given the ministry for the purpose of the gathering together and perfecting of the saints among men, to the end of the world. And as this ministry is one, so also the Church is one.[16]

In the Book of Acts (2:42), there is a devotion to the apostles’ teaching from the very beginning of the Church. In Ephesians (2:20), the Apostle Paul teaches that the Church is God’s household, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” These verses show that to be “apostolic” is to continue to adhere to the original foundation, the apostolic gospel and teachings.[17] The attributes of “apostolicity” and “unity” necessarily belong together: there is one apostolic foundation and one church that teaches the doctrines of the apostles.

Concerning the Head and the unity of the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith states: “There is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.”[18] Christ appointed the apostles to ordain those after them who would continue the work of the Church.[19] Christ, by his authority, established not only the Kingdom of God internally, within men’s hearts, but established a visible government in elders and deacons to serve him and his people in His Church. Christ established the government to rule his church by his Word perpetually until he returns again for his saints. In fact, when the Apostle Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, established churches, his first priority was to establish elders and deacons. (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1; cf. Acts 15). James Bannerman wrote: “In every place, the first object of the Apostles was to provide for the continuance of the ministry.”[20] This Biblical church government and the important truth of apostolic perpetuity was regained in the Reformation of the 16th century, particularly in Scotland.

The Reformation had rejected the doctrine of a personal succession from the apostles, rather the succession was in apostolic doctrine, the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” through the Apostles (cf. Jude 3). John Knox wrote in 1566 that the purpose of the Reformation was the
restoration of ‘the reverend face of the primitive and apostolic church’, and the Church of Scotland has always believed itself continuous with the Church of the first Christians, and based upon the testimony of the Apostles, Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.[21] Additionally, Knox believed that the Church of Scotland was “able to show the succession of our Kirk directly and lawfully to have flowed from the Apostles.”[22] In the mind of the Scottish Reformers, there was no “new” church that had been established with the Reformation, only the one, holy, apostolic church that Christ had been restored. John T. McNeill wrote:

The founders of Protestantism were intent not only upon a revival of personal piety; it was their aim also to reshape the corporate forms of religion. They did not go about converting individuals to the Protestant faith only to leave them in a state of lonely detachment; they labored to rebuild the church and felt themselves highly called to be the agents of its restoration. It was their unaltering belief that the Holy Catholic Church had been instituted by God for the nurture and fellowship of souls and that there is ‘no ordinary possibility of salvation.’ Accordingly the theologians of the Reformation laid emphasis upon the nature and function of the church and sought to understand and explain it. Ecclesiology is a prominent and an essential part of their theology.[23]

It was the belief of the Reformers that the Roman Catholic Church had ceased to teach the only and true word of God that Christ had given for the ruling of his church and people.[24] Rome had established in a lineal succession of bishops, the papacy, or the vicar of Christ upon the earth. Rome contended that since the confirmation of St. Peter in Matthew 16:18 as “the Rock” that there was a continuous and personal succession of bishops from St. Peter that ruled Christ’s church. The Reformers wanted to go back to the foundational, inscripturated word of God in order to biblically understand the true authority of Christ alone as the Head of the Church. Christ’s headship implied the perpetuity of his church. As Jesus said himself: “The gates of hell shall never prevail against the Church.” According to Scottish Theologians, because there was only one church and because Christ the King ruled this church, the perpetuity of the government, as well as the doctrine would continue until the King returned for his people. The Larger Catechism reflects this theological truth when it answers question 63, What are the special privileges of the visible Church?

The visible church hath the privilege of being under God’s special care and government; of being protected and preserved in all ages, notwithstanding the opposition of all enemies; and of enjoying communion of saints, the ordinary means of salvation, and offers of graces by Christ to all the members of it in the ministry of the gospel…[25]

III. “One Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church”

During the Reformation, the four biblical attributes of the Church were reaffirmed: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. Although the four attributes were reaffirmed there was a
need in the Reformation to additionally define the true church according to the apostolic foundation. Calvin wrote in his Institutes of the Christian Religion: “The Church is “catholic,” or “universal,” because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder [cf. 1 Cor. 1:13]—which cannot happen!”[26]

The verity of Apostolic succession in the Scottish church is not to be understood as lineal, through the hierarchy of bishops or prelacy, who descend from St. Peter. Rather, the doctrine of the apostolic succession in Scottish theology should be understood as based upon the reality of Christ the head, and the faithful teaching of the apostles in the Word of God that is passed down from succeeding generations. The Scotch found the principle of Catholicity and unity in the Headship of Christ as we considered in the previous section.[27]

As the Westminster Confession of Faith states, “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, 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.”[28]

Rome charged all the Reformers with breaking from the one true, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. In response to their charges, the Reformers did not reject the Nicene attributes of the church. What they explicitly rejected was the way the attributes of the Church had been tied or associated with the institutional papacy. In other words, finding the church was not a matter of locating the pope, but locating specific marks of apostolicity. These marks of the Church, or notae ecclesiae, were to substantiate the four attributes of the church that had been held since Nicea in the early fourth century.[29]

For Scottish theologians, the succession from the apostles was ultimately faithfulness to the three marks of the church: The ministry of the word,[30] the right administration of the sacraments,[31] and church discipline.[32] It was these three marks that the Reformers set as the proper test of determining how the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” was to be identified. It was these “marks” that defined the church of Christ as related to him in service both theologically and functionally. As Calvin had said in his Institutes, when he spoke of the true marks of the visible church: “From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes. Wherever 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].”[33]

Because of the Sole Headship of Christ in the Church, the doctrinal succession back to the apostles was through fidelity to the Word of God, the apostolic commission to preach; the necessity for the right preaching of the Word and the administration of the two Gospel Sacraments. All of these lie behind the Ministry of the Word in the Church which is One, Holy,
Catholic and Apostolic.[34] For Scottish Presbyterians, there is an intimate connection between
the apostolic word and the apostolic preaching of the word of God.[35] Faithful adherence to the
apostolic preaching of the apostolic word is truly biblical apostolic succession in Christ’s
Church. In chapter 18 of the Scots Confession, the Scottish doctrine of the Church is placed in
contrast to the false and apostate Church of Rome. The three marks of the true church are listed
in the Confession to clearly define what the Scots mean by the Church: the pure preaching of the
gospel, right administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline.

In a message of The Superintendents, Ministers, and Commissioners of the Churches
Reformed within the Realme of Scotland, this statement was written in December 1565:

The ministers of Jesus Christ have an office without comparison more excellent than that of
Jewish priests and Levites, for they bring us the glad tidings of salvation, by the two-edged
sword of Goddes worde, which is mighty in operation; they slay that old man that every fightes
against God, they make his thought potent to his own confusion that the new man of God may
take lyfe. They wash the soules with the bloode of Jesus Christe which abundantly drops from
their lips...If we think that all these things may be due without ministers or without preaching,
we utterly deceyve ourselves. For the same order that God hath observed since that He hath
collected His visible Church, His will shall be observed so long as it continueth upon the face of
the earth.[36]

The marks of the church that were biblical and visibly manifested were for the building of
Christ’s church and were based upon apostolic doctrine. As Samuel Rutherford said in Due
Right of Presbyteries, he claimed that the Church of Scotland recognizes only succession to the
true and apostolic doctrine. The apostolic succession taught in the Scottish Church was defined
by Rutherford (as it was defined by Knox before him) as defined in the ministry of the apostles,
rather than in the minister himself, such as a Bishop. It was the office of ministry, rather than the
person in the office of ministry that succeeded from the apostles.[37] The Church of Rome
makes the ministry the end, and the church the means; Protestants reverse the order, and make
the ministry the means, and the church the end.[38] Principal Story wrote concerning the
Scottish Reformation in contrast to Roman Catholicism of the 16th century:

I showed you...that the threefold order of bishop, priest and deacon is no part of the constitution
of the apostolic church; that the only two orders recognized in the New Testament are those of
the elder or overseer and the deacon, that the episcopate emerged from the presbyterate, in post-
apostolic times, by a natural evolution; and that the congregational episcopacy of the early
Church was essentially different from the diocesan episcopacy of the medieval. Further, I
pointed out that the catholicity and apostolicity of a Church could not depend on its owning a
certain mode of government; but on its spirit and character, its holding the true faith, and
possessing an orderly and properly authenticated ministry.[39]
The divines of Scotland believed that the ministry exists for the Church, not that the Church exists for the ministry, contra Rome. According to the Scottish divines, the ministry is a gift of the ascended Christ to his Church according to the teaching in Ephesians chapter 4. The Westminster Confession of Faith says: “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: and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.”[40] Their doctrine taught: “It is from the ministry that any man receives ordination, and the power bestowed is the same as that of those who confer it, and is not limited by the limitations of those who constitute the sphere to which he is immediately designed.”[41] We shall now consider the Scots’ understanding of the office of presbyter or minister in the Scottish Church, including the importance of an ordained ministry in the Church.

IV. The Ministry of Word and Sacrament

As we learn from Ephesians 4:8, 10-11, the ministry of Word and Sacrament was committed to a body of men, called the apostles by the Lord Jesus Christ himself: “‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.’…He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he who gave…some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service.” With the end of the apostolic age came the end of the apostolic office, but the apostolic teaching or doctrine preserved in the ministry continues as it is faithful to the deposit of apostolic teaching in the inscripturated Word. C. H. Burn-Murdoch defines the relationship between the ministry and apostolic succession in the Scottish Church:

The principle of apostolic succession involves the belief that the sacred office of ministry is a stewardship, appointed for the Church by its Head, in which stewardship the Apostles were the first generation. (It was to be a perpetual office). It involves the belief that this office of stewardship in the visible Church is a visible office, demanding, for its due exercise, certainty of recognition by the other members of the Church: that under Divine guidance the first generation of stewards appointed other stewards to come after them, with the visible and recognizable commission of the laying on of their hands with prayer.[42]

The ministry is the stewardship of the Word of God that is perpetual. The Minister of the Word is the ordained officer of the Church in which Christ alone is King and Head; his Commission is from Christ; he ministers in Christ’s Name and is answerable to Him, his Lord. [43] These men in turn ordained others to this office. In other words, The Church cannot ordain anyone to the ministry without at the same time ordaining him to the power of ordaining. H. Burn Murdoch wrote that “Presbyter and ‘minister’ are synonyms for a church officer who is empowered to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments; to such presbyters there belongs, therefore, ‘jure divino’, the necessary power to ordain others for the same sacred function.[44]
George Hill has defined the doctrine of apostolic succession in the Scottish Church in his Lectures in Divinity: “The right of performing all the ministerial function which were intended to be perpetual in the Christian Church is conceived to be conveyed by the act of ordination, so that every person who is ordained is as much a successor of the Apostles as any teacher of religion can be.” [45] James Walker defined apostolic succession in the Scottish Church as “those who were ordained by apostles to the ministerial office were endowed with the authority to ordain others to that office, and so to continue the succession—that ordinarily neither the possession of the needed gifts, nor the call of the people, superseded the solemn setting apart of the Presbytery.” [46]

The Scottish Church has only recognized those who are ordained to be appointed by God for the preaching of the Word and the administering of the Sacraments. The Form of Church Government accepted by the Scottish Church in the 17th century said:

No man ought to take upon him the office of a minister of the word without a lawful calling. Ordination is always to be continued in the church. Ordination is the solemn setting apart of a person to some publick church office. Every minister of the word is to be ordained by imposition of hands, and prayer, with fasting, by those preaching presbyters to whom it doth belong.…He that is to be ordained minister, must be duly qualified, both for life and ministerial abilities, according to the rules of the apostle. [47]

Additionally, the Second Book of Discipline (1578) used in the Scottish Church speaks of a “double call” to the ministry: “called of God and duly elected by men”; “Besides the calling of God, and inward testimony of a good conscience, a minister has the lawful approbation and outward judgment of men.” [48]

This ordination is given with divine authority, but the authority comes from Christ himself, the Head of the Church. For instance, a Scottish minister is not a medium of grace whereby because he has laid hands on a candidate, the candidate is therefore equipped for the office. Rather, Christ has established the laying on of hands as the proper channel whereby men are tested and submitted to authority in his visible government in the church, and the call or ordination is from Christ himself. The Presbytery merely recognizes the call and the gifts that Christ himself has already given to the candidate; this is true ordination.

Carnegie Simpson points out: “…The Church cannot ‘make’ a man a minister of Christ. What it can do is to recognize him as one called of Christ, and, then place him in due ordo in the visible Church.” [49] The Scottish doctrine of “succession” has nothing sacramental in the idea of order, but Presbyterian ordination is installation into an office. [50] The ordained Minister of the Word administers the sacraments and these ministers have authority to ordain others to the Ministry. This ministry is derived in other words “from above” (or from Christ in heaven) rather
than “from below” that is, from the people. It is apostolic in character and function. The Form of Church Government wrote in Touching the Power of Ordination: “Ordination is the act of a presbytery. The power of ordering the whole work of ordination is in the whole presbytery…”[51]

Some have argued because of the great emphasis on the Reformed ordained Minister of the Word, that he is merely an “old priest writ large”. This statement meaning that the ministry has been elevated to a very high status in the Scottish Church. However, it should be remembered that it is the office and the message which are elevated and revered, not the office-holder or the minister himself. Not the minister, but the Ministry of the Word is given a place of honor.

This is the emphasis placed on apostolic succession in Scottish theology since the Reformation, because this ordination has been passed down from the apostles. Lord Balfour of Burleigh wrote in Perpetua successio presbyterorum in 1911: “The order of Presbyters is the one essential ministry within the Catholic Church, through which, and from the time of the Apostles, the full ministry of the Word and Sacraments has been transmitted throughout the Catholic Church in a regular and valid succession…” Again, the doctrine concerns the proper teaching of the Word and the Sacraments, it is the marks of the church that reveal a true church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Form of Presbyterial Church Government (1645) said: “The pastor is an ordinary and perpetual office in the Church, prophesying of the time of the gospel.”[52] The candidate to be ordained must show that he is capable and gifted to rightfully preach the Word and to serve Christ’s people. This efficacy of ordination is similar to the efficacy of the sacraments. The ordination of other faithful men do not make the ordination efficacious, or inefficacious in the case of Rome or other false churches, but the ordination is efficacious because Christ has gifted particular men for the task.

In the Reformation, the Scottish church did not re-ordain those who had been ordained priests in Rome. The ordination by priests of Rome was not invalid just because the minister himself was ordained in Rome. This gave authority and established the fact that the Reformers themselves were not schismatics or sectarians but were ordained ministers who faithfully returned to the teaching of the apostles revealed in Holy Scripture. Samuel Rutherford said concerning the Reformer’s ordination by Rome in Due Right of Presbyteries: “Though Luther and Zwingli had their whole calling from the Pope and his clergy, yet think we not that calling no calling, but that it hath that which essentially constituteth a minister.”[53] By the mid-seventeenth century, the doctrine of apostolic succession had come to be strongly maintained by Presbyterians. H. Burn-Murdoch wrote:

They [Scottish Presbyterians] held that our Lord’s promises were a pledge that the ministry could never fail; that ordination makes the minister as Baptism makes the member of the Church; that, notwithstanding the corruption of Rome, her ordination was no less valid than her baptism, and
that if this were not so, the continuity [emphasis mine] of the visible church would be destroyed.”[54]

It is most admirable and noble how the Scottish Reformers held a high and biblical doctrine of the Church in the face of Rome and her corruptions. For instance, concerning the Scot’s view of Rome’s baptism, they never denied that it was illegitimate. The Scottish Divines did not treat Rome’s baptism as invalid, Rome was a branch of the Church of Christ, not withstanding her manifold and grievous corruptions. Although Rome had many corruptions of the apostolic faith, it never ceased to have true members who were faithful to the apostolic teaching and ministry.[55] James MacPherson wrote:

They [the Scottish ministers] recognized too that in all ages [emphasis mine] there were in the Romish Church representatives of evangelical truth, whose successors they claimed to be; they did not separate from Rome’s baptism, nor even from its ordination of pastors according to the substance of the act, nor yet from the articles of the Apostle’s Creed, nor from the contents of the Old and New Testaments, but only from the false interpretation of those who made themselves lords over the faith and consciences of men.[56]

The Scottish Reformers did not want to break from the one church Christ had established, they wanted as the earlier Reformers, to reform the corruptions within the Church herself.

V. Schism and Independency

Because of the Scottish Church’s high regard for ordination to the ministry. Under most circumstances, they were against those who would divide from the church, or attempt to raise up ministers for congregations who were not authorized by the Scottish Church itself. Particularly those who would attempt to raise themselves up for the task of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments, they found to be unbiblical.[57] In Scottish theology, there is only one church according to Scripture. This one church may be manifested in differing communions because it is an imperfect church. Nevertheless, the one church must do all that is in its power to remain united in apostolic doctrine and ordination of ministers to the office.

The Scottish Church that was very much influenced by John Calvin held to his same views concerning separation from the one catholic and apostolic church. John Calvin wrote in his Institutes: “Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions.”[58] John Knox wrote as well concerning the dangers of schism and separation. In a letter to Scotland, he condemned those who “have separated themselves, from the society and communion of their brethren, in sects damnable; being bold to
affirm, that among us there is not true kirk…” Later, in his 1560 predestination treatise, he castigated the Anabaptists for seceding from the Church.[59]

James Walker gave examples of the Scottish Church’s dedication to the one apostolic church during the time of the Cameronians. These Scottish “Covenanter”s were without a minister and they waited on one to be trained and sent by ordination to them. They even went without the sacraments for a season.[60] They held the ordination and unity of apostolic office very highly, and even in this extreme and irregular situation, they showed in their actions that they were dedicated to the one Church Christ had established. There is a high regard for the ministerial office and therefore no man is at liberty to “ordain” himself to the task. If Christ has called a man, he will also properly ordain them within the visible government he has established in the church.

The importance of the one apostolic Church of Scotland can be noticed early in the Scottish Church. This stress on the one apostolic Church was directed against both sectarians and independents. John Cameron (1577-1625), Professor at Glasgow, wrote his Prelectiones, and the first volume was concerning De Ecclesia where he wrote against the Independents who broke from the church. Robert Baillie (1602-1662) wrote, A Dissuasive from the Errors of the Time in mid 17th century, directed mainly against the Independents and Sectaries. During the same time period in the seventeenth century, George Gillespie (1613-1648) wrote Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland in 1641, where he defended Presbyterianism against Independency. Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) wrote A Peaceable and Temperate Plea for Paul’s Presbytery in Scotland in 1642, which was directed against independents and separatists. Later in 1644, he wrote Due Right of Presbyteries; or, a Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland against congregational independency. William Wilson (1690-1740) wrote in the early 18th century on the horrors of schism in A Defense of the Reformed Principles of the Church of Scotland:

“…It is one thing to depart from communion with a particular church on account of her corruptions, and another thing to unchurch that same particular church…The seceding ministers are neither afraid nor ashamed to own that they have made a Secession from the present Judicatories of this National Church; but they refuse that they have ever seceded from the Communion of the Church of Scotland, or that they have made any kind of separation from her.[61]

All of these examples, particularly in the seventeenth century, a generation after the Reformation of the Church of Scotland, demonstrate the focus of these Scottish divines were consistently on remaining in the one true and Apostolic Church. There was to be no separation from the true Church, this was just as evil as the false teaching in the Roman church. The many
writings on these topics during this period flowed from the great importance of the one Church which Christ had established, founded upon the apostles and the prophets (Eph. 2:20).

The Scottish Church answered the charges of schism made by the Roman Church by probing that to break away from the Church of Rome was not schism or separation, just because Rome had ceased to be a true church. James MacPherson wrote: “[Scottish Protestants] unchurched no community which preaches Christ, not even Rome which unchurched them, nor the Separatists who unchurched them both.”[62] Samuel Rutherford said concerning this: “Rome made the separation from the Reformed Churches and not we from them, as the rotten wall maketh the schism in the house, when the house standeth still and the rotten wall falleth.”[63]

VI. Contrasted to Roman Catholic Apostolic Succession

The differences between the Scottish doctrine of apostolic succession and the lineal succession affirmed in the Roman Catholic Church are found in the sixteenth and eighteenth chapter of The Scots Confession of 1560.

There is an importance difference between the doctrine of apostolic succession understood in Scottish Theology and that affirmed in Roman Catholicism. James Bannerman wrote: There is a vast difference between the unbroken ecclesiastical descent of the order, as an order, and the unbroken ecclesiastical descent of individuals belonging to the order, as individuals…the office of the ministry, as an office, has existed without interruptions from the days of the Apostles to the present time, and that the office has been filled from age to age by men ordained and set apart to its duties.[64]

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), it declares: The Church is apostolic because ‘she is founded on the apostles’ and ‘continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ’s return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, ‘by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church’s supreme pastor.’[65]

R. H. Story lectured on the difference between Rome’s doctrine and the Scottish Church’s doctrine in the Baird Lecture in 1897. He wrote: The Church of Rome traces back an unbroken series of occupants of the episcopal chair in the so-called Apostolic See of Rome, a series going back to St. Peter and to the commission from the lips of Jesus Christ as personally applied to St. Peter…Regular ministry is found only in attachment to this chair. This Roman position is historically inconclusive, exegetically difficult to maintain, and also spiritually unsound in suggesting that grace is a substance to be channeled along a particular formal and linear succession rather than being God himself operating in the realm of persons.[66]
In other words, Rome’s focus is upon the ministers, more than upon the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. The ministry was given by Christ to his Church to build it up in unity and to nourish it through Word and Sacrament until he returned to renew all things. The ministry exists because Christ has established his Church. Again, the Scottish Church elevates the ministry of the Word rather than the mere ministers of the Word.[67] It is in this faithful succession, or fidelity to the Word of God preached and the sacraments rightly administered, that the Church has apostolic faith, function, and succession.

VII. Conclusion

Our study has attempted to define and clarify the Scottish doctrine of “Apostolic Succession.” There is only one Head of the Church who has established his Church as witness to his Kingdom until he returns. In this one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, he has given the ordained ministry. No matter how many years separate us from the time of Christ, ministers in the church of Christ must always be mindful of being faithful to the apostolic doctrine and practice. That is, they must remember not only the four biblical attributes of the church of Christ, but more importantly strive to retain the three apostolic marks that identify a true church in this world.

True apostolic succession is faithfulness in ministry to the deposited truth given to, and preserved for us in the Holy Scriptures. We must be aware of the erroneous doctrine of prelatic forms of apostolic succession and affirm the biblical doctrine of apostolic succession found in the office of the ministry and not the minister himself. This is the rich and enduring legacy that the Scottish Church and Reformation has given to the Presbyterian churches located universally around the world. Stuart Louden wrote:

Against any kind of formal, linear succession, whether through bishops or even through presbyters, the Reformed Church affirms the continued life of the one Body of Christ, and places the emphasis on spiritual succession, especially in doctrine and faith. Apostolic doctrine and practice give the true basis for claiming apostolic succession. The Word of God, ever found within the living Body of Christ, is the vital link with the apostles. Continuity in the Church is secured and preserved by a Ministry of the Word, properly constituted, doctrinally sound and validly ordained.[68]

In other words, as Professor David Wright has written, the term Apostolic succession better communicates the fidelity to truth than a linear succession.[69] This must be understood from the beginning of any exploration of Scottish Ecclesiology. This fidelity is understood ultimately as obedience to apostolic truth contained in the Holy Scriptures and faithfulness to the apostolic command to preach the gospel to every creature. Another way of saying this is that the Church remains apostolic today as long as it is a Bible and missionary church. R. Stuart Louden wrote: “Real ‘apostolic succession’ is to be traced at this point, rather than in the realm of particular church structures and patterns of ministry.”[70] Prof. R. H. Story defines the apostolic ministry
that is continued in the Scottish church as: “A ministry exercised in the Spirit and example of the first planters of Christianity, and transmitted from them to us in an orderly and recognizable succession.”[71]

The maintaining of the doctrine of the apostles was much more important to the Scottish Church than merely maintaining a lineal succession. G. D. Henderson wrote concerning this:

The Scottish position has shown something of the same attention [as Calvin] to adherence to apostolic doctrine as the test of succession. John Knox was not interested in the lineal succession from the Apostles in that ‘we neither admit doctrine, rite or ceremony which by their writings we find not authorized’.[72]

Carnegie Simpson in his book Evangelical Church Catholic has written concerning the lineal succession of the person of a bishop in the church:

For a man to stake the validity of his ministry on this succession, whether episcopal or presbyteral, is simply to give it into the region of the historically insecure. No human being can guarantee that the chain has been kept intact all through the centuries, and the possible errors and deceptions are incalculable… I base it [the validity of my ministry] on what is certain—on, first, the vocation of Christ Himself, and on, secondly, the authorisation of the living Church, the existence of which is indisputable, and, moreover, the continuity of which the apostolic days is beyond any historical cavil.[73]

It is important for our Presbyterian Churches today, with many divisions and strife, to retain the Scottish Church’s doctrine of apostolic succession. It is imperative that we remember the Kingship of Christ, the Head of the Church and that he has given gifts to his church for its perpetual growth until he returns. By understanding this doctrine in Scottish Theology, it would hopefully return us to a high view of preaching and the ministry as well as the Church. Preaching should be apostolic in character. That is, it should preach not man, nor man’s wisdom, but the Word of the resurrected and ascended Savior as the hope for all the world. The ministry is apostolic in that there is a great burden on ordained men who have been called by God to not only rightly divide God’s word, but to administer the sacraments and discipline in the Church. The ordained minister must be called by God and he should be a servant of all.

Principal Story has said in the Baird Lectures: “The value and efficacy of a ministry cannot depend on its form and method, so much as on its character and spirit…The succession, which binds the life of the Church age after age into one unbroken unity, is not that of the members of an ecclesiastical order, but of these who, in virtue of their spiritual oneness with the Father, have been in their day and generation ‘the friends of God’.”[74]
This position of apostolic succession in the Scottish Church was maintained from Calvin, through Knox and the Scots Confession, even up to the time of Samuel Rutherford where this doctrine was much more clearly articulated. Rutherford claimed that the Church of Scotland recognizes only succession to the true and apostolic doctrine in his work Due Right of Presbyteries.[75] G. D. Henderson wrote:

The Reformers were antagonistic to the hierarchical system which seemed to them to have developed into a mass of abuses, and in the excitement of the revolution they were consequently inclined to go far in order to be rid of it. But there was nothing objectionable to them in the idea of continuity, so long as it did not imply that Reformed clergy inherited the sad infirmities of their predecessors. Calvin wrote: ‘We deny not that there has been an uninterrupted succession of the Church from the beginning of the Gospel to our day’. The ‘Scots Confession’ and similar documents refer to continuous Church life down through the centuries.[76]

Our Lord’s calling, training and commissioning of the Apostles is the foundation of the Ministry. The Reformed Churches, particularly the Scottish Church, have always regarded the Church’s Ministry as standing in the succession of the apostles. Controversies with other branches of the Church Catholic and controversies within the Reformed Church itself have caused divergent interpretations of what is meant by Apostolic Succession.[77]

Since the office is apostolic in origin, the man in the office has the great responsibility of preaching and teaching apostolic doctrine found in the Word of God. As Paul told his disciple Timothy, we are to guard the deposit that was given to us, guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is just that a deposit that has been continuously handed down to us in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. For the church to be anything other than apostolic is to be a different Church than the one Christ established founded on the apostles and their authority. To have succession from any other than the apostles is to be in an office without authority and to be in a church without any historical connections to the foundation that was once and for all laid by Jesus Christ himself. His promise to the apostles is still the promise to us today: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

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Scripture we should speak of ‘the church’ and conceive of it as that visible entity that exists and functions in accord with the institution of Christ as its Head, the church that is the body of Christ indwelt and directed by the Holy Spirit, consisting of those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, manifested in the congregations of the faithful, and finally the church glorious, holy and without blemish.” Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. I (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint, 1989, 236.

[16] MacPherson, 94.
[24] John Calvin wrote in Book IV of his Institutes: “We deny the titles of successors of the apostles to those who have abandoned their faith and doctrine…If the Church resides in the successors of the Apostles, let us search for successors among those who have faithfully handed down their doctrine to posterity.” Quoted in G. D. Henderson, Church and Ministry, 144.
[32] cf. Matthew 18:17; Acts 20:28ff; Romans 16:17ff; 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 14:33, 40; Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 1:20; Titus 3:10.
[33] John Calvin, Institutes, IV.i.9. Both the Geneva Confession of 1556 and the Scots Confession of 1560 listed the three marks of the pure preaching of God’s Word, the right administration of the sacraments and ecclesiastical discipline. The preaching of the Word is necessary for the being of the Church as Berkhof taught: “Strictly speaking, it may be said that the true preaching of the Word and its recognition as the standard of doctrine and life, is the one mark of the Church. Without it there is no Church, and it determines the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of Church Discipline.” L. Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 577.
[35] Louden wrote: “Calvin sees the true succession to lie in the commission to preach and to administer the sacraments. Those who rightly fulfill that commission within the visible Church are the true spiritual successors of the apostles.” Institutes, IV.iii.6, quoted in “The Ministry of the Word,” 166.
[36] The Superintendents, Ministers, and Commissioners of the Churches Reformed with the Realme of Scotland…, 164.
[37] Calvin wrote concerning ordination and ministry: “…We must here remember that whatever authority and dignity the Spirit in Scripture accords to either priests or prophets, or apostles, or successors of apostles, it is wholly given not to the men personally, but to the ministry to which they have been appointed; or (to speak more briefly) to the Word, whose ministry has been entrusted to them. For if we examine them all in order, we shall not find that they have been endowed with any authority to teach or to answer, except in the name and Word of the Lord.” Institutes, IV.viii.2.
[41] Cunningham, 100.
[45] Quoted in Henderson, Church and Ministry, 161.
The Scottish Church’s position on the Church was built upon Calvin’s teaching in his Institutes in Book IV. It is interesting to point out that while Calvin repudiated the papacy as an institution, he was still willing to recognize the presence of God’s people in the Roman Church. He writes in the Institutes, IV.iii.12: “I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain…But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church.”

“No man ought to take upon him the office of a minister of the word without a lawful calling.” The Form of Church Government: “Touching the Doctrine of Ordination.”


James MacPherson, 125.


R. Stuart Louden, The True Face of the Kirk: An Examination of the Ethos and Traditions of the Church of Scotland, 14. He wrote further: “Apostolicity and catholicity, along with unity, are the attributes by which the true face of the Kirk is exhibited, and the Church of Scotland claims to be apostolic and catholic in its mission, doctrine, and practice. The essential apostolic foundation of the Church lies in its obedience to its mission.”
[75] Samuel Rutherford, Due Right of Presbyteries, 189.
[76] Henderson, Church and Ministry, 152.