

The Westminster Assembly (1643-1649): A Brief Historical Summary

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A Century of Struggle for Reformation in Britain

To understand the setting of the Westminster Assembly we must go back more than a century in English history and review key events. King Henry VIII was no true champion of Reformed theology. He had himself written against Luther (1521) and for it was honored by the Roman Catholic Pope. Nevertheless, in 1534, when the Pope would not sanction the divorce from Catherine which Henry sought in order to marry Anne Boleyn, Henry proclaimed himself head of the church of England. This brought a political break with Roman Catholicism, but not a theological one. Furthermore, England's break with Rome did not liberate the church to operate under the auspices of its own courts, but simply transferred authority over it from a foreign Pope to the domestic King (or state) - an arrangement called "Erastianism."

Henry's son, Edward VI, came to the throne in 1547. Under his reign the Calvinistic leaders in church and university (Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer, Bucer) effectively introduced Reformed doctrine into England. However, in 1553 Mary Tudor ("bloody Mary"), an intolerant Romanist, became Queen. During her reign allegiance to the Pope was restored and the Protestant leaders (more than 200) were burned at the stake. Her half-sister, Elizabeth (daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn), became Queen in 1558, disliking both the Romanists (for denying her legitimacy) and the Calvinists (for criticizing her episcopacy). Out of political expediency she restored Protestantism - with an episcopalian government and liturgy - to England; during her reign the "Thirty-Nine Articles" (basically Calvinistic) were formulated as a doctrinal basis for the English church. Elizabeth's cousin was Mary, Queen of Scots, a Roman Catholic who unsuccessfully opposed the reform of the Scottish church by John Knox. A year before the English defeat of the Spanish Armada, during the Spanish (hence Romanist) threat to England, Elizabeth had Mary executed in Scotland.

Nevertheless, Mary's son - James VI of Scotland - came to the throne of the united kingdoms upon the death of Elizabeth in 1603; his new title became James I of England. He is best known for the "King James Bible," a translation which he authorized in 1611. James held to the "divine right of kings" and insisted that episcopal government in the church was essential to his royal authority (declaring "No bishop, no king"). Accordingly, he disdained the Puritans for their opposition to episcopacy (which James tried to impose on Scotland), for their demand to rid England more thoroughly of Romanism, and for their sabbath strictures. Throughout his reign he experienced tension with the English Parliament, especially over attempted foreign treaties involving

entanglements or favors for Roman Catholics. At his death in 1625, his son - Charles I - assumed rule over the united kingdoms.

Charles was even worse than his father, regarding himself as above the law and incapable of error. He appointed William Laud as archbishop, a man who favored Romanism and hated Calvinism, bitterly persecuting the Puritans - so much so that many emigrated (some to America). Many in the English Parliament, however, were sympathetic to the Puritan party in the church. In 1629 Charles dared to dissolve the English Parliament and governed without it until 1640. His unpopularity was intensified by two infamous courts: the Star Chamber (civil) and the High Commission (ecclesiastical). In these days and circumstances it became increasingly clear that the issue of royal absolutism had to be fought on both sides, ecclesiastical (led by the Puritans) and civil (led by the Parliament). English civil liberty and reform would of necessity go hand and hand with ecclesiastical liberty and reform.

Under the earlier reforming efforts of Knox, the church in Scotland had come to be governed by representative courts (presbyteries) which exercised a spiritual jurisdiction independent of civil rulers. However, in 1637 Charles tried to personally impose, without any warrant from the Scottish presbyteries, episcopacy and a new prayer book (with strong Roman Catholic elements) upon the church of Scotland - leading Jennie Geddes to throw her milking stool at the bishop in the Edinburgh church. All of Scotland was prompted by the intrusions of Charles to sign a "National Covenant" (1638), an oath to maintain the cause of their religious liberty and presbyterian polity. When the General Assembly of the Scottish church met in November, Charles ordered it to disband; instead, led by Alexander Henderson, the Scottish church repudiated episcopacy altogether. Scotland prepared to resist the military campaign threatened by Charles.

The English Civil War (or "Puritan Revolution")

War broke out between Scotland and England in 1639, compelling Charles to reconvene Parliament in April, 1640, to raise funds. This parliamentary assembly met less than a month (the "short Parliament"); it refused the king's request until he would address their grievances, so he dissolved Parliament. After a strategic loss to the Scottish army, however, Charles demanded Parliament to reconvene in November (the "long Parliament"), and found to his dismay that the House of Commons was now determined to take the government of England into its own hands. Parliament impeached and imprisoned the heads of the Star Chamber and High Commission; it passed a law forbidding the king to dissolve Parliament. Both sides (king and Parliament) now raised troops and prepared for open military conflict with each other. In 1642 Charles was compelled to flee London, and civil war erupted: Anglicans and Romanists sided with the king, while most in the parliamentary party were aligned with the Puritans (whether of presbyterian or separatist variety).

In the midst of this conflict with the King, Parliament summoned the Westminster Assembly. In January of 1643 Parliament had finally abolished the episcopal system of government and its liturgical trappings in the English church. In May and June respectively, the Commons and the Lords enacted a bill authorizing 121 of the most godly and theologically astute men of England (called "divines") to assemble on July 1 at Westminster Abbey for the stated purpose to advise Parliament on the reformation of the liturgy, discipline and government of the church of England, as well as the vindication and clarification of its doctrine. (It should be noted that the assembly was in no way a court of the church, being entirely a creation of the Parliament and having no independent power.) Now, during the course of that same summer of 1643, the Parliamentary army suffered devastating setbacks, and it became urgent for Parliament to secure the assistance of Scotland in the war against the King's forces. The English Parliament thus entered into an alliance with the Scottish rebels, known as "The Solemn League and Covenant." Its terms called for an endeavor to bring the religion of England, Scotland and Ireland into uniformity, the "preservation" of Reformed doctrine, worship, and government in Scotland, and the "reformation" of the English church "according to the word of God and the example of the best reformed churches." This meant the recognition of presbyterianism as the proper form of church government throughout the realm.

After suffering initial defeats, the Parliamentary army was reorganized in 1644 (as the "New Model") under Oliver Cromwell, leading to crucial victories over the king's forces at Marston Moor and Naseby. In late Spring, 1646, the King was compelled to surrender. Unfortunately, though, dissension developed within the parliamentary party (the Puritans) between the presbyterians and the separatists. The former would permit Charles to return as a very limited monarch, with the Reformed faith and presbyterian government in the church of England; the latter wanted nothing further to do with Charles, favored independent (or congregational) church government, and insisted upon complete civil toleration for it. Although the presbyterians were in the majority (both in Parliament and among London's citizens), the separatists had a determined leader, Cromwell, who was backed up with the force of military might. The Parliament and the army quarreled. When the Parliament and the King finally came to terms (May 12, 1647), the army forcibly intervened and seized the King (June 3). The army demanded that eleven presbyterian leaders in the House of Commons be ejected, and when the citizens of London protested, the army marched upon the city and took possession of it (August 7). The King escaped to the isle of Wight.

Attempting to take advantage of the split between Parliament (the presbyterians) and Cromwell's army (the separatist-independents), King Charles negotiated with the Scots for support, promising now to acknowledge presbyterianism, at least for a time. Scotland was duly upset with the developments in London, for the army's resistance to Parliament's plan to establish presbyterian government in the church was nothing less than a repudiation of the Solemn League and Covenant, on the basis of which the Scottish army had recently contributed its help to the English. In April, 1648, King Charles again went to war with England; the Scots crossed the border and there were royalist insurrections throughout the country. Cromwell easily and quickly suppressed the uprising, and the King was defeated again (by August). Cromwell now took political matters into his own hands.

In December, 1648, Cromwell excluded 143 presbyterians from the House of Commons by military force ("Pride's Purge"), leaving a "Rump Parliament" (of about 60 members) who then followed his wishes and abolished the monarchy. Charles was tried for treason and, in January, 1649, was beheaded. In the ensuing reorganization of the state as a "Commonwealth" Cromwell dismissed the House of Lords and, when the "Rump Parliament" exasperated him, in 1653 he marched troops into it to disperse its members. A virtual dictatorship was then established with a constitution that stipulated Cromwell would be "Lord Protector" for life (and his office to be hereditary). England had sadly come full circle from a tyrannical king (under episcopacy) to a despotic *protector* (under independency). Scotland recognized Charles II (son of the executed king) as king of Scotland, and Ireland revolted against Cromwell. Cromwell cruelly butchered the Irish rebels. He routed the Scottish army, forcing Charles II to flee to Europe. Upon his death in 1658, Cromwell was succeeded by his son, but the vast majority of Englishmen were now weary of the harsh Protectorate.

A newly elected Parliament restored the monarchy in 1660, declaring Prince Charles II of Scotland (presently in exile in Europe) to be King of England. Anglicanism (episcopacy) became the established religion of England. The "Act of Uniformity" (1662) required all ministers to assent to exclusive use of the Book of Common Prayer, repudiate the National Covenant, and be deprived of their positions if not ordained by an episcopal priest. (Some 2,000 presbyterians refused and lost their vocations.) Even worse, on his deathbed (1685), King Charles II formally professed the Roman Catholic faith and was succeeded on the English throne by his Roman Catholic brother, James II.

The Work of the Westminster Assembly

Given this overview, we can now go back to the year 1643 and the convening of the Westminster Assembly, seeing it in its historical setting. It was, indeed, the highpoint of the English effort toward a truly Protestant Reformation.

In a sense, this kind of assembly had been the genius of Alexander Henderson of Scotland, for as early as 1641, when he was part of a peace commission to London, he drew up a paper suggesting the advantage of having "one Confession of Faith, one form of Catechism, one Directory for all the parts of the public worship of God...and one form of Church government, in all the Churches of his majesty's dominions." In 1642 the English Parliament had passed a bill to call leading divines to such a convention, but the King refused to consent to it. After further attempts, and with the King having fled London, the Parliament finally authorized the assembly (the sixth bill to this effect) on June 12, 1643. The intended purpose of the Assembly was primarily to reorganize the church of England in government and worship, and only secondarily to clarify and vindicate its doctrine. Given the subsequent course of history, though, the latter project would prove to be more influential and better remembered than the former.

An earnest effort was made to secure a truly representative gathering of godly theologians. Of the 121 who were invited to sit in the Assembly: 4 were from London, 2 from the channel islands, 2 from each English county, 1 from each Welsh county, 2 from each university, and 2 from the French Reformed church in London. Men of widely diverse views were selected: presbyterians (like Twisse and Reynolds), episcopalians (like Brownrigg and Ussher), erastians (like Lightfoot), and independents (like Goodwin and Nye). Following the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant, 8 commissioners from Scotland were assigned to sit with the Westminster Assembly (the best known being Henderson, Baillie, Rutherford, and Gillespie). They were especially astute in theology and exercised important leadership in the deliberations of the Assembly, even though they had no formal vote in its decisions.

The Assembly originally met on July 1, 1643, in the Henry VII Chapel of Westminster Abbey. It opened with a sermon preached by William Twisse, the prolocutor (chairman) appointed by Parliament. With the coming of Autumn weather in 1643, the Assembly moved its meetings into the Jerusalem Chamber, which became its regular place of business thereafter. Throughout their many months and years of work the commissioners to the Assembly engaged regularly and thoroughly in corporate prayer for their sessions, deliberations, and conclusions - often praying together for hours at a time.

The first task taken up by the Assembly was the revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which it proceeded to do with the help of the Lambeth Articles (of 1595) and the Irish Articles (of 1615). By the time the Assembly reached article 15, the Solemn League and Covenant had been signed and Scottish commissioners sent to Westminster. So on October 12, 1643, Parliament suspended the revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles and directed the Westminster Assembly to compose "a Confession of Faith for the three Kingdoms, according to the Solemn League and Covenant."

This new formulation and summary of theology would become the "Westminster Confession of Faith" - 33 chapters covering the fundamental doctrines of Scripture and most pressing Christian

issues of the day. Work commenced on it August 20, 1644, and it took 27 months to write, being finished on December 4, 1646. There was little serious disagreement over most points of Reformed doctrine. However, the presbyterian majority in the Assembly found itself in most strenuous debate with two ideological opponents: the independents (over the sacraments and the jurisdiction of church courts: chapters 27, 31) and the erastians (over the power of church censures: chapter 30).

On September 25, 1646, the first 19 chapters of the Confession were submitted to the House of Commons for approval. On December 4 in the same year, the last 14 chapters were submitted. After receiving the first set of chapters, the Commons requested the Westminster Assembly to provide Scriptural proof-texts in the margins of the Confession. Although initially hesitating to do so (since this matter had not been debated and voted upon during the writing of the Confession), the Assembly agreed to it in April, 1647.

The last items to be taken up by the Assembly were the preparation of a Larger Catechism and a Shorter Catechism. The former served as a popular tool for teaching the theology of the Confession, the latter intended to do the same for children. Both documents were largely the work of Anthony Tuckney, who was especially aided in the Larger Catechism by James Ussher's *Body of Divinity*, and in the Shorter Catechism by the help of John Wallis. The two catechisms were completed (respectively) on October 15 and November 25, 1647.

The last mention of the presence of the Scottish commissioners at the Westminster Assembly was on November 9, 1647. The last regular session was held on February 22, 1649 (totaling 1,163 sessions in all). After this there were irregularly scheduled meetings for the examination of ministerial candidates until 1653. There is no record that the Assembly was formally dissolved.

Response to the Westminster Assembly's Work

In chronological order of completion, the main documents produced by the Westminster Assembly were these:[\[1\]](#)

Directory for Ordination (finished April, 1644)

Propositions Concerning Church Government (autumn, 1644)

Practical Directory for Church Government (July, 1645)

Directory for the Public Worship of God (1645)

The Confession of Faith (December, 1646)

The Larger Catechism (October, 1647)

The Shorter Catechism (November, 1647)

Although the standards for worship were adopted throughout the united kingdoms, the Westminster documents on church government were ratified only by the Scottish church, meeting resistance from the English Parliament. Similarly, on August 27, 1647, the General Assembly of the Scottish church ratified the Westminster Confession of Faith in the form proposed by the Westminster Assembly. However, the English Parliament only adopted it (June 20, 1648) after some significant changes: the exclusion of chapters 20 (section 4), 30 and 31, as well as a revision of chapter 23 - these modifications being in the interest of retaining an erastian view of church government. On the other hand, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms were adopted by the Scottish church in July, 1648, and with only slight changes approved by the English Parliament in September of the same year.

Two things stand out about the work of the Westminster Assembly: a grand *discrepancy*, and a grand *irony*. The grand discrepancy is the disparity between the key purpose of the Assembly and its most noted accomplishment. The Assembly had been called for the purpose of settling the dispute over church government - over against the episcopalian tyranny favored by the King. The Assembly gave much of its effort to this matter (as is evident from the list of its documents), and throughout its debates and decisions, the majority were resolutely presbyterian in the conclusions they drew from Scripture. Given the historical circumstances, with royalist episcopalians on one side and the stubborn independents threatening on the other, this defense of presbyterian government in the church might be expected to become that accomplishment for which the Assembly was best known. In fact, though, very few people today are even aware of - must less can give a cogent account of - the presbyterian importance of the Westminster Assembly. The Assembly has rather come to be remembered for the masterful summary of Reformed doctrine which was framed in its Confession of Faith and Catechisms. Indeed, those documents are precious to those whose hearts burn for the Reformed Faith, being a source of instruction and comfort for generation after generation over more than 300 years now.

The grand irony is that the Westminster Assembly was a body devoted to a religious and ecclesiastical project, but a body which had absolutely no ecclesiastical authority, having been called and strictly subjected to the domination of the civil authority, Parliament. Henry VIII had earlier transferred authority over the church from Pope to King. Now the contest for ecclesiastical oversight shifted to one between King and Parliament. Nevertheless, the theologians at Westminster, seeking fidelity to the word of God, were brave to assert the "divine right" of church government over against *all civil intrusions* - addressing this to the very civil authority which at the time maintained jurisdiction over the Assembly: "The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of Church officers, *distinct from the civil magistrate*" (Westminster Confession of Faith 30.1). Given the very circumstances in which the Assembly met, and the issues of its day, the significance of this particular stand can hardly be underestimated. The Westminster position was that there should be a free church in a free state, neither institution having dominion over the other (cf. Westminster Confession of Faith 23.4) - the principle which produced the liberties in church and state which we enjoy today.

The sad fact remains that the documents issued by the Westminster Assembly were only partially accepted - and then only temporarily - in England itself. The bone of contention, as we have seen, was the *government of the church*: what should be (1) its relation to the civil authority and (2) its own nature and order.

Regarding (1), it should be noted that the English Parliament which convened and ruled over the Westminster Assembly was decidedly *erastian*, determined from the earliest days of the Assembly's work to retain control over the government of the church (and even its sacraments), contrary to the Puritan stand for a church government distinct from the civil magistrate. (Ironically, the English Parliament originally rejected the Westminster chapter on the civil magistrate since it gave too *little* power to the state in the affairs of the church - while the presbyterian church in America later [1729] revised the same chapter, fearing it gave too *much* power to the state in this area!) Regarding (2), it should be remembered that by the time that the Assembly's regular sessions ceased, England had come under the sway of Cromwell, a fervent advocate of the *independent* party, which stood contrary to the presbyterian conclusions about the internal nature of church government which had been reached in the Westminster debates.

Given these observations, it is not surprising that the presbyterian position did not prevail in England during those days. Nevertheless, the work of the Westminster Assembly - especially its masterful Confession and Catechisms - was adopted by the Church of Scotland and thereby has come to have general authority and use as "subordinate standards" (subject to the primary authority of Scripture itself) throughout the presbyterian churches in the world. Indeed, the Reformed theology of the Westminster Confession, apart from views on the sacraments and church government, is even found virtually verbatim in the Baptist and Independent standards known as the Savoy Confession (1658) and the Philadelphia Confession (originally 1677). The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms represent the apex of the Protestant creeds stemming from the Reformation. In 1729 they were formally adopted as the doctrinal standard of the Presbyterian Church in America.

Integration and Summary of Key Historical Events Bearing on the Westminster Assembly

- 1625 Charles Stuart I becomes King of England, Scotland, and Ireland
- 1629 King Charles dissolves Parliament, ruling without it for 11 years
- 1633 William Laud becomes Archbishop of Canterbury, persecuting Puritans
- 1638 Scotland signs the National Covenant against religious imposition
- 1639 War between Scotland and England (King Charles) 1640
- April Short Parliament called, dismissed
- Nov. Long Parliament called; opposes King, Star Chamber, High Commission
(Laud)
- 1641
- Dec. King Charles receives Grand Remonstrance (indicting his errors) from he disdains
Puritan call for church reform
- 1642
- Jan King Charles fails to impeach or militarily seize his opponents in Parliament; in
Parliament; the King flees London
- June Bill for synod of theologians (to reform the church) passes Parliament, but fails to
get the King's consent
- Aug. Civil War erupts between King and Parliament
- 1643
- Jan. Parliament abolishes episcopal government and liturgy in the church
- June Bill authorizes Westminster Assembly to advise Parliament on church government,
worship, and doctrine
- July Westminster Assembly first convenes
- Sept. Parliament signs Solemn League and Covenant with Scotland
- Oct. Parliament requests Westminster Assembly to write a new confession
- 1644 Parliamentary army reorganized as "New Model" under Cromwell

April Westminster Assembly completes Directory for Ordination

Aug. Westminster Assembly commences work on a new confession of faith

1645

Jan. Parliament replaces episcopal Book of Common Prayer with the Westminster Assembly's new Directory for Public Worship

July Westminster Assembly completes Directory for Church Government

1646

June King Charles surrenders

Sept. First portion of Confession submitted to Parliament; it requests proof-texts

Dec. Westminster Assembly finishes the Confession of Faith

1647

April Westminster Assembly agrees to provide proof-texts for Confession

May King Charles agrees to Parliament's terms for a presbyterian monarchy

June Cromwell's army overrides the agreement, seizing King Charles

Aug. Cromwell's army takes possession of London Church of Scotland adopts the Westminster Confession of Faith

Oct. Westminster Assembly completes Larger Catechism

Nov. King Charles escapes, negotiates with Scotland Westminster Assembly completes Shorter Catechism; Scottish commissioners depart

1648

April War between Scotland (King Charles) and England (Cromwell)

June English Parliament modifies, adopts Westminster Confession

July Scottish church adopts the Westminster Catechisms

Aug. Cromwell victorious over King Charles

Sept. English Parliament adopts the Westminster Catechisms

Dec. Pride's purge leaves Rump Parliament to do Cromwell's bidding

1649

Jan. King Charles executed

Feb. Last regular session of the Westminster Assembly

[1] In OPC vol. (Pressing Toward Mark), Wayne Spear says (p. 84) that Directory for Worship & Form of Church Government were both finished Dec. 1644. Then Directory of Church Government, etc. was completed July 1645.