

Introduction:

In the 1640's, in London, England, there was a gathering of Puritan ministers and laymen. It was called the Westminster Assembly because it met in Westminster Abbey.

The Westminster Assembly was called to help the British Parliament achieve reforms in the Church of England in the areas of doctrine, church government, worship, and discipline. The Assembly met for more than five years. This Assembly produced the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, the Directory for Worship, a metrical Psalter, the Form of Presbyterial Church-Government, and the Directory for Church Government.

Some of these documents have strongly influenced all Presbyterian churches, and many Baptist and Congregational churches as well.

These lectures will describe

- the political and religious factors which led to the Westminster Assembly
- the members and the procedures of the Assembly
- the contents of the documents which were produced
- the lasting legacy of this historic gathering.

Bibliography for Study of the Westminster Assembly

ORIGINAL SOURCES

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Historical Background of the Westminster AssemblyI. The English Puritan Movement [see William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*]

A. The British Monarchy

1509-1547	Henry VIII	1625-1648	Charles I
1547-1553	Edward VI	1648-1660	Interregnum (Oliver Cromwell)
1553-1558	Mary I	1660-1685	Charles II
1558-1603	Elizabeth I	1683-1688	James II (James VII)
1603-1625	James I (James VI of Scotland)		

B. The English Reformation

Prior to 1529, Lutheran ideas began to affect England.

Henry VIII broke with the papacy to divorce Catherine of Aragon.

The break with Rome was accomplished through Acts of the Parliament, 1529-36.

The doctrine and worship of the Church of England were formulated in the 39(42) Articles and the Book of Common Prayer. Thomas Cranmer was the author.

The Church of England became more Protestant under Edward VI.

Mary I led a return to Catholicism. She persecuted Protestants.

C. The Elizabethan Settlement

When Mary died, her half-sister Elizabeth (a Protestant) became queen.

The Act of Uniformity of 1662 required the use of the Book of Common Prayer.

D. The Rise of Puritanism

A party arose in the C of E which was influenced by Calvin (the "Marian exiles").

In the 1570's, Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers (*Manual of Ecclesiastical Discipline*) taught the regulative principle of worship and presbyterianism.

Puritan efforts to have the Church reformed by Elizabeth and the Parliament failed.

In 1603, James I refused a Puritan request for reform. He did agree to a new translation of the Bible (The "King James Version").

During the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, the Puritan movement was "tolerated."

However, it grew through books and "lectureships"--particularly in law schools.

E. Puritans and Laudians in the Reign of Charles I

Charles believed in "the divine right of kings."

He ruled without calling Parliament for 11 years.

Archbishop William Laud and other bishops supported Charles.

They required a style of worship which seemed to be a return to Catholicism.

In the 1530s, persecution of the Puritans became more severe.

Historical Background of the Westminster Assembly, continued

II. The Scottish Reformation and "Second Reformation"

A. Pre-Reformation Scotland

Scotland was an independent nation, separate from England, allied with France. Half of the land (and wealth) of Scotland was owned by the Catholic Church. The clergy and the people of Scotland were largely ignorant and immoral (e.g., Cardinal Beaton)

B. The Reformation in Scotland

1528 Patrick Hamilton, who had studied under Luther, was executed as a heretic.

1547 John Knox, a priest, was converted, He began to preach at St. Andrews.

Knox became a chaplain of Edward VI in England. He had to leave England during the reign of Mary I. He spent several years in Geneva with John Calvin.

Knox returned to Scotland in 1559. His preaching led to many conversions, and widespread rejection of Roman Catholicism.

In 1560, the Scottish Parliament made Scotland officially Protestant. The *Scottish Confession of Faith*, written by Knox, was adopted.

The Church of Scotland was re-organized with presbyterian church government.

C. The Scottish Revolution

After the time of Knox, there was a long struggle between presbyterianism and episcopacy.

King James, and King Charles I succeeded in having the church governed by bishops. The General Assembly met only when they wished.

1637 King Charles prepared a new Prayer Book for Scotland. It included using an altar, readings from the Apocrypha, and a calendar of saints' days.

Ministers and church members rebelled against this new Prayer Book.

(Jennie Geddis)

The National Covenant of 1638 Committed the signers to the Reformed Faith, and presbyterian church government. The absolute authority of the King was rejected.

1638 The General Assembly met in defiance of King's order. The bishops were removed, and presbyterian church government was restored

1639-40 In the "Bishop's Wars," the King tried to stop the Scottish Revolution. His army was defeated.

III. Events Leading to the Meeting of the Westminster Assembly

A. The Long Parliament

Charles reigned without a Parliament 1629-1640.

Financial difficulties from the Bishops' Wars in Scotland forced him to call the Parliament

Parliament immediately called for reforms in the Church and in the Government.

Bishops were removed from the House of Lords.

Frequent efforts were made from 1641 on to call an assembly of ministers to advise Parliament about religious reforms, but the King did not give permission.

Historical Background of the Westminster Assembly, continued

B. The Outbreak of Civil War

There was growing public reaction against the King's policies, and against the bishops.

In Jan. 1641/2, Charles charged 5 leaders of the House of Commons with treason. Charles' attempt to arrest the leaders provoked the militia of London to defend the Parliament against the King.

Charles withdrew to the North to prepare for war. The war began officially on Aug. 22, 1642.

C. Parliamentary Motives for Religious Reform

Genuine commitment to Puritan (Christian) principles

Conspiracy theory regarding Catholic intentions

The Irish Massacre; Laud's liturgical reforms

Loss of freedom and economic well-being through the bishops' support of "divine right of kings" and persecution of Puritans

D. The Calling of the Westminster Assembly (July 1643)

Most people believed that there should be only one national church in the country.

The Puritans in Parliament wanted the Church to be Reformed. They believed in the Reformed Faith, purity of worship, and presbyterian church government.

The Parliament called together an Assembly of ministers to advise about church reform.

E. The *Solemn League and Covenant*

After the first year of war, the Parliamentary army was losing.

In July, 1643, the English Parliament sent commissioners to Scotland to ask for help.

The agreement whereby this help was provided was the *Solemn League and Covenant*. Summary of the content of the *Covenant*:

- It involved the nations of England, Scotland and Ireland.
- It promised **preservation** of the reformed religion in Scotland
- It promised the **reformation** of religion in England and Ireland, "according to the Word of God, and example of the best reformed churches"
- It aimed at "uniformity in confession of faith, form of church-government, directory for worship and catechizing.
- It promised removal of "popery, prelacy, and independency."
- It promised the preservation of rights of Parliament, and the king's lawful authority.
- It expressed their purpose to walk worthy of Christ.
- It included the hope that others will join in the covenant [millennial views].

To carry out these aims, six Commissioners from the Church of Scotland were sent to the Westminster Assembly. Their names were Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie, George Gillespie (ministers), and Archibald Johnston, and Lord Maitland.

I. Members of the Assembly (see Will Barker, *Puritan Profiles*)

The members of the Assembly were chosen by the Parliament.

121 ministers were named as members. 18 ministers were appointed later.

20 members of the House of Commons and 10 members of the House of Lords were named as members of the Assembly. (They were not ruling elders.)

30 ministers and 10 members of Parliament never attended.

The numbers of members who regularly attended was from 40-60.

All ministers in the Assembly were:

- Reformed in theology
- Episcopally ordained (except George Gillespie)
- Non-separatists

II. The "parties" of the Assembly

A. Episcopalians

They believed that church authority rested in bishops (chosen by other bishops).

8-20 were appointed, including 3 bishops.

Only Daniel Featley attended. He was soon removed.

B. Erastians

Erastianism is "the view that disciplinary power, and ultimately all church power rested...in the civil magistrate"

John Lightfoot, Thomas Coleman, and John Selden were Erastians; they had much influence because of allies in Parliament.

John Selden was defeated by George Gillespie in a famous debate.

C. Independents ("Congregationalists")

They believed that people could choose their own congregation ("gathered church" rather than "parish church.")

They believed that church authority was located only in the local congregation, although they favored consultation and cooperation with other congregations.

The most prominent Independents were Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, Philip Nye, and William Bridge.

D. "Pragmatic presbyterians"

They believed that presbyterianism was best *in the present circumstances*.

Many of them were willing for a limited form of episcopacy

Their most influential members were Cornelius Burgess and Edward Reynolds.

(Reynolds later became a bishop.)

Members, Parties, and Procedures in the Westminster Assembly, continued

E. "Divine right presbyterians"

They believed in the "Regulative Principle" for church government.

They believed that the Scripture teaches that:

- Church authority rests in elders chosen by the people.
- Decisions must be made by a body of elders, not by one.
- Church government is administered by church courts which are over many congregations: sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the general assembly.

They had some disagreements about ruling elders, deacons, and teachers.

(The Scottish Commissioners were "divine right presbyterians," with practical experience in actual government by elders.)

III. Rules and Procedures in the Westminster Assembly

(see Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly*, pp. 116-7)

Parliament named the Prolocutor (moderator), William Twisse.

Parliament also named the Scribes (clerks) who kept the minutes and records of the Assembly: Adoniram Byfield, Henry Roborough

Each member took an oath that he would be guided by the Scriptures.

Any member who disagreed with a decision of the Assembly could have his dissent, and the reasons for it, recorded in the minutes.

Decisions were made by a majority vote (51% or more).

There was no limit on debate in the Assembly.

The Assembly met five days a week, from 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m.

Much of the work of the Assembly was done by committees

IV. Calendar of the Work of the Assembly

October 12, 1643 to December 11, 1644 *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*
Directory for Government

May 24, 1644 to August 20, 1644 *Directory for Worship*

November, 1643 to September, 1645 *Metrical Psalter*

August 20, 1644 through December 4, 1646 *Confession of Faith*

April 15, 1647 through October 15, 1647 *Larger Catechism*

August 9, 1647 through November 25, 1647 *Shorter Catechism*

I. *The Directory for Worship*

A. The Need for the Directory (Preface)

The Book of Common Prayer was welcomed at the time of the Reformation. It removed the Mass and the use of Latin. Now, it is offensive, because:

- All the prayers are written.
- There are many unprofitable and burdensome ceremonies (kneeling for communion, the sign of the cross, required vestments).
- Preaching is not emphasized.

God's gracious providence now calls for further reformation.

B. Aims of the Directory

- to state things of that are of divine institution (the "elements" of worship)
- to order *other things* according to Christian prudence, and the general rules of the Word (the "circumstances" of worship; see WCF I/VI and XXI/I)
- to promote uniformity of worship
- to give a "pattern of soundness," for the assistance of ministers

C. Order for Public Worship

Prayer of Approach and Invocation
Reading of Scripture
Singing of a Psalm
Prayer before the Sermon (the "long prayer")
The Preaching of the Word
The Prayer after the sermon
The Lord's Prayer
Special petitions and thanksgivings
Singing of a Psalm
Blessing the people

E. Other matters in the *Directory*

- The Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper
- The Sanctification of the Lord's Day
- Marriage
- Visitation of the sick
- Burial of the dead
- Public Fasting and Thanksgiving

Documents of the Assembly, cont.

II. *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*

(A progress report--not intended to be the final document.)

Preface: source of church government is the Kingship of Christ

1. Of the church
 - Visible Church: General and particular
 - Membership: "visible saints"
2. Of the officers of the church
 - Extraordinary: apostles, prophets, evangelists
 - Ordinary: pastors, teachers, other church-governors (elders), deacons
7. Particular churches
 - Parish system vs. "gathered church"
10. Several sorts of Assemblies
 - congregational, classical, synodical
15. Ordination
 - "The solemn setting apart of a person to some publick church office."
 - Laying on of the hands of preaching presbyters
 - Designation to a particular church; right of the congregation to object
 - Rules for examination

III. *The Directory for Government* (see *Pressing Toward the Mark*, p. 83ff.)

A. Differences from the *Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*:

- more carefully edited
- does not contain scripture proofs
- includes directory for excommunication and restoration
- spells out practical details and procedures

B. Particular features:

- explicit rejection of "gathered" churches and separation
- officers chosen by eldership with consent of the people
- excommunication rests in the classical presbytery
- deposition of ministers rests in the synod
- procedure for excommunication
 - grounds (allowance for dissent and weakness)
 - assistance of the civil magistrate
- provision for restoration

Documents of the Assembly, cont.

IV. Psalmody and the *Westminster Psalter*

A. Psalmody

The use of "hymns" was not disputed. Catholics and the *Book of Common Prayer* gave the reading or chanting the Psalms a central place in worship.

Congregational singing of the Psalms was restored at the Reformation.

The *Directory for Worship* advised "lining out" when people could not read.

Issues:

- inspired versus uninspired praise
- simplicity versus complexity
- whole church versus specialists (clericalism)
- liberty of conscience

B. The Psalter

1. Background: Calvin's French Psalter, 1541-62

Sternhold and Hopkins, 1549 (in England)

Whittingham's Anglo-Genevan Psalter 1556-61

Francis Rous' Psalter 1643 (He was a member of the Assembly.)

2. Production and adoption of the *Psalter*

In November, 1643, fifty Psalms from Rous' metrical version were assigned to each "general committee" for revision. The revision was completed in Sept., 1645.

On 15 April 1646, the House of Commons ordered that only the *Westminster Psalter* be used in worship in the Church.

(The Church of England had used Psalms only in public worship since the Reformation. Use of hymns was not authorized until after 1800.)

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland revised the Westminster Psalter 6 times, issuing *The Scottish Psalter of 1650* (commonly, but mistakenly, called the "Rous version").

V. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*

A. Doctrinal Background

"Ecumenical Creeds": Apostles', Nicene, Athanasian, Chalcedon

"catholic" theologians: Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas

Reformers: Luther, Calvin, Bucer

English Theologians: William Whitaker, William Ames, William Perkins
Lambeth Articles (1595); *Irish Articles* (1615); *Canons of Dort* (1620-1)

Covenant Theology: Robert Rollock

B. Preparation of the Confession

Work began Aug. 20, 1644--preliminary committee

Drafting Committee appointed May 12, 1645.

July 11, 1646 Topics divided among 3 General Committees

Sept. 25, 1646 First 19 chapters sent to Parliament

Dec. 4, 1646 Remaining chapters sent to Parliament

April 27, 1647 Scripture proofs sent to Parliament

The Documents of the Assembly, cont.

- C. Characteristics of the Confession
 - catholic (II, VII)
 - Protestant (XI, XVI)
 - Reformed (III, XVII, XXVIII, XXIX)
 - evangelical (XIV, XV)
 - Biblical (I)
 - devotional (XII, XVIII)

VI. *The Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism*

1. Background (see Alexander Mitchell, *Catechisms of the Second Reformation*)

2. Writing of the Catechisms

After working on one catechism in 1646, the Assembly decided to have two:

The *Larger Catechism* was "more exact and comprehensive."

The *Shorter Catechism* was "easier and shorter for new beginners."

Both catechisms were based on the *Confession of Faith*.

3. The Distinctive Features of the *Larger Catechism* (see J. G. Vos' *Commentary*)

- "proofs" of Scripture Q. 4
- the doctrine of the Church Q. L57-64
- union and communion with Christ Q. 65-83
- reading and preaching of the Word Q. 155-160

I. Official Approval of the Westminster Documents

Document	England	Scotland
<i>Directory for Worship</i>	Lords and Commons January 1645	General Assembly February 1645 Parliament February 1645
<i>Form of Presbyterial Church Government</i>		General Assembly February 1645
<i>Directory for Government Confession of Faith</i>	Lords and Commons March 1648 (excepts parts of Chapters 20, 30, and 31)	(Printed for study) General Assembly August 1647 Parliament February 1649
<i>Larger Catechism</i>	Commons July 1648	General Assembly July 1648 Parliament February 1649
<i>Shorter Catechism</i>	Lords and Commons July 1648	General Assembly July 1648 Parliament February 1649
<i>Psalter</i>	Commons April 1646	

II. Results in England

When Oliver Cromwell established the "Protectorate" in 1653, all legislation regarding a national church became ineffective. After the "Restoration" of Charles II in 1660, the documents of the Westminster Assembly were condemned, and adherence to them was regarded as treason.

III. Results in Scotland

During the "killing times," adherence to the Covenants and the Westminster documents was condemned, and thousands were fined, imprisoned, exiled, or executed for their faith.

In the "Revolution Settlement" of 1690, the Westminster Confession of Faith was ratified as the "public and avowed confession" of the Church of Scotland, but no other Westminster documents were adopted.

The dissenting churches (Covenanters from 1689, and Seceders from 1733), from their sense of covenant obligation, had a high regard for all the Westminster documents, but the historical evidence for formal ratification is unclear.

I. Background and Commentaries

John Calvin, *Calvin: Commentaries, in Library of Christian Classics*, Vol 23:

"Preface to Olivetan's New Testament, and Chapter I, "The Bible."

William Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*.

B. B. Warfield, "The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture," in *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*.

Wayne R. Spear, "The Westminster Confession of Faith and Holy Scripture," in *To Glorify and Enjoy God*.

II. Exposition

Sec. 1 General and Special Revelation (The Necessity of Scripture)

Sec. 2,3 The Canon

Sec. 4,5 The Authority of Scripture

Sec. 6 The Sufficiency of Scripture

Sec. 7 The Clarity (Perspicuity) of Scripture

Sec. 8 The Authentic Edition (and Translations) of Scripture

Sec. 9,10 The Interpretation of Scripture (and its Judge)

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter One

WCF 1:1 Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.

WCF 1:2 Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testament, which are these: [the 66 books]. All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

WCF 1:3 The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

WCF 1:4 The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it as the Word of God.

WCF 1:5 We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture, and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.

WCF 1:6 The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word; and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are

always to be observed.

WCF 1:7 All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

WCF 1:8 The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

WCF 1:9 The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

WCF 1:10 The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.