

Lecture 18 – “The Foundation for Many Generations”: The Westminster Assembly

Question: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.” 2 Peter 3:18

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 20, pp. 183-84

Prayer

Larger Catechism Q. 183

“For whom are we to pray?”

“We are to pray for the whole church of Christ upon earth, for magistrates, and ministers, for ourselves, our brethren, yea, our enemies, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead.”

“The Foundation for Many Generations”: The Westminster Assembly

I. Occasion

- A. Conflict between the Parliament and the king (Charles I)
 - 1. Representative government (vs. royal absolutism)
 - 2. Religious freedom (vs. ecclesiastical tyranny)
- B. Theological and political radicalism of the 1640s (See *The World Turned Upside Down* by Christopher Hill)
 - 1. Religious sects
 - 2. Long Parliament
 - 3. July 1, 1643: Westminster Assembly

II. Place—Westminster Abbey in London

- A. Chapel of Henry VII
- B. Jerusalem Chamber

III. Members—121 Divines

Richard Baxter describing the Westminster Assembly: “The divines there congregated were men of eminent learning and godliness and ministerial abilities and fidelity; and, being not worthy to be one of them myself, I may the more freely speak that truth which I know, even in the face of malice and envy, that as far as I am able to judge by the information of all history of that kind, and by any other evidence left us, the Christian world since the days of the apostles had never a synod of more excellent divines (taking one thing with another) than this Synod and the Synod of Dort.”

- A. The officers of the Assembly—including William Twisse, Cornelius Burgess
- B. The Episcopalians—James Ussher, Daniel Featley
- C. The Presbyterians—including Stephen Marshall, William Gouge
- D. The Erastians—John Selden, Thomas Coleman, John Lightfoot
- E. The Independents—“the five dissenting brethren”: Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Jeremiah Burroughs, William Bridge, Sidrach Simpson
- F. The Scots—Alexander Henderson, George Gillespie, Robert Baillie, Samuel Rutherford, Archibald Johnston, John Maitland

Samuel Rutherford to a fellow-minister, October 20, 1643: “I am now called for to England; the government of the Lord’s house in England and Ireland is to be handled. My heart beareth me witness, and the Lord who is greater knoweth, my faith was never prouder than to be a

rough country barrowman [=laborer] in Anwoth [his parish in southeastern Scotland], and that I could not look at the honor of being a mason to lay the foundation for many generations, and to build the waste places of Zion in another kingdom, or to have a hand or finger in that carved work in the cedar and almug [=sandalwood] trees in that new temple. I desire but to lend a shut [=shout], and cry, ‘Grace, grace upon the building.’ I hope ye will help my weakness in this; and seek help to me from others as if I had named them, and intercede for the favour of my Father’s seas, winds, and tides, and for the victory of strong and prevailing truth.”

IV. Work

A. Preaching and prayer

B. Revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles (July through October 1643)

C. “The Four Points of Uniformity”

1. Form of Church Government (October 1643 through April 1645)

2. Directory for Public Worship (October 1643 through April 1645)

Robert Baillie writing to friends in Scotland on November 21, 1644: “Our Church affaires goes on now apace, blessed be God...that which most comforts us, is the Directorie. All that we have done in it is this day sent up, with a full unanimite of all: many a wearisome debate had it cost us; but we hope the sweet fruit will over-balance the great toyle we had in it...The chymes of midnight are ringing at Westminster, so I must crave leave to go to bed.”

3. Confession of Faith (April 1645 through December 1646) (See “Outline of the Westminster Confession of Faith”)

a. Reformed theology—Differences in doctrine among the Westminster divines “lay for the most part within the recognized limits of the reformed system, and there was little disposition to press them to extremes or to narrow their creed to a party document” (B. B. Warfield)

b. Federal or covenant theology

4. Catechisms (January 1647 through April 1648)—“one more exact and comprehensive, another more easie and short for new beginners”

a. Shorter Catechism

b. Larger Catechism

D. After mid-April of 1648 the Assembly functioned primarily as a ministerial screening committee

V. Post-Westminster

For Further Study

**The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, B. B. Warfield

*“The Origin and Formation of the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Presbyterian Church in America)

Brief but helpful account ordered by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1906.

**To Glorify and Enjoy God: A Commemoration of the Westminster Assembly* (1994), ed. John L. Carson and David W. Hall

Addresses commemorating the 350th anniversary of the convening of the Westminster Assembly.

**Puritan Profiles* (1996), William S. Barker

54 influential Puritans at the time when the Westminster Confession of Faith was written.

**The Westminster Assembly: A Guide to Basic Bibliography* (1993), David W. Hall and J. Ligon Duncan III

A. Read Robert Baillie’s “Description of the Westminster Assembly” from *A Short History of the Westminster Assembly*, W. Beveridge (A Press, 1991), 162-65. Robert Baillie (1602-1662) was the quietist of the Scottish delegation to the Westminster Assembly in public debate, but he may have been the most influential through his private diplomacy and his *Letters and Journals*, one of the main sources of

information about the Westminster Assembly. Baillie was in many ways a moderate. When the General Assembly of 1638 voted on the question whether Episcopacy was abjured by the Confession of Faith of 1580, he was the lone dissenter. He became the leader of the Resolutioners in Glasgow in the 1650s, but died, some felt of a broken heart, when the Act Recissory of 1661 undid all the work of the Second Reformation.

Baillie begins this short account of the Assembly with the welcome given the five Scottish commissioners (of whom he was one). He then describes the setting and the operations of the Assembly. What is the one criticism that Baillie offers?

B. Read about the “Devotional Exercises” of the Westminster Assembly from *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly* by S. W. Carruthers (Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 99-108.

The Westminster Assembly was engaged not only in debating issues of doctrine, church polity, and corporate worship but also in meeting for prayer and preaching. This chapter from Carruthers’ important book describes this aspect of the Assembly’s activities (as does chapter 9 on “Fasts and Thanksgivings”). The background against which these meetings are set is, of course, the civil war between the King and the Parliament.

*What themes do you find repeated in these pages?

*How would you describe the spiritual tone of the Assembly?

C. Read the selection from the Westminster Directory of Worship from *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (Fortress, 1961), 354-71. The Westminster Assembly produced not only a confession and two catechisms but a service book or directory of worship. A sub-committee (that included English Presbyterians, the Scots commissioners, and one articulate Independent, Thomas Goodwin) produced the first draft. When this work was placed before the full Assembly in May, 1644, the chairman, Stephen Marshall, reported that “many serious and sad debates” had taken place over the crucial issue of form and freedom. To satisfy all parties the committee had found it expedient to produce a “directory” as opposed to a liturgy. It outlined the main headings of worship and described the substance of each element in such a way that “by altering here and there a word, a man may mould it into a prayer.”

*What are the objections to the Book of Common Prayer as stated in the Preface? What was the attitude of the Westminster Divines (expressed in the Preface) toward “our first Reformers”? What principle guided the divines in their work of creating a directory of worship?

*What is the theme of the first prayer?

*How long a passage of Scripture is recommended for public reading?

*List the main points of the “long” prayer.

*Notice especially the impressive list of qualities (on page 366) that should characterize the minister.

*What is the purpose of the prayer after the sermon?

*How often is the Lord’s Supper to be celebrated?

*Study carefully the “exhortation, warning, and invitation” that proceeds the Lord’s Supper.

*Notice the inclusion of “the collection for the poor” as part of worship.