

The Westminster Assembly

In this lesson we will talk about the Westminster Assembly, the foundation for many generations. The Larger Catechism of the Westminster Assembly question 183 asks the question, “For whom are we to pray?” The answer is, “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.” As we begin our class today, I would like for us to join in prayer. I will read this answer to question 183 again, and I want you to pray silently to the Lord for these various categories that we have listed here. Let us pray.

Let us pray for the whole church of Christ upon earth. Now pray for magistrates. And for ministers. Let each one of us pray for ourselves. Let us pray for our brethren. And for our enemies. And for all people living or that shall live hereafter. Amen.

I have a little book called *The Westminster Standards*. It is a facsimile addition of the 1648 first English printing of *The Westminster Standards*. It contains the catechisms, the Confession, and the Directory for Worship. It has all the major productions of the Westminster Divines except for the form of government. The forward to this new printing of this old document is written by Dr. William S. Barker, professor of church history and dean at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. Dr. Barker attended Covenant Theological Seminary and went to Covenant Presbyterian Church. He begins his forward with these words:

When I was a seminary student, my wife and I attended an adult Sunday school class taught by one of my favorite seminary professors in a local Presbyterian congregation. Although it was in a Presbyterian church, the class was composed of many highly intelligent young adults who though evangelical Christians would probably have not termed themselves as Reformed in doctrine. Over several months the teacher conducted us through a systematic survey of the Christian faith simply by means of a steady exposition of Scripture. My wife and I realized early on that without saying so, he was following the outline of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The rest of the class were enthusiastically absorbing his teaching and, without being conscious of it, were being persuaded to Reformed theology right out of the Scriptures.

We are talking about the Westminster Assembly, its Reformed theology, and its various documents related to worship and church polity. We have already discussed in a previous lesson the occasion for the call and meeting of the Westminster Assembly. We looked at the puritan period in English history. Just to review it for a moment, we should remind ourselves that it was the time of the conflict between the parliament and the Stuart king, Charles I, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century. There were two major issues dividing the parliament and the king. One was representative government favored by the parliament versus royal absolutism or the divine rights of kings, favored by King Charles. The second issue was religious freedom. The church wanted freedom to establish its own laws, practices, and doctrine versus ecclesiastical tyranny in which the king and the hierarchy of the church would control the practices and life of the church. The father of Charles I, James I, had said at one point in debating with puritans and Presbyterians, “No bishops, no king.” He tied together, in his mind, the hierarchical prelacy, the prelacy of the Episcopal Church of England, with the kingship. Those issues finally came to a boiling point and resulted in civil war between the parliament and the king in England. It was a time of theological and political turmoil. This was the period of the 1640s.

One book by Christopher Hill on that period is called *The World Turned Upside Down*. Certainly England turned upside down. There were Roman Catholics there, but they met in secret. It turned upside down from the conservative Anglicans, who wanted to keep things pretty much the way they were in the church, to mainstream Presbyterians and Congregationalists, who could be identified as puritans. Then it turned from more radical Baptists and Quakers finally to the most radical fringe of the period. These were the sects called the Levelers, the Diggers, the Fifth Monarchy Men, and others who called for the overthrow of just about everything. In this time of turmoil and change, the long parliament became the major political force working to create a new government, first with the king, and then after 1649 without the king. They did this because in that year the king was put to death by the order of the parliament. For about a dozen years there would be no king in England. The long parliament was meeting not only to try to create a new government for England, but also to create a new church. They at least wanted a reformed church. To help with that task the parliament called the Westminster Assembly in 1643.

The Assembly began meeting on July 1 in London at Westminster Abbey. It is certainly one of the most famous churches in the world, perhaps along with Saint Paul's in Rome. It was in this church, already 500 years old or more by this time, that the Assembly began its deliberations on July 1, 1643. Until the time of the Reformation, Westminster Abbey had been a Benedictine abbey or monastery. At the period of the Reformation it became a church of England. It was an Anglican church called A Royal Peculiar because the church was directly under the authority of the sovereign of England through the dean and the local chapter. It was not under the bishop of London. The Assembly first met in the chapel of Henry VII, which was a large chapel on the eastern end of the abbey. It was about as big as a large church. When the weather turned cold, the delegates decided to move to a room called the Jerusalem Chamber. There was a fireplace there. The deliberations of Westminster, from that point on, took place in this room, the Jerusalem Chamber. If you go to Westminster Abbey, you will not be shown this chamber as part of the normal tour. Some people have insisted on seeing it, and they have been able to view the Jerusalem Chamber, which is the place where the dean and the chapter now meet. The familiar twin towers on the western end of the Abbey, which so mark it for us today, were not constructed until the eighteenth century. Therefore the Westminster Abbey did not look exactly like it does today when the Westminster Divines met there in the 1740s.

Let me talk for a bit about the members of the Westminster Assembly. These members were chosen by the parliament. They were described as the most grave, pious, learned, and judicious divines. There were 121 English puritan ministers chosen by the parliament from the various counties and from the universities of England. Most were local pastors. Some were teachers and military chaplains, but all were engaged actively in ministry. These divines were assisted after September 1643 by six Scottish commissioners elected by the Church of Scotland to go to Westminster. We will look at those commissioners in a few minutes. Thirty laymen, made up of 10 members of the House of Lords and 20 members of the House of Commons, also assisted them. The recent book by Dr. Will Barker called *Puritan Profiles* is a wonderful survey of 54 of the most influential the puritans of the period. Most of them were members of the Westminster Assembly. That book helps a great deal to enable us to keep these divines straight. It is hard to see them as separate and individual people. We usually think of them as a group, but *Puritan Profiles* is a good place to start in your study of the lives of the divines. The officers of the Assembly included William Twisse and Cornelius Burgess.

William Twisse was the prolocutor, or the presiding officer. He was a man of international reputation as a Reformed scholar. The Scot, Robert Baillie, described him as "very learned, very good, beloved of all, but the unfittest of all the company for any action." Apparently Baillie felt that despite Twisse being a beloved figure he was not very good in debate or in carrying things forward in the work of the

Assembly. That may have been, but Robert Baillie tended to be rather impatient with almost anybody. He wanted things to move much faster than they did. At the opening of the Assembly William Twissee preached the first sermon. He preached on John 14:18, "I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you." You can see why that was an appropriate text for a country that was attempting to recreate the church. That text promised God's presence with the divines as they carried on their important work. William Twissee did not live to see the end of the work of the Westminster Assembly. He died in 1646 during the sitting of the Assembly. A true scholar, he said when he was dying, "Now at length I shall have leisure to follow my studies to all eternity." Cornelius Burgess was the assessor or assistant to the prolocutor. He was sometimes called the "turbulent doctor." On one occasion he was expelled for a time from the Assembly until he could agree with the majority on the Scottish Solemn League and Covenant.

There were different parties, groups, or factions at Westminster. We should understand that these different parties were not different parties in terms of theology. They were all Calvinists. There were very few and minor differences among them regarding theology. But there were major differences regarding church polity. The big issue separating the Westminster Divines was what kind of church polity should be created to replace the Church of England.

We will look first at the Episcopalians. Of the 121 divines originally appointed by the parliament, 28 did not attend at all. This was mostly because they were Episcopalians loyal to the king. The king had not given approval for the sitting of the Westminster Assembly, so the Episcopalians felt that they could not take part in the deliberations of the Assembly. The most famous of these Episcopalians invited to Westminster was Archbishop James Ussher of Ireland. He did not attend, but his influence on Westminster was great. His Irish Articles of 1615 served as a model for the Westminster Confession of Faith. Archbishop Ussher was a strong and zealous puritan. He was a man whose writings are of great value. He wrote to preachers and said, "It is not difficult to make easy things appear hard, but to render hard things easy is the hardest part of the work of preachers." You can remember that when you start preaching. The hardest part is going to be to make hard things easy. Daniel Featley was the one Episcopalian who did attend the deliberations of the Assembly for at least a short time. Before long he was expelled as a spy for the king.

That brings us to the English Presbyterians. The English Presbyterians are probably the least well known and yet did most of the work to produce the Westminster Standards. They were people like Stephen Marshall, the noted preacher, and William Gouge, the leader of puritan clergy in London. The English Presbyterians were of two opinions. There were those who felt that Presbyterianism should be held and established by divine rite. This was called the *Juray of Eno* Theory of Presbyterianism. That is, God has prescribed this in the Bible just as He has prescribed the doctrine we are to believe. He has set forth the one and only form of church polity acceptable, which is Presbyterianism. There were other English Presbyterians who took a different view, the *Juray Humano* view. That is that Presbyterianism is acceptable to the principles that the Bible sets forth. This group did not want to go as far as the first group in insisting that this is the only biblical form of church polity that can be allowed.

There was another group at the Assembly called the Erastians. They were not in favor of any particular church polity. They probably would have accepted almost any form of church polity, from episcopacy to congregationalism. They wanted church discipline to be in the hands of the state. In other words, any church would have to get the approval and permission of the state before it could exercise church discipline. The Erastians were a small but learned group in the Assembly. There was John Seldon, the classical scholar, Thomas Coleman, the most outspoken of the Erastian clergymen, and John Lightfoot, the renowned biblical scholar. The Erastians were supported by a majority in the parliament, which never approved the parts of the Westminster Confession relating to the civil magistrate. The parliament

felt that the Confession did not recognize sufficiently the authority of the state in church matters. It is a curious thing, but the Westminster Assembly in one sense is an Erastian assembly. This is because it was called, not by the church, but by the parliament to do the work of the parliament. The parliament had to approve the final product of the Assembly. That produced a certain amount of tension all along the way between the divines and the lords and commoners of the parliament.

The next group is the Independents or the Congregationalists. They were led by an able and vocal group called the Five Dissenting Brethren. Some of their names might be known to you. Thomas Goodwin and Jeremiah Burroughs have written great puritan books. These five men had gone into exile in the Netherlands in the 1630s. They had close relations with churches in the Netherlands as well as with the Congregationalists, the puritans in New England. They were what we call non-separating puritans. They promoted the concept of congregational church polity, but they wanted the churches to be linked in some sort of national church. They were not for separating from the national church but reforming the national church in a congregational direction with an association among churches and an association with the state. The Congregationalists or the Independents at Westminster had a very difficult road. They had to go between the Presbyterians, who were insisting on uniformity in one form for the church and one form for the state, and the more radical puritans, who wanted greater flexibility and plurality. Between those two groups were the Congregationalists or the Independents. These men wanted a national church connected with the state but with local autonomy.

Then we come to the Scots. The Scots joined the Assembly late in 1643 after the Solemn League and Covenant was accepted. They were not voting members, but they were extremely influential. This was because they were some very able men and also because they had been appointed by the Church of Scotland. They represented Scotland, both in the parliament and in the Assembly. Their words carried the weight of the country of Scotland and the Church of Scotland. We have already been introduced to some of these Scottish commissioners. Alexander Henderson was the author of the Solemn League and Covenant. George Gillespie was one of the youngest ministers present at Westminster. He was just 30 years old in 1643 when he went to Westminster. There is a famous story about him. When the divines were attempting to come up with their definition of God, they were frustrated by the difficulty of finding a sentence that could encompass such a noble and grand topic. After some futile attempts to come up with something, they called on the youngest member of the committee to pray, that being George Gillespie. He began his prayer, "Oh God, Thou art a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchanging in Thy being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." The members of the committee quickly wrote the sentence down and made it the answer to the question in the Shorter Catechism. Do not ever use that story in a sermon illustration, though, because it is not true! It is a wonderful story, and it perhaps tells us something about George Gillespie, that people could imagine that he would have been the one to come up with this statement. George Gillespie had already gone home to Scotland when the catechisms were debated, so he was not there at the time. Use illustrations from church history in your teaching and preaching, but be sure they are accurate and true.

Robert Baillie was another Scottish commissioner. We are very glad that he went to Westminster because his letters and journals give us a lot of information about what actually went on in the Assembly. He had a nose for news and even an occasional bit of gossip. Some very interesting tidbits come out about the various members and what they were doing. Occasionally he mentions that somebody fell asleep during a particular debate or someone was absent more than he should have been. This adds a bit of spice to the record of the proceedings. His description of the Westminster Assembly is one of the most important statements that we have about Westminster because it is from an eyewitness participant.

Samuel Rutherford is another Scottish commissioner. His book, *Lex Rex*, made him a marked man at the restoration. There were four ruling elders appointed, including Archibald Johnston, called the lawyer of the Covenant, and John Maitland, the Duke of Lauderdale, who later changed sides and became a severe persecutor of the covenanters. In thinking of all of these delegates and commissioners, Richard Baxter, a contemporary puritan who was not a member of the Assembly, wrote, "If all Episcopalians had been as Archbishop Ussher, all the Presbyterians as Stephen Marshall, and all the Independents as Jeremiah Burroughs, the divisions of the church might soon have been healed."

Let us talk a bit about the work of the Assembly. Although political conditions were revolutionary, the theological work of the Assembly was not. Part of the work of the Assembly was preaching and prayer. As we have read in the writing by Caruthers called *Devotional Exercises of the Westminster Assembly*, there were regular monthly fast days or prayer days. And there were times of special occasions of thanksgiving and preaching. It was not unusual to have a nine-hour-long service with two-hour-long sermons and two two-hour-long prayers. I sometimes wonder how the divines managed all of that, but they seemed to have done that regularly and with great joy in being able to set aside long periods of time for preaching and prayer.

The Westminster Assembly spent its first three months revising the 39 articles of the Church of England. Those articles were Calvinistic in their force and content. But Westminster felt, directed by the parliament, that it would be good to revise the articles to prohibit any non-Reformed interpretation. They set out on that work and made very minor changes in the first 15 articles. That is as far as they got before circumstances intervened to move the parliament to direct the Assembly to get on with the difficult work that was before them. The Assembly had as its task to reform the Church of England in four ways: in church government, in worship, in confession of faith, and in catechisms. They were to do this according to the Word of God. The Assembly was an assembly of biblical exegetes. They had their Hebrew Bibles, their Greek Testaments, their Latin Bibles, and their English Bibles on the tables before them. They constantly poured through the Scriptures as they debated the various points that came before them. They were to reform the church according to the Word of God and according to the example of the Church of Scotland and other Reformed churches abroad. Not only did they have the Scripture, but they also had the Presbyterian church in Scotland and the Reformed church in the Netherlands to look to as examples of what a Reformed church really should be.

The work of the Westminster Assembly we call the four points of uniformity. First was the Form of Church Government. This was perhaps the most difficult and the most prolonged debate that took place at Westminster. It is sometimes called the "grand debate." It was between Presbyterians and Congregationalists. The Presbyterians finally won the debate but not without a great deal of struggle and, on both sides, some unhappiness with the other side. Finally the Form of Church Government was produced. It is a Presbyterian document, but because of independent objections it is not as fully Presbyterian as Presbyterians both before and after would have wished. The Directory of Public Worship was also an early product of the Assembly. Notice that it is a directory or a guide. That word was chosen deliberately. It is a guide for ministers to use in creating services of worship in the church. It is not a liturgy with the very words of the service imposed by a book of common prayer as the Church of England had. The Directory of Public Worship is not only a guide for Sunday worship, but it is also a comprehensive pastoral theology including sections on preaching and visiting the sick. The regulative principle is much in evidence in the debate and in the product of the Assembly. One realizes how difficult it is to apply this principle to every situation as you go through the debate at Westminster. For instance, on how the Lord's Supper is to be served, the Scots insisted that people come to the table at the front of the church and be seated like the disciples and Jesus were. Some pointed out that they probably were not seated, though. The English insisted that people stay in the pews and have the

elements brought to them because they said the regulative principle required that everybody be served together, not in successive seatings. Both parties debated long and hard before a compromise was agreed upon. They decided it would be appropriate to sit at or about the table. This could mean you could come forward and sit at the table as the Scots did it or stay in the pews as the English did it. There was certainly a commitment on the part of all the divines to a basic biblical simplicity in worship.

The Confession of Faith is the part of Westminster that became the most well-known and the most famous even though the directory for worship and the form of government were the more urgent matters facing the divines in the 1640s. One writer has said the Confession was not only the conclusion of 125 years of protestant theology, but it was also, in a real sense, along with other seventeenth-century statements of faith, the conclusion of 16 centuries of theological work. Westminster comes at the very end of a long period of theological activity, particularly at the end of a century or more of great attention to theology during the time of the Protestant Reformation.

Westminster sums up Reformed theology from the days of John Calvin down to the 1640s. There are certainly differences between Calvin and Westminster, but I would see those differences as differences in relatively minor points. It is not a major recasting of Calvin's thought. I would take exception with the writer of our textbook who says, "While claiming to be a faithful interpreter of Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith tended to turn the theology of the Genevan Reformer into a strict system that Calvin himself might have had difficulty recognizing." I think Calvin would recognize his theology at Westminster. He probably would have said, "Why did you say it that way? Why did you feel you had to include this? Why did you leave that out?" He might have asked questions like that, but I do not think Calvin would have not known what they were talking about. It certainly stands in line with Calvin's thinking. The distinctive theological point at Westminster, the central theme, is federal or covenant theology. This had been developing within the Reformed camp for a number of years, since the days of Zwingli. That theme is not unknown in Calvin as well, although at Westminster it becomes more prominent and tends to structure the whole organization of the Westminster Confession—the first time that covenant theology had been used in a creedal way in such a major fashion.

After working on the Confession for about a year-and-a-half, parliament sent it back to the Assembly for proof texts. The Westminster Divines seemed a bit reluctant to take it back. After all, they had debated it long and hard. They were not afraid to affix proof texts, but they realized that that, too, would be difficult work. They did it; it took them five more months to add all the Scripture proof texts. There are 1500 biblical texts, generally well chosen and relevant, although you can find some places where one would think they apparently went astray.

The fourth of uniformity was the work on the catechisms. There are two catechisms. The Larger Catechism was described as more exact and comprehensive. It was to be a directory for ministers in teaching week by week so that they could teach their congregations the Reformed faith in a very effective and accepted manner. Thomas Chalmers, the nineteenth-century Scottish minister, called the Large Catechism "sanctification broken small." The divines were said to have thought that the Larger Catechism would be the most popular and most used of all their productions. As a matter of fact, it probably is the least known of the productions at Westminster. The Shorter Catechism is much more popular for obvious reasons to us today. The Shorter Catechism was written for new beginners or for children. In the frank words of the Church of Scotland's introduction, it was for "those of weaker capacity." We use it today as a standard for the ordaining of our ministers! Perhaps that says something about the difference of our time and the seventeenth century, at least in the ability to memorize and commitment to the hard work of memorizing more lengthy passages.

The Assembly's major work ended with the completion of the catechisms in 1648. The last plenary session was held on February 22, 1649. There were 1163 meetings over five-and-a-half years. Large group English ministers with a few Scottish ministers and elders had worked through all those years to give us the precious documents that we now have. The Assembly continued another four years until 1653 as a small committee for examining prospective ministers. They functioned almost like a committee of presbytery in that period when no church was established in England. It was a time of great confusion and uncertainty. The return of the king in 1660 undid the work of the Westminster Assembly in England. It never really functioned in the Church of England in any significant or national way. The English Congregationalists adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1658 with some revisions on polity. This is known as the Savoy Declaration. From Savoy it was brought into New England where the New England puritans adopted it in various forms. The English Baptists adopted it in 1677 with revisions both in polity and, of course, baptism. It is known as the London Confession, and American Baptist churches later adopted it as the Philadelphia Confession in 1742. It was adopted already long before by the Church of Scotland in 1647 and subsequently by Presbyterians in many lands.

I would like to conclude by turning again to Will Barker's forward. He tells about being a student at Covenant Seminary and going to Covenant Church and hearing Dr. Laird Harris teach the Bible but following the outline of the Westminster Confession. Will says, "This experience, almost four decades ago, affirmed for me several points of importance to my subsequent ministry. One, that there is a system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures. Two, that the Westminster doctrinal standards, Confession of Faith, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms faithfully set forth this system. Three, that steady, regular exposition of the Bible will lead one to agreement with that system."

"Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).