

His-Story

Church history and why it matters to me

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY (1643–1652)

I. The Wesminster Confession

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. –WCF 1:X



II. Background

A. Queen Elizabeth (1533–1603)

1. Cleaning up the mess Mary (Bloody Mary) had left – Catholics and Protestants
2. Held together the tension between the conservatives who sought to maintain ancient beliefs and practices and the Calvinist Protestants who wanted to see Reformed Theology penetrate all of England
3. Since Elizabeth had no direct heir, she declared her legitimate successor to be James VI, King of Scotland (who became James I of England upon her death in 1603)

B. King James I (1566–1625)

1. Conflicts
 - a. James, with considerable influence in Scotland, wanted to unite Scotland with England (and Ireland)
 - b. While politically this was not a popular move, it was popular with the Reformers since Reformed teaching had permeated and been accepted in Scotland
 - c. Reformers felt like now was the time!
 - d. Fear and threat of Roman Catholicism making a come back (1605 Gunpowder Plot: many Catholics arrested for planting kegs of gunpowder, but disguised as wine barrels, under the room where the King and Parliament convened)
 - e. On-going tension between the church (Anglican Church and its bishops) and the state (House of Commons of which many were Puritans)
2. Lack of unity among the Reformers
 - a. Reformed Calvinists
 - b. Radical Protestants: Puritans
 - Called “Puritans” because they wanted to see the church pure
 - Famous Puritans include: John Bunyun, Matthew Henry, John Owen
 - Pilgrims that sailed on the Mayflower were Puritans
 - c. Even more radical Protestants: Anabaptists
3. Mixed feelings about James I
 - a. Reformers favored his desire to unite the church

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b. Reformers didn't like James' character

4. KJV published in 1611 and considered the authorized version for England

C. **King Charles I (1600–1649)**

1. Inherited the conflicts from his father and only added to them

a. Sympathetic to the Catholics

b. Persecution against the Puritans

2. War ensued between the Crown (Charles and a Catholic Army he conscripted from Ireland) and Parliament (who received help from the Scots and by forming their own army)

a. Oliver Cromwell: a Puritan who created the "Model Army"

In January 1645 Oliver Cromwell proposed to Parliament that a new army be set up... The New Model Army was to be raised through conscription and paid for by taxation. Around 22,000 strong, its infantry would consist of twelve regiments and 14,000 men; the cavalry, eleven regiments and 6,600 men; and 1,000 dragoons or mounted infantry. All these men were to be properly trained and dressed in a red uniform, the first time the famous "redcoat" was seen on the battlefield. This new professional force overcame the reluctance of the local militias to fight outside their own counties, and soon became a highly mobile, motivated army. (from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Naseby>)

b. Defeated Charles I at the Battle of Naseby (1645)

III. The Westminster Assembly

A. Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly

June 12, 1643, the Parliament passed an act entitled "An Ordinance of the Lords and Commons in Parliament for the calling of an Assembly of learned and godly divines and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament, for the settlement of the Government and Liturgy of the Church of England, and for the indicating and clearing of the doctrine of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations." The persons who were to constitute this Assembly were named in the ordinance. They embraced the finest representatives, with two or three possible exceptions, of the Church of

Puritans and Separatists

Keith L. Sprunger



The Lord has more truth yet to break forth out of his holy Word.



John Robinson to the Pilgrims, as they set sail for America

People had often complained about various abuses in English religion in the Middle Ages. The Church of England, as established by Elizabeth I, was quite unsatisfactory to Roman Catholics and also to more extreme Protestants. The second group desired a fully Reformed church, more on the lines of Calvin's at Geneva. Those who worked to purify and reform the church beyond what the government had established were called 'Puritans'.

The first Puritans

The Elizabethan Puritans, working from within the Church of England, mostly wanted to abolish religious ceremonies thought to be remnants from Roman Catholicism—the use of the cross in baptism, the

surplice, kneeling at communion. Many of the Puritans questioned whether there was any biblical authority for bishops. They wanted the Reformed pattern of church government, by elders and synods, with stricter discipline.

During the first years of Elizabeth's reign, the Puritan-minded clergy and lay members of the Church of England had strong support in Parliament, and high hopes of achieving their reforms. Their leaders included Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) and William Perkins (1558-1602).

Elizabeth I was unwilling to allow changes along Puritan lines, and King James I was equally adamant against Puritans. 'I will make them conform themselves,' he threatened, 'or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse.' The main part of the Puritan movement still survived within the Church of England. Many Puritans only marginally conformed to Anglicanism: they were very much on the defensive.

A pro-Anglican drawing contrasts the 'Orthodox true Minister' preaching in church, with the separatist 'Seducer and false Prophet' preaching from a tavern window.



From *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity*. ©1977. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Notes

the age. Subsequently about twenty-one ministers were added to make up for the absence of others. The original list contained one hundred and fifty-one names - the names of ten lords, twenty commoners, and one hundred and twenty-one divines - and included, in fair proportions, Moderate Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, and Erastians. –from *The Origin and Formation of the Confession of Faith, WCF*

B. Purpose of the Assembly

1. To settle the conflict between Parliament (with Puritan beliefs) and the Crown (the King) along with the Church of England (bishops)
 - a. Representative government verses royal absolutism
 - b. Religious freedom versus ecclesiastical tyranny
2. to make the religions of England, Scotland, and Ireland as nearly uniform as possible and to reform religion “according to the Word of God, and the example of the best Reformed churches,” Parliament directed the Assembly to “consider among themselves of such a discipline and government as may be most agreeable to God’s holy word.” Thereupon the Assembly entered at once upon the work of preparing a Directory of Government, Worship and Discipline. –*The Origin and Formation of the Confession of Faith, WCF*

C. Setting of the Assembly

1. 1643-1649: five and a half years with over 1,000 sessions
2. Westminster Abbey in London, England

D. Members of the Assembly

1. 121 ministers
2. 30 laymen (20 from the House of Commons; 10 from the House of Lords)
3. 8 representatives from Scotland

E. Diversity (and some drama) in the Assembly

1. **Episcopalians**

- a. Majority were faithful to the Lord did not attend on behalf of the king (were there to support the true work of the Assembly)
- b. James Ussher, Arch-Bishop of Ireland, invited but did not attend; however, Ussher wrote the *Irish Articles of 1605* (for the church in Ireland), and these were used at the assembly
- c. Daniel Featly: Episcopal who attended the session in 1643 but was expelled when it was discovered he was a spy for the King

2. **The Presbyterians**

- a. Did most the work on the Confession of Faith
- b. Noted preachers and teachers in the Presbyterian Church

3. **Erastians**

- a. Erastianism: named after the 16th-century Swiss physician and theologian Thomas Erastus
- b. Believed the state (government) should control church discipline

4. **Independents:** Believed in the independency of the local churches (were against bishops and presbyteries)

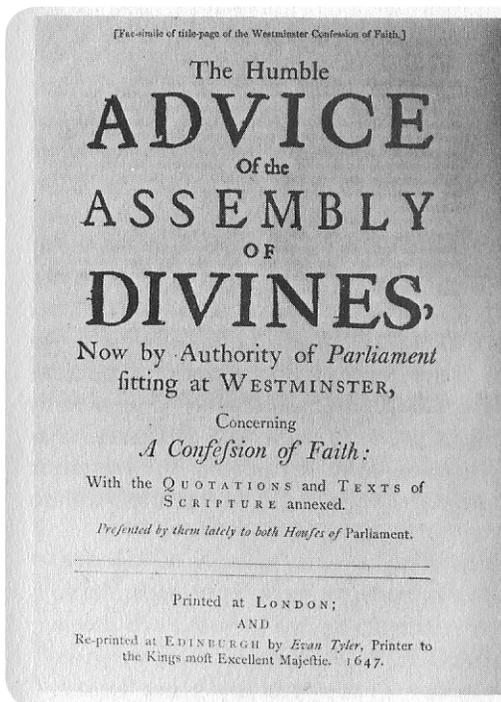
5. **The Scots**

- a. Had great influence in the assembly but did not vote
- b. Promoted presbyterian form of government

F. The work of the Assembly

1. **Prayer**
2. **Preaching and hearing sermons**

3. **Fasted:** Declared a once-a-month Assembly fast day
4. **Revision of the Thirty-nine Articles:** July through October 1643
 Thirty-nine Articles, the doctrinal statement of the Church of England. With the Book of Common Prayer, they present the liturgy and doctrine of that church. The Thirty-nine Articles developed from the Forty-two Articles, written by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in 1553 “for the avoiding of controversy in opinions.” These had been partly derived from the Thirteen Articles of 1538, designed as the basis of an agreement between Henry VIII and the German Lutheran princes, which had been influenced by the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530). (from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Thirty-nine-Articles>)
5. **The Four Points of Uniformity**
 - a. Form of Church Government (church polity): Oct. 1643 through April 1645
 - b. Directory for Public Worship: also Oct. 1643 through April 1645
 - c. Confession of Faith: April 1645 through Dec. 1646
 - Recognized Reformed Theology (sought to give it a formal definition)
 - Federal (or Covenant) Theology as the framework for Scripture
 - d. Formed the Catechisms (shorter and larger): Jan. 1647 through April 1648
6. After April 1648 the Assembly functioned as a ministerial screening committee



The Westminster Confession became one of the foremost documents of orthodox Calvinism, particularly in English-speaking countries.

from: Justo González. *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 2. page 183*

IV. Why this segment of history matters (or *should matter*) to me

- A. How does this lesson enhance your knowledge of God?
- B. In what new ways are you challenged in your own walk with Christ?