



The WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

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THE ASSEMBLY

The Westminster Assembly was the product not simply of the internal theological life of the church, but also of the economic, social, and political forces of the time. While it is impossible to ignore the religious factors that were involved in the upheavals of English history in the 1640's and 1650's, recent studies have made it apparent that the term *puritan Revolution* has to be qualified. Economic factors such as prices and land, political factors such as the increased power of Parliament or the converging of the interests of the gentry with the Puritan preachers, international factors such as the threat of continental powers played their parts, not

only for English Protestants but also for English traders.

The political preparation that preceded the Westminster Assembly was deliberate, partly from choice and partly from the force of events. The origins of the Westminster Assembly reach far back into the Puritan movement and especially into the conflict between the Puritans and the Stuart Kings, James I and Charles I.

The immediate background includes Charles' attempt to force the Prayer Book on the Church of Scotland in 1637 as part of his effort to bring the Church of Scotland into conformity with the Episcopal Church of England. This led to the National Covenant in Greyfriar's churchyard in Edinburgh (1638), to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1638) that protested the policies of Charles, and subsequently to the First Bishops' War

when Charles attempted to put down the Scottish rebellion. Charles now had to call Parliament to raise funds, but Charles adjourned Parliament when it began listing its grievances. The controversy with the Scots continued and the Second Bishops' War broke out in 1640. Scottish troops marched into England. Charles was forced once again to call Parliament in November 1640. This Parliament continued in session until it was purged by Cromwell in 1648 and dispersed by him in 1653. Parliament was also in conflict with the King on religious as well as political and social grounds, and it regarded the invading

were presented. On December 1, 1641, the House of Commons presented the King with the Grand Remonstrance, which outlined many of the theological and ecclesiastical grievances and called for a synod. 'And the better to effect the intended reformation, we desire there may be a general synod of the most grave, pious, learned and judicious divines of this island; assisted with some from foreign parts, professing the same religion with us, who may consider all things necessary for the peace and good government of the Church, and represent the results of their consultations unto the Parliament, to be

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Scottish army as an ally. This controversy erupted in a struggle that would continue until the King had been executed in 1649 and the Protectorate established in 1653.

The controversy between King and Parliament was rooted in the deep-seated religious, social, and political ferment in the whole of society. In the Root and Branch petition of 1640 a long list of theological and ecclesiastical grievances was presented to Parliament by his majesty's subjects in London and in several counties of the kingdom. Subsequently numerous petitions calling for reformation and for a synod to deal with the religious situation

there allowed of and confirmed, and receive the stamp of authority, thereby to find passage and obedience throughout the kingdom'.

In April 1642, Parliament began the selection of members for the prospective Assembly. In May 1642, a bill was introduced in Parliament calling for an Assembly, but the King withheld his approval. In June 1643, both houses of Parliament, disregarding the refusal of the King, agreed upon an ordinance calling the Assembly into existence. The ordinance is specific as to the task of the Assembly and as to its limitations.

Whereas, amongst the infinite blessings of Almighty God upon this nation, none is or can be more dear unto us than the purity of our religion; and for that, as yet, many things remain in the Liturgy. Discipline, and Government of the Church, which do necessarily require a further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained; and whereas it hath been declared and resolved by the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament, that the present Church-government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors, commissaries, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical officers depending upon the hierarchy, is evil, and justly offensive and burdensome to the kingdom, a great impediment to reformation and growth of religion, and very prejudicial to the state and government of this kingdom; and that therefore they are resolved that the same shall be taken away, and that such a government shall be settled in the Church as may be most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland, and other Reformed Churches abroad; and, for the better effecting hereof, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the Church of England from all false calumnies and aspersions, it is thought fit and necessary to call an Assembly of learned, godly, and judicious Divines, who, together with some members of both the Houses of Parliament, are to consult and advise of such matters and things,

touching the premises, as shall be proposed unto them by both or either of the Houses of Parliament, and to give their advice and counsel therein to both or either of the said Houses, when, and as often as they shall be thereunto required.

...the said persons, or so many of them as shall be so assembled or sit, shall have power and authority, and are hereby likewise enjoined, from time to time during this present Parliament, or until further order be taken by both the said Houses, to confer and treat among themselves of such matters and things, touching and concerning the Liturgy, Discipline, and Government of the Church of England, or the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the same from all false aspersions and misconstructions, as shall be proposed unto them by both or either of the said houses of Parliament, and no other; and to deliver their opinions and advices of, or touching the matters aforesaid, as shall be most agreeable to the word of God, to both or either of the said Houses, from time to time, in such manner and sort as by both or either of the said houses of Parliament shall be required; and the same not to divulge, by printing, writing, or otherwise, without the consent of both or either House of Parliament.

...That this Ordinance, or any thing therein contained, shall not give unto the persons aforesaid, or any of them, nor shall they in this Assembly assume to exercise any jurisdiction, power, or authority

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ecclesiastical whatsoever, or any other power than is herein particularly expressed.

The Assembly convened on July 1, 1643, in the face of a prohibition and warning by Charles I, with a sermon by the Prolocutor (presiding officer), William Twisse. The first work of the Assembly was a revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to remove any possibility of Arminian, Pelagian, or Roman interpretation.

Arminianism and Romanism were slogans that connoted quite as much as they denoted.

Arminianism gets its name from Arminius, the Dutch theologian who sought to modify the doctrine of predestination that was held by Reformed orthodoxy; but English Arminianism cannot be identified with the views of Arminius. It did emphasize human freedom and tended, as Tuckney charged, to make the love of God so free as to make it shallow. But Arminianism was also identified with a more relaxed attitude toward theology and also toward the discipline of the Christian life. It was likewise associated with episcopacy and the divine right of kings. Pelagianism was closely related to Arminianism in popular

theology, though Arminius had been careful to define his doctrine in distinction from pelagianism, insisting that man could not turn to God without divine grace. Pelagius, in his controversy with Augustine in the fifth century, had exalted man's freedom and his capacity to respond to the love of God. He denied original sin, and he limited grace to revelation and man's created capacities.

Romanism specifically referred to those elements in the liturgy and government of the church that the Puritans did not feel had been sufficiently reformed. It too had political implications. There were Roman Catholics with great influence in the government, and many hoped England would be a Catholic nation again. The role of Catholics in government was also a sensitive issue in foreign policy, especially when Holland, with which many English sympathised, was still in conflict with Catholic Spain. Furthermore, the Thirty Years War, which Protestants understood as an effort to exterminate the Protestant community, was still in process when the Assembly met. Arminianism and Romanism had specific theological references, but they also had a range of social and political implications that a secular culture such as ours finds difficulty

understanding. The effort to eliminate any remnants of either from the confession of the church was directed to a broad range of concerns and would orient the whole work of the Assembly. By October 12 the revision of the first fifteen Articles had been completed and work had begun on the sixteenth. The work was never completed, but the debates and discussions served as a useful foundation for the later work on the Confession and Catechisms.

A new situation that had long been anticipated, and hoped for by some, was the occasion of another assignment. Parliament, faring badly in the war with the King during the summer of 1643, needed the support of Scotland. On August 17 a Solemn League and Covenant was approved by the Scottish Parliament, and in September it was approved by the English Parliament. The object of the Solemn League and Covenant was the defence and 'preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government...(and) the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland...according to the Word of God, and the examples of the reformed Churches, and (the bringing of) the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction of uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of Church government, directory for worship and catechising...' On September 25, 1643, members of the Assembly and the Scottish commissioners subscribed the Solemn League and Covenant. From this

point the Assembly took a new direction.

The Solemn League and Covenant meant that the Assembly would devote a major proportion of its time to church government and worship. In these areas members of the Assembly had their deepest differences. In the end the Assembly drew up a Form of Presbyterial Government in which the Presbyterianism of Melville, Cartwright, and Travers was tempered both by the Congregationalists and by the Erastians who insisted that the church's power was limited to moral persuasion. It also replaced the *Book of Common Prayer* with a Directory for Worship, that, in place of fixed forms, contained directions for worship, some of which were compromises or were ambiguous. The real consensus of the Assembly was in the area of theology, and in the Confession and Catechisms it reached its highest technical achievement.

It is important to note that the Assembly was an appointment of Parliament, not an ecclesiastical synod. Its purpose was to advise Parliament, not to act in the name of the church. Its charter allowed it no freedom of initiative and permitted advice only on such things as were proposed to the Assembly by Parliament. Members were not to divulge by printing or writing or otherwise their proceedings except with permission of Parliament. The Assembly was explicitly prohibited from assuming 'to exercise any jurisdiction, power, or authority ecclesiastical whatsoever'. The

members were appointed by Parliament. The lay members attended as members of Parliament, not as church officers, except for the Scottish lay commissioners. Robert Baillie, a Scottish commissioner, observed, '...this is no proper Assembly, but a meeting called by the Parliament to advise them in what things they are asked...'

The Assembly carried on its theological work, however, in splendid isolation from the political and social events of the time. There is no indication that the members were put under any political pressure on theological issues. This was due to the theological consensus that was shared by

the theologians and their culture. It does not mean that the theology was indifferent to political and social crises.

The preaching of the members of the Assembly to Parliament and to the public always included political and social applications. Indeed, seldom has preaching been so directly applied to the events of the day. The members of the Assembly understood the happenings of their time in terms of their theology and the providence of God, and they believed that God would fulfil his purposes in England either through reform or through apocalyptic events.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1603** Accession of James I.
- 1625** Accession of Charles I.
- 1637** Imposition of Prayer Book on Church of Scotland.
- 1639** First Bishops War requires King to call 'Short' Parliament (1640).
- 1640** Second Bishops War. Scottish army marches into England.
- 1640, Nov** King compelled to call Long Parliament.
- 1640, Dec** London Petition, calling for abolishment of episcopacy, root, and branches.
- 1641, Nov** Parliament passes Grand Remonstrance.
- 1643, May** Ordinance calling for Assembly introduced in the Commons.
Passes June 12, 1643.
- 1643, July** Assembly convened.
- 1643, Aug** Solemn League and Covenant approved by Scottish Parliament.
- 1643, Sept** Solemn League and Covenant approved by English Parliament.
- 1643, Sep** Members of Assembly and Parliament and Scottish Commissioners subscribe to Solemn League and Covenant.
- 1643, Jul** Revision of first fifteen of Thirty-nine Articles.
- 1643** Work began on Form of Government and Directory of Worship.
- 1644, Aug** Committee appointed on Confession of Faith.
- 1646, Nov** Confession of Faith finished and presented to Parliament on December 4-7, 1646.
- 1647, April** Minutes note that Confession finished with proof texts.
- 1647, April** Scripture proofs for Confession given to Parliament.
- 1647, Aug** Confession approved by Church of Scotland.
- 1647, Oct** Larger Catechism completed.
- 1647, Nov** Shorter Catechism presented to House of Commons.
- 1648, Apr** Catechisms presented in final forms.
- 1648** Purge of Parliament by Oliver Cromwell.
- 1649, Feb** Last numbered Plenary Session of the Assembly.
- 1649, Feb** Members of the Assembly met to examine and license candidates for the ministry.
- 1653, Dec** Oliver Cromwell proclaimed Lord Protector.

THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT

The Solemn League and Covenant, for reformation and defence of religion, the honour and happiness of the King, and the peace and safety of the three kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland; agreed upon by commissioners from the Parliament and Assembly of Divines in England, with Commissioners of the Convention of Estates and General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and by both Houses of Parliament, and the Assembly of Divines in England, and taken and subscribed by them anno 1643; and thereafter, by the said authority, taken and subscribed by all ranks in Scotland and England the same year; and ratified by act of the Parliament of Scotland anno 1644. (And again renewed in Scotland, with an acknowledgement of sins and engagements to duties, by all ranks, anno 1648, and by Parliament, 1649; and taken and subscribed by King Charles II., at Spey, June 23, 1650; and at Scon, January 1, 1651).

religion, having before our eyes the glory of God, and the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST, the honour and happiness of the king's majesty and his posterity, and the true public liberty, safety, and peace of the kingdom, wherein every one's private condition is included: and calling to mind the treacherous and bloody plots, conspiracies, attempts, and practices of the enemies of GOD, against the true religion and professors thereof in all places, especially in these three kingdoms, ever since the reformation of religion; and how much their rage, power, and presumption, are of late, and at this time, increased and exercised, whereof the deplorable state of the Church and kingdom of Ireland, the distressed state of the Church and kingdom of England, and the dangerous state of the Church and kingdom of Scotland, are present and public testimonies: we have now at last (after other means of supplication, remonstrance, protestation, and sufferings), for the preservation of ourselves and our religion from utter ruin and destruction, according to the commendable practice of these kingdoms in former times, and the example of GOD'S people in other nations, after mature deliberation, resolved and determined to enter into a Mutual and Solemn League and

“... having before our eyes the glory of God, and the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST”

'We, noblemen, barons, knights, gentlemen, citizens, burgesses, ministers of the Gospel, and commons of all sorts, in the kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland, by the providence of GOD living under one king, and being of one reformed

Covenant, wherein we all subscribe, and each one of us for himself, with our hands lifted up to the Most High GOD, do swear,-

1. That we shall sincerely, really, and constantly, through the grace of GOD,

endeavour, in our several places and callings, the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, against our common enemies; the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the Word of GOD, and the example of the best reformed Churches; and shall endeavour to bring the Churches of GOD in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, Confession of Faith, Form of Church Government, Directory for Worship and Catechising; that we, and our posterity after us, may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us.

2. That we shall, in like manner, without respect of persons, endeavour the extirpation of Popery, Prelacy (that is, Church government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors and commissioners, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and all other ecclesiastical officers depending on that hierarchy), superstition, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of Godliness; lest we partake in other men's sins, and thereby be in danger to receive of their plagues; and that the Lord may be one, and his name one, in the three kingdoms.

3. We shall, with the same sincerity, reality, and constancy, in our several vocations, endeavour, with our estates and lives, mutually to preserve the rights and privileges of the Parliaments, and the liberties of the kingdoms; and to preserve and defend the king's majesty's person and authority, in the preservation and defence of the true religion and liberties of

the kingdoms; that the world may bear witness with our consciences of our loyalty, and that we have no other thoughts or intentions to diminish his majesty's just power and greatness.

4. We shall also, with all faithfulness, endeavour the discovery of all such as have been or shall be incendiaries, malignants, or evil instruments, be hindering the reformation of religion, dividing the king from his people, or one of the kingdoms from another, or making any faction or parties among the people, contrary to this League and Covenant; that they may be brought to public trial, and receive condign punishment, as the degree of their offences shall require or deserve, or the supreme judicatories of both kingdoms respectively, or others having power from them for that effect, shall judge convenient.

5. And whereas the happiness of a blessed peace between these kingdoms, denied in former times to our progenitors, is, by the good providence of GOD, granted unto us, and hath been lately concluded and settled by both parliaments; we shall, each one of us, according to our place and interest, endeavour that they may remain conjoined in a firm peace and union to all posterity; and that justice may be done upon the wilful opposers thereof, in manner expressed in the precedent article.

6. We shall also, according to our places and callings, in this common cause of religion, liberty, and peace of the kingdoms, assist and defend all those that enter into this League and Covenant, in the maintaining and pursuing thereof; and shall not suffer ourselves, directly or indirectly, by whatsoever combination, persuasion, or terror, to be divided or withdrawn from

this blessed union and conjunction, whether to make defection to the contrary part, or to give ourselves to a detestable indifference or neutrality in this cause, which so much concerneth the glory of God, the good of the kingdom, and honour of the king; but shall, all the days of our lives, zealously and constantly continue therein against all opposition, and promote the same, according to our power, against all lets and impediments whatsoever; and what we are not able ourselves to suppress or overcome, we shall reveal and make known, that it may be timely prevented or removed: All which we shall do as in the sight of God.

And, because these kingdoms are guilty of many sins and provocations against GOD, and his Son JESUS CHRIST, as is too manifest by our present distresses and dangers, the fruits thereof; we profess and declare, before GOD and the world, our unfeigned desire to be humbled for our own sins, and for the sins of these kingdoms; especially that we have not, as we ought, valued the inestimable benefit of the Gospel; that we have not laboured for the purity and power thereof; and that we have not endeavoured to receive Christ in our hearts, not to walk worthy of him in our lives; which are the causes of other sins and transgression so much abounding amongst us: and our true and

unfeigned purpose, desire, and endeavour, for ourselves, and all others under our power and charge, both in public and private, in all duties we owe to GOD and man, to amend our lives, and each one to go before another in the example of a real reformation; that the Lord may turn away his wrath and heavy indignation, and establish these Churches and kingdoms in truth and peace. And this Covenant we make in the presence of ALMIGHTY GOD, the Searcher of all hearts, with a true intention to perform the same, as we shall answer at that great day, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed; most humbly beseeching the LORD to strengthen us by his HOLY SPIRIT for this end, and to bless our desires and proceedings with such success, as may be deliverance and safety to his people, and encouragement to other Christian Churches, groaning under, or in danger of the yoke of antichristian tyranny, to join in the same or like association and covenant, to the glory of GOD, the enlargement of the kingdom of JESUS CHRIST, and the peace and tranquillity of Christian kingdoms, and commonwealths.

This document can also be found, along with other documents, in the volume entitled *'The Westminster Confession of Faith'*.