

...'. Last, we must be students of the Word for '... the mysteries of God ... cannot be discerned in themselves ... but we behold them only in his word ...'.¹⁹ Are we beholding wondrous things out of God's law?

We have seen from this brief and cursory glance at Calvin's thoughts on what it means to know God, that it means much more than to know *about* God. To be Reformed or to be a Calvinist it is not enough '... if the knowledge of Christ dwell on the tongue or flutter in the brain'.²⁰ It must be that knowledge which consists principally in the sense of the heart. Is this the Calvinism we hold to today?

Footnotes

1. Wallace, R. S. 1987, 'Calvin's Approach to Theology', Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology,

Special Study Entitled: The Challenge of Evangelical Theology.

2. Sermon on Eph. 3:14-19.
3. Sermon on Eph. 1:4-6.
4. Comm. on Is. 6:1.
5. Comm. on Is. 6:1.
6. Comm. on Is. 6:5.
7. Comm. on Is. 6:2.
8. Comm. on Jn. 14:21.
9. Comm. on Jn. 14:23.
10. Comm. on Lk. 24:32ff.
11. Comm. on Lk. 24:32ff.
12. Comm. on Lk. 24:32ff.
13. Comm. on Ex. 33:18ff.
14. Comm. on Ex. 33:18ff.
15. Comm. on Acts 7:55ff.
16. Comm. on Acts 7:55ff.
17. Sermon on Eph. 1:15-18.
18. Sermon on Eph. 1:15-18.
19. List 3.2.14.
20. Sermon on Eph. 3:14-19.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

Wayne R. Spear

July 1, 1993 marked the 350th anniversary of the beginning of the Westminster Assembly, a gathering whose work has profoundly shaped the theology of those churches which bear the name Presbyterian, as well as others such as Congregationalists and some Baptists.

The Westminster Assembly was not a regular ecclesiastical assembly but an advisory commission called by the English Parliament to propose legislation for the restructuring of the Church of England in a time of great social and political turmoil. The Assembly was composed of ministers ('divines') and laymen who were members of the Houses of Parliament. They met in Westminster Abbey for more than five and a half years, and during that time they produced documents which are well known and in use today: The Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism and Shorter Catechism.

The commemoration of this anniversary of the beginning of the Westminster Assembly, it is hoped, will stimulate new interest in the history of the Assembly, and new study of the remarkable documents which they produced.

The Background of the Assembly

The Westminster Assembly did not meet in a place of quiet for undisturbed theological reflection. Rather, it met in the nation's capital, a stone's throw from the Houses of Parliament, in a time of civil war in England.

James I of England, famous for his reluctant support of the 'King James' version of the Bible, was succeeded on the throne by his son Charles, who was more ruthless but less politically astute than his father. Charles I, with the eager assistance of William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, tried to rule without the assistance or interference of Parliament for 11 years. Along with economic policies which many regarded as ruinous, he also followed a course of revising the liturgy of the Church of England to make it more like many practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Those who resisted were punished by imprisonment, exile and mutilation.

The resisters were usually part of a group within the Church of England known to their enemies as 'Puritans'. Deeply influenced by the principles of the

Calvinistic Reformation, they had struggled since the reign of Elizabeth I to bring their church more closely into harmony with biblical teaching. Through that time, many future members of Parliament had been influenced by the Puritan preachers. In the 1640s, resistance to the policies of Charles I moved from the pulpits and the streets to Parliament, especially the House of Commons. John Pym, Speaker of the House, was a convinced Puritan—and later a member of the Westminster Assembly.

Charles' treasury was drained by his efforts to suppress the revolution of the Covenanters in Scotland which began with the National Covenant of 1638, so he reluctantly called the English Parliament into session in order to obtain more tax money. The Parliament refused to grant revenues unless Charles would agree to respond to their grievances. Among their demands was a change in church government, for the Puritans who led the House of Commons were determined to remove from power the bishops in whom Charles found some of his strongest allies.

In 1642, when negotiations failed, Charles attempted to invade the House of Commons to arrest the leaders. The armed guards turned his forces back, and Charles withdrew from London. The great English Civil War had begun.

The Calling and Operation of the Assembly

The Parliament (excluding those who supported the King) adopted an ordinance on June 12, 1643, calling together an assembly of 'learned and godly Divines, and others', for assistance in establishing a government in the Church of England which would be 'most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church' (Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, p. ix). The ordinance named 10 members of the House of Lords, 20 members of the House of Commons and 121 ministers.

Not all of those named actually attended; the King forbade attendance, and some of those nominated obeyed. Sixty-nine gathered for the opening session. As the time the Assembly met stretched out into years, some grew ill or weary. The usual attendance was probably around 60.

Parliament had named the moderator of the Assembly and two scribes. Almost unlimited debate was permitted; members often complained of the length of the debates. Thomas Goodwin told his brothers that if they studied more they would debate less! Decisions were by majority vote. One notable vote which passed by that margin was in favor of women deacons; the action was quietly dropped in the final editing.

The rules provided that a member who disagreed with any action could have his dissent recorded, and give his reasons. In the time of civil war, that measure meant more than the relief of conscience. If the Parliament lost the war, members of the Assembly would face trials for treason, and a written record of dissent might prove helpful.

At first the Assembly met in the ornate chapel of Henry VII, behind the main sanctuary of the Abbey. When cold weather came, they moved to the smaller Jerusalem Chamber, which had 'a good fire' (Robert

Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, p. 107). There they sat according to rank, the Lords nearest the fire.

Views Represented in the Assembly

Historians frequently write of the 'parties' of the Assembly. These were not organized groups or caucuses, but rather shifting alliances which represented a number of differing points of view on certain issues, usually having to do with church government.

Some of those named as members of the Assembly were committed to episcopal church government, including three bishops. None of them participated in the main work of the Assembly.

A number of the English ministers were 'pragmatic Presbyterians', open to presbyterial church government as the only viable option in the circumstances, but favored limited rule by bishops. For example, Edward Reynolds, who helped draft the Westminster Confession, later served as Bishop of Norwich.

A small number of Assembly members were called Erastians. They defended the supremacy of the civil magistrate in the church. Their most eminent spokesman was a member of Parliament, John Selden. They had powerful allies in Parliament, where there was much distrust of a church which would operate with some independence from the state.

There were many in the Assembly who were committed to presbyterian church government as a matter of conviction. They had been taught by the writings of the Elizabethan Puritan leaders Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers. On most matters they agreed with the Scottish commissioners.

Another small but influential group was the English Independents (the name was given by their opponents; they held that theirs was a 'middle way' between independency and presbyterianism. Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye were their most prominent spokesmen. Dissenters in Scotland, including Reformed Presbyterians, later came to adopt views of church membership which resembled theirs.

Scottish Participation in the Assembly

The members of the Westminster Assembly were Englishmen; they met on English soil, to debate the doctrine, worship and government of the Church of England. The work of the Assembly, however, had its most lasting effect in the Church of Scotland and her daughter churches. God's providence used military and political developments to bring this surprising outcome.

In 1643, the English Parliament seemed to be losing the war against the King. They sent a delegation to Scotland, which had already successfully resisted Charles, to obtain the help of the Scottish Army. The treaty under which Scotland agreed to send assistance was called the 'Solemn League and Covenant'. Its terms included a commitment by the countries to seek to bring the churches of England, Ireland and Scotland into 'the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of church government, directory for worship and catechising'.

To implement that pledge, commissioners were

sent to participate in the Westminster Assembly. The commissioners were ruling elders Lord Maitland and Archibald Johnston and ministers Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie and George Gillespie. They were very active in the debates and committee work of the Assembly, but did not vote.

As the Assembly completed work on the various documents, they were sent not only to the English Parliament but also to the Scottish Parliament and to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

The Documents of the Assembly

The composition of a new confession was not the primary purpose for which the Assembly was called. However, the situation changed with the adoption of the Solemn League and Covenant, which called for a common confession of faith. Neither the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England nor the Scots Confession of 1560 was deemed suitable for the purpose.

The Assembly spent nearly three years in producing the confession which came to bear its name, from August 1644 through April 1647. The confession embodied the Reformed faith as developed in Geneva by John Calvin and passed on by such British theologians as Whitaker (the theologian quoted most frequently in the debates), Perkins and Ames.

The Westminster Confession of Faith was unique among the confessions of the Reformation in using covenant theology as a basic theological framework.

The Christians' education materials of the 17th Century were catechisms. Several members had published catechisms of their own before the Westminster Assembly doctrines of the confession by way of catechism. After an extensive effort to write a single catechism, the Assembly decided upon two: A short and plain one for those who were 'common and unlearned', and another for those 'of understanding' (Mitchell, *Westminster Assembly*, p. 418).

The Larger Catechism was debated between April and October of 1647. It is known chiefly for the minute detail of its exposition of the Ten Commandments. It has many beautiful features which deserve to be better known. For example, it echoes the Heidelberg Catechism in treating obedience to God's law as the way in which a regenerate person may express thanksgiving for God's grace in the gospel. It has questions on the doctrine of revelation, and on the church (missing in the Shorter catechism). The application of redemption is treated under the themes of union and communion with Christ, emphasizing the experiential dimension of Christian faith.

The Shorter Catechism was prepared beginning in August, 1647, but debated for only a brief time in later October and November before being approved. The Shorter Catechism was in Scotland the most popular and perhaps the most influential of the Westminster Assembly's products. It is therefore ironic that the Scottish commissioners had very little to do with its composition; most of them had returned home before the catechism came before the Assembly.

Other documents produced by the Assembly are not so well known. The primary goal in the calling of

the Assembly was to produce a plan for reformation of the government of the church. On that subject there was considerable disagreement among the various members. The Assembly was largely occupied in debating matters of church government from September 1643 through December 1644. The material they had approved in that period is now found in the document entitled 'The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government'. That document was a kind of progress report, not yet put into final form.

The Assembly's final word on church government, including many practical directions and a section on church censures, is found in the Directory for Government. This document never received official approval in either England or Scotland, and thus is almost unknown today. It deserved more attention, as expressing more completely the views of the Assembly, and reflects a more careful editorial process.

The Puritans were concerned that the worship of the church should be 'according to the Word of God'. While appreciative of many features of the Book of Common Prayer, they were committed to eliminating those features which seemed to promote a return to the practices of the unreformed church. The Westminster Assembly was asked by Parliament to produce a 'directory for worship'. Committee work on the directory began in December 1643, and the Assembly was able to approve the completed document a year later. The directory included sections on the public reading of Scripture, prayer, preaching (with a splendid description of 'Puritan plain-style preaching' and the necessary qualities of the preacher's work), the sacraments, the Lord's Day, marriage, care of the sick and burial of the dead, and days of public fasting and thanksgiving (a prominent feature of the piety of that time).

The 'Directory for the Public Worship of God' had a paragraph on the singing of Psalms in praise. To implement uniformity in praise, the Assembly produced a metrical psalter. Francis Rous, a lay member of the Assembly, had published the Psalms in meter. The Assembly revised his work, and directed that that book alone be used in the public worship of the church.

The Outcome of the Assembly

The Westminster Assembly began with high hopes that Reformed Christianity would prevail in the British Isles. In God's providence, those who held such hopes were disappointed. The reform legislation prepared by the Westminster Assembly received qualified approval from the English Parliament, and was more fully ratified in Scotland. That approval was short-lived.

In the Civil War, a cavalry commander named Oliver Cromwell won many notable victories, and with his military success his political power advanced. When he became Lord Protector, Cromwell, a congregationalist, put an end to efforts to install presbyterian government in the Church of England. When he invaded Scotland, he restricted the operation of the presbyterian government already in place.

Cromwell's regime was succeeded by the tyrannical reign of Charles II, who repudiated his own oath of

adherence to the Covenant and fiercely persecuted all who remained faithful.

When William and Mary came to the throne in the Revolution of 1688, the Church of England retained the episcopal government, the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles which had characterized its existence before the Westminster Assembly met.

In Scotland, the Westminster Confession was made the official creed of the church, but none of the other Westminster documents was made part of the ecclesiastical law of the church. The other documents, however, continued to have a significant impact in Scotland. Except for the Directory for Government, they were found in a collection of documents, under the title 'The Westminster Confession of Faith', which has almost continuously been in print up to the present time.

The dissenting Presbyterian Churches in Scotland, and Presbyterian Churches in other countries, have given official status not only to the Confession but also to a number of the other Westminster documents. Especially the Shorter Catechism has been known

and loved, since memorization of it has been a standard requirement for children in Presbyterian churches. Interest in and discussion of the Westminster standards in our time seems to be increasing.

The history of the Westminster Assembly is both humbling and encouraging for Christians. It is humbling, because it contains the story of the failure of earnest believers to achieve what they set out to do: the full reformation of the church 'according to the Word of God'. But it is also encouraging, because the Lord has used the work of the Assembly to give theological clarity and biblical direction to Reformed churches (and others!) for three and a half centuries. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways our ways. To Him be glory for ever and ever! Amen.

Dr. Spear is professor of systematic theology and homiletics at The Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pa., and a member of the NAPARC Westminster Assembly Commemoration Committee.

MAN'S CHIEF END

Jay E. Adams

I have had the experience of asking diverse groups of pastors, from a large variety of backgrounds, 'What is man's chief end?' Uniformly, and without hesitation, the answer is, 'To glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever'. Usually they do not repeat the introductory words to the answer, 'Man's chief end is . . .'. But they have the answer anyway. And that's what counts!

There is something significant about that fact. Here are people with Calvinistic and Arminian theologies, as well as nondescript theologies, all uniting in this great affirmation—and, basically, in the words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. That says something for its powerful influence upon the Church of Jesus Christ.

But in many other ways today the church, while affirming the truth taught in the catechism, is departing from it in practice. This is a day in which Christians, perhaps more than ever before, rather than merely uttering the right words about man's chief end need to understand what those words mean and live them out in everyday actions.

Listen to any discussion about the problems of believers. Read the average book appearing on the shelf of Christian bookstores. You will discover that the focus, far from glorifying God, instead probably contains all sorts of statements about man's end that flatly contradict the affirmation in the catechism. They don't always begin with the statement, 'Man's chief end is . . .'. Nevertheless these statements assert that man's purpose in life is 'to find happiness', or 'to

feel good about himself', or 'to obtain security and significance'. Clearly there is something quite different about those answers. Nowhere does the Bible teach any such thing.

What is the problem? You can see what has gone wrong by comparing the direction of the catechism's answer with that of those listed above. In the one case, it is God-directed; in the other, man-directed. In the one case, God is the object of life; in the other, man.

Today we live in a time of unparalleled self-centeredness. This humanistic world philosophy has permeated the church, so that the dominant concern no longer is to glorify God but to become self-actualized. It is, therefore, time to re-emphasize the truth taught in Question One: Man's chief end—not his *only end*, but his *chief end*—is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Note well, the catechism answer does not say, 'Glorify God, and enjoy the world—or yourself—forever.' It does not say that part of man's purpose is enjoyment. What it says is that man should enjoy God. That means an enjoyment of His being, His works, His Word—the kind of enjoyment found in the words of the psalmists. Man is not capable of finding true, lasting joy in perishable things, or in associations with other sinful creatures. It is only in fellowship with the God, who made Him, that one can experience such joy. And even that, as the catechism seems to say, is a derivative—a by-product—of *glorifying God*.