

American Presbyterian History

Week 2 – The Westminster Assembly

Trinity Presbyterian Church

1. Historical Setting of the Westminster Assembly

a. English Reformation

- i. It was a series of events in England during the 1500s which resulted in the Church of England breaking away from Roman Catholic Church.
- ii. It was initially sparked by King Henry VIII's desire for a divorce, but ultimately led to reformation in the Church of England.

b. The Puritans

- i. The Puritans were those during the 16th and 17th century who thought the English Reformation hadn't gone far enough.
- ii. The Puritans were not agreed on the reforms.

c. Political Timeline

- i. England and Scotland were united under one crown from 1625 to 1649.
- ii. English Civil War took place from 1642 to 1651. *This is the timeframe of the Westminster Assembly, which began in 1643.*
- iii. The Commonwealth of England existed from 1649 to 1660.
- iv. The restoration of the monarchy happened in 1660 with Charles II.

2. Effort in Unity: Forming the Westminster Assembly

- a. In the midst of the civil war, this was an effort by Parliament to seek advice on further reforms of the church, as an effort to unite a divided church.
- b. The English Parliament, without the king's consent, called for the assembly on June 12, 1643.
- c. The members of the assembly were known as the Westminster Divines, comprised of 121 ministers of the Church of England, 6 commissioners representing the Church of Scotland, and 30 members of Parliament.
- d. The original intent was for the assembly to propose amendments to the Thirty-Nine Articles, which was the existing confession of faith for the Church of England. It quickly became clear to the assembly that they would need to do more than that.
- e. The assembly first convened in 1643 and conducted its work in the Westminster Abby in London.

3. The Work of the Assembly

- a. *A Form of Church Government* was completed in 1643
- b. *A Directory for Public Worship* was completed in 1644

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- c. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* was completed in 1647.
 - d. The *Larger Catechism* and *Shorter Catechism* were completed in 1648
 - e. This work of drafting documents was finished by 1648, but the assembly continued to sit until about 1653, primarily to examine ministers for ordination.
4. Ongoing Significance of the Assembly's Work
- a. Church of England initially accepted it, but was not able to implement it before its repudiation upon the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.
 - b. Church of Scotland
 - i. Initially accepted all documents, though in 1690, after the Glorious Revolution, they only affirmed the Westminster Confession of Faith.
 - ii. There are other denominations in Scotland that have formed that have affirmed the Westminster Standards (e.g. The Free Church of Scotland).
 - c. American Presbyterianism
 - i. First adopted the confession and catechisms in 1729.
 - ii. Revised in 1789, 1887, and 1903.
 - iii. Some of the 1903 revisions were recalled by the OPC when it was founded in 1936; this is the same edition now also used by the PCA.
 - d. Congregationalists modified the confession, naming it the Savoy Declaration in 1658.
 - e. Baptists modified the confession, naming it the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.
5. Confessionalism
- a. Relationship to *sola scriptura*
 - b. What it means to be a confessional church
 - c. Strengths and weaknesses of being a confessional church

Next week... Scottish/English Presbyterian History