

Covenanted Uniformity in Religion

Covenanted Uniformity in Religion

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SCOTTISH
COMMISSIONERS ON THE ECCLESIOLOGY
OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

Wayne R. Spear



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SERIES PREFACE

Studies on the Westminster Assembly

The Westminster Assembly (1643–1653) met at a watershed moment in British history, at a time that left its mark on the English state, the Puritan movement, and the Churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Assembly also proved to be a powerful force in the methodization and articulation of Reformed theology, and the writings of the gathering created and popularized doctrinal distinctions and definitions that—to an astonishing degree and with surprising rapidity—entered the consciousness and vocabulary of mainstream Protestantism.

The primary aim of this series is to produce accessible, scholarly monographs on the Westminster Assembly, its members, and the ideas that the Assembly promoted. Some years ago, Richard Muller challenged post-Reformation historians to focus on identifying “the major figures and... the major issues in debate—and then sufficiently [raise] the profile of the figures or issues in order to bring about an alteration of the broader surveys of the era.” This is precisely the remit of this Studies on the Westminster Assembly series, and students of post-Reformation history in particular will be treated to a large corpus of material on the Westminster Assembly that will enable comparative studies in church practice, creedal formulation, and doctrinal development among Protestants.

This series will also include editions of classic Assembly studies, works that have shaped subsequent generations of scholars and are difficult to obtain at the present time; that encapsulate valuable research we cannot afford to lose; and that ask necessary questions and provide thoughtful answers with which current students of the Assembly must reckon.

It is our hope that this series—in both its new and reprinted monographs—will both exemplify and encourage a newly invigorated field of study to create essential reference works for scholars in multiple disciplines.

John Bower
Chad Van Dixhoorn

Introduction

The study which follows had its origin in my interest in theological and practical questions regarding the nature of the Christian church. The Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church and the Consultation on Church Union of the mainline American Protestant bodies are only the best known of many such efforts. Even among the more conservative churches, such as the one to which I belong, it has not been possible to remain immune from the necessity to reexamine the doctrine of the church.

A fresh look at the ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly should be useful to the church today. That Assembly, called by the English Parliament during the Civil War of the 1640s, was the culmination of the Puritan movement in England, which had sought for at least seventy-five years to achieve the “further reformation” of the Church of England. For more than five years, leading Puritan theologians and representatives of the Church of Scotland met together at Westminster Abbey to debate with great freedom concerning the government, worship, and doctrine of the church.

The view of the church advocated by the Westminster Assembly did not gain general acceptance in England, especially after Oliver Cromwell’s rise to power. However, when the Assembly’s documents were carried north to Scotland, most of them received official approval. Perhaps more importantly, they were revered by the people of Scotland, and by those who emigrated to Ulster, North America, and other parts of the world. The result was that the beliefs and practices of the English-speaking Presbyterian churches were strongly influenced by the work of the Westminster Assembly ever since. An underlying assumption of this study, therefore, is that an investigation of the work of the Westminster Assembly can make a contribution to the present reexamination of the nature of the church, especially for those whose ecclesiastical tradition has been shaped by English Puritanism or Scottish Presbyterianism.

Originally, it was my intention to study the Assembly’s “ecclesiology” in the broad sense of that term—that is, to examine everything that the Assembly had to say on the subject of the Christian church. As my research progressed, however, I found it necessary to narrow the field of investigation.

The first document produced by the Assembly was the "Form of Presbyterial Church-Government."¹ I soon realized that an intensive analysis of that document would be necessary before it could be used as a source of information for the Westminster Assembly's ecclesiology as a whole. There is an almost complete lack of literature concerning the document itself; I know of no published exposition of it. This stands in sharp contrast to the great number of works which have interpreted and explained the Assembly's Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. As a document that has been included among the subordinate standards of many of the Presbyterian churches, the Form of Church Government has not yet received a thorough and scholarly interpretation.

The nature of the Form of Church Government, however, is such that it requires careful investigation. It is a virtual mosaic whose bits and pieces are the sentences debated and passed by the Assembly over a period of many months and subsequently rearranged by two different editorial committees. In the process of redaction, many of the sentences approved by the Assembly in one context of discussion were inserted in quite another context in the finished document. Also, minor changes of wording or punctuation which were made during the editorial process sometimes obscured the real intention of the Assembly in voting approval of certain statements. In order to ascertain the intended meaning of the Assembly, therefore, it is necessary to gain knowledge of the debates in the Assembly which produced the propositions making up the document as it now stands.

The effort to gain a clear and accurate understanding of the process by which the Westminster Assembly produced its Form of Church Government has become the central focus of this project. It has proved to be a difficult and time-consuming task. Because of this, the term "ecclesiology" in the title must be understood in its narrower sense, as meaning "the study of the proper structure and operation of the church." With that understanding of the term, this study deals with the ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly *as expressed in the formulation of the Form of Church Government*. For a fuller understanding of the Assembly's view of the church, much more work still needs to be done, but my hope is that the present study will make a contribution toward that continuing task.

1. This document was first printed with the title *Propositions Concerning Church Government and Ordination of Ministers* by Evan Tyler in Edinburgh in 1647 and was reprinted in London the same year by Robert Bostock. I have examined a copy of the first edition in the Library of Union Theological Seminary in New York. For work on this volume, however, I have relied on the version which appears in one of the standard editions of Scottish church documents, *The Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Johnstones, Hunter, 1869), in which the document bears the title "The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government." In this study, the work will be referred to by its popular designation, the Form of Church Government.

In the process of seeking a clearer understanding of the Westminster Assembly's work on the Form of Church Government, I have also looked for evidence which would shed light on the question of the degree of Scottish influence upon the Assembly. It is a rather common view that the Westminster Assembly was dominated by the Scottish commissioners, whose power lay in the fact that the English Parliament desperately needed the assistance of the Scottish army. According to this view, agreement to the Solemn League and Covenant, which bound England to seek religious uniformity with Scotland, was the price which Parliament unwillingly paid for Scotland's help.²

A good deal of evidence can be cited to show that the Scots did attempt to control the general course of events during the Civil War in accordance with their own interests. Though it is not within the scope of this study to give an account of the political, military, diplomatic, economic, or social forces which were at work during the momentous period of the English Civil War, beyond what is necessary in order to place the Westminster Assembly in its historical context,³ research into the detailed, day-by-day records of the debates of the Westminster Assembly has made it possible for me to make a judgment about the nature and success of the Scottish influence within the Assembly itself during the first year and a half of its existence.

It is a major finding of this investigation that the Westminster Assembly operated as a truly deliberative body, in which the Scottish commissioners were prominent participants: the results of the Assembly's debates were neither predetermined by the Solemn League and Covenant, nor dictated by the Scots. Such a judgment requires that attention be paid to specific decisions made by the Assembly, and to the positions taken by the Scots in the discussions leading up to those decisions. The detailed description of the production of the Form of Church Government provides evidence which is important for assessing the degree of Scottish influence in the Westminster Assembly.

In this study I have relied heavily upon original materials from the Westminster Assembly. Robert Baillie's revealing and readable letters are

2. Such a view is strongly put forth by William A. Shaw, *A History of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth 1640–1660* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1900), 1:141–42: "As it was, no sooner had it become apparent that the war could not be finished at a stroke, than the necessity of securing Scotland for the Parliamentary cause was at once seen. The only possible condition was the adoption of the Covenant—of a uniformity of Church government—so much was known from the first...the final adoption of the Covenant was, under the circumstances, of the nature of a capitulation."

3. I am aware, of course, that an enormous amount of historical literature deals with the period of the English Civil War and with the question of the causes of the Parliamentary Revolt. For a helpful introduction, see John Edward Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in the Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th Century* (New York, [1958]).

well known to every student of the Civil War period and are of special usefulness in understanding the activities within and surrounding the Westminster Assembly.⁴ Two men who attended the Assembly kept careful notes of the proceedings: John Lightfoot's *Journal* and George Gillespie's *Notes* are the only published materials which give a day-by-day account of the first year of the Assembly's work, and I have referred to them constantly.⁵

In addition to these well-known sources, I have had the advantage of access to the unpublished minutes of the Westminster Assembly. The original manuscripts, mostly in the hand of Adoniram Byfield, the Assembly's official scribe, consist for the most part of hastily written notes on the speeches which were made in the Assembly. Though Byfield's handwriting is nearly illegible, a transcript was made in the last century by E. Maunde Thompson and J. Struthers. The third volume, containing reports of the sessions from November 18, 1644, to February 22, 1648/9, was published from that transcript.⁶ A. F. Mitchell, editor of that volume, wrote in the introduction that further historical work on the Assembly awaited the publication of the remaining volumes.⁷ Microfilm copies of the transcripts have been made, however, and I have had the advantage of the use of a copy in my research.⁸ The minutes cover the same general time period as Lightfoot's *Journal* and Gillespie's *Notes*, but offer significant clarification and supplementation of what is contained in those published sources.

Many histories of the Westminster Assembly have been written, most of them partisan in perspective and heavily dependent upon secondary materials. Three works are deserving of special mention. The third volume of Daniel Neal's *History of the Puritans* contains a good bit of material on the Westminster Assembly.⁹ Neal made good use of the published works which were available to him nearly a century after the Assembly met, as

4. Robert Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, 1844).

5. John Lightfoot, *Journal of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines*, in *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, ed. John Rogers Pitman (London, 1824), vol. 13; George Gillespie, *Notes of Debates and Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines*, in *The Presbyterian's Armoury* (Edinburgh, 1846), vol. 2.

6. *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, ed. Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1874). Hereafter cited as *Minutes*.

7. Mitchell and Struthers, xii. Mitchell gives a thorough description of the manuscript minutes on v–x. Publication of all of the Assembly's minutes finally took place in 2012. See *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. Chad Van Dixhoorn, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

8. The transcript of the manuscript minutes will be cited as MS, to distinguish it from the published *Minutes*.

9. Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans* (London, 1822), vol. 3. (This volume was first published in 1737.)

well as certain unidentified manuscripts. (He thought that the Assembly's own records had been destroyed in the Great Fire in London in 1666.) When Neal's work is compared with the better materials now available, it is clear that while his general interpretation of the period is worthy of consideration, he cannot be relied upon for a detailed understanding of the work of the Assembly.¹⁰ A number of later histories have relied upon Neal, and have tended to perpetuate his mistakes.¹¹

In my judgment, the most knowledgeable and dependable historian of the Westminster Assembly is Alexander F. Mitchell, whose work on the Assembly is set forth in his Baird Lectures¹² as well as in his extensive introduction to the published *Minutes*. Mitchell had the advantage of an intimate knowledge of the unpublished minutes and a broad acquaintance with the confessional literature of the period. He was primarily interested in the doctrinal work of the Assembly as expressed in its Confession of Faith and catechisms, so that he gave relatively little attention to the Assembly's discussions of church government.

A third important history of the Assembly is that of S. W. Carruthers, whose aim was to set forth the human side of the Assembly in response to the reverential and often unrealistic view of the Assembly which had been prominent in the Scottish tradition.¹³ Carruthers gives a wealth of factual material about the Assembly. He must have made use of the unpublished minutes, since he refers to information contained only in them; but nowhere in his book does he make a clear reference to the unpublished minutes as a distinct source.¹⁴

Although the major purpose for which the Long Parliament summoned the Westminster Assembly was to advise it in setting up a structure of church government to replace episcopacy, relatively little attention has been given to this aspect of its work. Only three studies of any length are known to the writer. Edward D. Morris has a long chapter titled "The Church of God" in his study of the Westminster documents, but his

10. Neal's account of the Assembly's debates on "the constitution and form of the first church of Jerusalem; the subordination of synods, and of lay-elders" (3:238) does not indicate clearly that the debate on lay-elders took place in December 1643; the debate on the church of Jerusalem in February and March 1643/4; and the debate on the subordination of synods in September and October 1644. Neal treats all three points as though they had been discussed concurrently.

11. For example, W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (New York: Robert Carter, 1859).

12. Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly* (London: James Nisbet, 1883).

13. S. W. Carruthers, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1943).

14. Carruthers, *Everyday Work*, 106, where Carruthers refers to "the earliest minute extant." The lack of adequate references is a major technical flaw in Carruthers's book.

approach is theological rather than historical.¹⁵ W. A. Shaw's *History of the English Church*, to which reference has already been made, is important because of its treatment of the sequence of events in the Assembly's work, and especially because it narrates the fate of the Assembly's advice in the English Parliament. Shaw's work must be used with caution, however, because of his overt hostility to the whole Presbyterian movement, and because, though he knew of their existence, he failed to make use of the unpublished minutes of the Assembly. A doctoral dissertation by J. R. de Witt gives a detailed chronological study of the Assembly's work on church government.¹⁶ De Witt focuses upon the question of the "divine right" of church government and follows that question through the whole course of the Assembly. He made extensive use of the transcripts of the unpublished minutes, and one of the values of his work is that it calls attention to this neglected source.¹⁷ My study differs from his in that I have concentrated upon the Form of Church Government *as a distinct document*, and I have therefore traced its development in greater detail than de Witt. In addition, I have attempted to look at the Westminster Assembly from the standpoint of the Scottish commissioners and their influence in the drawing up of the Form of Church Government.

This book is divided into three parts. Part 1 places the Westminster Assembly in its historical setting and gives an overview of the way in which it conducted its business. The first chapter draws heavily upon well-known secondary materials to set forth the historical background of the Assembly, giving special emphasis to the history of Anglo-Scottish relations leading up to the swearing of the Solemn League and Covenant by the parliamentary parties of both nations. The second chapter gives necessary information on the organization and operation of the Assembly. The complicated committee structure of the Assembly is dealt with in some detail, because knowledge of the various committees is essential for an understanding of the process by which the Form of Church Government was formulated. (The manuscript minutes are especially helpful in giving the membership of the committees.) In keeping with my interest in the Scottish influence upon the Assembly, the third chapter presents biographical sketches of the Scottish commissioners, and a description of the methods by which they attempted to fulfill their mission in England.

15. Edward D. Morris, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols* (Columbus, Ohio: Champlin Press, 1900), 601–66.

16. J. R. de Witt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1969).

17. Another dissertation, Jack Bartlett Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), also makes use of the unpublished minutes.

Part 2 contains an analysis of the Westminster Assembly's Form of Church Government. For convenience, part 2 is divided into four chapters, dealing respectively with the officers of the church, particular or local congregations, governmental assemblies, and ordination. The analysis follows the order of the Form of Church Government as a completed document, taking it up section by section. Each significant expression is traced from its origin in a committee, through its debate and modification in the Assembly, to its final placement in the document. At points where Scottish interest or influence was significant, the development of the Scottish position is presented, with reference to the important historical documents on church polity in the Church of Scotland.

Part 3 consists of the concluding chapter, which traces the response which the Form of Church Government received in England and Scotland. While its acceptance in Scotland, but not in England, might be taken as evidence that the Scottish commissioners had imposed their church polity on an unwilling English Assembly, I argue differently. The careful analysis of the language of the Form of Church Government reveals that the Scots failed to achieve some of their most cherished goals in the Assembly debates on church government. I contend, therefore, that the reception of the Form of Church Government in Scotland is evidence of the good faith in which the Scots entered into the Solemn League and Covenant. That covenant was not a mere mask for pursuing Scottish nationalistic goals. The Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly did not entirely lack Scottish chauvinism, and they were not above attempts to manipulate matters behind the scenes. But my research has persuaded me that they were motivated in an important way by a desire to achieve the "covenanted uniformity in religion"¹⁸ to which they were pledged by the Solemn League and Covenant and went to London full of hope that it might be achieved by mutual agreement with their brethren in England.

The pages which follow contain the fruit of my research and the evidence on which I have based my conclusions. It is my hope that from them may be gained a more accurate picture than has hitherto been available of the Westminster Assembly as it debated the proper structure and function of the Christian church.

18. This phrase, which I have used in the title of this book, is intended to set forth the central purpose of the Solemn League and Covenant, which was to pledge its subscribers to endeavor to bring the churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland "to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion." Sec. 1 of the Covenant, in *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625–1660*, ed. S. R. Gardiner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 268. Baillie used the expression "Covenanted Uniformitie" in a letter dated August 18, 1644. Baillie, *Letters*, 2:220.