

ADDRESSES

AT THE

CELEBRATION OF THE

Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary

OF THE

WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

BY THE

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OF THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A.

EDITED BY THE

REV. WM. HENRY ROBERTS, D. D., LL. D.



PHILADELPHIA

PRESBYTERIAN BOARD OF PUBLICATION AND
SABBATH-SCHOOL WORK

1898

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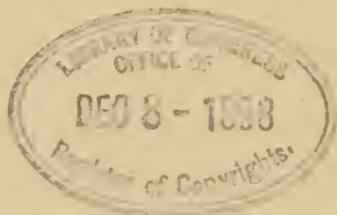


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Oct. 5. 98

THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY, THE
MEN AND THEIR WORK.

BY THE

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THE Westminster Assembly was a rebellion of the people against the bosses. It was the assertion of the independent conscience, the claim of spiritual liberty, the protest of outraged right. The grip of spiritual usurpation was closed by Henry VIII. It tightened under James. It crushed under Charles. When the tale of bricks is doubled Moses comes. The long suppressed demand forced utterance. The explosion and crash in Scotland gave shock and release. The people were heard from. The response was at last the "Assembly of godly and learned divines to be consulted with by Parliament for the settling of the government and liturgy of the church." It was a representative assembly made up of choice men—one hundred and twenty-one divines, eleven lords, twenty commoners—representing all the counties of England, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and all shades of ecclesiasticism. It was an

effect and most suggestively an Episcopalian assembly, its few Scotch members excepted. It was equal to its task, on every side men conspicuous for learning, eloquence, and piety. Milton's lofty scorn is out of place. Call the roll of that Assembly. Here are ecclesiastics wise, tolerant, and profound, like Calamy, distinguished Orientalists like Lightfoot, Greek specialists like Gataker, dialecticians like Reynolds, and Gillespie the prince of disputants; versatile and profound scholars like Wallis of Oxford, whose eminence as a theologian was only surpassed by his attainments as a mathematician; linguists like Palmer, conspicuous preachers like Marshall and Goodwin; the élite of Scotch theology and wisdom in Rutherford, Henderson, and Baillie, "the learned Selden," lawyer, historian, theologian, archæologist, and linguist; laymen distinguished as statesmen, scholars, or jurists; scores of walking libraries, bands of armed disputants, the whole presided over by Twisse, scholar and theologian of continental fame. When such men come together, there is a reason for it, and their conclusions cannot be whistled down the wind.

The opening scene in the Abbey was solemn and impressive. But the crowning event was in the following September in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, when the Assembly and Parliament—the whole representative body of Church and State—stood up in divine worship and with uplifted hands

took oath to receive and stand by the Solemn League and Covenant—a civil treaty as well as religious bond—heroes all, to whom life was testimony and conscience dominant.

There is a sketch of the civilization of the times in the record of the transfer from Henry V., Chapel to the Jerusalem Chamber, which the gossipy chronicler says “has a good fyre which is some dainties in London.” In that historic chamber—now chiefly historic because of their presence and work—this Assembly met June, 1643–Feb. 22, 1649, five and a half years. They took their time. It was a way they had, as the gossipy Ballie so often reveals. “Every proposition they harangue long and very learnedlie.” “When every man has said and the replies and duplies and triplies are heard.” “Their longsomeness is awful.” “When all were tired it came to the question.” One almost imagines he is describing some General Assembly somewhere.

There is a refreshing revelation of carnal wisdom in these high counsels when, remembering that armed men are in the field, we hear the naïve confession and plea “not to meddle with haste till it please God to advance our armies which we expect will assist much our arguments.”

It was an assembly of devotion—their monthly day of fasting and prayer, but one expression of the pervading spirit which pleaded the promise of the opening sermon, “I will not leave you comfortless.”

It bowed to but one absolutism. It backed its propositions with Scripture. It sought and followed unhesitatingly the voice from heaven.

The work reveals the men. Their heroism, scholarship, statesmanship, spirituality, have their most brilliant revelation in the results of that Assembly.

I. THE FORM OF GOVERNMENT.

This was necessarily their first address. This was the center of the battle. The war cries indicate the parties—"Divine Right," "Limited Episcopacy," "Root and Branch." The divine right of episcopacy was a recent claim, first maintained by Bancroft in 1588. Erastianism was doomed to an early dismissal by such men. Church rule cannot be a whim of society nor be changed with the changing complexion of transitory politics. And experience led them to believe with James, "No bishop, no king." But there is another king, one Jesus. "God alone is Lord of the conscience." What does he say? They turned to their Greek Testaments.

Their first dispute was as to the identity of doctor and pastor in the individual congregation. They were wiser in the seventeenth than in the nineteenth century. Our Church must return to the wisdom of the fathers if in the larger communities we are to conserve our forces and advance. The diversities of gifts must be recognized and used. The suggestion of the Westminster Assembly—the doctor and pastor

—will overtake many a difficulty and give strength and efficiency to the modern Presbyterian Church.

They were not very pronounced upon the eldership. They considered it as “a poynt of high consequence,” but only decided that it was scripturally warrantable but not expressly instituted. But the principles of government were not uncertain. The doctrine of the supreme authority of Scripture struck at the root of hierarchical authority. In letters of heavenly light they saw gleaming from their Bibles, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.” They asserted republicanism as the architect’s principle of the pattern shown in the Mount. They were not extremists. Ussher’s plan retaining a formal episcopacy as a part of presbyterial or synodical government, if urged by him and others as members of that Assembly, might well have been the true and permanent reform—a moderate Presbyterianism. It was only another formula for the superintendents of the Knox government in Scotland. Their conclusions were distinct. Presbytery is the continuation of apostolic Christianity. Primitive episcopacy is presbytery. It is not silenced or es-topped by synods or councils. It is historic, not traditional. It exalts the Scripture above the Church. It presses back to Christ and his word. It asserts above all the crown rights of Jesus Christ. It is significant that the draft of the church government was finished on the Fourth of July, 1645—a declaration of independence antedating by more than a cen-

ture that of the American Colonies. That principle here formulated so distinctly—liberty capable of order, order fruitful of liberty, self-government recognizing the governing self—that principle uttered in the Jerusalem Chamber, was the gun whose ball went round the world, and whose sound wakened the echoes at Bunker Hill and Gettysburg.

II. THE DIRECTORY FOR WORSHIP.

It was not imposed. The singed cat fears the fire. It was recommended. It was prepared by men familiar with liturgies. The Reformed Church used prayer-books. Knox's Book of Common Order was of use in Scotland and was never officially put aside. These men were familiar with the Book of Common Prayer, and were there not to destroy, but to purge. The Directory was a compromise. I question whether it ever occurred to any to prescribe unwritten forms. It certainly does not determine between free and written prayer. It left the churches in the sphere of Christian liberty. Their letter to the Scottish churches specifically gives liberty to use either the old—Knox's Liturgy—or the new, the Directory for Worship. Even in the discussion of the section upon the Public Prayer it was stated that they did not only set down the heads of things, but so largely that with the altering of here and there a word, a man may mould it into a prayer. The Directory certainly never contemplated the

heterogeneous and irresponsible license which in our day has come to be known as Presbyterian worship, wherein every Presbyterian minister does that which is right in his own eyes; nor that absolute tyranny which practically ordains a most unliturgical liturgy as the only freedom of worship. Its contention was against certain prescribed forms and imposed ceremonies. Jenny Geddes threw her stool not at the prayer book, but at the Romish abuses which the book sought to impose upon her. "Will ye say mass at my lug?" It asserts the liberty of worship to have its best expression in form of highest truth and beauty. It erects the pulpit as the central object in the church. It emphasizes the sermon. But the sermon is not the only element in the worship. We preach. But we also pray and sing and read the Word and make offerings and observe sacraments. It very suggestively directs that "ministers ought to be careful not to make their sermons so long as to interfere with or exclude the more important duties of prayer and praise" (Chap. vii. Sec. 4). It lays stress upon the order of topics and succession of parts of worship. It makes no demand for severe simplicity. It utters no prohibition. Its liberty embraces the liberty of using the written form as genuinely Presbyterian. The continued assertion of this liberty would have saved and strengthened our Church. The liturgical tendency of to-day is only a return to the earlier

Presbyterianism, which aimed in this Directory at a service book with freedom of extempore or written prayer which should be not a master but a guide. It is our province so to apply the principles of our book as to give a proportioned and harmonious order and expression to prayer, praise, preaching, and sacrament with such appropriate and local freedom as shall above all others illustrate and encourage the communion of the saints.

III. THE CONFESSION OF FAITH.

The best thing they did was a thing they did not intend to do. They were asked to revise the Thirty-nine Articles. But revision, as our own Church found, is apt to be a delicate matter. They dropped revision and wrote the Confession. It is the only Protestant Confession of which we have details of its composition and construction. It was the culmination of the creeds. From the first creed in the confession of Peter and the Baptismal Formula, through the simplicity of the Apostles' Creed, the expansions and limitations of the Nicene and Constantinopolitan creeds, the strong and sturdy challenge of Luther's Ninety-five Theses, the comprehensive but faulty Augsburg Confession, the glowing martyr tone and color of the Scotch Confessions, the moderation and faithfulness of the Gallican Confession, the minute, controversial yet catholic statements of the Helvetic, and the sweet and scriptural yet limited Heidelberg

Confession, there were progression, definiteness, and comprehension, until out of all came the Westminster Confession, of superb logical construction, unmatched precision, unapproachable dignity, and magnificent fidelity—the ripest fruit of Reformed theology. It bears the impress of its militant times. It came out of the throes of mightiest controversy, and we hear sounding through it the tramp of hosts, the clash of arms, and shout of victory. Of course, it was Calvinistic. Their doctrine of the Church compelled it. The question of the Church has more intimate relation than is commonly thought to one's convictions upon the scheme of redemption. Rationalism will most commonly be found with the Erastian or Independent theory of the Church, Sacramentarianism with Prelacy, and Calvinism with republican Presbyterianism. And it was a necessity of the times. The Protestant world was Calvinistic. A Reformed Council in the middle of the seventeenth century could have announced nothing other than Calvinistic theology.

Its proximate source was the Irish Articles, drawn up by Archbishop Ussher, and adopted by the Irish Convocation in 1615, which form the connecting-link between the Thirty-nine Articles and the Westminster Confession. Many of its objectionable phrases and sentences are evidently borrowed from this source. There is a striking similarity in the chapter on Decrees, and generally in the order of

subjects, headings of chapters, doctrine, and very language. It is also worthy of notice that much of its doctrinal statement is due to Reynolds, who is also the author of the General Thanksgiving of the Book of Common Prayer. It seems to me that the man who claims Archbishop Ussher as his father in God, and subscribes to the Thirty-nine Articles and uses devoutly every Sabbath Reynolds's Thanksgiving, should not object very strenuously to the Calvinism of the Westminster Confession.

This Confession begins right. It is framed from the standpoint of divine sovereignty. It starts with God and unfolds the entire history of the created universe as the unfolding of the eternal purpose. It is more logical, more comprehensive, and more scriptural than the modern cry of "Back to Christ." A whole chain is more than one of its strongest links. The covenant of grace is a subordinate part of the eternal purpose.

It is evangelical. It is flushed with the ardor of individual conviction. It gives clear and sufficient expression to the doctrines of the Trinity, the Person and Work of Christ, and offices of the Holy Spirit, and binds us in the communion of historic Christianity. It has no place for the new mysticism. It does not recognize Christian science falsely so called.

It is comprehensive. It proclaims itself the heir of all the doctrinal attainments of the Christian Church. Lutheranism had wrought out into dis-

tinct and enduring form the doctrine of justification by faith alone; Calvinism that of salvation by grace alone; Puritanism that of the authority of the Word alone. These they took, and giving even clearer definition and purer form, made their own the culmination and crown of all systems of theology.

It is refreshingly distinct. It was written in the day when men made definitions. They knew what Arianism and Antinomianism and Arminianism meant. Ours is the day of Ritschlianism, when we supplant definition with feeling, when the river does not believe in having any banks, and when the home of truth is supposed to be all out-doors.

It is liberal and tolerant. It was not the product of any school. It was a compromise, and compromises are moderate. It assumes the fact but does not define the mode of inspiration, so that you may believe with me in verbal inspiration, or with my neighbors in plenary inspiration, or with him beyond who avoids both words, provided you agree with all of us that the Scriptures are "the Word of God written."

It presents election, not of sovereignty but of grace, not of selfishness but for service. It preaches hope even to those incapable of being outwardly called. It teaches the highest and best doctrine of the Lord's Day. It presents the simplest, most spiritual, and satisfying doctrine of the Lord's Supper. It pronounces the broadest and most catholic definition

of the Church, embracing in its cordial recognition and fellowship affusionist and immersionist, post-millennial and premillennial, sub-, super-, and infra-lapsarian, and "all throughout the world who profess the true religion together with their children."

It has imperfections. It shows the pressing of the galling chain which bound the Church to the State. Its author was the creation of the Long Parliament and amenable to its authority. It assigns to civil government the duty of calling synods, protecting orthodoxy, and punishing heresy. It does not mention the word atonement. It pays too much attention to the deceased wife's sister. It might have had less interest in elect infants. It is too logical in reference to reprobation. It might have given larger emphasis to the Holy Spirit. But it has enriched literature with one of its noblest chapters upon the Holy Scriptures. It has endowed human liberty with its golden maxim, "God alone is Lord of the conscience." It is up-to-date—the most modern of modern creeds in that it anticipates the favorite humanitarianism in giving the humblest man a necessary place in the eternal purpose, and thus endows him with a dignity far transcending the dreams of mere human philosophy.

IV. THE CATECHISMS.

The Catechisms, Larger and Shorter, one for pulpit exposition, the other for the education of chil-

dren, were their closing work. The Shorter Catechism differs from most in not taking the Apostles' Creed as its basis. It is not historical nor experimental. Lacking something of warmth and simplicity, it is strictly logical, of unrivalled statement, skilful construction, and incalculable value. Omitting the questions, the answers give a well-jointed, comprehensive, brief, and satisfactory creed. Perhaps that is what we are coming to—the best and most enduring bond of unity in sight. Its one hundred and seven questions divide logically into two parts at the thirty-eighth. The first part is a system of divinity. It recognizes that true life is built upon sound doctrine. The second part affords a fit directory for every stage of the Christian life. Truth is in order to goodness. In the question, "What does God require of man?" the conscience is confronted with the inner witness. The Commandments voice duty. The "requireth" and the "forbiddeth" reveal the inability and guilt, and the awakened soul is led by faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life, and the means of grace—a complete circle of knowledge and experience. The soul whose life is hallowed by prayer has learned how to glorify and enjoy him. It cannot be too highly praised. It is a model of definition. Most of the answers are minie balls, some of them columbiads. It has been the moulding power in uncounted lives. It has never been revised. It cannot be amended. It must not be neglected.

It carries in its use the perpetuation and glory of the Presbyterian Church.

Their complete work was presented as "an humble advice"—an advice which if well heeded had saved Charles his head, England her Church, constitutional government her prerogative, and endowed the world with the speedier gift of free institutions, enlightened consciences, and an enlarged humanity.