



the **CALVIN**
ORUM

Westminster Assembly
A Tercentenary

Church Union
As Calvin Saw It

Realistic Writing
Purity and Prudishness

The Labor Problem
Christian Organization

British-Israelism
The Great Pyramid

Democracy's Ship
Rats Aboard!

Our Correspondents

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VOL. VIII, NO. 11-12

**TWO DOLLARS
A YEAR**

JUNE-JULY, 1943

The CALVIN FORUM

Published by the Calvin Forum Board of Publication

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Rapids, Michigan.

Address all subscription and circulation cor-
respondence to: THE CALVIN FORUM, Business
Office, at the same address.

THE CALVIN FORUM is published monthly, ex-
cept from June to September, when it appears
bi-monthly. Subscription price: Two Dollars
per year.

Entered as second-class matter October 3,
1935, at the Post Office at Grand Rapids,
Michigan, under the Act of March 3, 1897.

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The Story of the Westminster Assembly

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ENGLAND, in the first half of the Seventeenth Century, produced the Authorized Version of the Bible and the Westminster Standards. The translation of the Scriptures was accomplished in the reign of James I, that lover of monarchy and foe of presbytery, while the Standards were formulated in those strangely stirring times which preceded the execution of his son, Charles I. Thus, in the providence of God, these two Christian classics date from the discouraging days of the Stuarts—the written Word in the beauty of the common tongue, and the interpretation of that Word as set forth in the Confession and Catechisms and applied in the Form of Government and Directory for Worship.

An Assembly at Westminster

Three hundred years ago there assembled at Westminster a body of “learned, judicious, and godly divines.” Unlike many other ecclesiastical councils, this convocation was not commissioned to frame articles of faith and practice which would immediately become authoritative, but had been convened by Parliament for consultation and advice, on the basis of which the Lords and Commons proposed to enact a suitable constitution for a church which was designed to be both official and inclusive.

Parliament’s call for the gathering, issued on June 12, 1643, had stipulated that each of the members was to receive four shillings per day for his services. One hundred and fifty-one men were chosen to compose the assembly, one hundred and twenty-one ministers, ten of the Lords, and twenty members of the House of Commons, with a quorum fixed at forty. King Charles, who had been able to frustrate two earlier attempts to hold such a synod, responded, on June 22, with what he described as a “gracious warning”—not so gracious, however, as to preclude his forbidding attendance upon threat of fine and imprisonment. The authority of Parliament, nevertheless, was recognized by the majority of the prospective commissioners; for with the kingdom moving into decline, an urge toward liberty was stirring across the land.

On Saturday, July 1, a large congregation, including the members of the Parliament and invited commissioners, gathered in Westminster Abbey and heard the appointed moderator, Rev. William Twisse, deliver the opening sermon from John 14: 18,

“I will not leave you comfortless: I will come unto you.” The sixty-nine clerical members of the Assembly who were present then met with their colleagues in the Chapel of Henry VII, though the approach of a London winter impelled withdrawal, some weeks later, to the Jerusalem Chamber of the Abbey, which boasted a fireplace of effective proportions.

Descent of the Scots

Political and military developments of the summer of 1643 were to have a definite effect upon the business; for during that period the army of King Charles showed disconcerting strength, and a hurried appeal was made to Scotland for aid against the royalists. Making the most of the situation, the Scots agreed to lend the desired assistance on condition that the members of the Assembly and of Parliament would subscribe to the *Solemn League and Covenant* and that the Kirk might be permitted to send representatives to sit in the Westminster Assembly. There was scant time for haggling over terms, since a decisive triumph for the royal forces would mean, among many other things, that thenceforth there would be no Assembly. The commissioners from the Church of Scotland moved to London; the Covenant was promptly signed, but the Scottish army did not cross the border at Berwick until January 15, 1644. A treaty between the two countries, previously signed on November 29, provided that the cost of this expedition should be repaid by England at the close of the war, and promised an advance of £100,000 for outfitting the forces of Scotland. Thus the course of the conflict was altered and the Presbyterianism of the Westminster Standards insured.

Scotland, having furnished two incompetent rulers for the sometime United, though then sadly divided Kingdom, was permitted to make considerable amends through her contribution to the personnel of the Assembly. These emissaries were few in number, great in influence, and generally worthy of that lasting remembrance which has been accorded them. From the northern universities came Robert Baillie, principal of Glasgow; Alexander Henderson, rector at Edinburgh; Samuel Rutherford, of the faculty of St. Andrews; along with that

youthfully winsome Edinburgh pastor, George Gillespie. The fifth clerical representative does not appear to have been enrolled. Two of the lay commissioners, Lord Maitland and Sir Archibald Johnston were not soon forgotten above the Tweed, the former as the latter infamous renegade who despoiled the Covenanters, and the latter as among that number who laid down their lives during the persecutions following the Restoration. Charles II gave express evidence of desire for Johnston's execution, and his erstwhile colleague, Maitland, exerted himself in securing compliance with that unworthy sovereign's will.

The Assembly in Session

But to return to the days and doings of the Divines! Extensive sections of the manuscript minutes of the Assembly were published under the editorship of Drs. Alexander Mitchell and John Struthers in 1874. These records reveal, though in brief form, much of what was done and how it was accomplished, and are dated according to the then current custom in England, whereby the change of year was effected, not on January 1st, but on the 25th of March. Thus Session No. 814 was held on "March 24, 1646," while No. 815 is dated "March 25, 1647." To Robert Baillie we are indebted for an intimate and comprehensive account of certain of the proceedings as set down in his *Letters and Journals*, while Rev. John Lightfoot has left a somewhat similar narrative.

Each member of the Assembly was bound by a vow to "maintain nothing in point of doctrine" but what was believed by him to be "most agreeable to the Word of God, nor in point of discipline but what may make most for God's glory and the peace and good of His Church." This solemn obligation, which was frequently repeated, appears to have borne rich fruit in the basic Scriptural viewpoint which is manifest in the Confession and Catechisms, while a careful desire to ground the system of government in the teachings of the Bible is obvious to those who are familiar with these canons.

Meetings were usually held from nine in the morning until one or two p.m. with no sittings on Saturday or Sunday. The afternoons were devoted to sessions of the three large committees into which the total membership was divided. The representatives from the House of Lords were, not surprisingly, assigned seats near the fire; while the Scots were also grouped, but in a somewhat less comfortable portion of the room. Full advantage appears to have been taken of the absence of any time limit on debate, so that an ample hearing was accorded all who desired to speak on a given subject. Several of the Scotch commissioners exercised their full prerogative in these discussions, as is indicated by an examination of the Minutes.

Though there was considerable debate on certain theological points, such as the doctrine of Election, those who actually attended the Assembly were Calvinists, and the Standards bear recurring testimony of this fact. In regard to church government, there was a sweeping desire to discard Episcopacy. As a matter of fact, legislation toward this end had already been initiated by Parliament. There was no such unanimity, however, as to what should be substituted. The advocates of Independency, who stood for the autonomy of the local congregation, though not numerous, exerted considerable power; while the Erastians, favoring a thorough subordination of church to state, were in a decided minority, but succeeded in leaving their imprint on the government of the church. The staunchness of the Presbyterians from Scotland proved ultimately decisive in the outcome.

As might be expected, during the course of several years' sessions, various matters of an occasional nature received the attention of the Assembly. The members found time to assist the Lord Admiral in securing chaplains for the fleet (March 7, 1644-1645 according to our reckoning); to apportion, in more than one instance, the funds provided for their sustenance (Oct. 14, 1645, etc.); to deputize certain of their number to attend the several public burnings of a particularly objectionable book (July 25, 1645); to approve Rouse's version of the Psalms (Nov. 14, 1645); and to expel one of their own members, Rev. Daniel Featley, who had been adjudged guilty of illegally revealing their proceedings to Archbishop Ussher, now remembered for the chronology frequently inserted in the Authorized Version of the Bible, but then suspiciously in the company of the King at Oxford.

The Divines at Worship

There was time for worship as well as work, and it is not difficult to believe that the work has endured the longer because worship was not neglected. Numerous sermons were preached to various bodies by members of the Assembly during its sessions. Some of these were delivered before the House of Commons, at least one to "the right Honorable Lord Maior and court of aldermen," while in connection with a fast held, after considerable discussion and debate, on Christmas Day, 1644, Edmund Calamy preached before the Lords. So popular were certain of these discourses in printed form that unscrupulous and unauthorized publishers were induced to issue them in "bootleg" fashion, which, in turn, led Parliament to take careful measures to prevent such unspiritual trading in spiritual things.

May 17, 1644, was observed as a day of fasting and prayer and is described by Baillie as "the sweetest I have seen in England." Writing to a cousin, William Spang, he added, "God was so evidently in all this exercise, that we expect certainly a blessing

both in our matter of the Assembly and the whole Kingdom." The service of worship continued for eight hours on this particular occasion.

The Westminster Standards

Although the Assembly, as already noted, had been convoked in an advisory capacity and addressed Parliament by way of "humble advice," it was allowed no small degree of freedom in its work. The first undertaking was, at the instance of Parliament, a revision of the *Thirty-nine Articles*. After having completed the Fifteenth Article in the autumn of 1643, it was directed to suspend this endeavor and not long thereafter was engaged in work on a scheme for church government. Dr. B. B. Warfield has expressed the opinion that Parliament had no serious intention of adopting the *Thirty-nine Articles* in revised form, but simply prescribed this activity until something of a more important nature might be undertaken.

The ultimate result of the several years of work of the Assembly was a three-fold creed: *The Confession of Faith*, written in narrative style, and adopted by Parliament in the summer of 1648; the *Larger Catechism*, embracing the same general subject matter as the Confession and often employing identical phraseology, but arranged in the form of question and answer, which was adopted by the Commons, July 24, 1648, but was never passed by the Lords; and a somewhat more elementary *Shorter Catechism*, which received Parliamentary sanction by September 25, 1648.

The Form of Government, the subject of prolonged and dramatic debate in the Assembly, was completed in 1644 but was not approved until four years later (August 29, 1648). The *Directory for Worship*, another element in the constitution of the church as prepared by the Divines, had been submitted in 1644 and passed by Parliament on January 3-4 of the following year. By way of brief characterization, it may be said that the theology of the Confession and Catechisms is Calvinistic; the articles of government are Presbyterian; while the Directory contemplates worship of the free, as contrasted with the strictly liturgical type.

The ecclesiastical government projected by the Assembly was substantially an endorsement of that already prevalent in Scotland, for Alexander Henderson and his fellow-countrymen did not attend the meeting merely as spectators. In England, on the other hand, it was necessary to introduce Presbyterianism de novo, as is illustrated by the publication of such legislative manuals as *The way of the Presbyterian government as it is established by both Houses of Parliament* (London, 1647). The manner in which the Scots General Assembly embraced the standards prepared at Westminster sug-

gests that its members were cognizant of welcoming back their own articles of faith and discipline, though in somewhat modified form.

Conclusion

It should be recorded that the Westminster Assembly, as constituted at the beginning of 1649, did not concur in the execution of King Charles, but, according to the historian Neal, condemned that drastic act, advocating his release in the face of an appeal from the Army for support, or at least acquiescence, in the prosecution. On January 18, a considerable group of Presbyterian ministers from London and the vicinity, among whom were a number of members of the Assembly, presented to the military authorities a formal and vigorous protest against violence toward the Sovereign's person. After this proved ineffectual and the King had been beheaded on January 30, a paper disclaiming responsibility for his death was drawn up and signed by fifty-nine London clergymen, including certain of the Divines.

The Assembly did not formally adjourn. The body, according to the minutes of October 15, 1647, had, on the motion of Samuel Rutherford, expressed its appreciation of the services of the "honourable, reverend, and learned commissioners from the Church of Scotland." Many other members departed for their homes after the primary work of the gathering had been accomplished in the autumn of 1648. The last of the 1,163 numbered sessions was held on February 22, 1649. After this date a number of members were formed into a committee for the examination of ministers, a function previously exercised by the Assembly. This activity was definitely ended by Cromwell's abrupt ejection of the Long Parliament, though it actually appears to have ceased even earlier.

The influence of the Westminster Assembly, however, has persisted these three hundred years, and the Divines will be held in esteem so long as their spiritual heirs retain the determining conviction that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever."

The present issue consists of 32 instead of 24 pages. It is an enlarged number in view of the combination of two summer issues into one. This is the June-July issue appearing about the last week of June. The next issue will be for the months of August and September and will also be eight pages larger than usual. It is scheduled to appear about the third week of August. Apart from these two combinations during the summer season, THE CALVIN FORUM will continue to appear every month as heretofore.