

# *The Westminster Assembly 1643 -1649*

## *The Men, Their Times & Their Work*

*Study #1*

We are not pragmatics when it comes to our faith. We are bound to pursue theology in all its right parts with a passion if we profess to have a passion for God. The saving knowledge of God is essential to Christian living. This entails knowing God personally and learning about Him through His word. Because of this, all Christians are called to be theologians – the question is whether we are going to be good ones or bad ones! -  
\_William Beveridge<sup>1</sup>

***“It is impossible to honour God as we ought, unless we know Him as he is.” - Stephen Charnock***

If we had no interest in doctrine we would pass on confessions and their close attention to stating Biblical truth. This is their purpose to the church and to the individual Christian. The truth of our faith must always be clearly stated. We need to know what we believe. We also need to know how to guard what we believe.

**See Statement of purpose of the Free Presbyterian Church** - Single page with ten headings.

With this purpose we need to arm ourselves to the task. You will note how the documents of our church proceed to introduce the WCF and Catechisms. (Note our Free Presbyterian declaratory statements in areas of Baptism, Eschatology and Civil Magistrate).

The question is why are these documents which are 360 years old still adhered to by our denomination and by many others of the reformed tradition? The Baptist Confession of 1688 and Congregationalists of the Savoy Declaration 1658 based their creeds on the WCF.

To answer this we need to look into the lives of the men who were called to the Westminster Assembly as advisers to the English Parliament, the caliber of their work and the political upheaval within the church and nation during the time in which the WCF was produced. To fail to do so our generation may throw away a rich heritage and adopt lesser shabby religious models of our time.

The 1600's, or 17<sup>th</sup> Century, was a time of second Reformation in England. Wycliffe, Tyndale and Latimer had struggled and died for the spread of the gospel. Afterwards their work brought forth a powerful harvest of Puritanism in England. Those men planted the root of Biblical religion but there was still need to shake the tree of false religion and establish the true gospel in the nation.

“In 1377, Papal bulls were vainly hurled at his head, and he was accused of nineteen heresies. On to his death in 1384, Wycliffe zealously pursued his reformations. In his strong advocacy of the absolute authority of Scripture, and in his thorough condemnation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, he sowed seeds which afterwards blossomed and bore fruit. Above all, his translation of the Bible was not only an epoch in the English language, but also an epoch in English life. If England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became “the people of a Book,” it must not be forgotten that something of that was due to Wycliffe, “the morning star of the Reformation.” The seeds which were sown by Wycliffe were nursed into living energy by William Tyndale (1494 – 1536), Miles Coverdale (1488 – 1568), Hugh Latimer (1485 – 1555), John Hooper 1500 – 1555.” \_William Beveridge<sup>2</sup>

“The mantle of Wycliffe fell upon William Tyndale. He died ten years before the death of Luther. Tyndale's greater work was the translation of the Bible. He is reported at one time to have said to a priest,

***“If God spare my life, ere many years I shall cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scripture than you do.”***

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<sup>1</sup> W. Beveridge A short History of the Westminster Assembly Intro pg. 12

<sup>2</sup> W. Beveridge A short History of the Westminster Assembly pg 3

God spared his life till his purpose was fulfilled. His translations profoundly influenced English life. They became a living factor in Puritanism. The more Puritanism came to consciousness, the more stress on the authority of Scripture, which indeed, was the objective principle of the whole reformation. In the prefaces and prologues attached to the various books of the New Testament Tyndale laid stress on the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. He stated one of the arguments for Presbyterianism, when he asserted the scriptural identity of Bishop and presbyter; and when he advocated a simple scriptural form of worship, he was the herald of a plea which Puritanism never ceased to contend or to suffer for. It has been well said that, "Tyndale was the true reformer for Great Britain, the man chosen of God to lead a reform which was deeper, more thorough, longer in its sweep, higher in its range, grander in its destiny, than those branches of the Reformation which sprang from Wittenberg and Zurich. For Puritanism had in it a principle of reform, which was the most far-reaching of the principles of the Reformation..."<sup>3</sup>."

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#### **PURITAN ALLEGIANCE TO SCRIPTURE:**

*"Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation, so that whatever is not read therein, nor may be provided thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation."*

#### **NONCONFORMITY:**

With this loyalty to Scripture permeating the people of England it was only a matter of time until a reaction set in against the corruptions of the English church and Royalty. This was all the more heightened when James Ist took the throne.

In their controversies the Presbyterians in Scotland and Nonconformists in England got little sympathy from King James.

**"When the temple of a man's heart is empty, he becomes unconsciously a worshipper of himself."** \_Rawson Gardiner

#### **Three day Conference at The Hampton Court<sup>5</sup> Jan. 1604**

King James presided with Archbishop Whitgift, eight bishops and eight deans on one side.

On the other side were four eminent and moderate Puritans, of whom Dr. John Reynolds was leader.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day the Puritans were allowed to set forth the following four demands:

1. that the doctrine of the church might be preserved in purity, according to God's word.
2. that good pastors might be planted in all churches to preach the same
3. that the church government might be sincerely ministered according to God's word.
4. That the Book of Common Prayer might be fitted to more increase of piety

On the third day King James threatened the Puritans by saying,

***"If that be all your party have to say, I will make them conform themselves, or else I will harry them out of he land, or else do worse."***

However, in the providence of God one lasting benefit was yet received by the Puritans from King James at that conference. The Authorized Version of the English Bible was commissioned.

Otherwise King James alienated himself from the people in England and Scotland where he sought to reimpose Episcopacy. All he achieved was that Assemblies could not be held without his permission, and that his bishops should be constant moderators of presbyteries. Scottish hearts were determined to follow a biblical form of worship free from vestments, crosses, symbols and clerics who acted like popes in their midst.

#### **The Reign of Charles 1 1625 - 1649**

Under Charles 1 things went from bad to worse. There was liberty neither in Church nor State.

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<sup>3</sup> Briggs, Presbyterian Review, October 1884

<sup>4</sup> W. Beveridge A short History of the Westminster Assembly Pg 4

<sup>5</sup> Built by Cardinal Wolsey , A Tudor Palace on the Thames, Southwest of St. Paul's Cathedral

“The King, who was constitutionally a tyrant, was supported in the State by John Stratford whose policy was “Thorough,” and in the church by William Laud who was constitutionally a pope. The result was “political and ecclesiastical absolutism.” From 1629 – 1640 there was no parliament. The Star Chamber and the High Commission Court were supreme. Ecclesiastically, the Puritan demands for reformation in doctrine, discipline, government, and worship were ignored. The leaders the Puritan revolt were silenced, imprisoned, fined, or done to death. The consequence was that everywhere in England indignation, contempt, and ridicule broke forth. Puritanism was on all sides in revolt against the High Church party, driven everywhere into Nonconformity, into Presbyterianism, Independency, Sectarianism. What was the end to be. **Clearly the established order was doomed. England was in a dangerous state.** Its church had lost hold of the people, who in turn were burning with indignation when they saw their best men persecuted, and leaders such as William Prynne, Robert Leighton, Bastiwick and Burton most cruelly mutilated.”<sup>6</sup>

“The people of Scotland resented his [Charles ] absolutism, and his government of their Church by divine right. They would all owe no *jus divinum* [divine right] to regulate the affairs of Christ’s Church. Charles visited Scotland I 1633. His order then, that clerical vestments should be resumed, was a warning of what was to follow. In 1636 he sent down a Book of Canons which ignored Assemblies, and in effect practically abolished Presbyterianism. In 1637 he sent down a Liturgy, which was meant to supersece Knox’s.... the Liturgy was the spark which set Scotland in a blaze. When it was introduced in July 1637 in St. Giles’ Cathedral, riots immediately took place. On February 28, 1638 The National Covenant was signed, and on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November the General Assembly was convened in Glasgow.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Charles was facing revolt all over his three Kingdoms Scotland, England & Ireland**

In desperation he reconvened Parliament on April 13 1640. This he quickly dissolved when he realized that members were defiant of his reign of tyranny. Hence it is known as the short Parliament. Events were still beyond the king’s control and on Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> the Long Parliament met. It sought to reform government. The Star Chamber was abolished. But with a treacherous King still on the throne England was rapidly heading for civil war. However, it was this ‘Long Parliament’ or its committees which called for the Assembly of Divines to advise on the reformation of worship.

### **The mandate or order for an assembly of divines [ministers] to advise Parliament**

By the 1<sup>st</sup> of June a bill had passed both houses, “for calling an Assembly of godly and learned divines to be consulted with by the Parliament for the settling of the government and liturgy of the Church, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the Church of England from false aspersions and interpretations.”

Three times the King refused to sign the bill. At last on June 12 1643, an ordinance calling the Assembly was finally passed. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July the Westminster Assembly was a great reality.

**Online resources:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster\\_Confession\\_of\\_Faith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Confession_of_Faith)

#### **See links also in above site:**

- [Puritan](#)
- [Presbyterian Church](#)
- [Reformed churches](#)
- [Bishops' Wars](#)
- [Long Parliament](#)
- [Glorious Revolution](#)
- [Religion in the United Kingdom](#)

[http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/)

<http://www.apuritansmind.com/WCF/PDF/HistoryWestminsterAssembly-Hetherington.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> W. Beveridge A Short History of the Westminster Assembly pg 10

<sup>7</sup> W. Beveridge A Short History of the Westminster Assembly pg 11

**To do:** Prepare for a quiz on this history. Learn Shorter Catechism #1-3 with one Scr. Proof for each ans.