

The Westminster Assembly 1643 -1649

The Men, Their Times & Their Work

Study #2

Who commissioned the Westminster Assembly and what mandate were they given?

Ans: The English Parliament commissioned them to advise on the liturgy of the English Church.

On the 1st of July, 1643, the Lords and Commons passed an ordinance:

“For the calling of an assembly of learned and godly divines and others, to be consulted with by the Parliament for the settling of the government and Liturgy of the Church of England, and for vindicating and clearing of the doctrines of the said Church from false aspersions and interpretations.”

How many men were called to serve in the Assembly?

Ans: 151

The Assembly consisted of 30 laymen (10 lords and 20 commoners) and 121 divines or clergymen.

What was the religious make up of these men?

Ans: The clergy were selected to represent four separate groups:

1. The *episcopalians* (who supported an episcopacy) included such figures as James Ussher, bishop of Armagh. The episcopalian group usually did not attend the sessions, because the king had not authorized them.
2. The *presbyterians* (who supported an assembly-based structure found in Puritanism), the largest group, included figures such as Edward Reynolds.
3. A small group of *Independents* (of the various Congregationalist views) were present and had the support of Oliver Cromwell, and these included Thomas Goodwin.
4. The *Erastian* representatives, such as John Lightfoot, who favored the state's primacy over the ecclesiastical law.

Thomas Erastus (September 7, 1524 – December 31, 1583) was a Swiss theologian best known for a posthumously published work in which he argued that the sins of Christians should be punished by the state, and not by the church withholding the sacraments. A generalization of this idea, that the state is supreme in church matters, is known somewhat misleadingly as "Erastianism".

How were the men of the Westminster Assembly chosen?

Ans: By the vote of members seated in the English Parliament.

William Beveridge suggests that the divines, were chosen by the members who represented the counties and boroughs in England and Wales. Each member chose or recommended two divines; the Welsh members, however, selected only one.

Were the Men of the Westminster Assembly Suitably Qualified?

Ans: Yes. This remains uncontested even by their arch enemies who were silenced by their learning.

“It would be hard to find in the annals of the Church, council or synod in which there were so many men of great talents, ripe scholarship, mature theological knowledge, sober judgment, and sincere piety as in the Assembly which now met at Westminster. The works of many of them, which have descended to our day, attest the range of their acquirements and the strength of their genius.

Hallam admits their “learning and good sense” and Richard Baxter, who must be allowed to be an impartial judge, says, “Being not worthy to be one of them myself, I may the more freely speak that truth which I know, even in the face of malice and envy — that the Christian world had never a synod of more excellent divines (taking one thing with another) than this synod and the synod of Dort.”

At the request of the English Parliament, seven commissioners from Scotland sat in the Assembly — three noblemen and four ministers. The names of the four ministers the best proof of whose superiority and worth is that they are household words in Scotland to this day — were Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie, and George Gillespie. The elders associated with them were the Earl of Cassilis, Lord Maitland, and Sir Archibald Johnston of Warriston.¹

Where did the Assembly meet?

Ans: Westminster, London

They met in Henry VII’s Chapel, and on the approach of winter they retired to the Jerusalem Chamber.²

Who was the chairman of the Assembly?

Ans: Dr. William Twiss

They were presided over by Dr. William Twiss, the prolocutor — “a venerable man verging on seventy years of age, with a long pale countenance, an imposing beard, lofty brow, and meditative eye, the whole contour indicating a life spent in severe and painful study.”³

“Fuller in his worthies of England calls him “a divine of great abilities, learning, piety, and moderation.” “His plain preaching,” he says, “was good, his disputing better, his pious living best of all.” “Good with the trowel, but better with the sword, more happy in polemical divinity than edifying doctrine.”⁴ “.... Such was the man who presided over the assembly – profoundly learned earnest and moderate.”⁵

Who was the most outstanding Scottish representative at the Westminster Assembly?

Ans: Alexander Henderson.

He was a spiritual and political giant who first proposed the crafting of a confession and had the vision to work for a reformed statement of faith to unite the three Kingdoms – Scotland, England and Ireland.

“Henderson is one of the greatest men in the history of Scotland and, next to Knox, is certainly the most famous of Scottish ecclesiastics. He had great political genius; and his statesmanship was so influential that he was, as Masson well observes, a cabinet minister without office. He has made a deep mark on the history, not only of Scotland, but of England; and the existing Presbyterian churches in Scotland are largely indebted to him for the forms of their dogmas and their ecclesiastical organization.

He is thus justly considered the second founder of the Reformed Church in Scotland.”⁶

¹ McCrie, *Annals of English Presbytery*, p.145

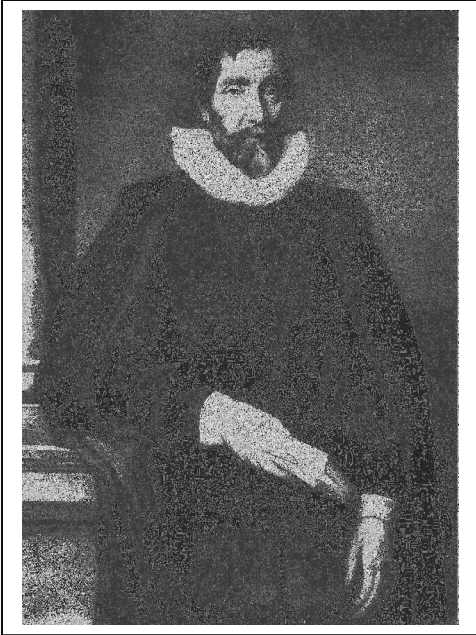
² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

⁴ W. Beveridge *A short history of the Westminster Assembly* Pg 19

⁵ *Ibid* pg 20

⁶ www.wikipedia.org



ALEXANDER HENDERSON

“For eighteen years he had prepared himself for coming days in the quiet parish of Leuchars. The suicidal actions of Charles I called him from his retirement; and from 1638 on to his death in 1646, he was in a very true sense the political genius of his nation. Preacher, statesman, wise in word, cautious in action; trusted and consulted by great and small, both in Scotland and in England; a power in the Assembly, honoured as none other with high debate and keen argument with King Charles himself – such was Henderson. True, he did not venture much on the wide sea of authorship; but there were few important papers that did not, in some way or other, pass through his hands; and in the “National Covenant” of 1643, he has left imperishable memorials. In 1641 he published a little work on The Order and Government of the Church of Scotland. When the “Directory for Church Government” was being drawn up in 1645, Henderson made use of this pamphlet.”

—W. Beveridge

In 1640 Henderson was elected by the town council rector of Edinburgh University, an office to which he was annually re-elected till his death. The Pacification of Birks had been wrung from the king; and the Scots, seeing that he was preparing for the Second Bishops' War, took the initiative, and pressed into England so vigorously that Charles had again to yield everything. The maturing of the treaty of peace took a considerable time, and Henderson was again active in the negotiations, first at Ripon (October 1st) and afterwards in London. While he was in London he had a personal interview with the king, with the view of obtaining assistance for the Scottish universities from money formerly applied to the support of the bishops.

On Henderson's return to Edinburgh in July 1641 the Assembly was sitting at St Andrews. To suit the convenience of the parliament, however, it removed to Edinburgh; Henderson was elected moderator of the Edinburgh meeting. In this Assembly he proposed that a confession of faith, a catechism, a directory for all the parts of the public worship, and a platform of government, wherein possibly England and we might agree, should be drawn up. This was unanimously approved of, and the laborious undertaking was left in Henderson's hands; but the notable motion did not lead to any immediate results.

During Charles's second state-visit to Scotland, in the autumn of 1641, Henderson acted as his chaplain, and managed to get the funds, formerly belonging to the bishopric of Edinburgh, applied to the metropolitan university.

In 1642 Henderson, whose policy was to keep Scotland neutral in the war which had now broken out between the king and the parliament, was engaged in corresponding with England on ecclesiastical topics; and, shortly afterwards, he was sent to Oxford to mediate between the king and his parliament; but his mission proved a failure.

HE PRESENTED A DRAFT OF THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT IN THE SCOTTISH CHURCH ASSEMBLY

A memorable meeting of the General Assembly (of Scottish Presbyterian Church) was held in August 1643. Henderson was elected moderator for the third time. He presented a draft of the famous Solemn League and Covenant, which was received with great enthusiasm. Unlike the National Covenant of 1638, which applied to Scotland only, this document was common to the two kingdoms. Henderson, Baillie, Rutherford and others were sent up to London to represent Scotland in the Assembly at Westminster. **The Solemn League and Covenant, which pledged both countries to the extirpation of prelacy, leaving further decision as to church government to be decided by the example of the best reformed churches,** after undergoing some slight alterations, passed both parliaments, the Parliament of Scotland and the Parliament of England, and thus became law for the two kingdoms. By means of it Henderson has had considerable influence on the history of Great Britain.

As Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, he was in England from August 1643 till August 1646; his principal work was the drafting of the directory for public worship.

HE TRAVELED TO LONDON BY SHIP

“On the 30th of August, Mr Henderson sailed from Leith for London, in company with other Commissioners. The Covenant having been approved by both Houses of the English Parliament, and by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, the members of the latter, with those of the House of Commons convened in Margaret's Church, Westminster, upon the '25th of September; and having first solemnly sworn, afterward subscribed it.

HE DELIVERED THE OPENING SPEECH

Immediately before they proceeded in that most important work, Mr Henderson delivered a very appropriate and encouraging speech to them, in which he very judiciously and warmly recommended the duty, as acceptable to God, and well pleasing in his sight - exemplified by the people of God, and by other reformed churches and kingdoms, both in former and later times, - as very necessary - and crowned with the most surprising success.

Mr. Henderson acted a very conspicuous part in assisting the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as a Commissioner from the Church of Scotland. His deportment was very grave, and highly becoming the dignity of his station; and great deference was paid to his opinions. He always discovered uprightness in his designs, and was indefatigable in the application of his talents.

HE DEFENDED THE PRINCIPLES OF REFORMED CHURCHES

He honourably maintained a sway over men, who, in point of acuteness and erudition, have seldom been equalled. And when it became necessary to vindicate the principles of the Church of Scotland, and of the other Reformed Churches, from slanderous charges, he spoke with great facility, and most judiciously. His wisdom was seen in speaking with great propriety on the various subjects which were discussed. And his rare abilities were peculiarly displayed in reconciling contending interests, and in preserving harmony among the members of the Assembly, in the prosecution of that cause, which they had all solemnly sworn to promote. Several very striking instances of this kind occur in the History of the proceedings of that truly Venerable Assembly.' But he always most strenuously resisted every attempt which was made, with a view to introduce any principles which were opposite to those of the Church of Scotland, and of other Reformed and Presbyterian Churches.

HE WITHSTOOD THE ERASTIANS

Accordingly, he stated himself equally in opposition to the schemes of the Independents, and of a strong party in the House of Commons, who had imbibed Erastian principles, denying the Divine right of Church government, and wishing to subject the proceedings of Church judicatories to the control and review of the Parliament.⁷

HE SOUGHT TO NEGOTIATE WITH KING CHARLES I

Early in 1645 Henderson was sent to Uxbridge to aid the commissioners of the two parliaments in negotiating with the king; but nothing came of the conference. In 1646 the king joined the Scottish army; and, after retiring with them to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he sent for Henderson, and discussed with him the two systems of church government in a number of papers.

HE DIED AUG. 1646

Meanwhile Henderson was failing in health. He sailed to Scotland, and eight days after his arrival died, on the 19th of August 1646. He is buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard, Edinburgh; and his death was an occasion of national mourning in Scotland.⁸

⁷ James Reid Memoirs of the Westminster Divines <http://www.newble.co.uk/hall/henderson/biography.html>

⁸ www.Wikipedia.org