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# To Glorify and Enjoy God

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*This review article reflects on the COMMEMORATION OF THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY, published by the Banner of Truth (338 pages, £15.95).*

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The Assembly was convened in Westminster Abbey on the 1st July 1643 and dissolved on the 25th March 1652. At the behest of Parliament it had produced a Confession of Faith, two Catechisms (a shorter and a larger), a Form of Church Government and a Directory for Public Worship. There have been several commemorations of the Assembly during the past 350 years and David W Hall, one of the editors of this volume, has contributed an informative account of them in the Introduction. A preface, however, from his co-editor, John L Carson, insists that this latest occasion was more than a commemoration; it was a celebration bringing together Christian people from Australia, Korea, Brazil, The Netherlands, America and Britain.

It took place in 1993 from 23rd to 25th September in Westminster Abbey, the Abbey Church of St. Margaret, and Westminster Chapel. The addresses given are divided into three sections. The first section consists of three addresses on the Context and Work, the Men and Parties, and the Preaching of the Assembly by Samuel T Logan Jr, William S Barker and Robert Norris respectively. Much of this section is historical but we are introduced to the various groups involved, namely, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, Erastians and the Scottish Delegation. Of the divines selected for mention we meet William Goudge, one of the oldest and most highly regarded members of the Assembly; Thomas Goodwin, an Independent respected for his learning and godliness; Herbert Palmer, whose background was upper class, but whose preaching was plain and simple, designed to reach ordinary people. In the Assembly his contribution was considerable and he was known for his prudence in dealing with "tricky" problems. Then, there was the Scottish Commissioner, George Gillespie, appointed with Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford and Robert Baillie to attend the Assembly as a consequence of the Solemn League and Covenant. His influence was felt in the debates regarding Church Government, strongly arguing for Presbyterianism.

The second main section of the addresses deals with the five enduring achievements of the Assembly mentioned earlier. Wayne R Spear defends the Confession of Faith against the charge that it represents a departure from mainstream Christianity via "Post-Reformation Scholasticism". In particular, he argues that its doctrine of Scriptures is simply what B B Warfield called "... the careful and well-guarded statement of what is delivered by Scripture concerning itself".

Douglas F Kelly, in his treatment of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, reminds us that the "clarity, brevity and harmony, along with the authoritative Scriptural proof texts" found in this Catechism, have combined to give it "an unexcelled acceptance with generations of church people across the world for more than three centuries". He defends

the catechetical method of education against modern derogatory criticism, affirming that true knowledge is usually developed by finding the right answers to the right questions. The merit of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism is that it engages the mind with the kind of questions that evoke correct Biblical answers and thus stimulate a growing knowledge of God. But the Catechism itself, according to Kelly, subordinates propositions, and belief in them, to the person to whom they are "...a scarlet cord to lead us, so that we may repose all our trust in Him".

The third product of the Assembly was its **Longer Catechism**. W Robert Godfrey compares it with the Shorter Catechism. The latter, he affirms, "deliberately focuses on individuals whereas the former focuses much more on the Christian community. The Shorter Catechism does not even have a definition of the church, whilst the Larger contains a fully developed, reformed doctrine of the church". The Shorter "is relatively brief in its treatment of the means of salvation"; the Larger "develops these means much more fully. . . and is also more specific about the ordinances of God". Indeed, according to Robert Godfrey, the Longer Catechism is a "full, balanced, edifying summary of the Christian faith".

John R de Witt deals with the Assembly's fourth achievement, the **Form of Church Government**. He shows that the Westminster Divines were set the huge task of reforming church government biblically. Differing biblical interpretations were represented in the Assembly so that its Form of Church Government, though the fruit of much labour and complete as regards its essential elements "has the appearance of a penultimate book of church order rather than of a polished and finished document". John de Witt avers that we face today an unfinished task and that "we have to be sure as we move forward and as we re-think and re-draw and re-structure - once more on the foundation of the holy Word of God - that we do so in humility, in obedience to the Lord, and in a way broader than our own tradition or interest, and with a wide desire to reach out and to accommodate in our embrace brothers and sisters who are essentially one with us and who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity".

The fifth and last enduring achievement of the Assembly is the **Directory for Public Worship**, which was, in fact, chronologically its first publication. Iain H Murray draws attention to the principles governing the teaching of the Directory. Only what is commanded in Scripture is to be regarded as essential in worship but this does not rule out the place of Christian prudence and common sense in matters pertaining to it. In public worship all are called to praise their Creator, Preserver and Ruler but true worship is spiritual, relying on the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of the gathered worshippers. There are no liturgical prayers in the Directory but that does not mean that it is weak on public prayer. On the contrary it contains comprehensive guidance regarding the conduct and content of prayer in services of public worship. Such guidance is worthy of close study by ministers and congregations. Iain Murray remind us that the compilers of the Directory thought it necessary to include a section on "the sanctification of the Lord's Day", and indication that they believed "that a true view of public worship stands or falls with a true view of the sanctification of that day".

The third and final section draws attention to three **Grand Themes** of the Assembly. The book concludes with an "Afterward" by Jay Adams on the Influence of Westminster and three appendices on the Unfinished Westminster Catechism by Wayne Spear, the Parliamentary Background of the Assembly, and a Bibliographical Guide - both by David Hall. James M Boice deals with the first grand theme of the Assembly, the **Sovereignty**

of God. He begins by stressing the importance of the doctrine. "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of God's sovereignty", he declares. It is "an essential attribute of God, without which God would be proven to be no god. It is interwoven with God's other attributes, which could never be exercised apart from it. It gives meaning and substance to all the other doctrines. Far from being an abstract philosophical or theological concept, it is deeply relevant to the Christian. God's sovereignty is the Christian's "strength and comfort in this life".

James Boice draws on the experience of King Nebuchadnezzar, as recorded in the book of Daniel, for a powerful example of sinful man's rebellion against God's sovereignty and of the futility and folly of engaging in such a course. In judgement God smote the proud king of Babylon with terrifying afflictions, until he came humbly to acknowledge that "the Most High is Sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes" (Dan 4:32).

The blessings of appreciating Divine Sovereignty are greatly to be desired and James Boice draws attention to three, namely, the deepening veneration of the living God, comfort in trials and encouragement and joy in evangelism. "If God cannot convert depraved and rebellious human beings", concludes James Boice, "it is certain that you and I cannot. The situation will be hopeless. But if, on the other hand, God is sovereign... then we can be bold in evangelism, knowing that God has chosen to use weak messengers like ourselves to reach other people with the message of the cross and to bring Him glory".

The second grand theme of the Westminster Assembly was the **Pre-eminence of Christ**. Joel Nederhood deals with this theme under three headings; Christ and predestination, Christ the Mediator and Christ as the Source of every spiritual benefit. He admits that he was "overwhelmed by emotion" as he approached "this most majestic of subjects". He shows that predestination means that salvation is by the grace of God alone and his emotion comes through as he declares: "So, with awed response, we acknowledge the ineffable supremacy of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who is the Person upon whom our salvation centred before creation came to be. As we think of him and praise him, we are overwhelmed by the splendour of this revelation. Before the stars were set in place, my Saviour knew me by name, and he has done whatever is necessary to insure that my salvation will be actualized in history and in my life, Praise the Lord!"

Nederhood develops his second major theme by pointing to the pre-eminence of Christ as expressed in his work as the Mediator between God and man. He stresses the word *work*. Jesus, the Mediator, appears as the perfect worker wholly absorbed in the mighty task of achieving redemption for and in his people. Not only was Jesus "involved in the election of his children before the creation of the world, but he came to be among us. Here he accomplished the mightiest work of all, the achievement of reconciliation between God and man. He is our Prophet, our Priest, our King. . . Salvation is his work from beginning to end".

Finally, our attention is drawn to Christ's pre-eminence as the Source of *all* spiritual good. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. It is the Holy Spirit, sent from the Father and the Son, who comes into the lives of Christian believers and works in them all that the pre-eminent Christ achieved for them in his death, resurrection and ascension. ". . . Christ is the source of the rich multitude of blessings we receive through faith. Even the works we do for him, he has not only prepared, but also empowers us for their execution. There is no spiritual good of which we are the origin; he is the origin of it all". Nederhood concludes with a stirring call to Christians to point people to the pre-eminent Christ.

The last of the grand themes of the Assembly to be expounded was the **Application of Redemption**. Referring to Rom 8:29-30, Eric J Alexander focused on three words bearing on the process by which sinners are brought by God into the experimental knowledge of His saving grace. These three words, *called, justified and glorified*, are then expounded clearly and powerfully.

Opinions vary as to which of the Westminster Assembly's achievements are most relevant for us today. Because doctrine is always relevant and important, the Assembly's Confession of Faith will be seen by many as its greatest legacy. I agree, but the Directory of Worship ought also to be considered as a useful document highly relevant to today's church. For example, today there is a restless seeking after change to make services brighter and more attractive to people. Are we not absorbed with the outward trappings of worship? The more important question is how we can change our worship to make it more acceptable to God who is, or ought to be, the grand object of our praise. The Assembly's Directory of Worship contains a response to such a question. It has to do with our spiritual condition and our priorities. It teaches us that all acceptable worshippers of the Lord must worship him in spirit and in truth. Iain Murray reminds us that one of the main concerns of those who have clamoured for change has been for greater "participation". "It is said that people should cease to be passive onlookers and mere listeners in services; they need to be *participants*". With that sentiment the Puritans would no doubt have agreed, and Iain Murray believes that "the contemporary call for participation is in real danger of going back to the outward, the physical and the visual. For the Puritans, what makes true participation is the influence of the Holy Spirit, who alone can unite hearts and help congregations to offer 'prayer and supplication in the Spirit' (Eph 6:18). It is when there is a united quickening of the inward graces of faith and reverence, of love and praise, that there is true participation in public worship".

It would be good for congregations and church members to give themselves to a carefully planned and prayerful study of the Assembly's Directory of Worship. It will drive us to study our Bibles. Who knows what the result might be for us? It could lead to a re-discovery of that kind of worship which truly pleases God and to which the Assembly's Directory points. It could lead to a renewal of the life of the church in love and devotion to God. As the Puritan Stephen Chamock put it, "love is God's right in every service, and the noblest thing we can bestow upon him in our adoration of him. . . When the affection is set to the worship of God, everything the soul hath will be bestowed upon it. . . The happiness of heaven consists in a full attraction of the soul to God, by his glorious influence upon it". Our happy, holy objective in public worship must be to please God and make our church services an anticipation and foretaste of the worship of heaven.

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