

The Solemn League and Covenant and the Westminster Assembly

Introduction

Remind the pupils that if they have ever attended a service where a man has been ordained and installed they will have heard him agreeing to “acknowledge the obligation of the Covenants, National and Solemn League and the obligation arising from the swearing of these covenants by the Reformed Presbyterian Church.”

The Reformed Presbyterian Church believes that these covenants are still binding on us and that the principles expressed in them have a continuing relevance for the church and nation today.

We especially affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is the King and Head of the church.

This is why the badge used by CY members and displayed on church publications and in some buildings states “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant”.

Also tell them that every minister when ordained and installed puts his signature to a lengthy statement which begins “I believe the doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith...”

The Covenant and the Westminster Assembly therefore have continuing importance within the life of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

Following the lesson you could ask the pupils to consider why it is important that a church has a written Confession of Faith. Suggested answers:

It provides a useful summary of Christian doctrine;

It declares openly to the world and other Christians what we believe;

It provides the basis for Christian unity;

It is useful as an instruction manual for members.

Background to the Assembly

Both the Covenant and the Assembly have to be seen in their historical context.

Charles I, like his father James I, believed in what is called the doctrine of “the Divine right of kings”. They ruled with the assumption that no one “could dispute what a king may do in the height of his power.”

This arrogant claim brought Charles into conflict with the Church in Scotland and the Parliament in England.

Charles would have liked to rule without Parliament but he needed to raise finance and so had no option but to recall Parliament in 1640. He hoped it would be short lived but in fact it lasted so long that it became known as the Long Parliament. Among its members were a great many Puritans.

Tension between king and parliament grew increasingly bitter and Charles made an abortive attempt to rid Parliament of its troublesome members.

This high handed and unlawful action was one of the triggers which led to the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642.

So the Westminster Assembly was meeting at a time of great social conflict and civil war.

The Covenant

The leaders of the Parliamentary forces came to the realization that to succeed against the king’s army they would need help. So they looked to Scotland. The Scots agreed to help on condition that Parliament in England would subscribe to a religious covenant – the Solemn League and Covenant.

The Covenant was signed by the English Parliament and in the Westminster Assembly, and later in Ireland. It is doubtful if it was viewed in England in the same way it was viewed in Scotland. One Scottish Commissioner at the Westminster Assembly commented that “the English were for a civil

league, we for a religious covenant.”

Once the English Parliamentary forces had achieved military success their zeal for the Covenant abated.

One positive consequence of the signing of the Covenant however was that Scottish Commissioners were appointed to attend the Westminster Assembly and made a great contribution to its work.

The purpose of the Covenant was “to bring the churches of God in the three Kingdoms to the nearest conjunction of uniformity”: in other words, that the churches in England, Scotland and Ireland would be united in doctrine, government and practice.

Its intention was “the preservation of the reformed religion in the church in Scotland, in doctrine, discipline, worship and government” and “the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland in doctrine, worship, discipline and government according to the Word of God and the example of the best reformed churches.”

The Westminster Assembly was not an ecclesiastical court like a Synod or Presbytery. It met because Parliament had summoned it to meet. Parliament called together this gathering of “learned, godly and judicious divines” to “consult and advise of such matters and things as shall be proposed to them by both or either Houses of Parliament.”

Initially the remit of the Assembly was to revise the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England.

However once the Covenant had been signed its terms affected the work of the Assembly and it now turned its attention to producing a Confession of Faith, a Form of Church Government and a Directory for Worship and a Catechism. It was hoped that these documents would be the basis for union of the Church in England, Scotland and Ireland.

The Assembly began meeting in July 1643 and the formal meetings ended in 1648. There were 1,163 recorded sessions. It was held in the vicinity of Westminster Abbey, hence the name.

Membership

There were 10 members from the House of Lords, 20 from the Commons and 121 ministers and 6 Scots Commissioners (who did not have voting rights).

These men were Calvinist, though they disagreed about church government. Some were Episcopalian, some were Independents, some were Erastian and the majority were Presbyterian.

The Documents

Long debate, hard work and much prayer led to the production of several documents which have had a lasting and beneficial influence on the church of Christ. These are:

- the Directory of Worship,
- the Form of Church Government,
- the Confession of Faith,
- the Larger and Shorter catechisms.

The Assembly spent two and a half years preparing the Confession. When completed it was presented to Parliament as “humble advice”. The Confession was approved by the Church of Scotland though not fully accepted by Parliament in England.

It has had a powerful influence around the world.

Churches from all around the world attended the 350th anniversary of the Westminster Assembly: Brazil, North America, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Korea and Japan. All of them subscribe to the Westminster Confession.

The Confession has been adopted with a few modifications by Congregationalists (The Savoy Declaration) and by Baptists (the 1689 Baptist Confession).

Though the Assembly did not achieve its stated aim it can fairly be said that its effect was even wider than the original members could ever have envisaged.