

The Solemn League and Covenant and the Westminster Assembly

We would all agree that our name is important to us. When your Primary School teacher read the roll you answered to your own name. No-one else could answer for you. Your name is an important part of your identity.

It is like that too with the church. Our name is important. We belong to a denomination known as Reformed Presbyterian or alternatively Covenanter. These are the names by which this branch of Christ's church is known in the world. So where did we get these names? In this lesson we consider part of the answer. The names are rooted in events which took place more than three hundred and fifty years ago. That does not mean that they are long past their sell by date and should be revised, like changing to a new logo. The two events we consider in this lesson are as vibrant and relevant for the Church of Christ in the twenty first century as they were in the seventeenth century.

The Solemn League and Covenant

A covenant is a solemn agreement which is entered into voluntarily. At the time of the Reformation covenants were agreed in many parts of Europe. There were covenants in Geneva, Holland, Hungary and France. In Scotland there were several covenants, most notably the National Covenant in 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of England, Scotland and Ireland in 1643.

What lay behind the drawing up of this covenant?

The motivation for this covenant was the very good desire to honour God in the church and in the state.

It appeared at a time of great conflict. The Civil War was raging in England and the forces of King Charles I, the Cavaliers, were fighting the Parliamentary forces, the Roundheads. The leaders of the parliamentary army realized that they needed help if they were to overcome the King's forces. They asked the Scots for help and the Scots agreed on condition that Parliament in England would subscribe to a religious covenant – the Solemn League and Covenant.

The Covenant was duly signed by both Parliament and the members of the Westminster Assembly, though some at the time were doubtful of the motives of the English Parliament. One Scot commented, "The English were for a civil league, we for a religious covenant."

The stated purpose of the Covenant was "to bring the churches of God in the three kingdoms [i.e. England, Scotland and Ireland] to the nearest conjunction of uniformity." In other words the intention of the covenant was that all the churches in the land would be united in doctrine, government and practice. It is hard for us, living at a time when there are so many denominations in the United Kingdom to imagine what it would be like if there was just one church. But the church should not be divided. Think of how Jesus prayed for His church in John 17:11,20-21.

The Covenant took this prayer seriously and the men who signed it were committed to "the reformation of religion in the Kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship and government according to the Word of God and the example of the best Reformed churches." The churches in Scotland and in some other parts of Europe were regarded as "the best Reformed churches."

The signing of this covenant had an immediate effect on the work of the Westminster Assembly.

The Westminster Assembly

Meeting so the Assembly had begun before the Covenant was signed. Once it was signed by members of the Assembly its terms set the agenda for Assembly business.

Meetings

The Assembly began meeting in July 1643 and formal meetings ended in 1648. The meetings were held in the vicinity of Westminster Abbey which explains the name by which the Assembly has always been known.

It was made up of one hundred and twenty one ministers from England and six from Scotland. The Scots were not allowed to vote but they could speak in the discussions – and did so with great effect! There were also ten members from the House of Lords and twenty from the House of Commons.

Different denominations were represented including Episcopalian (like the Church of Ireland today), Independents (like the Congregational church and the Baptist church today). The majority were Presbyterian.

The meetings were not arranged by any church but by Parliament. The Assembly met because Parliament had ordered it to do so. However the members did not allow Parliament to interfere with their discussions.

When the Assembly finished its work in 1648, it presented the documents it had produced to parliament as “Humble Advice.”

The Documents

The document with which Sunday School pupils will be most familiar is the Shorter Catechism. There was also a Larger Catechism and the Confession of Faith. Other documents drawn up were a Form of Church Government and a Directory for Worship.

It was hoped that all the churches in England, Scotland and Ireland would agree and be united on the basis of these documents. However not all were prepared for that and so in a sense the Assembly failed in its great aim.

But there is a real sense in which it was even more successful than those taking part could ever have imagined. They were thinking only of the churches in England, Scotland and Ireland. But today, in countries as far apart as Brazil and Canada and Korea and Japan and Australia there are churches, like our own, which warmly accept the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms.

We believe that God greatly blessed the work of the Assembly and guided the men in their conclusions.

Today we accept the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms as excellent summaries of what the Bible teaches.