WORSHIP AND ORDER:
THE OVERLOOKED PRIORITIES OF WESTMINSTER

Christopher K. Lensch

The Westminster Standards are such a universal and thorough statement of the teachings of Scripture that they have well stood the test of time. Even in the face of sweeping twentieth-century change, Presbyterians and Reformed groups faithful to the authority of the Bible still find their clearest direction for life and belief in the work of Westminster.

Historical Background

Originally, the Westminster Assembly was called to focus on church practice more than on church belief. Church government and God’s worship were made the priority due to the current national crisis in England.

In 1640 the Puritans gained control of Parliament. In an effort to stop the Church of England’s drift back toward Rome under Archbishop Laud and King Charles I, the Long Parliament convened in 1643 a group of godly ministers and Parliamentarians to advise Parliament regarding a “further and more perfect reformation” of the government and worship of the Church of England.

Although the doctrinal Confession of Faith and the Catechisms are the most famous documents produced by the Westminster Assembly, they were not the primary mission. Actually, the first two years of deliberation were dedicated to work on proper forms of church government and worship.

The urgency for reforming the government of the Church of England was manifest in the threat of growing persecutions of the Puritans by the bishops. As for the church’s worship services, the early Reformation had given the Church of England “The Book of Common Prayer” under the pious young King Edward VI. Although the prayer book was in the common tongue of the people, its numerous prayers and empty ceremonies proved to be burdensome.

There was also a concern that the old liturgy tended to increase “an idle and unedifying ministry, which contented itself with set forms made to their hands by others, without putting forth themselves to exercise the gift of prayer, with which our Lord Jesus Christ pleaseth to furnish all his servants whom he calls to that office . . . .“ (Preface to Directory of Publick Worship).

The Westminster Assembly’s initial results, then, were the “Directory of Worship” and the “Form of Church Government.” A more thorough document on church polity was completed in 1645, “A Directory for Church-Government, Church-Censures, and Ordination of Ministers.” The latter is practically a lost document as it has not been republished in the last 200 years. Still, its imprint can be seen in modern denominational constitutions and books of discipline.

The Long Parliament carried out the recommendations of its advisory commission when, in 1648, presbytery boundaries were set up in Puritan controlled areas. The English Civil War, however, as well as Oliver Cromwell, of Independent Church persuasion, soon dashed the possibility of official

The influence of Westminster still casts a long shadow over modern church government and worship. The work of the Assembly not only was preserved but was also practiced by the church in Scotland. From there and from its vestiges in England, Presbyterianism was transplanted to the New World where it became a dynamic in shaping the American experiment.

**Order**

The genius of Presbyterian government is the biblical principle of “safety in a multitude of counselors.” Westminster removed English Presbyterianism from the tyranny of bishops and the caprices of an Erastian church.

While there is a plurality in representative leadership on the local, regional, and national levels, Presbyterian government also observes a division of labors. This is especially seen in our congregational government where the pastor, elders, and deacons cooperate in the ministry, yet within the areas of their defined duties.

Plurality in leadership avoids the concentration of authority in one or two hands where it can be abused. Representative rule means leaders arise from within the flock, so that they understand the needs of the flock and are held accountable. Specialization and division of labors also decentralize authority while enabling servants to focus fully on their area of responsibility. Significantly, some of these same biblical principles articulated by the Westminster Assembly are found in the American system of government.

**Worship**

On the title page of the “Directory for the Public Worship of God” is the hallmark theme verse of Presbyterianism: “Let all things be done decently, and in order,” followed by the admonition to “Let all things be done unto edifying” (I Cor. 14:40, 26).

This document puts the proper emphasis on spiritual worship over man-made ceremonies. The Directory addresses the proper spirit of worshipers, and it accentuates the simplicity of the public reading of Scripture, prayer, expounding the Scriptures, followed by more prayer.

The Assembly did not produce a statement on personal piety or family devotions (there is an allusion in WCF XXI:6). Its commission was to reform the public worship of the Church of England. The urgency to address family worship may have appeared slight since the practice was common in Puritan circles. However, in 1648 before the end of the Westminster Assembly in London, the Scottish General Assembly produced four pages of “Directions for Family Worship.”

The Scottish Presbyterian desire to produce the “Directions for Family Worship” shows an appreciation for God’s covenant. It is to and through the family that God extends His promises. The importance of training the next generation in piety was such that household heads were held accountable for carrying on regular family worship, and ministers and elders were charged with inquiring about their faithfulness in family worship. Delinquent and stubborn fathers were barred from the Lord’s table.

Modern evangelicalism places proper importance upon the Christians’ personal devotions, but
evangelicalism diminishes God’s dealing with families. We Presbyterians need to return to our roots to balance today’s individualism with a renewed focus on families worshipping together in church and especially at home.

Conclusion

“Decently and in order.” “In spirit and in truth.” These were watch words of the Presbyterians who met at the Westminster Assembly 350 years ago. These biblical ideals have served our church well and will keep us close to the God of the Scriptures.