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THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

READING ITS THEOLOGY
IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

ROBERT LETHAM



P U B L I S H I N G

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In memoriam
Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (1915-1990)
Anglicanus ecclesiasticus
Doctor eminentissimus seminarii Presbyterianii
Theologus Calvinianus
Scholasticus Reformationis ac Novi Testamenti
Consiliarius doctissimus
In impositione manuum cum presbyterio ordinatione mea participavit,
et sic in successionem apostolorum meo loculum donavit!

You are at this time as a citty set upon a mountaine; the eyes of E[ngland], S[cotland], I[reland] & of all reformed churches are upon you; a delight to this meeting [?]; a desire & fervent expectation. And the eyes of papists, Arminians, &c. are all upon you, & howsoever they may seeme to dispise the day of small things, yet they behould this Assembly with great feare and astonishment.

—ALEXANDER HENDERSON, in a speech at the Westminster Assembly, 15 November 1643 (Van Dixhoorn, 3:311.)

If it were practicable, it would be interesting to contemplate the Assembly more at length in its historical setting and relations;—to pass in review its vital connections with the antecedent developments of British Protestantism from the age of Henry VIII, and also with much of the civil history of Britain during the hundred years preceding its convocation;—to call to mind also the diversified movements of the developing Protestantism of the continent during this period, and study the amazing revolution in belief and experience which occurred throughout northern Europe between the age of Luther and Calvin and the memorable day when the Assembly held its opening session in the beautiful Chapel of Henry VIII. It would also be interesting, if we could contemplate the Assembly in its living connections with the other great Christian Councils from the era of Nicaea and Constantinople down to the memorable Council of Trent,—if we could compare its doctrinal products more specifically with those of others in that illustrious series, and estimate comprehensively its relative bearings upon the subsequent theology and faith of Christendom. Such comparative studies, if they did not stir us to special and reverent admiration, would at least make manifest to us the emptiness of much of the derogatory criticism which in earlier and in later times has been heaped upon that memorable body. It would also demonstrate the fact that, if indeed the Westminster divines were not individually notable, as unfriendly critics have alleged, the Assembly itself was great,—great in the magnitude and elevation of its aims, great in the specific work which it accomplished, and great in the influence it has exerted, and is still exerting, alike upon the religious beliefs and upon the moral activities of millions who in various lands speak the English tongue.

—EDWARD D. MORRIS, *Theology of the Westminster Symbols*

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Perspectives on Westminster



The Westminster Assembly and Protestant Scholasticism

Through much of the last century, scholars of Reformed theology pitted Calvin against the Calvinists.¹ According to this view, Calvin's dynamic biblicism was lost by his successors. Aristotelian philosophical methodology, dominant in the late medieval period, was introduced into Reformed theology by Theodore Beza, who was Calvin's successor at Geneva, as well as by Zacharias Ursinus of Heidelberg and others. It produced a thoroughgoing rational theology in which logic and reason were paramount. Doctrines were deduced from masterful premises. Causal analysis was employed throughout. Reason was accorded a priority, and the biblical text was squeezed into a rigidly imposed grid. The tensions evident in Calvin, stemming from his determination to follow the Bible, rather than to form an internally consistent logical system, were ironed out by logic.

Prominent among the scholars taking this position were Hans Emil Weber, Karl Barth, Basil Hall, Walter Kickel, Brian Armstrong, R. T. Kendall, T. F. Torrance, J. B. Torrance, and latterly Alister McGrath.² In essence, they postulated a radical division between Calvin and those

1. The pithy phrase comes from B. Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin* (ed. G. Duffield; Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1966), 19–37.

2. Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie und Rationalismus*; Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists"; W. Kickel, *Vernunft und Offenbarung bei Theodor Beza: Zum Problem der Verhältnisses von Theologie, Philosophie und Staat* (Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche;

who followed in the Reformed tradition. The Westminster Assembly supposedly fits neatly into the Calvinist camp, as a prominent example of developed Reformed scholasticism, with its doctrine logically deduced from the premise of the eternal decree of God, and the history of salvation demarcated into two distinct covenants, the covenant of works before the fall and the covenant of grace after it.³ This interpretation was notably advanced by Holmes Rolston III in *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession*.⁴

Among these critics, Barth sees the Scots Confession, together with Zwingli's *Short Christian Instruction*, Calvin's 1545 Catechism, the French Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism as conveying "an accurate picture of what the early Reformed intended. All the rest are repetitions and variations, and when variations, often departures from the main tradition that then easily lead astray."⁵ From this, the high noon of Reformed theology, the Westminster Assembly is a degeneration that Barth can only describe as "a tragedy . . . the death of Calvinism."⁶ Barth, it seems to me, has set up an arbitrary canon within a canon, setting apart the early Reformed theology and confessions as definitive, and failing to take into consideration the peculiar historical circumstances of the time until 1563. Equally, he does not take account of changed conditions later. We noted Jonathan Moore's cogent counterargument above.

Earlier, Edward Morris was much more sympathetic and reliable.⁷ The advantage of the Assembly over all other Protestant bodies, he said, was that "they had in their hands, not only all the antecedent creeds in Britain from the first Scots Confession down to the Articles of Ussher and the Irish Synod, but also most if not every one of the continental formularies which could be in any way helpful to them in shaping their

Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1967); Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*; R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); J. B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?"; A. E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 212.

3. See J. B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" whose particular target was federal Calvinism, which he saw exemplified at Westminster.

4. Rolston, *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession*.

5. Barth, *Reformed Confessions*, 133.

6. *Ibid.*, 135.

7. This is so, even though his book on the Assembly was published in 1900, just before the twentieth century began.

Symbols.”⁸ Indeed, they were inclined to adhere as closely as possible to the doctrine and language of those earlier creeds wherever practicable. Morris refers to their familiarity with the English Reformers and the continental divines, especially Calvin, whose *Institutes* had long been used in the universities. In fact, “at no date prior to the fifth decade of the seventeenth century could any body of men . . . have had such resources or such an opportunity to formulate a creed fitted to command interest and secure approval wherever Protestantism prevailed.” This was “a conjunction which was nothing less than providential.”⁹ Morris draws attention to the Assembly’s moderation, especially toward the Independents and those with tender consciences, and how it repeatedly avoided opinions that had aroused fierce debates in other quarters. He cites Gillespie’s comment in a discourse to Parliament, in which he urged, “Let that day be darkness . . . in which it shall be said that the children of God in Britain are enemies and persecutors of each other.”¹⁰ Morris’s own moderation was overtaken by the rise of the Calvin-against-the-Calvinists debate.

However, since the 1970s a growing movement has undermined the Barth-Weber-Hall argument. Richard Muller outlines the contours of its critique of the earlier model.¹¹ Early works by John Bray, Joseph McClelland, John Patrick Donnelly, W. Robert Godfrey, Jill Raitt, Ian McPhee, and Robert Letham pointed the way. Vast research by Muller has exploded the thesis, assisted by contributions from Lyle Bierma, Carl Trueman, Martin Klauber, Willem van Asselt, and others.¹² There is neither time nor space here to repeat these rebuttals. Certainly, it is not denied that there are definite discontinuities between the sixteenth-century Reformers and their successors a century later. Inevitably, there is historical development, involving new pastoral and theological contexts, with the need to defend the doctrine of the Reformation against new opposition, and to teach it in an orderly and systematic fashion to the church and its ministers. Equally inevitably, particular intellectual and philosophical tools were

8. Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 795–96.

9. *Ibid.*, 796–97.

10. *Ibid.*, 802–4.

11. Muller, *After Calvin*, 3–102.

12. See the bibliographical references in Muller, *After Calvin*, 64, 207.

used for that purpose, as they are in any time or place. However, to label a theologian as a scholastic simply because he used Aristotelian causal analysis has little meaning, for everyone did so, Calvin included.¹³ Carl Trueman's systematic demolition of the argument of Alan Clifford demonstrates the anachronistic and self-defeating nature of the accusation.¹⁴ Moreover, the lines of continuity—downplayed or ignored by the previous scholarship—have been clearly brought to the surface.

Paul Helm has discussed in detail the Westminster Confession of Faith's chapter on providence in the light of the argument that the divines used the doctrine scholastically as a basis for logical deductions leading to their other formulations.¹⁵ Helm argues that the place a doctrine occupies bears little or no relation to whether that person is a scholastic in method: "Each of the Chapters 2 through 5 presupposes the material of the immediately earlier chapter. But it does not follow from this that each chapter is *deduced from* the earlier material. The framers of the Confession sought to ground each of their assertions in the text of Scripture."¹⁶ At no point do they offer a *theory* of divine providence, for they are "resolutely *a posteriori* in intent." Nor is there any trace of dependence on natural theology, nor an appeal to natural light or human experience—their Confession is thoroughly grounded on the assertions of Scripture. Their only concession in the chapter is the use of the idea of primary and secondary causality, a distinction used in the Middle Ages. But Calvin also used it.¹⁷ There is no doubt that scholasticism is present in the sense of the technical development of theology by means of question and answer, careful distinctions, definition and argument, distinction of theological topics, and the like, but this is more "a presentational matter rather than theologically substantive."¹⁸ Thus, Helm concludes, "there is no substance to the charge that,

13. See Muller, *Unaccommodated Calvin*, 39–61.

14. C. R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Pater-noster, 1998).

15. P. Helm, "Westminster and Protestant Scholasticism," in *Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (ed. Duncan), 2:99–116.

16. *Ibid.*, 103.

17. *Ibid.*, 105–6.

18. *Ibid.*, 107.

in this area at least, the Confession expresses a degenerate form of Reformed theology.”¹⁹

Muller, as in his overall work in which he understands Reformed theology against its late medieval background, points to biblical exegesis as the Assembly’s primary source of theology.²⁰ This is strikingly evident from the record of debates. The divines were constantly discussing the meaning of passages from the Old Testament and New Testament. Their theology was grounded, not on abstract logical speculation or a chain of causal deductivism, but on their grappling with the biblical text in its original languages in interaction with the history of interpretation, not only in the Reformed churches, but also in the medieval and patristic periods.²¹

The Ecclesiological Captivity of the Assembly

Van Dixhoorn reflects on the almost uniform preoccupation of scholarship on the Assembly with ecclesiology. Its membership has normally been defined purely in ecclesiological terms, as Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or Independent. One is given to believe that theology was of little concern, a matter on which general agreement existed, and that the real issues concerned church government. As Van Dixhoorn indicates, this approach was consistent until its crowning work, that of R. S. Paul.²² In contrast, Van Dixhoorn’s examination of the 1,333 plenary sessions from 1643 to 1652, the 209 ad hoc committees, and the 162 published manuscripts shows that the greatest part of the Assembly’s energies were expended on theology, “a fact which cannot be gathered from any existing history of the Assembly.”²³ Only

19. *Ibid.*, 115.

20. R. A. Muller, “Either Expressly Set Down . . . or by Good and Necessary Consequence: Exegesis and Formulations in the Annotations and the Confession” (conference paper presented at Westminster Assembly 2004; Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004); R. A. Muller, “Inspired by God . . . Kept Pure in All Ages: The Doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Confession” (conference paper presented at Westminster Assembly 2004; Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2004).

21. Morris (*Westminster Symbols*, 807) notes that many have approached the documents anachronistically in terms of their language—focusing on expressions such as “mere love,” “utterly, wholly,” “pleasure,” “estate,” “guilt,” and “good works,” in particular.

22. Paul, *Assembly of the Lord*.

23. Van Dixhoorn, 1:5–10.

26 percent of the plenary sessions and 19 percent of the committees had church government as their main focus, whereas 36 percent of the plenary sessions were devoted to theological issues, as well as 31 percent of committees.²⁴ Occasionally this reigning paradigm has been questioned, but it has never been shaken from its dominance. Van Dixhoorn's work should help turn attention in a direction more compatible with the Assembly's main work. As he comments, ecclesiological classifications are essential to understand the Assembly on ecclesiastical and political matters, but they beg the question as to why the Assembly was bifurcated into Presbyterians and Independents. He suggests theological factors may even underlie the ecclesiological divisions: "These men were, after all, called divines for a reason."²⁵

The Criticisms of T. F. Torrance

The sea change in recent Calvinism scholarship had little effect on Thomas F. Torrance. In his book *Scottish Theology*, he devotes a chapter to the Westminster Assembly and marshals against it a range of arguments familiar to those acquainted with his trenchant criticisms of the later development in Scottish Calvinism.

However, Torrance's arguments have some surprising holes and historical inaccuracies. His listing of James Ussher as a commissioner at the Assembly is technically correct, but Ussher refused to recognize the body, let alone attend it, due to his royalist sympathies. Torrance dates the Irish Articles as 1614, rather than 1615. Moreover, he says the purpose of the Assembly was to give rational cohesion to the participating churches in the Commonwealth, forgetting that the Assembly, as set up, was an English body and that the Commonwealth lay in the future.²⁶ He argues that the Confession did not follow the lead of Calvin and the 1560 Scots Confession in holding justification and union with Christ inseparably together. But while this may be true, Torrance ignores the Larger Catechism, where this connection is

24. *Ibid.*, 1:212.

25. *Ibid.*

26. T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 125–26.

clear.²⁷ This also evaporates his contention that the Confession's *ordo salutis* is medieval, with a series of steps leading to union with Christ, a reversal of Calvin's teaching on union with Christ as the source of his benefits.²⁸ The Confession, he insists, does not demonstrate the spiritual freshness and freedom of the Scots Confession. The earlier evangelical Calvinism was here replaced by a more legalistic variety of theology.²⁹ We can recognize here the approach typical of the scholarship undermined by Muller and others, in which the earlier vitality of Reformed theology was supposedly stifled by rigidly logical and legal thinking. Torrance gives little attention to the historical context, the purpose of the Assembly in the situation of ecclesiastical and political anarchy in 1640s England, or the quite different needs of the time. He does not pay attention to the whole theological output of the Assembly, but is fixated on the Confession. His comments on the "frigidly logical proof texts" ignores the occasion for their inclusion—the order of Parliament—and the divines' reluctance to provide them, their wider view of the sense of Scripture, and the way the proof texts were intended to function.³⁰ We will discuss this in more detail in chapter 7.

Overall, Torrance makes very clear that, for all its merits,³¹ he dislikes the Assembly's work and does so from his distinctive theological position, which is very much his own, but owes much to Athanasius, his own reading of Calvin, McLeod Campbell, and Barth.³² This is clear in his almost visceral opposition to limited atonement and the pre-fall covenant of works.³³ We should note

27. *Ibid.*, 144.

28. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

29. *Ibid.*, 127.

30. *Ibid.*, 128–29.

31. He states: "The powerful intellectual coherence in theological outlook achieved in the Westminster Confession has given an enduring unified character to Scottish theology and culture ever since." *Ibid.*, 127.

32. I have written elsewhere that it is a mistake to label Torrance as a Barthian; he is too significant a thinker in his own right to be regarded in terms of someone else. However, it is clear that Barth had a significant impact on him, as he did on Barth. See Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 356–73.

33. Torrance's caricature of limited atonement as requiring the Father to be "bought off" and "induced to reconcile us" (*Scottish Theology*, 137–39) would almost be laughable, were it not so tragically false. He rightly points to the Father's prevenient love as the root of Christ's atonement. However, this underlies WCF 3 and 8, in which the intent of the

that the theological connection between the covenant of works (or covenant of life) and the atonement is direct; Paul's exposition of the two Adams in Romans 5:12–21 makes that clear. In this case, Torrance believes that the overpowering impact of the doctrine of election reflects a defective view of God, in which justice and law have primacy over love. Thus, God's love is restricted to a certain number of people, fixed from eternity. Hence, following this, the sacraments do not display God as our Father, but are signs of the covenant, framed in a legal mold to which conditions are attached. This bred lack of assurance in later Scottish theology.³⁴ Apparently, the significant debates on the extent of saving grace passed Torrance by. We will refer to these below and in chapter 9. An indigenous brand of hypothetical universalism was present and active at Westminster and, although the divines did not adopt it, its exponents were able to voice their views and to continue to play an active role in the Assembly thereafter.

Torrance's criticisms are redolent of the movement begun in the nineteenth century that looked for large organizing principles or central dogmas that were held to govern thought across the theological spectrum. In particular, it has been claimed that election and predestination have shaped the Westminster Confession and thus the theology of the divines.³⁵ Again, Torrance and his brother James have pointed to the dual covenant framework—covenant of works and covenant of grace—as organizing and controlling the Assembly's approach to theology.³⁶ However, it is more than unlikely that a group of largely English theologians in the 1640s would shape their work in terms of an abstract principle devised two hundred years later in Germany. This is even more to the point when we remember the dominance of biblical exegesis in the Assembly debates. We have every right to ask whether it is, in fact, Torrance who has fallen prey to an abstract form of thought in which he criticizes a group of theologians in the seventeenth century for failing to anticipate Karl Barth of the twentieth

atonement is addressed—not to mention LC 32, which traces every aspect of the covenant of grace and Christ's mediation to the grace of God and his free offer of life and salvation in Christ.

34. T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 125–50.

35. *Ibid.*, 134–35.

36. *Ibid.*, 136–37; J. B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?"

century, and for adopting a rationalistic *central dogma* when that whole idea was only to emerge in the nineteenth century.

Having said this, some of Torrance's observations carry weight. His criticism of the structure of chapter 2 of the Confession, with the Trinity relegated to the final section, is important. Even here, we have to add a rider that this is as much a criticism of the Western church and its consideration of the Trinity apart from the doctrine of God as it is of the Assembly as such. He is right to draw attention to the fatherhood of God belonging to God's eternal nature and not merely brought into effect in relation to the elect. This is correct, since the Father is the Father of the Son before he is ever our Father in heaven. However, the Confession explicitly acknowledges this in 2.3, where it speaks of the eternal relations of the Trinitarian persons. The Larger Catechism expounds this in more detail still. It undermines Torrance's claim that God is presented as Creator and Judge of all the earth, but as Father to his creatures only if they rigorously meet the requirements of his law. This assertion flies in the face of the Confession's expression of the sheer grace of God, both in election ("out of his mere grace and love") and covenant ("voluntary condescension," "freely offereth salvation").³⁷ We will address Torrance's criticism of the apparent lack of missionary vision at Westminster in passing in the next chapter, where we will note the Assembly's concern for the translation of the Bible "into the vulgar language of every nation . . . that they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope."³⁸ Missionary activity, after all, has as its aim that people may know and worship the triune God.

Tim Trumper and Constructive Reassessment

More recently, Tim Trumper makes some apparently sympathetic criticisms of the Westminster Assembly in arguing for what he calls "constructive Calvinism."³⁹ Strongly influenced by the biblical theology

37. WCF 3.5; 7.3.

38. WCF 1.8.

39. T. J. R. Trumper, "Covenant Theology and Constructive Calvinism," *WTJ* 64 (2002): 387–404; Trumper, "A Fresh Exposition of Adoption: II. Some Implications," *SBET* 23 (2005): 194–215.

of Vos, Ridderbos, and Gaffin, he urges that redemptive history be given centrality in a Reformed confession in a way that it was not at Westminster. In particular, he laments the lack of attention given to adoption and the filial dimension of salvation. He bewails the juridical and legal focus. We need a new confession, he says, since the Westminster documents have lost their ecumenical force.

Trumper makes many good points. I have argued elsewhere for the balancing of the legal and judicial focus of Western soteriology by the Eastern doctrine of deification. Interestingly, this did not altogether escape the attention of the Westminster divines themselves!⁴⁰ However, the Confession, uniquely among classic Reformed confessions—or any confession, for that matter—has a chapter on adoption. Furthermore, the strictly logical and sequential pattern of the Confession is balanced by a focus on union with Christ in the Larger Catechism. Overall, Trumper’s proposal is more like “deconstructive Calvinism,” as he peels apart one key doctrine of Reformed theology after another in support of a reconstruction. What Trumper misses is that biblical theology can *never* furnish the basis for a confession of faith, since the church is called to defend the gospel in words other than those of the Bible. Its task is not simply to repeat the nuances of the biblical authors, for it is all too often the meaning of the biblical language that is at stake. Its task is to bring out “the sense of Scripture,” which includes not merely its express statements set in their redemptive-historical context—important though that may be for biblical exegesis—but also its entailments and implications. Trumper’s line of argument would leave the church defenseless against heresy every bit as much as it would have done in the fourth century, when both orthodox and Arians could agree on biblical language, but gave to that language vastly differing meanings.⁴¹ Certainly, the ongoing march of history has created new spheres of conflict for the church, and so the Westminster documents may not address all the issues that come to the surface. There may well be a need for a new confession in our own day. However, with the great ecumenical councils each affirmation merely restated the gospel in a new context, building upon

40. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 472–73.

41. See *ibid.*, 108ff.

and *not replacing* what had gone before. Moreover, Trumper is simply over the top when he says, “While some readers may prefer the *status quo*, ongoing developments in biblical and historical theology suggest God may not.”⁴² We need to be careful about what we claim for our theology. This is doubly so when one can accurately be accused, as Trumper can, of substantial anachronisms and failure to be abreast of current scholarship on Calvin and Calvinism.⁴³

Compromise and Flexibility

The Assembly documents need to be understood as *compromise documents*. Compromise is inevitable in a group of 150 people.⁴⁴ If we leave aside the Assembly’s exclusion of what it considered false (the distinctive teachings of the antinomians, Arminians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and high church Episcopalians) and the well-known differences over ecclesiology between the Presbyterians and the Independents, as well as the issue of Amyraldianism, there were clear distinctions, nuances, and contours within what was considered acceptable doctrine.

The Ordo Salutis

First, there is a subtle but important distinction in the handling of the *ordo salutis*. The approach to the *ordo salutis* is strikingly different in the Larger Catechism than in the Confession. Instead of a purely logical order, the whole process of salvation is placed under the umbrella of union and communion with Christ in grace and glory (LC 65–90) and reaches its climax in a thoroughly Trinitarian view of glorification. We should note that, since these two perspectives exist side by side, the Assembly did not view them as incompatible. They are complementary, not competitive. For an adequate view of the process by which salvation is received and nurtured, both are required. We will discuss this at greater length in chapter 12.

42. Trumper, “A Fresh Exposition of Adoption,” 215.

43. See the pertinent criticisms of T. L. Wenger, “The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations,” *JETS* 50 (2007): 311–28.

44. It is also necessary in your marriage.

The Covenant of Works (the Covenant of Life) and the Imputation of Sin

Second, since thought on the covenant was still developing, the Confession takes a different tack than the Larger Catechism. This is not merely a difference of nomenclature (covenant of life versus covenant of works), but concerns the imputation of sin. In the Confession, the sin of our first parents is imputed, they being the root of mankind. This is the sin of Adam together with, rather than in distinction from, that of Eve. Our connection with our first parents is organic here, rather than representative; they are together the root of mankind. This statement is placed in the chapter on sin (6:1–4), not the one on the covenant, where we might expect to find it, if it were viewed in connection with Adam as federal head. It echoes the earliest views in Reformed theology on the transmission of the first sin. Both Bucer and Calvin saw the connection between Adam and the human race in terms of natural generation, rather than legal representation. However, in the Larger Catechism, Adam is identified as “a publick person,” who acted not for himself alone, but for his posterity (LC 22). The fall brought mankind into a state of sin (23). The guilt of Adam’s first sin is conveyed to mankind, although the means of conveyance is unaddressed (25), while original sin is passed on by natural generation (26). There is no reference here to imputation, although it may be implied, for all the necessary building blocks are in place.⁴⁵ Thus, in the Confession the sin of our first parents is imputed to us, since they are the root of the human race, while in the Larger Catechism Adam’s posterity incur the guilt of *his* first sin, he being a public person, but the manner of acquiring this guilt is left unsaid. This difference can be explained in a number of possible ways: flexibility, uncertainty in the face of ongoing development of the doctrine of the covenant, a preparedness to hold different positions in tension. This is a matter I will explore in more detail in chapter 10.

45. However, LC 22 appears to connect Adam to his posterity by natural generation. This is how the connection was understood in Reformed theology until at least 1600. Calvin, Bucer, and Vermigli all held this position. Although the idea of a pre-fall covenant of works emerged in 1585, the various ingredients of the doctrine were added, not at once, but over the course of time.

***Justification and the Imputation of the Active
Obedience of Christ***

Even more vivid differences surfaced in the extensive debate on justification when revisions to the Thirty-Nine Articles were being considered. Many divines (roughly one-third of the recorded speakers) argued that it is improper to say that Christ's active obedience is imputed to us in justification. Richard Vines, for one, insisted that he had never taught it. The debate went on for seven sessions, although one of these was largely taken up with an answer to a request from the Scottish commissioners. Eventually the approved revision referred to Christ's "whole obedience and satisfaction being by God imputed unto us."⁴⁶ This statement satisfied the majority, who held to the imputation of Christ's active obedience. However, it was couched so as to avoid any idea that Christ's obedience is divided, an idea unacceptable to those who opposed the imputation of his active obedience. It also allowed Christ's obedience to be equated with his satisfaction of divine justice on the cross. It was a compromise enabling both sides to claim it as their own. During these debates, Thomas Gataker argued that these differences should not lead to the imposition of one position on everyone, so as to prevent some men from exercising their ministry, for only the Second Helvetic Confession had specified the exact nature of Christ's obedience; and while it was mentioned in the Irish Articles, there was no compulsion for people to subscribe to them.⁴⁷ Norris hits the nail on the head when he remarks, "It was a point on which difference was tolerated. It shows that the Calvinism of the Assembly, so long regarded as inflexibly rigid, and pilloried for being so, was capable of divergent opinions within it, and of tolerating and discussing these opinions without much of the acrimony that accompanied continental theological debates."⁴⁸ The Assembly clearly committed itself to regard the active obedience as imputed in justification, but the minority who disagreed were not run out of the Assembly. They continued to participate actively and productively.⁴⁹

46. Norris, "Thirty-Nine Articles," 386.

47. *Ibid.*, 54.

48. *Ibid.*, lviii.

49. That the position of Gataker and Vines cannot be equated with the view of those in the early twenty-first century who deny the imputation of the active obedience of Christ in

This compromise on justification was carried over into both the Confession and the Larger Catechism. In fact, the word “whole” was omitted from both the Confession and the Larger Catechism. There is no mention of the active obedience of Christ anywhere in the Assembly documents. Later the Savoy Declaration (1658) of the Congregationalists referred to both the active and the passive obedience, as if it regarded Westminster as soft on the issue. Why precisely it was omitted remains uncertain—there is not enough historical evidence to make a firm judgment. We will discuss the matter in detail in chapter 12.

The Extent of Saving Grace

Significant debates were held in October 1645 on the universality of grace. Amyraut’s theology was a hot topic at the time. Many members were spotted reading Amyraut during the proceedings.⁵⁰ At the same time, there was—and always had been—a strong strain of hypothetical universalism in English theology, distinct from Amyraut and less developed than his.⁵¹ The debates thrust these significant differences into the foreground. Earlier they had been evident at the Synod of Dort, where the British delegation had mediated between the more universalist delegation from Bremen and the hard-line Dutch, brokering a final statement that gave full voice to the universal sufficiency of Christ’s death before it added a statement about its intention being for the elect.⁵² We will discuss this question in chapter 9.

Issues Concerning Baptism

Differences over the mode of baptism emerged during the course of debate, in S 261–63 22.7.44–8.8.44, eventually culminating in a vote as to whether, given that sprinkling was the correct mode, dipping was also acceptable. The initial vote supported dipping by 25–24, but then was reversed on a second vote by the same margin. The matter

justification is made clear by Jue, “Active Obedience of Christ,” 99–130. All sides in the Assembly rejected any idea that the sinner contributes anything, including works of evangelical obedience, to his or her justification.

50. Troxel, “Amyraut ‘at’ the Assembly.”

51. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism*.

52. Godfrey, “Tensions Within International Calvinism.”

was debated further, another vote was taken, and the lawfulness of dipping was reaffirmed.⁵³ In this light, it is interesting to note that the *Annotations* commissioned by Parliament state that the meaning of *baptidzo* (“to baptize”) is “to dip,” in the course of which reference is made to the ancient practice of baptism as immersion.⁵⁴ Similar differences of opinion existed on the practical issues of whether baptism brings the one baptized into the covenant of grace or whether he is to be baptized because he is in the covenant already, and whether parents should make a profession of faith at the time their children are baptized. Furthermore, there was the question addressed to the Assembly by Apollonius on behalf of the church of Wallcheren—and the practice of the Reformed churches in general—as to the limitation of the covenant simply to believing parents rather than seeing it as extending back in time from one generation to the next.

General Considerations

All this is to leave to one side the well-known differences on church government that have been rehearsed many times before. The majority of divines were Presbyterian, although not for the same reasons or with the same degree of commitment. The Scots were, of course, Presbyterian, but they were at the Assembly only to give advice. There were a number of Episcopalians and a small but able and vociferous group of Independents. We have already seen that the body as a whole was Erastian, with all power in the hands of Parliament.

The distinctions between the Confession and the Larger Catechism, and the underlying differences between members of the Assembly, demonstrate, among other things, the Assembly’s dynamism and flexibility, its ability and willingness to encompass a range of models for an understanding of salvation. A contextual approach

53. Van Dixhoorn, 5:210–20.

54. *Annotations* [Wing D2062]: annotations on Romans 6:1–2 re *baptidzo*, and also on Romans 6:5. Commenting on Romans 6.4 (where Paul states that believers have been buried with Christ by baptism), the *Annotations* read: “In this phrase the Apostle seemeth to allude to the ancient manner of Baptisme, which was, to dip the parties baptized, and as it were to bury them under the water for a while, and then to draw them out of it, and lift them up, to represent the buriall of our old man, and our resurrection to newnesse of life.” The identical comments are found in the third edition of 1657 [Wing D2064].

to the Westminster Assembly provides the opportunity to locate its doctrinal documents in the context of Reformed theology as a whole and within the broad flow of doctrinal development in the Christian church—and in England in particular—as *Christian* teaching proper to the whole church.

A notable example of the Assembly’s desire to reach as wide agreement as possible is provided by the Committee on Accommodation. In S536 M 17.11.45am, the Assembly received an order from both Houses for the Committee on Accommodation “to take into consideration the differences in opinion of the members of the Assembly in point of church government, and to endeavour a union if it be possible, and in case that cannot be done, to endeavour the finding out some way how tender consciences, who cannot in all things submit to the common rule which shall be established, may be borne with according to the Word, and as may stand with the public peace.”⁵⁵

Moreover, a few months later, the staunch Episcopalian Thomas Coleman, in S601 M 9.3.45(46)am, during the debate on whether church government is distinct from the civil government, voiced some concerns of conscience. Coleman disagreed with such a distinction and wanted to know whether, if he spoke his mind on this matter, it would be considered a breach of the Solemn League and Covenant to which he had given allegiance, and so open himself up to a charge of perjury. He clearly wished to be free to speak according to his conscience, even if that was contrary to the Covenant and to the overwhelming majority of the Assembly. The matter was debated “and the Assembly thought not fit to pass any resolution upon that, it being free to any member of the Assembly to speak his conscience in the Assembly; and so he was called into the argument.”⁵⁶

It is well known that the Independents were given leave to present their case to the Assembly and that this occupied a considerable amount of time in debate. In S639 TH 14.5.46am, it was resolved that “Goodwin, Ny, Burroughs, Bridge, Sampson, Greenhill, Carter junior, Phillips granted liberty to be a committee to bring to the Assembly

55. From the Journals of the House of Commons, 4:342, recorded in Mitchell and Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions*, 163–64.

56. Mitchell and Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions*, 204–5.

what they should think fit upon these questions [on the *ius divinum* of church government].”⁵⁷

As Morris points out, “Traces of fraternal compromise, even on points which at first were matters of strenuous discussion, such as the order of decrees or the scope of the Gospel or the divine right of the Presbyterian polity, are frequently apparent.” He finds “many indications . . . not only of a purpose to incorporate whatever was worthiest in the ancient creeds, but of a disposition to harmonize in belief, so far as possible, with other Protestant and especially with the Reformed communions.”⁵⁸ Morris goes on to argue that the Westminster documents are less technical than the Canons of Dort, less strictly theological; yet, when compared with the Heidelberg Catechism, they reveal a more thorough doctrinal structure without the sacrifice of spiritual tone. In fact, “they exhibit much in both spirit and thought which the common Christianity for all time will continue to appreciate as the most consummate flower of historic Protestantism.”⁵⁹ That these are not uncritical comments is evident from the fact that Morris points to the absence of such topics as the nature of the gospel and the person and work of the Holy Spirit, in suggesting that the Assembly may not have made the best grouping possible.

The Boundaries of Acceptable Doctrine

In short, the Assembly, within limits, was inclusive rather than exclusive. It sought to reach the widest measure of agreement possible, within acceptable limits of doctrine and practice. And what exactly was unacceptable doctrine and practice?

First, the Assembly obviously excluded the distinctive teachings of Rome. This is evident in its speaking of the pope as the Antichrist, its comments about churches degenerating into synagogues of Satan, its strong assertion of the supreme authority of Scripture, its rejection of transubstantiation and the Mass, and the limits placed on the power of synods and councils. However, this does not mean that the Assembly differed from Rome on everything; it expressed its adherence to the

57. *Ibid.*, 231.

58. Morris, *Westminster Symbols*, 62.

59. *Ibid.*, 63.

doctrines of the great ecumenical councils on the Trinity and Christology, its common opposition to Pelagianism, and so on. It disagreed with the teachings of Rome that had provoked the Reformation, and underlying these was, of course, the relative position of Scripture and the teaching authority of the church, which we will consider in the next chapter. This does not mean that the Assembly considered the Roman Church to be entirely a synagogue of Satan; clearly, it retained some of the marks of the church, including Trinitarian baptism. Indeed, much of the opposition to Rome was connected to fears of a popish plot emanating from France and Spain, aimed at overthrowing the Protestant establishment. Papists were not simply followers of the Roman Church, but threats to England.⁶⁰

Second, and in a far less antagonistic light, the Assembly distanced itself here and there from some aspects of Lutheranism. This is particularly evident in the Confession's chapters on the sacraments. Its statements on the efficacy of baptism in part distinguish Reformed theology, with its insistence on the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in effecting the reality to which the sacramental signs point, from the Lutheran objectivity. Moreover, the feeding on Christ in the Lord's Supper is not carnal but spiritual, but nonetheless real and true. Having said that, there is little in the documents directed explicitly against Lutheranism, and the differences, where they surface, are handled gently and discreetly. Luther and Melancthon are cited with approval as authorities.

Third, the Assembly is stronger in its opposition to Anabaptism. This is especially notable in the sections on the church and the sacraments, but it also surfaces in connection with lawful oaths and vows—which many Anabaptists refused to recognize as legitimate—and on the right of private property. Overall, it could be said that the theology of the Assembly as a whole was largely opposed to the predominantly semi-Pelagian individualism and antisacramental direction of Anabaptism. At the same time, there was in England an emerging group of Particular Baptists, who differed from the Assembly mainly on matters of baptism and church government, but who were in general agreement with most of what the Assembly produced. These churches produced their own confession in 1644 and revised it in 1677, adopting large

60. See chapter 13.

swathes of the Assembly documents in doing so. In this, they had a certain commonality with the Congregationalists who composed the Savoy Declaration in 1658, which—guided by their leading light, John Owen—followed Westminster in all but church government.⁶¹

Fourth, and most vehemently of all, is the immense concern expressed in the Assembly against antinomianism, the belief that Christ had fulfilled the law in its entirety on behalf of his people, so that it no longer had any significance for them. This was the real perceived threat, not only to the church, but also to civil society. This was particularly urgent, given that the country was engulfed in civil war, its institutions in disarray. A standing committee on the antinomians was set up, and it was constantly reporting to the Assembly, questioning prominent antinomians, arranging for their books to be burned, and sending them to Parliament for penal sanctions to be enforced. These were the main opponents the Assembly had in mind throughout its work. A minor, but amusing, indication of the hostility the antinomians provoked was the habit of the scribe, Adoniram Byfield, to record the name of a leading antinomian, Paul Best, as “Paul Beast.”

Fifth, the Assembly, following Dort, definitely excluded Arminianism. Its chapter on the decree of God and its various statements on the extent of the atonement and on the perseverance of the saints all oppose Arminius and his followers head on.

Sixth, Amyraldianism is implicitly ruled out by the strong teaching on the particularity of redemption, although hypothetical universalists such as Edmund Calamy were not excluded, but spoke up vigorously in debate and continued thereafter to play a prominent role in the Assembly’s activities. Evidently, they were regarded differently than Arminians or, worse, antinomians. Yet Amyraldian doctrine was excluded—the first chapter was in part written against tendencies at Saumur.

Behind all this was a united commitment to the historic Christian creeds. Deviation from the orthodox formularies on the Trinity and Christology was entirely out of bounds. Adherence to these was an axiom that underlay all the rest of the Assembly’s work. We shall refer to Robert L. Reymond’s suggestion that Westminster rejected Nicene Trinitarianism in chapter 8. In connection with this, in chapter 7 we shall also consider the debate on the three creeds.

61. Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:707–29.