

SURVEY OF HISTORY OF GREAT BRITAIN FROM 1633 TO 1660

As a help to understanding the Westminster Standards, it is important to know the historical context of these documents. Although they were produced in England, because of changing political forces they were not adopted there. Rather, they had more extensive influence in Scotland and North America.

Survey of Puritanism's progress

British kings of the period

James I	A.D. 1603-1625
(= James VI of Scotland	1567-1625)
Charles I	1625-1649
Commonwealth	1649-1660
Charles II	1661-1685

Periods of Puritanism

1633-1640	Puritanism under pressure
1640-1649	Puritanism struggling
1649-1660	Puritanism supreme
1660-1685	Puritanism destroyed

Situation in Great Britain in 1633

The new archbishop

Archbishop Abbot died in 1633; William Laud, new archbishop of Canterbury; oppressed Puritans, closed independent churches, enforced pro-Catholic liturgies; forbade evangelical, Reformed preaching

The Puritans

Enthusiastic for Bible; tremendous Bible study; most Puritans in Church of England; some separatists (Brownists and others; some fled to Holland; 20,000 to America)

Some groups in Holland rejected infant baptism, caused some divisions; baptism mode changed later

General Baptists—Arminian
Particular Baptists—Calvinistic

Secular parties

English squires: owned small amounts of property; mild luxury; outwardly pious (Sunday morning); after Restoration of 1660, more important

King's party: king's favorites; nobles at court; favored church ceremonies; generally semi-Pelagian

Scotland

Smoldering under enforced episcopacy under James I, and now under Charles I; people well versed in the Bible

Charles I and the Scottish Kirk

Attempted church changes

Bishops were put in office by James VI, given some power after he became James I (could preside at meetings, sit in Scottish House of Lords)

Charles I wanted more conformity to the English church, tried to bring new liturgy into Scotland

1637, new liturgy for Church of St. Giles in Edinburgh; read by the dean; elderly peasant lady threw her stool at the minister, "Will you say mass at my lug?" ("lug" = ear); all Scotland against new practices

1638, Scottish nobles and leaders reaffirmed the National Covenant (over 50 years old), to stand to the death for their church government and liturgy

The “Bishops’ Wars”

Charles I sent an ill-prepared army to subdue Scotland; Scots good fighters; truce, more fighting; Charles I agreed to allow freedom, but Scots did not trust him; Charles put earl of Strafford in charge of army

Charles I wanted a larger army for his war with Scotland; finally in 1640, had to call parliament (after 11 years without one)

Beginning of English civil wars

Short Parliament (1640)

Parliament had not met for 11 years; Charles I needed money to fight against Scots; instead, parliament passed resolution against Charles and Archbishop Laud; Charles dismissed it quickly, after only 3 weeks; convocation of bishops continued, favored Charles exceedingly; Charles did not get desired appropriations

Long Parliament (1640-1660)

Scots took advantage of Charles I’s situation, attacked northern England; Charles promised them indemnity, had to call parliament again

Parliament resolute; arrested and tried earl of Strafford; charges not capital or provable, so condemned him on a bill of attainder (“law to execute”); Charles gave in and signed bill; Strafford executed in 1641

Parliament arrested Archbishop Laud (executed 4 years later); abolished Court of High Commission and abolished Star Chamber

Parliament started to divide: hard liners vs. moderates

Charles I demanded 5 in parliament be arrested (such arrests against laws of parliament); parliament refused to comply; Charles himself and several hundred guards came to arrest them; but the 5 not there; Charles: “The birds have flown.”

Parliament now split: 1/3 with Charles, moved to Oxford; 2/3 stayed in London; both groups gathered forces for war; Cavaliers (nobles) vs. Roundheads (merchant class); fighting started 1642; Cavaliers had advantage for 3 years

Long Parliament continued; voted no bishops in House of Lords; abolished civil power of bishops; thus had majority in both houses

Negotiations with the Scots

Scots good fighters; many had been in Thirty Years' War (still going on, until 1648); either in king's army or in Scottish army; parliament needed Scots on their side against the Cavaliers

Scots sent emissaries to London; saw that some were fighting the king for religious principle, others for civil matters; Scots wanted religious agreement with parliament, a covenant; 1643, parliament and Scotland approved the "Solemn League and Covenant"—

Intended to preserve the true Scottish Kirk and to reform the English church "after the form of the best Reformed churches"

Taken by most to mean Presbyterian government, but parliament wanted to obey Scripture, not just follow Scotland; parliament to call an assembly of divines to meet in Westminster Abbey, to make recommendations to parliament

The Westminster Assembly (1643-1649)

Calling the assembly

Called by parliament; about 160 delegates; no power, only advise; all views (except like Laud): some pro-Episcopal (Bishop James Usser from Ireland), some Independent, most pro-Presbyterian, but in Church of England; 5 great Scottish theologians took part—spoke, but no vote

[Good biographical information about Westminster divines in James Reid, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* (1811)]

As to doctrine, more unity; high view of Scripture (cf. B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*); Calvinist, not semi-Pelagian

Assembly called to look at doctrine, recommend biblical church government (now that bishops overthrown), examine *39 Articles* (not outspokenly Calvinistic); to suggest changes

Deliberations of the assembly

Established 8 rules of order (see S. W. Carruthers, *The Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly*, pp. 45-47); deliberations consumed much time, especially when church government or relation to civil government involved; these far-reaching discussions, required much thought; great scholars in OT, NT, theology, church history involved; but situation in country called for progress, even haste

By the time they finished with 15 Articles, parliament told them to work on church government; most in assembly for Presbyterianism; small, able group of Independents

Problems: no or late pay, absenteeism, long-winded speakers (cf. Carruthers, pp. 48-49, 50-51); a few members apparently linked to special interests in parliament, delaying tactics; also, majority of parliament becoming more Independent (cf. W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*)

1644, as deliberations continued, saw need for whole new confession

Additional responsibilities included organizing church around London, trying ministerial candidates, etc.

First produced Larger Catechism; then Confession of Faith (adopted by parliament in 1646); last Shorter Catechism; finally, proof texts for all of the above. The Assembly also produced three other documents: The Directory for the Public Worship of God, The Form of Presbyterial Church Government, and The Directory for Family Worship.

Westminster standards

Previous years helped prepare abilities of divines; produced excellent confession and catechisms, generally recognized for balance and Scriptural base

Structure of Confession followed Usser's Irish Articles, but content followed more the beliefs in the Scottish church (Usser stopped attending because he favored loyalty to the king)

Although the Standards were not adopted by the English church (Parliament then being controlled by Independents, and later by Anglicans), they were adopted by the Scottish church

Standards became model for other churches; e.g., Reformed Baptists' "Philadelphia Confession" of 1689 (adopted in London, then called "Old London Confession"); received by many Reformed churches, and all Presbyterian churches

Americans changed Confession somewhat (civil magistrate; pope = Antichrist); Bible Presbyterians also amended Confession to reflect premillennial belief

Some resources

For several older standard commentaries on the WSC, see the BPC-sponsored website www.shortercatechism.com

Harmony of the Westminster Standards by Mark Baldwin online:
http://www.wrs.edu/publications/westminster_harmony.htm

For WLC, see Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, ed. by G. I. Williamson (2002; originally published in the *Blue Banner of Faith and Life* magazine, 1946-1949).

Great three volume standard on WSC, still in print: Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity, The Ten Commandments, The Lord's Prayer*