

Church History 101
Lesson 25
The English Civil War and Westminster Confession

Key Concepts: While the Reformation was transpiring on the European continent a very different kind of religious struggle was taking place in England. The results of this struggle would give the Reformed/Puritan Churches their greatest theological documents.

The Story: A distinct form of Protestantism (Church of England/Anglicanism) came to England under the rule and reign of Henry the VIII (1509-1547) when in 1532 Parliament declared that Henry was the “Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England.” This gave the monarchy the right to determine both church doctrine and governance. Over the course of the next century the nation vacillated between Protestant/Anglican (strict or lax) and Catholicism. This struggle would eventually play a role in the English Civil War.

The roots of the English Civil War lay in both religious and political disagreement between the King, Charles I (1600-1649), and Parliament. In the English governmental system, only Parliament could levy and collect taxes. Thus if the King wanted to pay for a war or carry out any significant military action he needed Parliament to agree. This dependence was anathema to the King who believed that kings were chosen by God to rule and were “little gods on earth.” In 1628, in need of money, Charles called Parliament into session. Instead of immediately acceding to his demands for revenue, they forced Charles to grant certain rights to the people. In response he imprisoned some members of Parliament and dissolved the body.

For the next eleven years Charles ruled without Parliament, all the while struggling to raise taxes. At the same time his appointee as Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, began to impose “high church” (similar to Catholicism) practices on the English church. When the Puritans complained, Laud had many of them arrested. Desiring to expand these changes, Charles attempted to impose them on the Scots. The Scots rebelled and in a series of brief wars defeated Charles and invaded England. Desperate to put down this rebellion Charles recalled Parliament in hopes of them raising taxes to fund his war with the Scots.

This new Parliament, which became known as the Long Parliament, was more antagonistic to Charles than had been the one before. They forced him to agree to more changes in taxation and personal freedoms. Parliament also accused the king of desiring to continue to impose “high church” religious practices and to rule by military force. In 1642 Charles had had enough and so attempted to arrest several members of Parliament for treason. The nation then slowly descended into a series of three civil wars fought between those supporting the Parliament and those supporting the King. The end result was that the Royalists lost and Charles was beheaded for treason.

During this period, the Parliament commissioned 121 Protestant clergy to produce doctrinal documents for the English Reformation. The product of that work was the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Longer and Shorter Catechisms. These documents were approved by both the English and Scottish Parliaments, as well as the Church of Scotland. They are expositions of classic Calvinism with an emphasis on the Sovereignty of God and the importance of scripture. These documents became the theological foundation for The Sixteen Articles contained within the Anglican/Episcopal Church Worship Book as well as for all of American Presbyterianism.

Questions

1. Who do you think ought to be the head of the church and why?
2. What role do you think that theological documents (confessions) ought to play in the life of the church?
3. How important for you is the form of weekly worship and why?