Dr. Chad Van Dixhoorn is professor of church history and director of the Craig Center for the Study of the Westminster Standards at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He is author of Confessing the Faith.

Tabletalk: You’ve spent more than a decade studying the Westminster assembly. How did it all start?



Chad Van Dixhoorn: I first encountered a text by the Westminster assembly while my family was on holiday in northern Ontario. We were visiting the Sunday school class of a little Scottish Presbyterian church, and after the initial embarassment of not knowing the “chief end of man,” I discovered the glory of a catechism that began with a one-line answer — clearly the one for me. I had been memorizing the ten-line opening question of the Heidelberg Catechism, and appreciated how much shorter the Westminster Shorter Catechism really was. Years later, I joined a Presbyterian church and was asked to lead a catechism class; in another church, I later lectured through the Westminster Confession. Both experiences proved real blessings, and I came to value these doctrinal summaries as teaching tools.

TT: How did the Westminster assembly itself become the focus of your doctoral research?

CVD: My interest in the Assembly started with my respect for its texts. I then wanted to know about the 120 or so theologians who wrote such thoughtful theological summaries. But as I read books on the Assembly itself, it seemed to me that too many authors were spending too much time quoting each other. When they did refer to an original text by the assembly or its members, they often inferred too much from too little. It was disappointing. And it occurred to me that what we really needed was more access to books and manuscripts (handwritten documents that had never been printed). It also occurred to me that most people studying the assembly had done so in America or Scotland. Most members of the Assembly were called from all over England (joined later by a handful of theologians from Scotland). If any manuscripts had survived, it seemed to me that they’d probably be in England, where most of the assembly’s members had lived and worked. It only takes one fresh idea to get a PhD. That was mine, and after a few years of work on the Assembly, the University of Cambridge said I could have one.

TT: Tell us a little bit about the Westminster Assembly Project and your role in it.

CVD: The project — admittedly not the most elegant acronym — was the brainchild of a fabulous first year of research. I found manuscripts of the Assembly and its members in Cambridge, Oxford, and London. There are millions of words of material, and I wanted people to know about it. So I started an informational website supported by the sale of mugs and t-shirts of Westminster divines marketed as the “Westminster Designs.” It was a great idea (my wife’s), but too time-consuming to maintain. I’m a little better with research than sales.

TT: Is the WAP a team effort?

CVD: Absolutely. What rescued the project from being a tedious information- only site was John Bower’s involvement. John quickly enlisted innocent victims and asked them to transcribe books and manuscripts to produce a searchable database of Westminster Assembly-connected works. He then checked all their work and prepared texts for release to the public. This work continues and we hope to launch a database soon. The project is fulfilling its goals, and we’re very thankful to those who are helping us along.

But just to be clear, the project has two public faces. The first is the critical edition of minutes and manuscripts of the Westminster Assembly that are awaiting publication with Oxford University Press, a work that I did with the assistance of Drs. Mark Garcia, Joel Halcomb, and Inga Jones. The second is the dissemination of material on our website and through publications with Reformation Heritage Books (RHB), done in conjunction with John Bower. John and I are also editing a series of studies on the Assembly, critical texts of the principal documents of the Assembly (John’s handsome study of the Larger Catechism was released in 2010), and an immense series of facsimiles of works by the Assembly and its members, all produced by the project working in conjunction with Joel Beeke, Jay Collier, and their team at RHB.

TT: Tell us about the manuscrip t discoveries. You seem really pleased about them.

CVD: I am. Some people are eager to see the minutes of the Assembly. I’m equally excited about the papers of the Assembly. Those who study the Westminster Confession and Catechisms often wish they had a little more context in which to read some of the less common or more important lines in these important theological texts. Manuscripts and books by members of the Assembly provide this context indirectly, but the manuscripts of the Assembly itself do this directly. The British Academy funded a Europe-wide hunt for Assembly papers and I now know that the Assembly produced over 140 different texts, not counting the thousands of certificates about ministers and candidates that the Assembly was asked to examine in theology. These shed light on the ideas of the Assembly, as well as different words and particular turns of phrases. I also located a journal by an Assembly member that provides information about weeks of debate about which we previously knew nothing.

These manuscripts also shed light on the Assembly’s broader context. It was called during a civil war that was further complicated by Charles I’s kingship over Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales. The political unrest of the 1640s was mirrored by religious confusion — these manuscripts and others explain the alliances and tensions that existed between Assembly members, foreign churches, and the House of Lords and House of Commons that formed the Parliament of England. The important shaping role of these events, and the tumultuous world that the Assembly addressed, is evident in these documents.

TT: What became of your doctoral research?

CVD: My postdoctoral work involved taking the minutes, or records of speeches and actions of the Assembly, and preparing them for publication. Most of these minutes, which comprises three volumes, had never been published. They were difficult to read, and nineteenth-century Presbyterians didn’t think the public would find everything interesting, so they published only a large part of the third volume. I knew they were wrong, and so I reproduced the full minutes in the final volumes of my doctoral thesis. What the minutes needed before they could be published was an introduction, thousands of explanatory footnotes and marginal notes, as well as a bevy of appendices and reproductions of surviving Assembly documents. Armed with this apparatus, the reader has a do-it-yourself history of the Westminster Assembly. Most of us have an Eeyore in our lives, and mine assured me that a project of this sort would take ten years. It took twelve.

TT: When wi ll this edition of minutes and pap ers be published?

CVD: Oxford University Press asked if I had any deadlines that they should meet for publication. I started this project before I was thirty, and mentioned that it would be nice to see it finished before I turned forty. They didn’t think my birthday was a pressing deadline, and suggested that the edition will probably appear around Christmas 2011.

TT: How might the publication of these documents affect our understanding of the Westminster Standards?

CVD: This is the million-word question, for that’s about the size of the forthcoming edition. The one-word answer is “context.” If you have the seven volumes of the seven major Assembly texts being published by Reformation Heritage Books and the five much thicker volumes of Assembly minutes and papers from Oxford University Press, you will have — for the first time — every surviving text ever written by the Westminster Assembly. This is really important for those who want to understand the Westminster Standards in depth. We must always read an author in the fullest context possible — we read a paragraph in the light of a book, and a book in the light of the author’s full corpus. This will finally be possible for the Assembly of Divines at Westminster.

Chad Van Dixhoorn is associate pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Virginia, and senior research fellow at Wolfson College in Cambridge, UK. Previously he served as associate minister of Cambridge Presbyterian Church and as a British Academy postdoctoral fellow in the history department of the University of Cambridge. Dr. Van Dixhoorn has authored historical and theological essays for the church and the academy. His current research project is a major edition of the minutes and papers of the Westminster Assembly with Oxford University Press. He organizes his free time by working on the Westminster Assembly Project, providing the public with access to rare manuscripts and books by the assembly and its members.

https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/minutes-and-years-westminster-assembly-project