

worthwhile read for those interested in the history of Reformed thinking and the issues involved in defining what “Reformed” implies.

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Chad Van Dixhoorn. *God’s Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643–1653*. Studies on the Westminster Assembly. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017.

Chad Van Dixhoorn, an expert on the Westminster Assembly, has provided a scholarly and readable study of the Assembly’s work toward the reformation of preachers and preaching in England. Here we find the story of ways the Assembly sought to reform both the preachers and the preaching practices that marked the Church of England in the midst of the Assembly’s extensive work during the English Civil War. What emerges is a study of important documents and debates about the ministers who preached and then the theory and theology of preaching. The Assembly believed preaching was the divinely established means by which the will of God is made known, focused on the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Preaching is carried out by ordained ministers who are “God’s ambassadors.”

The Assembly saw preaching as a ministry God instituted for “the gathering and perfecting of the saints” (5). In Assembly documents, such as the Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism, when the term “minister” is used, it is assumed the minister will always be one who preaches. The Assembly frequently expressed belief in the efficacy of preaching in God’s work of salvation in all its dimensions (7; see the question and answer of the Larger Catechism 155). Those of the Assembly who can be called “Puritans,” who wanted the reform of the church and who were what Patrick Collinson called the “hotter sort of Protestant,” were especially zealous to emphasize preaching and its importance.

Van Dixhoorn describes “The Road to Reform,” which began with the Assembly’s call to Parliament for “speedy proceeding” against “scandalous Ministers.” The major complaint was with the many ministers who were perceived as not being able to preach. Some ministers in the church were content only to read the Scriptures and not to proclaim Scripture’s message through preaching. This the Assembly deemed as inadequate. In preaching, God speaks through the person of the preacher as the preacher interprets the Scripture and applies it to the needs of the congregation. To deprive

congregations of preaching was to endanger the salvation of souls. Since preaching was central, this was literally a matter of life and death.

Those moderate Puritans in the Assembly looked to William Perkins (1558–1602), the great theologian. Perkins's *The Art of Prophesying* (1592) set forth three major aspects of preaching after the Scripture text was read: explaining the meaning in light of the whole of the Scriptures, gathering a few points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage, and applying the doctrines to the life and practice of the congregation in plain, straightforward speech (27–28). Perkins said, "The heart of the matter is this: Preach one Christ, by Christ, to the praise of Christ" (28).

A central goal for the Assembly was to purify English pulpits and establish a godly ministry to reform the people by powerful pulpit preaching. Part 2 of Van Dixhoorn's book examines "A Reforming Assembly" and details the Assembly's efforts toward this end. Here are discussions of the Assembly Examinations to assure the levels of competence and piety requisite for ministers. Problematic cases arose, even among the Assembly's own members (ch. 4).

The nature of the pastor's office was debated by the Assembly (ch. 5). These debates considered preaching and reading the Scriptures, with some arguing that the reading of the Scripture is the preaching of Scriptures, while others claiming that the ordinary way faith is born is through the preaching of the Scriptures and not only the reading (64).

The Assembly also wrestled with the issue of ordination of ministers, establishing a Directory which expressed its ideals and processes (ch. 6). Likewise, a Directory for Public Worship was written. This reflected Assembly debates about preaching while also considering the character of the preacher and sermon structures deemed most appropriate. Some members wanted sermons to be propositional and based on the "doctrine" of the text (according to Perkins's plan), while others favored direct preaching of the biblical text itself. The continuing education of clergy was also an issue. It is estimated the Assembly conducted approximately 5,000 examinations of ministers from among England's and Wales's 8,600 parishes, and perhaps 10,000 ordained clergy (101). This work was an important part of the Assembly's ongoing attempt to "purge the Church of England of preachers who were ungodly" and "unlearned" (101).

Part three of Van Dixhoorn's book is a very helpful discussion of the theory of preaching. These chapters embrace chapters on the need for preachers to be godly, trained, and ordained; and then preaching in relation to theological issues. These include preaching as "the ordinary means of grace" (ch. 9) and the relation of audible and visible words, that is,

preaching and sacraments (ch. 10). The Assembly recognized that both the preached (audible) word and the sacramental (visible) word must be received by faith.

Two chapters on preaching: “Christ-Centered Sermons” (ch. 11) and “Christ-Centered Exegesis” (ch. 12) are especially important. Preaching the Scriptures and preaching Christ were complementary to the Assembly, with Christ being the center of both preaching and biblical interpretation. Anthony Burgess said, “It’s the main end and scope of the Scriptures only to exalt Christ, and the end of the Ministry should be the same with the end of the Scriptures” (145). In the end, said the Scots commissioner Edward Reynolds, every minister should “preach Christ Jesus” (161).

Van Dixhoorn concludes that the Assembly could have done better in treating unmotivated and incompetent candidates, perhaps seeking to institute “prophesyings,” to aid ministers. But the Assembly did “communicate a vision for ministry” that lasted in Presbyterian and Congregational communions in Scotland, Ireland, and the North American colonies (177). The Assembly’s Directories were well received in these places.

This fine study reminds us that much we take for granted today about church and ministry and preaching was fully discussed and debated in the Assembly. Today, we continue to receive the insights of its dedicated work.

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Abraham Kuyper. *Common Grace: God's Gift for a Fallen World*. Volume 1: The Historical Section. Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas. Collected Works in Public Theology. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015.

“God’s redemption is as wide and high and deep as the expanse of his creation.” Statements like this one by J. K. A. Smith on the cover of this new translation of Abraham Kuyper’s *Common Grace* are supposed to be supported by what is in between the covers. And yet they are not. To be fair, Kuyper himself was also given to grand pronouncements. Nevertheless, upon reading this book, one wonders if there might be a fissure between Kuyper and the Kuyperians.

With Kuyper, we encounter a creative and serious thinker who addressed himself not mainly to the intelligentsia, but through newspaper articles to a popular audience. Moreover, he does not condescend; he aims to elevate and educate his readers and make them better theologians. Both in content