

The Regulative Principle of Worship

The question is, how are we to worship God? And I've long believed that the answer is already clearly implied in one of the most basic things we confess, which is this: the Bible is the infallible and only rule of our faith *and practice*. What I want to do right now, therefore, is to demonstrate (1) that the Bible does teach the historic regulative principle of worship as it is expressed in our Confession, and our two catechisms; and then (2) to discuss, briefly, what that principle meant in Reformed churches in times past, and ought to mean today.

You might like to have your Bibles handy because I'll be referring to texts all over the place.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

[1] We begin, then, with the Old Testament. And we begin with the first recorded instance of worship, in Genesis 4. And I read from verses 3 to 7:

“And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but he did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.’”

A lot of commentaries say that the problem there was subjective. There was a wrong attitude—a lack of faith in the heart of Cain. Well, that is undoubtedly true, but it is only half of the truth—because there was also an objective offense. The Lord had respect to Abel *and* his offering; but he did not respect Cain *or* his offering. That is why the Book of Hebrews emphasizes the objective aspect when it says, *“by faith, Abel offered up a more excellent sacrifice.”* (Heb. 11:4)

So it is a very big mistake to throw the emphasis entirely upon the subjective. The fact is that Abel paid attention to the instruction of his parents, and I believe they instructed him fundamentally in what we have in the first three chapters of the Bible: the creation, the fall, and the problem of bridging the gap that now existed between fallen man and God; and that he took to heart the fact that God covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve with the skins of sacrificed animals. Cain, on the other hand, did not take account of these things. And even if you take the view that a special revelation was given to Abel about how he should approach God, it really makes no difference in the end, because God made it clear to Cain what was—and what was not—acceptable. And the reason why he was rejected and became reprobate was that he was not willing to submit himself wholeheartedly and totally to the prescribed way of approach to the living God. And that is the regulative principle, right there.

[2] The second example is found in the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verses 4 to 6—the well-known second commandment:

“You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

As Calvin said:

“...although Moses only speaks of idolatry [here], yet there is no doubt that by synecdoche, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented.”

In other words, he takes the primary species of the violation of this principle from the ancient world and uses that as a concrete vehicle to express the great principle: **what God has not prescribed is therefore forbidden.**

[3] The third example is found in the legislation recorded in the Book of Exodus. It would be hard to think of a way to give greater weight to the principle that we call the regulative principle of worship than we find

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in this account of the prescribed preparation, construction and use of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. Did not God say to Moses, “*See that you make them* [and the “them” refers to all the articles and aspects of the tabernacle system]...*See that you make them according to the pattern shown to you on the mountain.*” (Ex. 25:40) It is true, of course, that God made use of men in the construction of the Tabernacle. But it is not true, as is commonly assumed—and I have heard over and over again—that the Tabernacle was a product of the mere natural, creative and artistic impulse of the people of God used to construct it. No doubt these men did have a natural creative talent. But that was not enough. The Bible is very clear about that. The things that went into the Tabernacle were produced as the Bible itself has been produced—by special divine revelation and inspiration! Exodus 31:2-11 clearly shows this.

“See, I have chosen Bezaleel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts...And I have appointed Aholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded...They are to make them just as I commanded you.”

how remote this is from the argument so often heard today, to the effect that art work by people in the church is justified (and sanctified!) by the “art work” in the Tabernacle. The truth is that there was no “art work” in the Tabernacle, unless by “art work” we mean the uniquely inspired and infallible kind, and that kind of art is no longer given.

What we’ve said about the Tabernacle is equally true of the more elaborate Temple. Nothing was left to man’s innovation. I Chron. 28:11:

“David gave Solomon his son the pattern of the porch of the temple, its buildings, its storehouses, its upper rooms, its inner rooms, and the room of the mercy seat, and the plan of all that he had by the Spirit...[And to his son he said] all this...have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of the Lord, even all the works of this pattern.” [Vs. 19]

Now why was this so important? Why did everything have to conform precisely to the pattern revealed first to Moses, and then in a more elaborate form to David? The reason is self-evident, is it not? **God will not be worshipped in any other way than he has commanded.**

[4] Consider also Leviticus, chapter 10, where we read that the two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were destroyed. Verse 2 says:

“...fire went out from the Lord and devoured them.”

Why did this happen? The same passage says it happened because they:

*“...offered strange fire before the Lord, **which he had not commanded.**”* (Vs. 1)

It does not say that they lacked sincerity. It does not say that they were devoid of good intentions. It does not even say that this happened to them because they did something God had expressly forbidden. No, what it says is that they did this without first making sure it was something God had commanded.

[5] Another example is found in Numbers, chapter 16, verses 8-10, and on down through that whole chapter. Moses and Aaron were appointed by the Lord to mediate between God and his people. But Korah, and those who followed him, didn’t like this exclusive arrangement. They wanted to break out of this narrow idea that there’s only one right way, namely, the way God set things up, so they rebelled against this restriction. The well-known result demonstrates, however, that this was exceedingly offensive to Jehovah.

All the way through the Old Testament we find abundant proof of the magnitude of this evil. Whenever men are not satisfied to worship God in the way he appoints, God always made it perfectly clear that he was greatly displeased.

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[6] Take King Saul for a sixth example. He was not authorized by God to partake in the priestly office (I Sam. 13:11ff). But because of the pressure of circumstances (my Old Testament professor used this as a spur to us—he said, “Preachers, don’t be late for appointments.” Then he told us this story about Saul.) The pressure of circumstances resulted in this: Saul—and I quote —“*felt compelled to offer the burnt offering...*” because Samuel was late. It may well be, for all we know, that he acted with the best of intentions. But we also know that God found it offensive. Samuel, the prophet, said he “*acted foolishly*” because he did not limit himself to what God had authorized. And it was because of this that God removed the kingdom from Saul, and gave it to David (vs. 14). Does this not make it perfectly clear that this principle holds a place of highest importance with God?

[7] Consider also the historical incident involving a man by the name of Uzzah. When David first attempted to bring the long-neglected ark to Jerusalem, the oxen suddenly stumbled. At that moment Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark, and the Scripture says, and I quote from 2 Samuel 6:7, “*God struck him down there for his irreverence.*” David was indignant about this at first. He didn’t understand it at the time. And we may not even find the explanation appealing, but it is clearly stated in Scripture: Uzzah died because, as David explained later (I Chron. 15:13) “*we did not inquire about how to do it in the prescribed way.*” It took David a while to wake up to that fact; but then he said—Ah, now I see it. We didn’t observe the regulative principle—even in moving the ark. But how different it was when “*the Levites carried the ark of God...as Moses commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord.*” (I Chron. 15:14) Isn’t that the regulative principle as clear as the noonday sun?

[8] And consider King Jeroboam. When he became king he wanted to consolidate his hold on the ten tribes that rebelled against the house of David. In order to do this he (and I quote) “appointed” or “instituted” a kind of worship which was (and I quote again) “of his own choosing.” (I Kings 12:32-33) For this reason a man of God from Judah was sent to denounce this unauthorized worship. And that’s not all; because Jeroboam, from that time forward, was always spoken of as the one who made Israel sin—corporately. (I Kings 15:30) It’s no exaggeration, then, to say that that act of innovation was the source out of which came Israel’s ultimate downfall. The worship which had been appointed by Jehovah God was replaced by a new form of worship—not commanded by God, and therefore, accursed.

[9] Recall also the sin of King Uzziah. (II Chron. 26:16):

“...he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar...”

The high priest courageously intervened to oppose that act of unauthorized worship. And he was vindicated by the intervention of God, for the king was instantly smitten with leprosy as a sign of God’s judgment. Again, it is clear that what is not authorized by God’s commandment is an abomination to him.

[10] And then there is King Ahaz. (II Chron. 28:2):

[he] “*burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations.*”

The prophet Jeremiah, commenting on this (Jer. 7:31):

“...they...built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire...”

And now, the bottom line, folks—listen, as God says—through his prophet, that this was:

“...something I did not command nor did it enter my mind.”

how could God make it any clearer? Worship that he has not commanded or authorized is therefore forbidden.

It is my contention, therefore, that this is *the* uniform principle taught in the Old Testament:

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“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.” (Deut. 4:2)

Now, of course, there is a sense in which this principle applies to all of life. But does it not, with special intensity, apply to the most awesome event in human life which is the worship of the true and living God?

THE NEW TESTAMENT

And now what about the New Testament. Does it teach the same principle with the same rigor as the Old? I believe it does.

[1] Jesus himself spoke in this manner concerning Jewish traditionalism: You scribes and Pharisees, he says, have (and I quote) *“a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.”* ([Mark] 7:9) Because of this fact our Lord went on to say this about their worship:

“These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain: their teachings are but rules taught by men.” (Mark 7:6-7 [quoted from Jer. 29:13])

No doubt this offended them. But that’s not what matters. What matters is that *God* was offended. And according to Jesus the cause of the offense was two-fold: (1) setting aside what God had commanded, and (2) diligently observing what was not commanded by God, but only by man-made traditions. And my dear friends, the Church of Christ is full of the very same thing today—chock-a-block full.

[2] Or consider Christ and the Samaritan woman. No one ever expounded the regulative principle with more force and clarity than Jesus did in his meeting with her. As Calvin points out, our Lord

“...divides the subject [that came up in that conversation] into two parts. First, he condemns the forms of worshipping God which the Samaritans used as superstitious and as false, and declares that the acceptable and lawful form was with the Jews.”

Well, you know that passage:

“...he puts the reason for the difference that the Jews received assurance from the Word of God about his worship, whereas the Samaritans had no certainly from God’s lips. Secondly, he declares that the ceremonies observed by the Jews hitherto would soon be ended.”

Concerning the first point, our Lord said, *“you Samaritans worship what you do not know.”* Calvin drew this conclusion:

“...all so-called good intentions are struck by this thunderbolt, which tells us that men can do nothing but err when they are guided by their own opinion without the Word or command of God.”

He then goes on in dealing with the second point to say:

“...we differ from the fathers only in the outward form because in their worship of God they were bound to ceremonies which were abolished by the coming of Christ.”

So, if we ask what it means to worship God “in spirit and in truth” this is Calvin’s answer:

“...it is to remove the coverings of the ancient ceremonies and retain simply what is spiritual in the worship...”

But the trouble is that:

“...since men are flesh...they delight in what corresponds to their natures. That is why they invent many things in the

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worship of God...[when] they should consider that they are dealing with God, who no more agrees with the flesh than fire does with water."

To worship God in spirit and in truth, then, is to worship God in the way that he commands—now that the Messiah has come and fulfilled all the promises of that ceremonial law. And “it is simply unbearable,” says Calvin, “that the rule laid down by Christ should be violated.” Those who want to worship the true God, acceptably, must (that is the word Jesus used—*must*) worship him in spirit and in truth. Any other way is useless.

[3] The third New Testament example is the Great Commission. Matt. 28:18-20:

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples... baptizing them...and teaching them to observe [or obey] everything I **have** commanded you.”*

It is my conviction that this is exactly what the apostles did: they taught what Christ had commanded—not what he had commanded plus their own inventions. Knowing that all authority belonged to him, they knew there was no place for their own inventions. In the words of Calvin again, quote:

“...he sends away the Apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver...what he has entrusted to them.”

[4] The fourth example is Paul’s view of Scripture. He writes to Timothy, the young pastor:

“All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

It is not my contention that the Apostle is thinking in a narrow way only about worship. But surely it is self-evident that this statement does have a tremendous application in the sphere of worship; namely, that worship which is not clearly and fully revealed by God is no legitimate part of his worship at all.

[5] The fifth example is Paul’s rebuke of the Galatians. In the Letter to the Galatians there is a clear mention of unauthorized worship. Galatians 4:9-11:

“...now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”

The people to whom Paul wrote this letter were probably observing the special days and seasons appointed by God in the Old Testament in such passages as Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18, and the like. But if that is the case, it only makes the force of the Apostle’s words all the stronger when applied to special days that God never did command. When Christ came the Old Testament ceremonial system of worship was superseded. Included in this category of the obsolete were the annual sacred days, and even the Jewish sabbaths. For the Galatians to go on celebrating those days was to act as if they were still waiting for the Messiah’s advent. And the application is self-evident. If the Apostle found it necessary to say this to people who observed days which had once been commanded by God, what would he say to people today who observe special holy days that God never even mentioned in his Word, let alone commanded?

At this point we need to take note of what Paul says about this problem in Romans 14. Here the Apostle instructed the strong to be patient with the weak, because the weak did not yet understand the liberty they had in Christ. The truth is that they were no longer under any obligation at all to observe even the special days that God had once appointed. And, by the way, they weren’t obligated either to observe some of the clean and unclean rules about food. But the problem was that some members of the Church in Rome did not yet understand these things. As long as it was only a particular member of the congregation that had this problem of weakness, Paul was willing to patiently bear with that person. He was willing to have the Church tolerate membership for a person who felt constrained, by a misinformed conscience, to observe those days.

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In Galatians 4, however, the Apostle had a different concern. (And we always need to compare Scripture with Scripture. As John Murray used to say, “the difference between truth and error is not the Grand Canyon, it’s a razor’s edge.”) In Galatians 4 the Apostle is speaking of something done by the Church, as a corporate body. This is very clear from the plural pronouns. The Galatian church had yielded to the demands of the weak by instituting an observance of these days in a corporate manner. And when this was imposed upon the Church body the Apostle was quite uncompromising in his opposition. The reason being, that it is wrong for the Church to impose, as a part of its corporate worship, anything that Christ has not commanded.

It’s one thing, in other words, to tolerate weakness in the individual believer. We all must do that—with love and patience. But it is another thing when the errant view of the weaker brother is imposed on the whole congregation. That is what Paul opposed in Galatia. And it is exactly what we see all over the Protestant church today—and in most would-be Reformed churches as well. The observance of special days is imposed on the people of God even though they are not divinely commanded!

[6] The sixth example is Paul’s warning to the Colossians, Chapter 2:

“Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Vs. 16).

Paul warned them not to be defrauded by those who sought to induce them to delight *“in self-abasement and the worship of angels.”* he said: *“These things have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion”* and then, in verse 23 he says, *“but they are of no value.”*

[7] The seventh example is the Book of Hebrews. The whole Book of Hebrews is an extended application of the regulative principle of worship. It argues that the whole system of worship commanded by God in the time of Moses is now obsolete because of the coming of Christ, the fulfiller of it. And what do we have in its place? The answer is, we have the real thing. Not the old *“copies”* of heavenly things, but *“the heavenly things themselves.”* (9:23) Whereas the people of God in the time of Moses came to an earthly mountain (12:18), we *“come to Mount Zion...the city of the living God...the heavenly Jerusalem”* and so on. (12:23) The Church today, in other words, is supposed to live in the realm of heavenly realities, and not any longer in the realm of shadowy representational symbolism.

What would you think of a mother who neglected her infant children to go up in the attic and play hour after hour with the dolls of her childhood? Yet that’s exactly what we see in many once-great Reformed denominations. They go back to the *“weak and beggarly”* elements of ceremonial and symbolic worship. As believers under the New Covenant, we are supposed to worship in the realm of spirit and truth—not in the realm of the material and representational, as our Old Testament brothers and sisters did.

Many Reformed churches today are clamoring for a return to ceremonial worship. They call it the liturgical revival. And it leads straight back to the Eastern Orthodox Church or Rome, and there are people traveling that path in an amazing number. I could at least respect them if they were really consistent. If you want to restore the ceremonial worship God commanded then you will need to get busy: You need a choir made up of men from the tribe of Levi; you need an orchestra that has all the instruments—not a piano, they didn’t have pianos (they were never commanded)—but all those instruments that are specified there; and I believe it would lead logically to a demand for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple; and if they were willing to be consistent enough to do that, I could have some respect for them.

But, of course, the truth is that these *“weak and beggarly”* elements of Old Testament ceremonial worship have no legitimate place in the New Covenant Church. We do not need choirs, orchestras, purple robes, candles, incense, dancing or dramatic performance. Why? Because these shadowy representations only get in the way of reality; which is, the privilege of going each Lord’s Day—in the Spirit, like John—in the faithful observance of the commanded exercises of God’s worship, right into the heavenly places, and the presence of Jesus.

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When my Scottish forefathers met out in an open field, with nothing over their heads but the heavens, and nothing to stir them up but the faithful preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments, and they were hushed in silence and stillness, with tears streaming down their faces through the operation of the holy Spirit convicting them of their sin and their need of the Savior—you saw something of the simplicity and beauty of spiritual worship, which is almost forgotten in our day.

What then should be our attitude in the face of this awesome privilege? Are we at liberty to do as we please to fashion our own style of worship, whereas the people of God in Old Testament times had to be sure that they worshipped God only as he commanded? No, I tell you the truth lies in the opposite direction. We, above all, should abhor and shun all these innovations. Is this not what underlies the following warning?

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for “our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12:25, 28-29, NIV)

If we dare to invent our own way of worship, when God has told us from heaven what he requires, our sin will be much greater than that of the Israelites of old. The way of worship under the New Covenant has been instituted by Jesus. How audacious, then, and daring for any of us to presume to change or add anything to what he has commanded.