The background of the cover features a top-down view of architectural blueprints. Several sheets of paper are rolled up, with their ends showing various technical drawings. A large, detailed drawing of a building's floor plan is spread out, showing walls, windows, and structural lines. A pair of drafting compasses is positioned in the lower center, resting on the blueprints. The entire scene is bathed in a soft, light blue light, creating a professional and technical atmosphere.

THE
REGULATIVE
PRINCIPLE
OF
THE
CHURCH

SAM WALDRON

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

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THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Introduction

It is an understatement to say that the regulative principle¹ has been the subject of much discussion in recent years. Many in the Reformed resurgence have adopted (as they should have) the regulative principle as part of the Reformed and Puritan tradition to which they are self-consciously returning.² Others in the Reformed tradition have recoiled from it and sought to distance themselves from it.³ Still others have (in my opinion) embraced the phrase but so reinterpreted it that it means something quite different from what it has meant in the tradition.⁴ My own response to the regulative principle is that it forms an important and even basic feature of both the Reformed tradition and biblical teaching. I do believe, however, that the regulative principle is in need of some clarification, but clarification that, I think, is suggested by the tradition itself. I will strive both to state and clarify the regulative principle by means of the following headings in these chapters:

Section 1: Its Historical Meaning

Section 2: Its Ecclesiastical Framework

Section 3: Its Biblical Support

Section 4: Its Multifaceted Function

Section 5: Its Necessary Limitation

Section 6: Its Contemporary Objection

Section 1: Its Historical Meaning

There are certain theological words and phrases that gain such a clear and defined meaning in the history of theology that to affirm that one holds to them is tantamount⁵ to affirming their meaning in that history. To affirm such words and phrases and not hold to their historical meaning is simply to mislead both ourselves and others as to our real theological convictions. For instance, to affirm the Trinity, but to hold views that have more in common with

¹ **regulative principle** – The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself and so limited by His own revealed will that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. (*London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, 22:1); available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

² Mark Dever in *The Deliberate Church* adopts the regulative principle. See particularly chapter 2.

³ Mark Driscoll, <http://marshill.com/media/religionsaves/regulative-principle> (January 22, 2013), and Steve Schlissel, <http://www.messiahnyc.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=89>, illustrate this tendency; R. J. Gore in *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2002).

⁴ This is my opinion of John Frame's *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996).

⁵ **tantamount** – equivalent.

historic Modalism⁶ than with Trinitarianism (as some contemporary Modalists do) is to deceive ourselves and mislead others.⁷ Again, to affirm *sola fide*, but hold views that are parallel to those of Rome (as do some modern evangelicals and devotees of the New Perspective on Paul) is frankly deceptive.⁸ Similarly, to affirm the regulative principle of worship and yet hold views that are more like the normative principle held by the opponents of the regulative principle is simply misleading.

The backdrop of the debates over the regulative principle among Protestants must, of course, be found in the debates over *sola scriptura*⁹ that came to light at the time of the Reformation. The conflict between the two viewpoints, which at the Reformation became characteristic of Romanism and Protestantism respectively, had in the centuries prior to the Reformation been crystallizing in medieval theology.¹⁰ When the Reformation churches affirmed *sola scriptura*, the question had to be asked whether the Scriptures alone were sufficient to regulate the worship of the church—or whether, on the other hand, tradition might have a place in ordering the government and worship of the church. This question gave rise to two answers on the part of the churches of the Reformation. Some gave tradition substantially no part in this construction process. This view became known as the *regulative principle*. Others regarded tradition as having a part to play in constructing the worship and government of the church. This became known as the *normative principle*.

The distinction between these two principles for the regulation of worship first emerged, then, in the controversies between the Reformed and Lutheran churches in Europe. The “Conservative Reformation” of Luther adopted the policy of preserving the worship of medieval Catholicism except where it contradicted Scripture. Calvin, on the other hand, adopted the principle that said the contents of worship had to have warrant in Scripture—in language that seems the same as that in which the Puritans later stated the regulative principle.

The claim is made by some that Calvin’s views were different from those of the Puritans. Thus, there is some debate about Calvin and his relation to the regulative principle of worship.¹¹ While it is true that one can point out differences of application between Calvin and the

⁶ **Modalism** – erroneous view of the Trinity that denies personal distinctions in the Godhead and makes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be three modes of operation of the same divine person, as creation, redemption, and sanctification. (Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms*, Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002, 283)

⁷ Many believe that this is what T. D. Jakes and other Modalists are doing today. See his “Elephant Room 2” discussion with Mark Driscoll and James MacDonald, <http://www.theelephantroom.com/category/featured/>.

⁸ In my doctoral dissertation I show that this is what a number of modern evangelicals are doing: Sam Waldron, *Faith, Obedience, and Justification: Current Evangelical Departures from Sola Fide* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2006).

⁹ *sola scriptura* (Latin = by scripture alone) – Reformation doctrine that the Bible is the sole and sufficient authority by which all matters of faith and practice may be settled. “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith and Obedience.” (LBCF 1689, 1.1)

¹⁰ Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (Cambridge, England: James Clarke & Co., 1967), 51-120.

¹¹ See the argument of R. J. Gore in *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2002), 53-90. In my and others’ opinions, Gore only succeeds in proving that there are differences of application, but not a difference in principle between Calvin and the Puritans. See the critical comments about Gore’s book by T. David Gordon in the article entitled, “The World’s Ruined: The Regulative Principle of Worship,” in *Modern Reformation* 12 (Sept./Oct. 2003): 5.

English Puritans, there is little doubt in my mind that Calvin articulated clearly what became known as the regulative principle of worship. Quotations from Calvin in support of this may be and have been given at length,¹² but perhaps the clearest and classic quotation is the following from his work entitled *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*:

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated¹³ worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of Him Who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which He everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed. For there is a twofold reason why the Lord, in condemning and prohibiting all fictitious worship, requires us to give obedience only to His own voice. First, it tends greatly to establish His authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on His sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions. Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what He wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with His command. Justly, too, does He, in express terms, define our limits, that we may not, by fabricating perverse modes of worship, provoke His anger against us. I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct: “To obey is better than sacrifice...In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (1Sa 15:22; Mat 15:9). Every addition to His Word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere “will worship” (*ethelothreskeia*) is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the Judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.¹⁴

This principle, articulated by Calvin and the Reformed against Luther and the Roman Catholics, was given sharp focus in the debates between the Puritans and Anglicans in late 16th and 17th century England. It was given its classic and definitive statement in Reformed confessions formulated in the 17th century in Britain. It is stated in identical language both in chapter 21,

¹² Note the multitude of quotations brought forward by Brian Schwertley in his appendix on Calvin and the regulative principle in his article, “Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship,” http://www.reformedonline.com/uploads/1/5/0/3/15030584/sola_scriptura_and_the_regulative_principle_of_worship.pdf (accessed September 25, 2018).

¹³ **vitiated** – corrupted.

¹⁴ John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” *Selected Works*, 1:128-129.

paragraph 1 of the Westminster Confession¹⁵ and in chapter 22, paragraph 1 of the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith:¹⁶

The light of nature shews that there is a God, Who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

This Puritan statement may best be understood by contrasting it with the statement of the Church of England found in the Thirty-Nine Articles.¹⁷ The twentieth article states: “The Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in the controversies of the Faith. And yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God’s Word written.”¹⁸

G. I. Williamson helpfully and popularly states the Puritan principle exemplified in the 1689 London Baptist Confession: “What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong.”¹⁹ James Bannerman provides this helpful contrast between the Puritan doctrine on this matter (contained in our confession²⁰) and the Anglican doctrine:

In the case of the Church of England, its doctrine, in regard to church power in the worship of God, is that it has a right to decree everything except what is forbidden in

¹⁵ **Westminster Confession of Faith** – Presbyterian and Reformed confession produced in 1645-1646 by an assembly of 121 theologians appointed by the “Puritan” Long Parliament to make proposals for reforming the Church of England.

¹⁶ **1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith** – The most important and authoritative Baptist confession in the English language, the LBCF 1689 (also known as the Second London Baptist Confession) was produced by the Particular Baptists; circumstantial evidence suggests that Nehemiah Coxe and William Collins were its originators. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) and the Savoy Declaration (1658) were its basic framework, with modifications to reflect Baptist views of covenants, church, and ordinances. First published in 1677, reprinted in 1688 and 1699, and adopted in 1689, it is known by many simply as the “1689”; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY. “By *Particular Baptists* are intended those that have been solemnly immersed in water, upon a personal confession of faith; and who profess the doctrines of three divine Persons in the Godhead—eternal and personal election—original sin—particular redemption—efficacious grace in regeneration and sanctification—free justification, by the imputed righteousness of Christ—and the final perseverance of the saints—according to the Confession of Faith that was published in London, by the Calvinistic Baptists, in the year 1689.” (*Rules and Orders of the Particular Baptist Fund in London*, 9)

¹⁷ **Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1571)** – confession of faith of Anglicanism and Episcopalianism, formulated in the Canterbury Convocation in 1563; all ministers were required to submit to them or face penalties or imprisonment.

¹⁸ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 1:339.

¹⁹ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, 162. Some might complain that Williamson’s statement requires explicit commands for anything done in corporate worship. I do not think this is Williamson’s intent. He simply means to clearly contrast the two views. At any rate, I should make clear that I do not think that to justify a part of worship an explicit command is necessary. If the regulative principle is true and thus was practiced in scriptural examples of proper worship, then a scriptural example or precedent would be sufficient. Such an example or precedent would then assume an implied command.

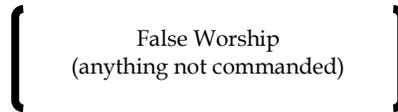
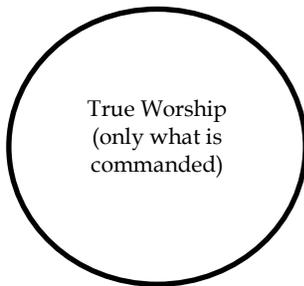
²⁰ The author’s reference “our confession” is to the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

the Word of God. In the case of our own Church, its doctrine, in reference to church power in the worship of God, is that it has a right to decree nothing except what expressly or by implication is enjoined by the Word of God.²¹

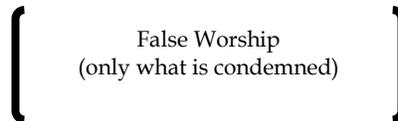
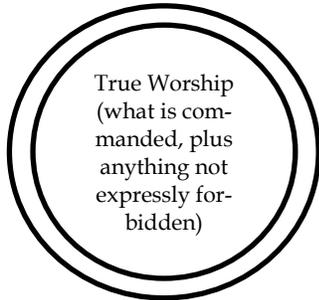
G. I. Williamson helpfully illustrates the difference between the Anglican and Puritan understandings of the regulative principle with the following diagram:²²

The Regulative and Normative Principles Contrasted

The Puritan View



The Anglican View



The difference between Puritans and Anglicans may be helpfully illustrated by means of two builders intent on building the temple of God. Mr. Anglican must use the materials of the Word of God, but has no blueprint and may use other materials. Mr. Puritan must use only materials of the Word of God and has a blueprint. It takes no special genius to discern that the

²¹ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:339-40.

²² Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, 160. A correspondent complained that the diagram misrepresents the Anglican view by asserting that they might introduce absolutely anything not forbidden into corporate worship. Of course, it is unlikely that Anglicans would do this. But the reason would be that it contradicts their reason and not because they have a biblical reason not to do so.

two completed buildings will differ drastically, or to discern which will be more pleasing to God.²³

Section 2: Its Ecclesiastical Framework

Introduction

In speaking of the ecclesiastical²⁴ framework of the regulative principle, I come to one of the matters in the Reformed tradition with regard to the regulative principle that I believe is in need of some clarification. The clarification that follows will, I think, help defenders of the regulative principle better to defend and apply it. At the same time, it will expose the problems with a modern affirmation of the regulative principle that is quite controversial.

The common name given to the principle under discussion is “the regulative principle of worship.” I propose to clarify this principle by calling it *the regulative principle of the church*. Implicit in historical discussions of the regulative principle is a distinction between worship and the rest of life. This distinction is given acute expression in Williamson’s description of the principle cited above: “What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong.” If this is an apt description of the regulative principle, and I think it is, it underscores the idea that God regulates His worship in a way that differs from the way He regulates the rest of life. In the rest of life, God gives men the great precepts and general principles of His Word, and within the bounds of these directions allows them to order their lives as seems best to them. He does not give them minute directions as to how they shall build their houses or pursue their secular vocations. The regulative principle, on the other hand, involves a limitation on human initiative and freedom not characteristic of the rest of life. It says of a certain slice of life called *worship* that it is regulated in a more restrictive and defined way than the rest of life.

The Westminster Confession of Faith at chapter 20 paragraph 2 provides further evidence for a view of the regulative principle that restricts it to something less than all of life. Notice the part of that paragraph I have placed in italics below:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; *or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship*. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an im-

²³ Some have reacted with doubt to my assertion that Anglicans have no blueprint for the temple of God. Surely godly Anglicans would not say this, they think! On the contrary, I believe Richard Hooker’s statement of Anglican views in his *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* confirms my assertion. Hooker does not believe we have a biblical blueprint for worship or church government. This is why Hooker then and the Anglican Peter Toon today [in the four views book, *Who Runs the Church?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 21-41, especially 23], believe that reason and the church councils of the first five centuries must be used in addition to the Bible to create an adequate or complete church government.

²⁴ **ecclesiastical** – pertaining to the church.

plicit faith,²⁵ and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.²⁶

According to this statement *sola scriptura* has a different application to matters of faith and worship than it does to the rest of life. In the rest of life it means that we are free from the commands of men that are *contrary to* the Word. In matters of faith and worship, it means that we are even free from the commands of men that are *beside* the Word. This area of life is different.

I will argue, however, that there is a better and more accurate way to describe the aspect of life governed by the regulative principle than “worship.” This description of the proper application of the principle is both too vague in certain ways, too broad in some ways, and paradoxically also too restrictive a description of its proper application. The proper scope or application of the regulative principle may be clarified if we squarely ask the question, “What distinction is it that gives rise to the special, more restrictive, and more defined regulation of the aspect of life under discussion?” The answer to this question is suggested by an attribute of the church ascribed to it in the Nicene Creed:²⁷ “We believe...in one, *holy*, catholic,²⁸ Apostolic church.” The church is holy in a way that the rest of life is not. It has a distinctive relationship to God that even other divine institutions like the family and the state do not have. It is the special holiness of the church that gives rise to and necessitates the special regulation of the church embodied in what has been called the regulative principle of worship.

I think this distinction is assumed in many traditional treatments of the regulative principle of worship. It is even suggested, I think, by the confession itself. As I will explain below, it is

²⁵ **implicit faith** – Sometimes called blind faith; a faith that is mere assent without certain knowledge, e.g., faith that accepts as true “what the church believes,” without knowing the objective contents of the faith. The Reformers and the Protestant scholastics uniformly deny implicit faith; since knowledge is lacking, this is no faith. (Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 117)

²⁶ It is true that the words in italics are missing in the Savoy Declaration and 1689 Confession. Some have opined that this is because the framers of these confessions did not hold the distinction they assume. John Owen was one of the framers of the Savoy and held to the distinction between the church’s worship and the rest of life. See for instance, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 15:445-530. It is very unlikely, then, that Owen did not hold this distinction. The deletion of the words in question is, however, difficult. Their absence raises difficult questions about the legitimacy of commands not contained in the Bible of human authorities like the state or family. Perhaps the framers of the Savoy felt that this possible misunderstanding was addressed by the statement later in the paragraph that such commands were not to be obeyed “out of conscience,” that is, perhaps, out of conscience toward God, but merely out of respect for human authority. In my view, the deletion of these words raises unnecessary questions. They should have been included and are needed to make the idea of the paragraph clear.

²⁷ **Nicene Creed** (AD 325) – early Christian creed or profession of faith, called “Nicene” because it was adopted in the city of Nicaea by the first ecumenical council. The second ecumenical council of Constantinople revised and affirmed it in AD 381. It has been accepted by Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and many Protestant denominations.

²⁸ **catholic** – universal; referring to all believers throughout the world and throughout all time; differentiated from the “visible church,” that is, local assemblies of professing Christians; not to be confused with Roman Catholicism. “The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.” (LBCF 1689, 26.1)

commonly acknowledged that an important supplement and clarification of the regulative principle is stated in the confession's discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture²⁹ in the second half of chapter 1 paragraph 6. Here is what both the Westminster and the 1689 say at that point:

...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence,³⁰ according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

In this statement of clarification with regard to the circumstances of the worship of God, it is to be noted that the government of the church is also and immediately³¹ mentioned. The suggestion is, thus, present that the government of the church is, like the worship of God, to be governed by the regulative principle except with regard to the matter of its "circumstances." It is also clear from the statement of 1:6 that the worship in view here in this qualifying statement with regard to the regulative principle is the corporate worship of the church (at least primarily). This provides, I believe, some justification for the clarification I am suggesting. John Frame, however, rejects completely the restriction of the regulative principle to corporate worship and to the church. Yet he himself testifies to the historical propriety of this restriction. He notes:

In the Presbyterian tradition, the regulative principle has been typically discussed in the context of "church power"...For them the issue of the regulative principle was the issue of church power: what may the church require worshipers to do? And the Puritan-Presbyterian answer was, quite properly, only what Scripture commands...This position on church power, however, led some theologians to distinguish sharply between worship services that are "formal" or "official" (i.e., sanctioned by the ruling body of the church), and other meetings at which worship takes place, such as family devotions, hymn sings at homes, etc., which are not officially sanctioned. Some have said that the regulative principle properly applied only to the formal or official services, not to other forms of worship. But that distinction is clearly unscriptural...On the Puritan view, the regulative principle pertains primarily to worship that is officially sanctioned by the church...I therefore reject the limitation of the regulative principle to official worship services. In my view, the regulative principle in Scripture is not about church power and officially sanctioned worship services.³²

As a matter of fact, and as I said above, the Anglican views against which the Puritans launched the regulative principle argued that church government as much as church worship was subject to supplementation by the traditions of men. This reality gives a context to the debate over the regulative principle that forces us also in the direction of including the government of the church under the regulative principle.

²⁹ **sufficiency of Scripture** – The whole Counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit or traditions of men. (LBCF 1689, 1.6)

³⁰ **prudence** – discretion.

³¹ **immediately** – directly; without anything in-between.

³² Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 43-44.

It is true that in the Westminster and 1689 Confessions, chapter 22 paragraph 6 might seem to imply that the regulative principle has application to other worship beside the corporate worship of the church. Note italics in the quote below:

Neither prayer nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the gospel, tied unto or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; *but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies*, which are not carelessly nor wilfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God by His Word or providence calleth thereunto.

Several things should warn us against a too facile³³ assumption that this paragraph applies the regulative principle equally to family and secret worship. First, the fact that several paragraphs intervene between this paragraph and the statement of the regulative principle found in paragraph one of this chapter must be taken into account. Second, we must seriously consider the additional fact that the intervening paragraphs seem to speak clearly of public worship as they reflect on the application of the principle. Third, the focus of the qualifying statement of 1:6 on the worship of the church ought to caution us about too quickly concluding that the Puritans intended the regulative principle of worship to be applied equally to domestic and personal worship. Finally, even supposing that this might be the case, I believe that this might be viewed as a remaining obscurity in their statement, which may be removed by clarification without affecting the substance of their views.

It seems to me that one of the major intellectual stumbling-blocks that hinders men from embracing the regulative principle is that it involves the idea that the church and its worship is ordered and regulated in a way different from the rest of life. In the rest of life, God gives men the great precepts and general principles of His Word, and within the bounds of these directions allows them to order their lives as seems best to them. He does not give them the same kind of detailed directions as to how they shall build their houses or pursue their secular vocations, as we assert that He does with regard to the church.

The regulative principle, on the other hand, involves a limitation on human initiative and freedom not characteristic of the rest of life. It clearly assumes that there is a distinction between the way the church and its worship is to be ordered and the way the rest of human society and conduct is to be ordered. Thus, the regulative principle is liable to strike men as oppressive, peculiar, and, therefore, suspiciously out of accord with God's dealings with mankind in the rest of life. The distinction between the church and the rest of life that I am suggesting means that *sola scriptura* has a different application to the church than it does to the rest of life.

This peculiarity of the regulative principle makes it absolutely necessary to commence our study of its biblical foundations by opening up its ecclesiastical framework. In other words, we must begin by clearly stating and showing that there is a reality unique to the church and its worship that demands that it be specially ordered in the way that the regulative principle assumes. That unique ecclesiastical reality is that the church is the place of God's special presence and is, therefore, the house or temple of God—and as such is holy in a distinct way that the rest of life is not. Once we understand the peculiar closeness of the church to God, and the

³³ facile – easy.

special holiness of the church as compared to the rest of human society, we will not be surprised by the fact that it is specially regulated by God. Rather, it will seem eminently appropriate that the church as God's own house should be regulated by the immediate directives of God. It will seem most suitable that the church as God's holy temple should be subject to a special and detailed regulation by His Word.

I. The Special Character of the Church of God

The special character of the church of God as the place of His special presence is presented in Matthew 18:15-20. This is one of the first two passages in the New Testament where the term *church* is used, and it contains the first explicit mention of the local church in the New Testament. It culminates in the great promise of verse 20. Very obviously this is a promise of the special presence of Christ.

¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. ¹⁶ But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Please notice three things about this promise:

a. Its specified limitation

The promise of verse 20 comes attached to a very plain condition or limitation, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" The stated limitation found in these words is the assembling of the local church, the formal or public gathering of the people of God. Upon what grounds do I assert that these words specify such an assembly? Let me set out four grounds for this assertion:

1) The context assumed in verse 20a

The passage from verse 17 and following deals with the local church. Several exegetical details in the passage underscore this contextual connection between verses 19-20 and verses 15-18.

The use of "again" at the beginning of verse 19 emphasizes it. This word often bears the meaning "furthermore." In the context of the entire Gospel of Matthew, and especially in light of the closely paralleled use of "again" in Matthew 19:23-24, it clearly connects the preceding context to the interpretation of this promise. Alfred Plummer remarks on verse 19, "By his 'Again'...Matthew couples the second 'I say unto you' with the former one (v. 18)...The connection is that God is sure to ratify the decision of the congregation."³⁴

Another significant reason for interpreting this promise as a reference to the special presence promised to the local church is that there is an actual web of parallels between this

³⁴ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Robert Scott, Roxburghe House, Paternoster Row, 1928), 254.

promise and what has gone before. Lenski suggests the parallel between the “two or three” of verse 20 and the “two or three” of verse 16. He remarks on verse 20: “Since He is thus in the assembly of the church or present when two or three are convicting a brother of sin, it is He Himself Who acts with His church and its members when they carry out His Word by invoking also His presence and His help.”³⁵

Verse 19 repeats the reference of verse 18 to the heaven and earth, which speaks of the discipline of the church on earth being confirmed in heaven. Hendriksen remarks: “Note ‘anything that they shall ask’ relates especially to prayer for wisdom in dealing with matters of discipline.”³⁶ The promise of the special presence of Christ is given pursuant to the promise of verse 18 that church discipline finds a heavenly or divine confirmation.

There are also conceptual connections between verses 19-20 and verses 15-18. A church or Christian synagogue is (to transliterate the Hebrew word often translated by *ekklesia* in the LXX³⁷) a *QAHAL*, a Hebrew word for “assembly.” God’s *QAHAL* is an assembly that gathers around Himself as Israel gathered around Yahweh in the day of the church or assembly (*QAHAL*) at Mount Sinai.³⁸ This same Old Testament imagery is present in the two or three that gather around Jesus in verse 20; there is an allusion to the *QAHAL* of Israel gathered around Yahweh. The smallest conceivable or possible assembly is the gathering of two or three people.

We must read the Bible contextually and not as providing mottoes for our living room walls with no context to fix their meaning. The “two or three” mentioned in verse 20, then, is simply a graphic way of emphasizing that even the smallest conceivable local church possesses this great promise of Christ.

2) *The verb used in verse 20a*

While by itself the verb used is not conclusive, yet it bears mentioning that the words, “have gathered together,” are a translation of the verbal root from which both in English and in Greek the word *synagogue* is derived. The Christian church is, in fact, called a synagogue in James 2:2, where the same verbal root is used: “For if a man comes into your assembly [or synagogue]...” Though this verbal root may be and often is used more broadly of other gatherings, in this context (as noted just above) its use is suggestive and forms part of a cumulative argument for the idea that the gathered church is in view.

3) *The qualification given in verse 20a*

The third ground upon which I assert that the words of verse 20a designate the formal gathering of the local church is the qualification given in verse 20a. I am referring to the words “*in my name.*”

Matthew 10:41 provides a parallel use of this phrase. To receive a prophet in the name of a prophet means to receive him in his official character as a prophet, to receive him *because* he is a prophet. It is, therefore, not any gathering of men, or even any gathering of Christians that forms the specified condition of this promise, but the gathering *in Christ’s name*. This phrase has refer-

³⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 707.

³⁶ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 702.

³⁷ **LXX** or **Septuagint** – Greek translation of the Old Testament, commonly abbreviated as LXX, which signifies the “seventy” and derives from the story that it was the work of seventy (rather, seventy-two) scholars who translated it from the original Hebrew.

³⁸ Deuteronomy 18:16.

ence to the gathering of Christ's people in their official character as His church and under His authority. It designates the gathering in view as one that is officially, formally, and intentionally a gathering of Christ's people under His authority. One commentator has clearly seen the significance of this phrase, when he says that gathering in Christ's name "is a synonym for the new society. The *ekklesia* is a body of men gathered together by a common relation to the name of Christ: a Christian synagogue."³⁹

Let me illustrate the significance of this phrase. A number of years ago, I worked in a large warehouse with a number of other Christians. The warehouse was owned and operated by Amway Corporation. At lunch we would eat together. We often opened lunch with prayer and spent the whole time discussing biblical issues. There were more than two or three of us. That lunch gathering was, however, not a gathering in Christ's name in the meaning of this text. It was a gathering of Christians, true enough; but it was a gathering of Christians in the name of Amway Corporation and because of hunger, not in the name of Christ. We were gathered as Amway employees and not as Christ's official people. We could not by any biblical right claim the promise of Matthew 18:20. The specified limitation of this promise is the assembling of the local church officially in Christ's name *because* they are a church, and in their character as a church. That condition must be met for the claiming of this promise.⁴⁰

4) *The parallels with 1 Corinthians 5:1-13*

The fourth reason for seeing verses 19-20 as closely connected to verses 15-18 are the parallels between this passage and the other major passage on church discipline in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

1 Corinthians 5:4 reads, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ." The parallels between this passage and Matthew 18:15-20 are striking and unavoidable, and they provide a *Pauline* and *biblical* interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew 18:20. Just as Paul's words in Ephesians 2:20 exegete⁴¹ Matthew 16:17-18, so Paul's words here exegete Matthew 18:15-20. What are the parallels I have in mind?

- Both passages are treating the subject of church discipline.
- Both call for this discipline to be enacted by a formal gathering of the church.
- Both use the same word to speak of this gathering (1Co 5:4 with Mat 18:20).
- Both describe this gathering as taking place in the name of the Lord Jesus (1Co 5:4 with Mat 18:20).
- Both speak of the authority of this gathering to exercise church discipline as consisting of the special presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. If Christ's power is especially present, then He is especially present (1Co 5:4 with Mat 18:20).

Here is my simple point: *the Apostle Paul supports the interpretation of Matthew 18:19-20 offered here.*

³⁹ *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton), 1:241.

⁴⁰ One correspondent disagreed that gathering in Jesus' name refers to the church and argued that we can pray in Jesus' name anywhere. We can certainly pray in Jesus' name anywhere. It does not take a gathering of the church to be able to pray in Jesus' name. Praying in Jesus' name and gathering in Jesus' name are, however, not the same thing. They are clearly different and should not be confused.

⁴¹ *exegete* – explain.

John Owen is one of the progenitors⁴² of our Reformed Baptist polity⁴³ and the regulative principle. In his *Brief Instruction on the Worship of God*,⁴⁴ he reads Matthew 18:20 in the way I here defend. He says, “So the Lord Jesus Christ hath promised His presence to the same ends and purposes, unto all them that assemble together in His name for the observation of the worship which in the gospel He hath appointed: Matthew 18:20.”⁴⁵

b. Its clear implication

The plain implication of this promise is that the Lord Jesus Christ, in His identity as the eternal Son of God, is promising the special presence of God to the church. This is the implication of the promise itself. Who but God Himself could keep such a promise as this? Who but God could say, *Wherever across the broad globe my disciples should gather until the end of the age, there I will be present?*

This is the implication of the allusion to Old Testament types⁴⁶ and promises. We remember passages like Psalm 46:4-5—“There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her.” See also Isaiah 12:6; Jeremiah 14:9; Hosea 11:9; Zephaniah 3:5; and Zechariah 2:10. When Christ gives the promise contained in Matthew 18:20, there is a clear allusion to such Old Testament types and prophecies.

But we know that this is a promise of the special presence of God with His people from the identity of the one speaking (Joh 1:1, 14). Two things are affirmed in John 1:1 and 14. First, they affirm that Jesus is God. Second, they affirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament types and shadows. When we read that the Word “dwelt [literally *tabernacled*] among us,” we are informed that in Jesus we have the new and greater tabernacle and the new and greater temple by means of which God dwells among His people. Jesus in Matthew 18:20 promises, in His own presence, the presence of God with His church.

Now let me enunciate⁴⁷ the clear significance of this. Even though God is everywhere present in the world and in human society, yet this promise must mean that He is present in a special way with His church. The gathered church is a holy place. It is the temple of God (1Co 3:16). It is the special possession of God with a peculiar relation to God. Of all the high and solemn and ennobling realities that surround gospel worship, the greatest, and therefore the controlling, reality is that God is present in His holiness and grace.

This brings us to my third point about the promise of Matthew 18:20.

c. Its scriptural consequences

If Christ is especially present in the midst of every gathered local church, the necessary, scriptural consequence of this is that He must be worshipped in the local church so gathered. Thus, in the promise of His presence, there is the divine institution of New Covenant worship. This promise contains the divine institution of New Covenant public worship for three rea-

⁴² **progenitors** – ancestors in the direct line.

⁴³ **polity** – particular form or system of government.

⁴⁴ Available from CHAPEL LIBRARY under the title *Worship and Order in the Church*.

⁴⁵ John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 15:475.

⁴⁶ **types** – a type is an historical person, place, institution, or event designed by God to point to a future historical person, place, institution, or event. (Richard C. Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, Cape Coral: Founders, 2017, p. 67)

⁴⁷ **enunciate** – declare.

sons. By means of these three reasons, we will also grasp something of the scriptural depth and richness of this promise.

1) God must be worshipped where He manifests Himself.

First, where God manifests Himself in a special way to His people, there He must be worshipped. Genesis 12:7 records, “And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.” Joshua 5:13-15 records the appearance of the captain of the Lord’s host to Joshua. In response we read, “And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand: and Joshua went unto him, and said unto him, Art thou for us, or for our adversaries? And he said, Nay; but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my lord unto his servant? And the captain of the LORD’s host said unto Joshua, Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy. And Joshua did so.”

In many passages (Exo 25:8-9, 21-22; 29:42-43; 30:6, 36; 40:34-38; Lev 16:2; Num 17:4), the Tabernacle is described by God as the place where “I will meet with thee.” Obviously, however, the Tabernacle was for that very reason the place of formal worship. Part and parcel of the dedication of Solomon’s Temple as a place of worship in 1 Kings 8 is the account of how “the cloud filled the house of the LORD” and “the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD” (vv. 10-11).

The same principle may be illustrated from the New Testament. You remember when, in Luke 5:1-11, the Lord Jesus manifested His glory to Peter in the great catch of fish, Peter’s response was to worship. Verse 8 records, “When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” You remember the vision of the ascended Lord given to John the Apostle in Revelation 1:11-17. Here Jesus is seen in His glory walking in high priestly attire in the midst of seven golden lampstands (vv. 12-13). These lampstands are the seven local churches who have sent their messengers to the apostle. This imagery assures each local church of the presence of the risen Christ in their midst. The point that must not be missed is, however, that the whole scene of this vision is one derived from the imagery of the Old Testament temple worship. Jesus is garbed as a high priest; His churches are pictured as lampstands—the setting is clearly the setting of worship.

2) God must be worshipped where He causes His name to be remembered.

The second reason why this promise contains the divine institution of New Covenant worship is that where God causes His name to be remembered, there is a place of worship (Exo 20:24-26; Deu 12:5-8; 16:5-6; 26:2, 10; 1Ki 8:16-20, 29; Mal 1:6-14 with 1Ti 2:8).

Exodus 20:24—In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee.

Deuteronomy 12:5—But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come.

3) The presence of Christ constitutes the church as a temple of God.

The third reason why we know that this promise constitutes the divine institution of New Covenant worship is that the presence of Christ constitutes the church a temple of God (1Co

3:16; 1Co 14:25; 2Co 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; 1Pe 2:5). It is often said that, in the New Covenant, God no longer has a literal temple, a geographical place where He has put His name and commanded that He should be worshipped. This is, of course, true in a very important sense, but this must never be thought to mean that there is no special place where God is present, that there is no special place where God has put His name, or that all formal or public worship of God has been abolished. There is still a spiritual place and a spiritual temple where God has put His name. Wherever two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, there is a place of worship, there is a temple of God, there is the spiritual place where God is to be worshipped!

We must not miss the practical impact of this reality. If God is present in the church, then what Jacob said may be applied to the church. Genesis 28:16-17 records, "And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Assemblies of the church must never be viewed in a common or profane way. The promised presence of God teaches us the sanctity⁴⁸ of the formal gatherings of the church. The assemblies of the church are holy. They are set apart from or different from the assemblies or gatherings of every other society whatsoever. They must, therefore, be viewed differently. Furthermore, our conduct in them must be regulated differently. If the ground upon which we stand in the assemblies of the church is holy ground, then we must take off our shoes!

This leads me to our second heading under the ecclesiastical framework of the regulative principle.

II. The Distinctive Regulation of the Church of God

The distinctive regulation of the church of God as the place of His special presence is presented in 1 Timothy 3:15. This passage is, of course, a key text for the doctrine of the church, but I had never realized its full implications for the regulative principle until I was preparing for a conference some years ago in South Africa. 1 Timothy 3:15 reads as follows: "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." You will notice that, in this text, the special character or unique identity of the church is emphasized by means of three descriptions. It is "the house of God," "the church of the living God," and "the pillar and ground [support] of the truth." Our particular interest is in the first two of these three descriptions.

The church is, first, "the house [or household] of God." The term *house* used here may refer to the church as God's family (1Ti 3:5, 12) or the church as God's temple (1Pe 2:5). In either case, the special and close relation of the church to God is emphasized.

Second, the house of God is identified in this text as "the church of the living God." The term *church* (Greek *ekklesia*) identifies the New Covenant people of God as an organized and governed assembly. In Greek culture this word was used of the official assembly of the Greek city-state and was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the *QAHAL*, the official civil and religious assembly of the nation of Israel. Both of these backgrounds serve

⁴⁸ **sanctity** – holiness; sacredness.

to emphasize the formal, official, or organized nature of the assembly to which reference is made.

But this church is described as “the church of *the living God*.” “The living God” is the one described in Psalm 115:1-8.

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is now their God? But our God *is in the heavens*: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them.

The significance of the use of this description here, “the church of the living God,” is to emphasize the idea that this church is dominated by the Word, presence, and power of God. It is the church in which He dwells, in which He is active, in which He rules. Now what is the reason for this tremendous emphasis on the unique identity of the church in this verse? I believe that the stated concern of this verse provides the answer. Paul says that he is writing to Timothy so that he may know how he ought to behave himself “in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” What is Paul's point? It is that there is a special conduct demanded by the special character of that church in which Timothy moves as Paul's apostolic delegate or representative. The unique identity of the church requires a unique regulation of Timothy's conduct in it.

Timothy was not ignorant of the laws of God. He was not even ignorant of the regulations that had governed the Old Testament worship. From childhood, he had known the sacred writings (2Ti 3:15). Why, then, did Paul have to write to Timothy and carefully instruct him concerning proper conduct in the house of God? The reason is plainly that with the coming of a new temple, there came new regulations for its ordering and worship. Hebrews 9:1 asserts that even “the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary.” The implication of such a text is that the New Covenant with its true tabernacle also has such regulations as are fitting for the divine worship conducted in the church.

When we understand the unique identity of the church as the new tabernacle and temple of God, it will not seem far-fetched to us to see an application to the church in Exodus 26:30, where Moses was strictly charged, “And thou shalt rear up the tabernacle according to the fashion thereof which was shewed thee in the mount.” The substance of this command is often repeated in the Bible (Exo 25:9, 40; Heb 8:5). Exodus 39 records Moses' careful obedience to the detailed divine commands regarding the construction of the Lord's house. All was completed “as the LORD commanded Moses” (v. 1). This statement is repeated in verses 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31, 32, 42, and 43. What is the application today of these emphases of the Old Testament? God specially regulates the construction and worship of His house or temple. Nothing short of the precise and complete obedience to those special regulations, which was exemplified in Moses, is required.

God never told Moses precisely how to construct Moses' tent. God never told Moses precisely how to regulate his family. Those tasks He left to the discretion of Moses because it was

Moses' tent and Moses' family.⁴⁹ But it is for that very reason that God exercises such pervasive control over the tabernacle and its worship. The tabernacle was God's tent; it ministers to His family. Thus, He rules its worship with a special and detailed set of regulations to which He expects precise obedience. As God told Moses when He appeared to him at the burning bush, and as God told Joshua when He appeared to him outside the city of Jericho, the place of God's special presence is holy ground and requires the removal of one's sandals from one's feet. Just so the church is holy ground, and this requires a unique mindset and special regulation of one's conduct.

Similarly in the New Testament, special and even unique regulations are given for God's New Covenant house. Some illustrations of this are the following: regulations are given for the speaking and keeping silent of prophets, tongue-speakers, and women, which only apply to the meetings of the church and not necessarily to other non-church gatherings (1Co 14:27-40; see especially the threefold emphasis on the church as the defined scope of the regulation given about women in vv. 33-35; 1Ti 2:1-13). Regulations are given for matters unique to the local church such as church discipline (Mat 18:15-17; 1Co 5:1-13); the Lord's Supper (1Co 11:17-34); the number, nature, qualifications, appointment, support, and protection of church officers (1Ti 3:1-13; 5:17-22; Phi 1:1; Ti 1:5-9); and the specific arrangements for the conduct of church prayer meetings (1Ti 2:1-13). The major elements of the worship of the church are designated (Act 2:42; 1Co 14; 1Ti 2). This detail of regulation for the church is unparalleled with regard to other divine institutions, like the family or the state. Of course, both the Old and New Testaments contain divine regulations for the family and the state, but the focus of biblical concern is on the regulation of the covenant community. In the New Covenant, this community is in a new way different from the Old Israel—fundamentally distinct from both the family and the state.

I do not put all this forward as my main argument for the regulative principle of the church. It does, however, provide the proper framework in which the scope, force, and application of those arguments are best appreciated. Having looked, then, at the theological framework of the regulative principle, let us come to those arguments that form its main biblical support.

Section 3: Its Biblical Support

Introduction

Four biblical arguments for the Puritan regulative principle of the church and its worship will now be presented.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ While God does not spell out all the mundane *details* of how we are to order our families and personal lives, He still gives authoritative and sufficient moral direction for our activities in every context.

⁵⁰ I am aware that there are objections to the way I will expound and apply the various scriptural passages that support the regulative principle of the church. For clarity of treatment I will address these in Section 6: Contemporary Objections.

I. God Alone Determines How Sinners May Approach Him.

It is the prerogative⁵¹ of God alone to determine the terms on which sinners may approach Him in worship. Bannerman eloquently states this first argument:

The fundamental principle that lies at the basis of the whole argument is this, that in regard to the ordinance of public worship it is the province⁵² of God, and not the province of man, to determine both the terms and the manner of such worship...The path of approach to God was shut and barred in consequence of man's sin: it was impossible for man himself to renew the intercourse⁵³ that had been so solemnly closed by the judicial sentence that excluded him from the presence and favour of his God. Could that path ever again be opened up, and the communion of God with man and of man with God ever again be renewed? This was a question for God alone to determine. If it could, on what terms was the renewal of intercourse to take place, and in what manner was fellowship of the creature with his Creator again to be maintained? This, too, was a question, no less than the former, for God alone to resolve.⁵⁴

But not only does God possess this prerogative, the Bible shows that He exercises it! Genesis 4:3-5 records the first instance of formal worship in the Bible:

And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.⁵⁵

It is clear from this passage that it is not merely the persons of Cain and Abel that determined God's acceptance of Abel's offering and the rejection of Cain's. The text is clear. It is both Abel *and his offering* that are accepted, and Cain *and his offering* that are rejected. Sometimes it is assumed that, because there is no mention previously of any particular requirements for such offerings, there could have been nothing more acceptable about Abel's offering than Cain's. But there are several problems with this assumption. First, the slaughter of animals to provide skin coverings for Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:21 is suggestive of the appointment of animal sacrifice. Second, the mention in Genesis 4:4 "of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof" anticipates later appointments of the sacrificial laws. For the sacrificial significance of the firstborn, notice Leviticus 27:26 and Numbers 18:17. For the sacrificial significance of the fat, notice Exodus 23:18; 29:13, 22; Leviticus 3:3-4, 9-10; 7:3-4, 23-24. The likelihood is that Moses intends us to think of these later appointments. Thus, it is not implausible to understand Moses in Genesis 4:4 as intending us to conclude that both Cain himself *and* his sacrifice were unacceptable to God (1Jo 3:12).

Exodus 20:4-6 is often cited as grounding the regulative principle in the Reformed tradition. It also makes clear that God exercises His prerogative to control how human beings bring worship to Him.

⁵¹ **prerogative** – special right or privilege.

⁵² **province** – area of responsibility.

⁵³ **intercourse** – communion.

⁵⁴ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 1:340-41.

⁵⁵ **his countenance fell** – he became dejected or angry.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven⁵⁶ image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Should God decree that He will be worshipped only by those wearing orange shirts and green ties, He would have the right to do so. How arrogant for man to think that he has the right to determine how God will be worshipped and served!

II. Extra-biblical Practices Tend to Nullify God's Worship.

The introduction of extra-biblical practices into worship inevitably tends to nullify and undermine God's appointed worship. Matthew 15:3 suggests the inevitable tendency of following human traditions:

But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?

2 Kings 16:10-18 is a penetrating moral tale and striking illustration of what happens to the ordinances when human invention intrudes itself into the ordained worship of God:

And king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglathpileser king of Assyria, and saw an altar that was at Damascus: and king Ahaz sent to Urijah the priest the fashion of the altar, and the pattern of it, according to all the workmanship thereof. And Urijah the priest built an altar according to all that king Ahaz had sent from Damascus: so Urijah the priest made it against king Ahaz came from Damascus. And when the king was come from Damascus, the king saw the altar: and the king approached to the altar, and offered thereon. And he burnt his burnt offering and his meat⁵⁷ offering, and poured his drink offering, and sprinkled the blood of his peace offerings, upon the altar. And *he brought also the brasen⁵⁸ altar*, which was before the LORD, from the forefront of the house, from between the altar and the house of the LORD, *and put it on the north side of the altar*. And king Ahaz commanded Urijah the priest, saying, Upon the great altar burn the morning burnt offering, and the evening meat offering, and the king's burnt sacrifice, and his meat offering, with the burnt offering of all the people of the land, and their meat offering, and their drink offerings; and sprinkle upon it all the blood of the burnt offering, and all the blood of the sacrifice: and the brasen altar shall be for me to enquire by. Thus did Urijah the priest, according to all that king Ahaz commanded. And king Ahaz cut off the borders of the bases, and removed the laver from off them; and took down the sea from off the brasen oxen that were under it, and put it upon a pavement of stones. And the covert for the sabbath that they had built in the house, and the king's entry without, turned he from the house of the LORD for the king of Assyria.

⁵⁶ **graven** – carved.

⁵⁷ **meat** – grain.

⁵⁸ **brazen** – bronze.

The altar of the Lord is not replaced by the new altar; it is only *displaced*. This is the usual subtlety of human error. We would never dream of getting rid of God's ordinances. We will treat them with great respect; but they will not have the central place in our worship. That will be occupied by the inventions of our wisdom.

This tendency is illustrated in evangelical churches today where mundane⁵⁹ or silly announcements in the middle of worship, the unwise tradition of hand-shaking in the middle of worship, badly organized testimony times, clown shows, mime,⁶⁰ liturgical dance, movies, and drama completely replace or severely restrict the clearly ordained parts of worship. These and other traditions of men, for instance, often leave only 15-20 minutes for preaching. Similarly, worship bands and the predominance of special music can push congregational singing into the corner of corporate worship.

III. Christ's Wisdom Is Questioned by Unappointed Elements.

By the addition of unappointed elements into worship, the wisdom of Christ and the sufficiency of the Scriptures are called into question. The reasoning behind the addition of unappointed elements in worship illustrates how this happens. John Owen remarks:

Three things are usually pleaded in the justification of the observance of such *rites* and ceremonies in the worship of God:—First, That they tend unto the furtherance of the *devotion* of the worshippers; secondly, That they render the worship itself *comely*⁶¹ and beautiful; thirdly, That they are the great preservers of *order* in the celebration thereof. And therefore on these accounts they may be instituted or appointed by some, and observed by all.⁶²

Reasoning such as Owen describes impugns⁶³ the wisdom of Christ. With all our weakness, sin, and folly, will Christ leave us without an adequate guide in the most important matter of worship? Has He left us, who are natively in such a spiritual condition, without a sufficiently devotional, beautiful, and orderly worship of God? Says another Puritan, “For He that is the wisdom of the Father, the brightness of His glory, the true light, the Word of life, yea, truth and life itself, can He give unto His Church (for the which He paid the ransom of His blood) that which should not be a sufficient assurance for the same?”⁶⁴

Not only is such reasoning out of accord with our needy spiritual condition; not only does it, therefore, bespeak not a little spiritual pride; but such reasoning also impugns the sufficiency of Scripture (2Ti 3:15-17). Dr. Tulloch, an opponent of the regulative principle, attempts to evade this charge that his view denies the sufficiency of Scripture by arguing that the Bible was never intended to be a rule of church polity. He remarks, “The Christian Scriptures are a revelation of divine truth, and not a revelation of church polity. They not only do

⁵⁹ **mundane** – of this earthly world rather than the spiritual; earthly; temporal.

⁶⁰ **mime** – the theatrical technique of suggesting action, character, or emotion without words, using only gesture, expression, and movement.

⁶¹ **comely** – attractive.

⁶² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 15:467.

⁶³ **impugns** – opposes.

⁶⁴ Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 75.

not lay down the outline of such a polity, but they do not even give the adequate and conclusive hints of one.”⁶⁵

The key biblical text on the sufficiency of Scripture provides us with explosives necessary to destroy Dr. Tulloch’s view of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is that text:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly⁶⁶ furnished unto all good works.

The sufficiency of the Scriptures spoken of in this text is its sufficiency precisely for the “man of God.” The man of God is the person charged to order and lead the people of God.⁶⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16-17 requires us to raise this question to those who think like Dr. Tulloch: Is ordering the church for the glory of God a good work that the man of God is peculiarly required to perform? Then the Scriptures are able to thoroughly equip the man of God for this task. They teach the man of God an adequate form of biblical church order and the essential elements of the worship of the church.

IV. The Bible Condemns All Worship Not Commanded.

The Bible explicitly condemns all worship that is not commanded by God (Lev 10:1-3; Deu 4:2; 12:29-32; 17:2-5; Jos 1:7; 23:6-8; Mat 15:13 as seen in context of vv. 8-14; Col 2:20-23). Three of these passages deserve special comment. Deuteronomy 12:29-32 in its original context is addressed precisely to the question of how God should be worshipped (v. 30). The rule given here in answer to this issue is very clear: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it” (v. 32). This clearly implies that it is a great temptation for God’s people to see how the world worships and to allow that to have a formative impact on our attitudes about worship. Such an attitude is explicitly forbidden for God’s people.

Colossians 2:23 condemns what may be literally translated as “will worship.” Herbert Carson states the unavoidable implication of this phrase: “The words...imply a form of worship that a man devises for himself.”⁶⁸

Leviticus 10:1-3 is the frightening account of what happened to Nadab and Abihu when they displeased God in the way they worshipped Him. What was it that brought upon them such a shocking judgment? Verse one is explicit: they “offered strange fire before the LORD.” The meaning of the phrase *strange fire* is expounded in the following clause. It is not fire that God had forbidden. The Hebrew clearly and literally reads that it was fire “which he commanded them not.” The mere fact that they dared to bring “unauthorized fire” (the translation of the NIV) brought fiery death upon them.

⁶⁵ *The Reformation of the Church*, 44.

⁶⁶ **thoroughly** – thoroughly; fully; completely.

⁶⁷ I assume here what I believe careful exegesis will prove: that the “man of God” is not every Christian, but the leader or pastor of God’s people. Both the OT use of the phrase, “man of God,” and the context of its use by Paul in 1 Timothy 6:11 support this identification. Of course, I do not deny that there is an important application of the sufficiency of the Scriptures to every Christian.

⁶⁸ Herbert Carson, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1976), 79.

Section 4: Its Multifaceted Function

A clear understanding of and a thorough commitment to the regulative principle of the church is, I am convinced, absolutely crucial if biblical church reformation is ever to become a reality in our churches. The regulative principle is intended, as we have seen, to govern the whole of the church's life both as an institution and as an assembly. G. I. Williamson summarizes the regulative principle, as we have seen, with a pithy sentence: *What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong*. Using this as a simple summary of the regulative principle, we can see that this principle has a proper and important application to four areas of church life.

I. The Doctrine of the Church

The doctrine of the church must be governed by the regulative principle. In other areas of life we are allowed to believe what we think true, as long as it does not contradict Scripture. So long as our political, scientific, or other views do not contradict the teaching of Scripture, we are allowed to follow our consciences as informed by Scripture. But this is not the case with regard to the church's doctrine: there must be clear and compelling biblical support. Regarding this, chapter 1 paragraph 6 of the 1689 Baptist Confession is clear:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

This statement is, of course, in its historical context, intended to combat Rome on the one hand, and certain Anabaptists'⁶⁹ claims to new revelation on the other. Extra-biblical tradition, contrary to Rome, can form no part of the basis for the church's doctrine. Similarly, extra-biblical revelations, contrary to the claims both of some Anabaptists then and some Charismatics today, can form no part of the basis of the confession or creed of the church. The church's doctrine must be (to quote the language of the Westminster Confession parallel to that of the 1689 quoted just above) "either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." The doctrine of the church may not be constructed on the basis of what the Scripture says plus what the church decrees. It must be constructed on the basis of the regulative principle.

II. The Government of the Church

Puritans (holding the regulative principle) have historically been committed to the *jus divinum*.⁷⁰ In other words, they have been committed to the concept that there is a divinely ordained form of church government given us in the Bible. Historically, Anglicans (beginning

⁶⁹ **Anabaptists** – the name Anabaptist means “re-baptizer”: the Greek preposition “ana”—meaning “re”—was joined with “baptist” and became Anabaptist, or “re-baptizer.” It was originally a term of contempt applied to Christians in the time of the Reformation, who rejected infant baptism and established churches based on believers’ baptism. German, Swiss, Polish, Dutch, and numerous other groups emerged, often with widely different theology. Some claimed new revelation, which is why the author includes them; however, not all Anabaptists held this position.

⁷⁰ *jus divinum* – Latin: divine law or right.

with Hooker's treatise on the government of the Church of England) and many others since then, have argued that God has left the church free within very general principles to construct its own government. Richard Hooker, in his work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, expressly denies the regulative principle of the Puritans. One writer says, "Its object is to assert the right of a broad liberty on the basis of Scripture *and* reason."⁷¹

Hooker's views have simply anticipated the views of many evangelicals today. But such views can only be entertained while one remains in ignorance of the identity of the church as the house of God, and of the special regulative principle appropriate to the house of God. Once these things are understood, the superficial and even profane character of the view espoused by Hooker is obvious.

The fact that the regulative principle controls both the worship and government of the church is suggested by the way in which the second paragraph of chapter 1 paragraph 6 of the 1689 qualifies the sufficiency of Scripture. It lumps together the worship and government of the church when it qualifies the regulative principle: "there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed."

Thus, when the Confession affirms the sufficiency of Scripture as the regulative principle of the church, it also makes clear that this refers not to the circumstances (detailed applications) of the government of the church, but to the basic parts or elements of church order.

We must see to it that, with regard to the government of the church, we remember that it is the house of God. It is not *our* house, to be ordered in accord with our own traditions, imaginations, or whims. It is God's house, to be ordered as He has expressly revealed in the Scriptures. Our elders' meetings, our church meetings, our ministerial commands, have no right to alter or add to the government of the church revealed in the Bible. We must impress on ourselves, our fellow-elders, and our church the great reality that only God has the right to regulate the proceedings of His house.

If we are to remember that the church is the house of God, and conscientiously endeavor to order it according to the mind of Christ, we must believe that the Word of God is a sufficient revelation of the way the church is to be ordered. Only a deep-rooted confidence in Scripture will make us search the Scriptures as we must so that our ministry will properly order the church of Christ.

One clear implication of what we are talking about is that there ought to be no standing office in the church of Christ but those two standing offices appointed and regulated in the Scriptures. If you are not a biblically qualified elder or a deacon, you have no standing office in the church of Christ. In the churches I grew up in, we had three offices. They were the offices of pastor, deacon, and trustee. What I am asserting is that there is no biblical warrant or precedent for a standing office of trustee as distinct from the office of deacon or elder in the church. I am, of course, not denying that the church through its elders may designate persons who will assist the pastors and deacons, like bookkeepers and secretaries; but new standing offices must not be created in the church.

⁷¹ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 5:360.

III. The Tasks of the Church

The church is subject to the special regulation of the Word of God precisely because of its unique identity in human society. In the language of the early creeds, the church is *holy* in a way that no other institution of human society is. Neither the family nor even the state is subject to the regulative principle summarized above in the words of Williamson: *What is commanded is right, and what is not commanded is wrong*. The unique identity of the church directly leads us to the unique identity of its functions, or tasks, in the world.

It is not my purpose to expound in detail or even identify the tasks of the church. Neither is it my purpose to deal in any kind of thorough way with the sphere sovereignty⁷² of the church, the family, and the state as the three major institutions that, by divine ordination, compose and regulate human society. I do think it is obvious to anyone with an appreciation of the development of the doctrine of sphere sovereignty in the Reformed tradition that God has given distinct tasks to the family, the state, and the church. If, however, the distinctive tasks of the church are specified by the regulative principle, this suggests to me three plain duties of the church.

First, it requires that the church carefully fulfill its distinct tasks. The church must clearly define and understand the peculiar functions God has given it. The church must put forth its resources and strength in the completion of those tasks.

Second, the church must carefully avoid usurping or having thrust upon it functions that are properly those of the state or the family. The danger is precisely the same as that pointed out in one of the arguments for the regulative principle. The introduction of extra-biblical practices into worship inevitably tends to nullify and undermine God's appointed worship. In the same way, the introduction of extra-biblical functions into the church inevitably tends to nullify and undermine God's appointed tasks. If the temple of God feels a need to function as a political party or as a general educational institution, there will be an inevitable tendency to forget its unique and exalted identity as the temple of God.

Third, the church must carefully refrain from abdicating its own peculiar tasks and permitting other spheres of society to fulfill its own unique functions. This is the great principle on the basis of which our attitudes to parachurch organizations must be formed. We are told constantly today that the church cannot do the things that God has ordained that it should do. I do not believe it! In fact, I believe that *only* the church can adequately perform its divinely ordained tasks. Only the church can maintain the public worship of God. Only the church can fulfill the Great Commission. Only the church can disciple, baptize, and teach the disciples to observe all Christ's commandments. Only the church can properly train its own leadership.

⁷² **sphere sovereignty** – Popularized by Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch Calvinist, sphere sovereignty is the concept that each sphere of life has its own distinct responsibilities and authority, and stands equal to other spheres of life. Sphere sovereignty involves the idea of an all-encompassing created order, designed and governed by God. This created order includes societal communities (such as those for purposes of education, worship, civil justice, agriculture, economy and labor, marriage and family, artistic expression, etc.), their historical development, and their abiding norms. The principle of sphere sovereignty seeks to affirm and respect creational boundaries and historical differentiation. Sphere sovereignty implies that no one area of life or societal community is sovereign over another. Each sphere has its own created integrity.—
Extracted from wikipedia.org

It is crucial that you appreciate the implications of the regulative principle for the tasks of the church. It is only when you appreciate it that you will begin to have a vision for what the church of Christ should be. It is only then that you will begin to grasp practically why Paul said, “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph 3:21).

IV. The Worship of the Church

The regulative principle of the church has historically been identified as the regulative principle of worship. While this is not the only application of the regulative principle, it is a major application. Here it is helpful to recall that, in the New Testament, “church” has two related but distinct meanings. 1) Sometimes *the church* is the institution or the organization of the church. In Acts 20:17, where Paul is said to call for the elders of the church, the text means the leaders of a certain institution or organization. 2) Sometimes *the church* is the actual meeting of the church. For instance in Matthew 18:17, where Jesus commands that something be told to the church, and in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, where Paul requires that women keep silent in the church, it is clearly the actual meeting of the church that is in view.

Keeping these two distinct meanings of the word in mind, we can see that the regulative principle of the church governs the church in both meanings. With regard to the church as an institution, its tasks, government, and doctrine are governed by the regulative principle. But the church’s formal meetings, or worship, is also governed by it. It is the regulative principle *of the church*.

The regulative principle of worship is often seen as repressive and negative. In actuality, it is positive and liberating. It requires that the great and spiritually invigorating elements of gospel worship ordained in the Word of God have central place in the worship of the church. Some feel that their worship is dull, lifeless, and traditional—and search everywhere for some new ceremony, program, or innovation to liven things up. How sad! The way to life, power, and reality in the worship of God is not the way of innovation and novelty. It is the way back to a zealous and believing practice of the great, central requirements of biblical gospel worship.

Let me charge you to maintain the centrality of the reading and proclamation of the Word in the worship of God (1Ti 4:13; Act 2:42; 20:7-9; 1Co 14); the centrality of the congregational praise of God in your worship (Mat 26:30; 1Co 14:15, 26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16); the centrality of prayer in your worship (Act 2:42; 1Co 14:13-17; 1Ti 2:1-8); and let me finally encourage you to maintain the centrality of the great ordinances⁷³ of the church in your worship (Mat 28:19-20; 1Co 11:23-26).

Section 5: Its Necessary Limitation

Chapter 1, paragraph 6 of the Confession provides an important clarification of the regulative principle:

...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light

⁷³ **great ordinances** – baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

When the Confession says, therefore, that what is not commanded in public worship is forbidden, we are speaking of the *substance* and *parts* of worship, not its circumstances. Note paragraphs two through six of chapter 22, and especially paragraphs two, three, and five:

2 Religious worship is to be given to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to Him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creatures; and since the Fall, not without a mediator, nor in the mediation of any other but Christ alone.

3 Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one part of natural worship, is by God required of all men. But that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of the Spirit, according to His will; with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and when with others, in a known tongue.

5 The reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and hearing the Word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord; as also the administration of baptism, and the Lord's supper, are all parts of religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to Him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and godly fear; moreover, solemn humiliation, with fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.

While the parts and substance of public worship are divinely limited, God has left the *circumstances* of worship to be determined by the light of nature, Christian prudence, and the general rules of Scripture. This distinction naturally and necessarily suggests this question: How may we distinguish between the parts of worship and its circumstances? This is a difficult and important question. Much of the contemporary opposition to and revision of the regulative principle is based on problems and objections raised by the distinction between the parts and circumstances of worship.⁷⁴ To it I have several responses.

First, Bob Fisher, in his unpublished teaching on this subject, points out that chapter 1, paragraph 6 of the Confession limits these “circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church” to things “common to human actions and societies.” We have seen that it is the unique identity of the church that requires its special regulation. It makes sense, then, that those things which the church has in common with other societies should be regulated in the same way that those societies are governed. Pastor Fisher mentions the times of the meetings (as long as the Lord's Day is observed); the place of the meetings; the posture in which people attend the meetings, whether standing or seated on the floor or on chairs; the order of the meetings; if the meeting involves singing, whether that singing is accompanied by a piano or a pitch-pipe or a flute—as illustrations of such circumstances.

Second, 1 Corinthians 14 contains two examples of such general rules which God demands that we apply to our specific circumstances. They are the rules of *edification* and *order* (vv. 26

⁷⁴ Gore in *Covenantal Worship*, 47-51, rejects the regulative principle partly because of difficulties he sees with this distinction. Frame in *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 40-41, bases much of his revision of the principle on similar difficulties.

and 40). God demands that these two rules be followed, but He has not given us a detailed list of what they mean in every situation and culture.

Third, the circumstances of corporate worship and church government must be understood in light of what we believe to be the parts or elements of worship. Once those parts or elements of worship are defined, it becomes much easier to see what things are the circumstances required to carry out or implement those elements of worship. For instance, once we understand that corporate worship requires the assembly of the church for, among other things, the hearing of the proclamation of the Word of God, it will follow that such circumstances as place, posture, and time will have to be worked out in such a way as to best implement that part of worship. In my view as well, once it is determined that singing the praise of God is a part of worship (as I believe it to be⁷⁵), then the issues of circumstance that must be decided become clear. Will there be musical accompaniment? Who will lead the singing? How will everyone know what to sing? Will a song sheet, hymnal, overhead projector, or Power-Point presentation be used? How long shall we sing? How many songs shall we sing?

Fourth, churches may differ as to where the line is drawn between circumstances and parts of worship without ceasing to be true churches or engaging in long polemics with one another. Just as churches may differ on certain doctrinal matters without becoming heretical, so also some differences on this issue of the regulative principle ought not to be a cause of division between churches. Reasonable differences should not be made the source of division. Let the elders of each church be fully assured in their own mind. Differences in application of the regulative principle may be tolerated as long as each church recognizes its unique identity as the house of God and holds seriously to the regulative principle. We may be charitable in such things, as long as the substance of the regulative principle is sincerely embraced.

Fifth, a godly fear will result from a genuine embrace of the principle that we must worship corporately only as God has appointed. This must certainly inject an attitude of caution and conservatism into what we justify as legitimate circumstances of corporate worship. Such caution must not, however, lead us to adopt the strictest and most conservative application of the regulative principle. Such a reactionary position often leads to the violation of other principles of Scripture.

Section 6: Its Contemporary Objection

The regulative principle has been the object of a great deal of contemporary objection, confusion, and question. I have isolated ten such objections and questions that need to be dealt with in this chapter.

I. Counterintuitive⁷⁶ Difference from the Rest of Human Life

Objection: “The regulative principle implies a counterintuitive regulation of worship (or the church) different from the rest of human life.”

⁷⁵ Interestingly, Frame does not believe it to be a part of worship, but believes it is a kind of mode by which we do other parts of worship. See *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 57.

⁷⁶ **counterintuitive** – contrary to intuition; opposed to what would be expected.

a. Initial observations

As noted previously, one of the major directions in which John Frame reinterprets the regulative principle is by arguing that it applies to all of life. So understanding it, he is able to adopt it verbally—though not, I would argue, substantially—in its historical form. In a key statement of this re-orientation of the principle, he says,

I therefore reject the limitation of the regulative principle to official worship services. In my view, the regulative principle in Scripture is not about church power and officially sanctioned worship services. It is a doctrine about worship, about all forms of worship. It governs *all* worship, whether formal or informal, individual or corporate, public or private, family or church, broad or narrow. Limiting the doctrine to officially sanctioned worship robs it of its biblical force.⁷⁷

Others adopt Frame's rejection of the historical limitation of the principle, but see this as a reason to reject the regulative principle itself. Mark Driscoll, for instance, in a preaching format, says the following:

I appreciate that freedom in the normative principle. And thirdly, it treats gathered and scattered worship the same. What I don't understand is why we would treat one hour a week by a certain set of rules, and the other 167 hours of the week by a different set of rules. When you were scattered for Mars Hill Church, you lived by the green-light normative principle. You don't wake up in the morning acting like a "regulativist." You don't wake up in the morning and say, "Okay. I need to brush my teeth. Where is that in the Bible? It's not in there...I was hoping I could brush my teeth, but I can't. Well, I guess I'll have breakfast. Well, the Bible doesn't say breakfast. It says to eat, but it doesn't say when. Is it okay to eat in the morning? I'd better pray about this. Okay. I gotta put pants on. Uh-oh, pants aren't in the Bible. Oh no! This is gonna be a bad day." "Well, I gotta go to work now. I'm gonna drive my car. Uh-oh, cars aren't in the Bible. I guess I'll walk, show up five hours late with no pants." Boss is, like, "What are you doing?" "I'm being biblical." He hands you a computer; you say, "That's not in the Bible. I can't do that." He'll say, "You're fired, biblically. You're fired!" We don't live that way. We don't sit at home paralyzed, saying, "I can't do it unless the Bible says to." No. We can live freely and do what Scripture encourages, what our conscience dictates, and what our life requires, until we bump up against something that's a sin, and we say, "No. That's a red light. I can't do that." But we live by green light until we see a red light.

Why is it that we live by a normative green-light principle until we get to church, and then we have to live by regulative red-light principle just for an hour a week, as if there's not a blur in between the lines? We also have other church gatherings, meetings, Wednesday night classes, community groups. Do they count red light or green light? The whole thing gets very confusing. I think we live our whole life by the same principles; whether we're scattered or gathered for worship, it's green light. We're free until we see something that is sinful and forbidden; then it's red light, and we stop.

⁷⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 44-45.

...The three weaknesses, one, again, it separates gathered and scattered worship. When you walk in the building, you flip into a totally new paradigm as if Jesus wasn't Lord over all, as if He ruled in the church in a special way that He does, and as soon as you step outside of the door—very peculiar.⁷⁸

It is clear from these citations that the notion that all of life is worship provides writers like Frame and Driscoll (and Gore) one of their primary reasons for either reinterpreting or rejecting the regulative principle. They, so to speak, intuitively dismiss the distinction between worship and the rest of life historically associated to the regulative principle, in favor of the popular contemporary notion that all of life is worship. By way of a response to this intuitive dismissal of the distinction between worship and the rest of life historically associated with the regulative principle, let me begin by summarizing my view of this matter.

First of all, I have a *sympathetic* response. I do not believe that the distinction involved in the regulative principle has been adequately or clearly articulated in Reformed tradition. Of course, I will confess the limitations of my own study of the matter; but in my view, the description of this principle as the regulative principle of worship says both too much and too little. It says too much because it speaks of worship generally when there is reason both in the Bible and in the tradition to limit the (strict) application of the regulative principle to that worship carried on by the gathered church. It says too little because it limits (or seems to limit) the regulative principle to worship, when there is reason both in the Bible and in the tradition to apply the regulative principle more broadly to the doctrine, government, and tasks of the church. This lack of clarity has perhaps contributed to the way in which the regulative principle of worship has struck men like Frame, Driscoll, and Gore as odd and contrary to God's normal way of doing business.

Second of all, I have a *critical* response. The motto that "all of life is worship" has blinded Driscoll and Frame to important distinctions and qualifications that the Bible provides to the notion that all of life is worship. Once the true framework and rationale for the regulative principle is understood to be the distinctive identity of the church—and therefore of its worship—the solid, biblical evidence for it becomes clear.

b. Evidence against the dismissal of the distinction between worship and the rest of life

Now with these initial observations clearly before us, let me summarize the evidence against the intuitive dismissal of the distinction between the church and its worship and the rest of life. Much of this evidence has been reviewed above.

1) The gathered and the scattered church

First, the "all of life is worship" motto forgets the distinction between the gathered church and the scattered church (to borrow Driscoll's words). Remember, Driscoll says of the regulative principle of worship: "it separates gathered and scattered worship. When you walk in the

⁷⁸ Mark Driscoll, <http://marshall.com/media/religionsaves/regulative-principle>; Steve Schlissel, <http://www.messiahnyc.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=89> illustrates this tendency; Cf. also R. J. Gore's discussion of this issue and consequent rejection of the regulative principle in *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2002), 112-116. Some have argued that Driscoll endorses the regulative principle. Statements he has made may be cited to that effect. While I do not impugn Driscoll's veracity, it is questionable to me whether these affirmations are really consistent with either the historic regulative principle or other statements (like the ones I have quoted here).

building, you flip into a totally new paradigm as if Jesus wasn't Lord over all, as if He ruled in the church in a special way that He does, and as soon as you step outside of the door—very peculiar.” Driscoll is right that the regulative principle separates (or at least distinguishes) the gathered and scattered church, but as we have seen, so does the Bible. The notion that Christ is especially present in the gathered church is supported throughout the Bible, but it is given explicit warrant in three classic passages:

Matthew 18:20—For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

1 Corinthians 5:4—In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ...

1 Corinthians 14:23-25—If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth [i.e., declaring that God is certainly among you].

In Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, and 1 Corinthians 14, the pregnant context of these assertions of Christ's presence is the assembly of the church. It defies reason to argue that such assertions promise nothing more than the same presence of Christ that is with His scattered church. There is, thus, a special presence of Christ in the corporate worship of the church which requires a special regulation of that worship different from the rest of life.

Since I have made this point above, let me buttress it with perceptive words of well-known contemporary Reformed theologians. Ligon Duncan writes:

The strong and special emphasis on the corporate worship of God being founded positively on the directions of Scripture came to be known as the regulative principle. It is an extension of the Reformational axiom⁷⁹ of *sola scriptura*. As the Bible is the final authority in faith and life, so it is also the final authority in how we corporately worship—but in a distinct and special way. Whereas all of life is to be lived in accordance with Scripture, Scripture does not speak discreetly [*sic*] to every specific component of our lives. There are many situations in which we must rely upon general biblical principles and then attempt to think Christianly, without specific guidance in various circumstances.

The Reformers thought the matter of corporate worship was just a little bit different from this. They taught that God had given full attention to this matter in His Word because it is one of central significance in the Christian life and in His eternal purposes. Therefore, we are to exercise a special kind of care when it comes to this activity—a care distinct from that which we employ anywhere else in the Christian life...

Paul regulates the number and order of people allowed to exercise extraordinary gifts vested in them by the Holy Spirit during corporate worship! One cannot conceive of

⁷⁹ **axiom** – statement of self-evident truth.

such a restriction on “worship in all of life” [Duncan is speaking of 1 Corinthians 14—SW]...

It is also apparent...that the New Testament has a distinctive category of corporate worship, and that it has a special concern about worship that is uniquely and distinguishably corporate. This is important to say because serious voices in the worship debate question whether a distinct category of corporate worship can be found in the new-covenant era.⁸⁰

Derek Thomas adds:

No amount of theological hair-splitting over what may be termed *broad* and *narrow worship* can overcome the definable moment (signaled by a call to worship) when God’s covenant people gathered together, and it is no longer permitted to do certain, otherwise legitimate, things. To cite Terry Johnson: “Whether or not I ought to dig ditches, fly kites, or bathe my children in the context of public worship is not the same question as whether or not God may be glorified by them.”⁸¹

2) “All of life is worship”?

Second, the motto that “all of life is worship” is associated with views that blunt other related and important biblical distinctions. Driscoll remarks at one point: “What I don’t understand is why we would treat one hour a week by a certain set of rules, and the other 167 hours of the week by a different set of rules.” To which I respond, “If you understood the biblical teaching on the Christian Sabbath, perhaps you would understand not only this, Mark, but also why one day a week has a different set of rules.” My point is, of course, *not* that Driscoll has to agree with me about the Christian Sabbath. My point is that the Christian Sabbath is another place where we have to say something like what I have said about the regulative principle of the church’s worship. Yes, all of life is worship, but that does not mean the gathering of the church is not worship in a *special sense*. So again here, I say, yes, every day is holy, but one day is especially and distinctly holy.

3) *The church in its unique identity*

Third, as I have said, the true and basic distinction that gives rise to the regulative principle is the distinction between the church in its unique identity and the rest of life. I have presented several solid reasons to grant the truth of the Nicene Creed when it makes one of the attributes of the church *holiness*. The church is holy, as we have seen, in a way that the rest of life is not. It is holy in a sense that even other divine institutions like the family and the state are not. This unique identity of the church is, as we have seen, emphatically stated in 1 Timothy 3:15. We have also seen, in that passage, the unique identity of the church connected to the necessity of special conduct in the church.

For all these reasons, the objections to and reinterpretations of the regulative principle advocated by many in our day are to be seen as completely unnecessary. To put this another way, the objections are counterintuitive to those who understand the biblical teaching that some

⁸⁰ *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 21, 47, 49.

⁸¹ *Give Praise to God*, 87.

things in life are especially holy, and that one of those things that is especially holy is the church and its worship.

II. Different Hermeneutic for the Church Than for Other Areas

Objection: “The regulative principle implies a different hermeneutic for the church than for other areas of life.” This objection and my answer to it constitutes a kind of footnote to the first issue. I am uncertain who first opined⁸² that the regulative principle provides a different hermeneutic for worship than for the rest of life. In my search online, I found several persons using this terminology. They said things like:

Author/evangelist Mark Driscoll did a series of sermons on the topic of “Religion Saves and Nine Other Misconceptions.” The last sermon in that series had to do with the Regulative Principle, the hermeneutical approach that says that unless Scripture specifically authorizes something, that thing is prohibited.⁸³

I have two responses to this notion that the regulative principle is a different hermeneutic. First, ignoring the rather odd use of the word *hermeneutic*, I have made clear that I certainly do think that the regulative principle has a scope or application far narrower than all of life and, in fact, was never intended traditionally or biblically to be applied to all of life. My second response has to do, however, with the odd and, now I will say, inappropriate and misleading use of the term *hermeneutic* in this context. A hermeneutic is a principle of interpretation. The regulative principle is not primarily, if at all, a principle of interpretation. It is not an interpretive principle, but a *governing* principle. D. Scott Meadows amplifies my response to this terminology:

Another confused notion has arisen in the discussion of these things. Some allege that the regulative principle of worship presents a different “hermeneutic,” or “principle of interpretation,” for worship than for everything else, and therefore it is implausible on the face of it. Such critics argue that “all of life” is worship, and therefore the Bible should not be applied any differently to the church’s worship than it is to our daily, mundane activities. With the best of intentions, I am sure, one advocate of the regulative principle of worship even asserts that “in point of fact, however, the regulative principle does provide a different hermeneutic,” but he adds, he finds “no cogency⁸⁴ in this difficulty,” nor did he “find it a difficulty” to maintaining the regulative principle of worship.⁸⁵ So one interprets the regulative principle as a “different hermeneutic” and rejects it, while the other allows that it is a “different hermeneutic” and accepts it. This “two hermeneutic theory” seems to me to fall short of a proper understanding of both the Scriptures and the regulative principle of worship as found in the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, 22.1. A much simpler and biblically-defensible way to think about this is that a single, sound hermeneutic recognizes that God has given us much

⁸² **opined** – expressed the opinion.

⁸³ This was accessed on December 7, 2012, at <http://www.timothyarcher.com/kitchen/mark-driscoll-on-the-regulative-and-normative-principles-of-worship/>.

⁸⁴ **cogency** – power of proving or producing belief; convincing force.

⁸⁵ T. David Gordon, “Some Answers About the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall 1993), 55:2.

more specific direction about worship proper than He has about other spheres of life, which we admit, in a very broad sense, may also be thought of as worship.⁸⁶

III. Acceptance of “Extreme” Practices

The implication is often present in arguments for the rejection of the regulative principle that “it leads to the acceptance of ‘extreme’ practices, like exclusive psalmody and non-instrumentalism.”⁸⁷ It cannot be denied that these practices have frequently been associated with the regulative principle in history. Neither can it be denied that those who hold these views are disposed to press the regulative principle in support of their views. Nevertheless, it appears to me that several cogent responses can be made to this argument.

First, it is guilty of a logical fallacy. The frequent association of two ideas does not prove that they are logically related by good and necessary consequence. For instance, the doctrine of original sin is closely associated with the doctrine of infant baptism historically, but this does not prove (at least to any Reformed Baptists), nor should it prove to any, that the doctrine of original sin leads to infant baptism.

Second, it is forgetful of the fact that the issue at stake is the regulative principle, not the regulative *applications*. While it may be the case that regulativists have often held to exclusive psalmody and non-instrumentalism, the fact is that regulativists have often not held to these views as well. Relevant to this point is the indisputable fact that the confessions, which clearly articulate the regulative principle, never teach either exclusive psalmody or non-instrumentalism.

Third, I personally believe that the views of the regulativists who argue for exclusive psalmody and non-instrumentalism are flawed. My view is that there are sound arguments based on the regulative principle of the church to practice both the singing of songs not given us explicitly in the inspired Scripture, and the accompaniment of that singing by musical instruments.

IV. Church’s Pattern after the Synagogue, not the Temple

a. *The objection explained*

Objection: “The regulative principle forgets that the church is patterned after the synagogue (which was without divine authorization), and not the temple (which alone was governed by the regulative principle).” One of the difficulties in addressing the objections to the regulative principle of the church and its worship is that it is difficult to untangle the various objections from one another sufficiently to address them coherently. This is certainly the case with the objection (or is it the *objections*, plural?) that I have just attempted to summarize. This objection is really a combination of claims.

⁸⁶ This quotation comes from a series of sermons by D. Scott Meadows posted online. They are entitled, *A Call to Pure Worship*. I am quoting from the third of these sermons. The web address for the one I cite is <http://heraldofgrace.org/biblicalexpositions/a-call-to-pure-worship-iii-the-standard-of-worship-part-ii/>.

⁸⁷ Derek Thomas in *Give Praise to God*, 91-92, refers to this objection and provides some citational evidence for it. Interestingly enough for us Reformed Baptists, he states the objection this way: “There is one more issue to consider briefly: the charge that consistency will make us all either exclusive psalm singers or Reformed Baptists.”

- First, the synagogue and its worship were not biblically appointed or scripturally regulated.
- Second, Jesus customarily engaged in synagogue worship, which means that He sinned by engaging in unregulated worship—if the regulative principle of worship is true.
- Third, the church and its worship are patterned on the synagogue, which means that the worship of the church is unregulated.
- Fourth, the worship of the Temple/Tabernacle was subject to a regulative principle.
- Fifth, since the church and its worship is not patterned on that of the Temple/Tabernacle, its worship is not subject to the regulative principle that governed Temple/Tabernacle worship.

All of these propositions are at one point or the other present in the following quotations. R. J. Gore argues that neither the synagogue nor the elements of its worship were divinely appointed. Yet, he goes on to say, Jesus worshiped regularly in the synagogue. Hence, Jesus violated the regulative principle. This leads either to the unthinkable conclusion that Jesus sinned, or to the conclusion that the regulative principle is wrong.

Here is what Gore says:

One issue that is casually skirted by the proponents of the traditional view is the question of synagogue worship. According to the Puritan regulative principle, only that which is directly commanded by God or may be concluded by due and necessary inference is a legitimate element of worship. Is synagogue worship compatible with the above definition?...The following discussion will focus on three issues: 1) the origin of the synagogue, 2) the worship of the synagogue, and 3) the practice of Jesus relative to the synagogue.

To begin with, the origin of the synagogue appears to be of human contrivance and not of divine command. The origin of the house of prayer, later known as the synagogue, is recorded neither in the Bible nor in the post-biblical records...

While thoroughly consistent with Old Testament faith and practice, the structure, the responses, and even the very existence of the liturgy⁸⁸ itself all lack explicit biblical command. Thus, the normal liturgy of the synagogue was largely of human origin and included ceremony (actions) and ritual (words or texts) clearly not of divine origin...

Jesus, then, frequented a place of worship established without divine command, the synagogue. Further, He worshiped in the synagogue according to Jewish practice and followed liturgical forms, ceremonies, and rites that were of human origin. Jesus, in His practice, violated the *Puritan* formulation of the regulative principle of worship. This does not undermine the principle that God regulates worship. It does mean, however, that the Puritan formulation is faulty and must be reconsidered in light of the practice of Jesus Himself.⁸⁹

Steve Schlissel argues similarly that synagogue worship was unregulated, but approved of by Jesus and the Apostolic church:

⁸⁸ **liturgy** – form or formulary according to which public religious worship is conducted.

⁸⁹ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 102-106.

In our treatment of the question, we considered the glaring fact that there are no commands in the Bible concerning the elements of worship to be employed in the synagogue, an institution recognized by most as providing the organizational foundation of the Christian churches. If, as the regulativists claim, sacred assemblies may do only what God has commanded to be done, and if there are no discernible inscripturated commands telling Israel what they may do in sacred assemblies, then Israel (if regulative principle compliant) was permitted, in fact, to do nothing in the synagogues.⁹⁰

The very existence of the synagogue, however, undoes the regulativist's position! For he knows that the synagogues existed. And he knows that Christ and the Apostles *regularly* worshiped at synagogues, without so much as a breath of suggestion that they were institutionally or liturgically illegitimate. And he knows that he cannot find so much as a sliver of a divine commandment concerning what ought to be done in the synagogue. And, according to his principle, if God commanded naught concerning what ought to be done, then all was forbidden. And if all was forbidden, then the whole of it—institution and liturgy—was a sinful abomination. But that brings him back to Christ attending upon the service of God there and Christ following its liturgy: did *He* sin by participating in an entire order of worship that was without express divine warrant? The thought is blasphemy!⁹¹

Schlissel also makes the argument that the regulative principle *only* applied to the sacrificial system of worship. Brian Schwertley writes:

He refers to this worship as “the Sinai approach.” According to Schlissel, the ceremonial, priestly, Levitical worship of the Tabernacle and Temple was strictly regulated in particulars, “while the decentralized synagogue worship was never so regulated.” Since Christ did away with the whole ceremonial law by His death, Schlissel asserts that there is no regulative principle at all in the New Covenant era. Schlissel argues that the proof texts used by regulativists for well over 400 years actually prove no such principle. According to Schlissel, these texts have either been taken out of context, or have been made to teach that which they were not meant to teach. He then argues that regulativists “skip the synagogue.” In other words, they purposely overlook the non-ceremonial, non-regulated synagogue worship because it destroys their position.⁹²

Here is what Schlissel says on this issue:

“Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount” (Heb 8:5). It can be justly said that, from Moses to Messiah, the architecture of the House of God was as strictly regulated as the worship within it. Yet God has not given to the post-Pentecost church a blueprint for its architecture. To see this freedom that we now have—in fitting church form (architecture) to function (the activities oc-

⁹⁰ Steve Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle,” Part 5, <http://www.messiahnyc.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=92>.

⁹¹ Steve Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle,” Part 1, in *Messiah’s Mandate*, 7, <http://www.messiahnyc.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?id=92>.

⁹² Brian Schwertley, “A Brief Critique of Steven M. Schlissel’s Articles against the Regulative Principle of Worship,” <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/schlissel.htm>.

curing within)—is to see the church exercising one of its many prerogatives as a mature entity in Christ. God treats us as grown-ups; regulativists treat us as toddlers. Instead of basing their appeals for improvement on higher sensibilities and principles, as one would reason with an adult, they seek simply to child-proof every house with their must nots. There are locks everywhere because God’s covenant people, in their view, are not to be trusted.

Whatever the relation between Temple and synagogue, and we certainly recognize a relationship, they remained quite distinct institutions. And it was the synagogue that became the model for New Order worship. Some seek to argue against the normativity of the synagogue model for the church by asserting that the Temple, rather than the synagogue, is the ultimate source of a number of the most important aspects of Christian worship. I’m from Missouri. Show me⁹³ any element of early biblical Christian (or current Reformed!) worship that can ultimately be traced to the Temple alone—or which came to the church in any way other than via the synagogue.⁹⁴

b. The objection answered

Of the five claims I distinguished above and which are mixed up together in the quotations from Schlissel and Gore, it is only the first and fifth that require response. I will stipulate⁹⁵ that Jesus as a matter of custom practiced and so approved of synagogue worship. I will stipulate that the church and its worship is patterned on the synagogue. Finally, I will stipulate that the worship of the Temple/Tabernacle was regulated. All of these things, however, only lead to the conclusion of Schlissel and Gore that the regulative principle is unbiblical if the first and fifth claims distinguished above are true. Let me repeat them here:

- First, the synagogue and its worship were not biblically appointed or scripturally regulated.
- Fifth, since the church and its worship are not patterned on that of the Temple/Tabernacle, its worship is not subject to the regulative principle that governed Temple/Tabernacle worship.

1) The Church patterned after the Temple

The notion that the church and its worship are not patterned on that of the Temple/Tabernacle may be answered first. It is certainly true that the Temple/Tabernacle worship was typical.⁹⁶ This does not, however, mean that in no sense the worship of the church is connected with it. The synagogue worship was also situated in Old Testament realities, types, and shadows, but this does not prevent both Schlissel and Gore from assuming that it has much to do with the church and its worship. Similarly, the fulfillment of the types and shadows of the Temple/Tabernacle system does not prevent the church from being pictured as God’s new Temple in many places in the New Testament. Recall the following examples of this:

⁹³ “Show Me” is the unofficial nickname of the USA state of Missouri, derived in the late 1800s when the simple plainmen were known for demanding strangers to prove what they said to be true.

⁹⁴ Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle,” Part 3.

⁹⁵ **stipulate** – acknowledge; agree.

⁹⁶ **typical** – representing something else as a symbol with similar characteristics.

Hebrews 3:6—But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

Hebrews 10:21—And having an high priest over the house of God...

1 Peter 2:5—Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:16—Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

1 Corinthians 3:17—If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.

2 Corinthians 6:16—And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Ephesians 2:21—In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.

If Schlissel seriously believes that something like the regulative principle governed the Temple/Tabernacle worship of the Old Testament, then the real conclusion he ought to draw from the New Testament is that the church also is subject to such a regulative principle. Because the fact is, that the New Testament makes abundantly clear that the Church is God's new Temple.

2) *The synagogue scripturally regulated*

But having disposed of this claim, we must come to the first claim I specified. It is that the synagogue and its worship were not biblically appointed or scripturally regulated. Actually, two slightly different claims are made here. First, the claim is made that synagogue worship itself is not appointed by God. Second, the claim is made that the elements of its worship are not appointed. We will deal with these two sub-claims one at a time.

a) *Synagogue worship appointed by God*

First, the claim is made that synagogue worship itself is not appointed by God. But to put it simply, on the contrary, the synagogue is appointed by God. We have an explicit text for it.

Leviticus 23:2-4—Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be *holy convocations*, even these are my feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings. These are the feasts of the LORD, even *holy convocations*, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons.

The Sabbath day was to be a day of holy convocation. The word means “assembly”; and it was to be a day of holy assembly not just at the Temple or Tabernacle, but in all the dwellings of Israel. It is not difficult to see how this command would lead directly to the synagogue worship we find practiced from ancient times in Israel. And it *was* practiced from ancient times.

Psalms 74:7-8—They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name to the ground. They said in their hearts, Let us destroy them together: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land.

Acts 15:21-22—For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren.

Gore asserts that “the available evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of an exilic or postexilic origin” of the synagogue. The evidence just presented makes this claim look more like wishful thinking than sound scholarship.⁹⁷ In light of texts like these, there is reason to think that synagogue worship had an early and divine origin.

b) Elements of synagogue worship appointed by God

Second, the claim is made that the elements of its worship are not appointed. The argument here is that, even if synagogue worship is appointed, there are no explicit regulations given for what was to be done in this worship. This claim, however, assumes something that the proponents of the regulative principle never assert. It assumes that the proponents of the regulative principle require explicit commands for the elements of worship. This is not the case. Explicit commands are not required. All that is required to establish something as an element of worship is a *good and necessary consequence of Scripture*.

This being the case, I am prepared to argue that we have such scriptural basis for the worship of the synagogues. The following facts must be remembered:

- The worship of the synagogue was very simple. It consisted of little more than prayer, praise, and the reading and explanation of Scripture. Derek Thomas says, “Of interest to us here is to know whether synagogue worship contained anything in it that would be deemed contrary to the regulative principle. Did it contain an element of worship that was not warranted by the Old Testament? The answer is definitely in the negative.”⁹⁸
- The worship of the synagogue was to be a holy assembly on the holy Sabbath. Clearly, the elements of its worship had to be in keeping with such an assembly. At a minimum such worship would have required prayer, praise, and the reading and explanation of Scripture.
- The worship of the synagogue was likely viewed as an extension of the worship of the Temple/Tabernacle embodying those elements of Temple/Tabernacle worship appropriate to such an assembly. By good and necessary consequence, prayer, praise, and the reading and explanation of Scripture would have been appropriate. Peter Leithart affirms: “Terry L. Johnson, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America, asserts that ‘the foundation for the simple and spiritual worship of the New Testament may be found in the synagogue services...The worship of the synagogue was essentially

⁹⁷ Some defenders of the regulative principle argue that we must “assume” a prophetic origin for the synagogue and its worship. Of course, their opponents see this as a gigantic exhibition of circular logic that goes something like this: “We know the regulative principle is true. Thus, the synagogue must have had divine precedent. Hence, we assume without biblical evidence that it does.” I do not necessarily agree with the adversaries of the regulative principle that this argument for the regulative principle actually itself violates the regulative principle or that this argument assumes what it has to prove. Nevertheless, it does seem somewhat questionable to me.

⁹⁸ Derek Thomas, *Give Praise to God*, 91.

the worship of the Temple minus the apparatus of sacrifice: temple, priest, altar, victim, incense, and ritual.”⁹⁹

V. Unworkable Distinction between Elements and Circumstances

Objection: “The regulative principle involves a difficult, obscure, possibly incomprehensible, and thus unworkable distinction between the elements of the church and its worship, and the circumstances of the church and its worship.” Note the differences between Calvin and the Puritans and even among the Puritans themselves on the issue of the *adiaphora*¹⁰⁰ and circumstances. As noted above, this seems to be one of Gore’s main objections to the regulative principle.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Steve Schlissel makes a point of this:

We are here simply insisting that the Westminster Confession’s admission concerning “circumstances” of worship—that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed”—is, in truth, a far more comprehensive statement of God’s will for New Order worship than is recognized in some quarters.¹⁰²

I have argued above that it is possible to avoid obscurity and achieve clarity with regard to the distinction between the circumstances and parts of worship. I will not retrace all that ground here. It is relevant, however, to repeat my point that we are defending the regulative principle of worship, and not the regulative *applications* of worship. The fact is that there need not be complete unanimity with regard to the applications of the regulative principle, in order for brethren to walk together in agreement over the principle. Furthermore, disagreements over particular applications, whether they have to do with dance, drama, non-instrumentalism, or exclusive psalmody, will each need to be examined on their own merits in light of the distinction between the parts and circumstances of public worship.

VI. Jewish Appointment of New Holy Days

Objection: “The Jews did not follow the regulative principle when, without divine authorization, they appointed new holy days—and Jesus observed such holy days.” This objection to the regulative principle is answered at length by a number of the defenders of the regulative principle.¹⁰³ Let me briefly summarize the major responses made to this objection. First, the

⁹⁹ Peter Leithart, “Synagogue or Temple? Models for the Christian Worship,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 2002), 64:1.

¹⁰⁰ *adiaphora* – Greek “things indifferent,” derived from Romans 14:5; the things that are neither commanded in Scripture nor can be inferred from Scripture; things that are not a good or necessary consequence of Scripture.

¹⁰¹ Gore in *Covenantal Worship*, 47-51, rejects the regulative principle partly because of difficulties he sees with this distinction. Frame in *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 40-41, bases much of his revision of the principle on similar difficulties. Note Derek Thomas’ response to this in *Give Praise to God*, 78-84.

¹⁰² Steven Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle,” Part 4, in *Messiah’s Mandate*.

¹⁰³ Cf. Brian Schwertley, “V. Some Contemporary Objections to *Sola Scriptura* in the Sphere of Worship Considered and Refuted”; Derek Thomas, *Give Praise to God*, 88-91; Daniel F. N. Ritchie, *The Regulative Principle of Worship* (Xulon Press, 2007), 72-73.

mere presence of Jesus on the occasion of non-appointed worship does not assume His participation in it or approval of it. Second, the appointment of national holidays, like the Feast of Purim by Mordecai (Est 9), is not necessarily the appointment of holy days of worship. Third, the confession itself makes provision for the church to appoint days of fasting or thanksgiving: “moreover, solemn humiliation, with fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner” (1689 Baptist Confession, chapter 22, paragraph 5).

VII. Insufficient Answer to All Questions about Worship

Objection: “The regulative principle is insufficient to answer all our questions about the worship and government of the church.” Driscoll says: “Number two, it’s not sufficient. It doesn’t answer all the questions like technology and announcements and seating.”¹⁰⁴

Of course it does not answer all these questions. But that is why the confessional statements of the regulative principle differentiated between the elements of worship, which had to be appointed and clearly taught in Scriptures, and the circumstances of worship, which did not have to be. Driscoll’s assertion manifests a shocking level of ignorance as to what the regulative principle really is.

VIII. Requirement of Explicit Command

Objection: “The regulative principle requires an explicit command for everything we do in worship.” One frequently runs across this assumption in rebuttals of the regulative principle. It must be admitted that some credence is given to it when advocates of very strict applications of the regulative principle begin to press their case. Nevertheless, the fact is that a historical and biblical understanding of the regulative principle does not require explicit commands for everything we do in worship. This objection ignores, first, the distinction between the circumstances and the parts of worship. No one thinks that an explicit command is required to arrange the circumstances of worship. Second, this objection ignores the fact that the earliest proponents of the regulative principle believed that what could be deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence was equivalent to Scripture, even though it was not “explicit” (see chapter 1, paragraph 6 of the Westminster Confession of Faith). Third, the very nature of the regulative principle leads to the necessary conclusion that explicit “commands” are not necessary. If we find an example of something being done in a meeting with apostolic approval, then it is clearly in compliance with the regulative principle. No explicit command is necessary.

IX. Requirement to Embody Every Element in Every Service

Objection: “The regulative principle means that we must embody every element of worship in every worship service.” Sometimes this objection is stated as more of a question. But when it is made an objection, it involves some very strange historical results. Calvin and the Scottish Covenanters¹⁰⁵ both advocated the regulative principle, but frequently met for worship without practicing the Lord’s Supper. Though Calvin desired weekly observance, he settled for much

¹⁰⁴ Mark Driscoll, <http://marshill.com/media/religionsaves/regulative-principle>.

¹⁰⁵ **Scottish Covenanters** – Scottish Presbyterians (1638-90) who held to the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant. In these they pledged to maintain the Presbyterian form of church government and worship, against episcopacy (the form of church government ruled by bishops and upheld by the Church of England).

less when the city council rejected his plan. It is well-known that the Scottish Presbyterians practiced the Lord's Supper on a quarterly basis. Another patent rebuke of this misunderstanding of the regulative principle is the practice of baptism. Baptism cannot be practiced unless there is someone to be baptized. Obviously, it is frequently the case that Christians engage in public worship when there is no one to be baptized.

The fact is simply that no proponent of the regulative principle to my knowledge has ever argued that every element of worship must be included in every church meeting.

X. Unclear Relation of OT Canon and NT Canon to the Principle

Objection: "The relation of the Old Testament canon¹⁰⁶ and New Testament canon to the regulative principle of the church is unclear. Why do some regulativists object to the practice of some things that were clearly a legitimate part of Old Testament worship?" In one sense the answer to this objection is so obvious as to be almost silly. Regulativists do not accept many parts of Old Testament worship because they were types and shadows that were fulfilled and in their literal practice abolished in Christ (Col 2:16-17). Thus, the entire Temple worship with all its accoutrements¹⁰⁷ is no longer obligatory for Christians. In fact, it is positively forbidden:

John 4:21-24—Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

But naïve as this objection may be when stated in this bald and unqualified way, it raises a more difficult and broader issue. That is the relation of the Old Testament canon and New Testament canon to the regulative principle of the church. It seems to me that from one perspective, what we have to do here is simply apply the same Reformed principle of interpretation with regard to the general application of the laws of the Old Testament to the subject of the regulation of corporate worship. That principle may be stated as follows: *Whatever is not abolished in Christ (at least in principle) continues.*

On the other hand, we also must recognize, when we come to the subject of the church and its worship, that we are dealing with an area in which we know that drastic changes have taken place from the Old to the New Testament. The composition of the church, for instance, has changed from a national to a spiritual principle. Along with this, the relation of the church to the family and the state has changed. Related to this, the government of the church is radically altered. Similarly, the nature of the Temple has changed from a geographical location to a spiritual location. Along with this, all the types and shadows related to the Old Testament sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood have been fulfilled in Christ—and, in their literal practice, have been abolished.

¹⁰⁶ **canon** – *Greek* "kanon," which meant "measuring stick," then "rule or standard," and finally a "list written in a column." In this sense it was applied to the list of books that the early Christian churches acknowledged to be inspired and authoritative for faith and life: the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

¹⁰⁷ **accoutrements** – accompaniments.

These considerations (and others that might be added) make clear that it is not nearly enough, in order to prove a practice to be regulative, for the New Testament church simply to quote some Old Testament text that gives an example of, or even command for, its practice. One needs to prove that the practice in question is required by those elements of Old Testament teaching that are permanent. The matter must be something that is a creation ordinance, that is contained in the Ten Commandments, or that is clearly natural and not ceremonial. One must also pay attention to the way in which the types and shadows of Old Testament worship are fulfilled in the New Testament. Do priestly choirs mean that we should have choirs, or that the whole of the church as a royal priesthood should sing? Does the use of musical instruments in the Temple worship mean that we should have musical instruments, or are they symbolic of the spiritual worship of the New Covenant with the instruments of their heart and lips? These are not easy, nor straightforward, questions. Each must be carefully considered. Leaps to conclusions that ignore the problems and difficulties with translating Old Testament precedents into New Testament regulations must not be ignored.

Excursus: The Role of Women in the Church

My thesis in this excursus is that the way in which God specially regulates the meetings of the church in a way different from the rest of human life may be seen in His instructions regarding the role of women in the church.

As I said above, the distinction between the regulation of the corporate worship of the church and the regulation of the rest of life is in no place more clear in the New Testament than in the regulations given by the Apostle Paul for the conduct of women in the gatherings of the church.

This is plain, I think, in 1 Corinthians 14:33-35.

³³ For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

³⁴ Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. ³⁵ And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

One of the plainest features of this passage is that Paul three times specifies that the commands he is giving are for the assemblies of the church at Corinth. Probably, as many interpreters note, verse 33b is to be connected with verses 34-35. The reference of the threefold use of *ekklesia* is not to the church as an institution or as an organization, but to the church as an actual or literal assembly. Notice a similar usage of *church* throughout all the mentions of it in the context (vv. 4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28). Many think that the rules for women are the same in church as they are anywhere. But this is not what Paul teaches here. He says the opposite (1Co 14:35)!

The key, as I just suggested, is in the contextual use of the verbs *to speak* and *to be silent*. They are used in clear and striking ways in this chapter. The verb *to speak* (*laleo*) is used 296 times in the NT, but strikingly 24 of those uses (about 8%) are in this chapter alone. We must allow this contextual usage of the verb to control its meaning in verses 34-35. So how is it used? Beside the two uses in verses 34-35, it is used as follows:

- *17 tongues speaking* (1 Corinthians 14:2 [3 times], 4, 5 [2 times], 6, 9, 11 [2 times], 13, 18, 21, 23, 27, 28, 39)
- *2 prophecy speaking* (1 Corinthians 14:3, 29)
- *3 general speaking* (1 Corinthians 14:6, 9, 19)

What about the verb *to keep silent*? This verb is used 9 times in the New Testament, 3 of them in this chapter. How is it used in the other two places where it is used in 1 Corinthians 14? See for yourself in 1 Corinthians 14:28 and 30.

²⁸ But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

³⁰ If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace [i.e., keep silent].

It is noteworthy that in these uses of the phrase *to keep silent* that it is also used correlatively¹⁰⁸ with *to speak*. This heightens the importance of these parallels. In verse 28, the reference is to tongues speaking; and in verse 30, the reference is to prophesying. What is my conclusion? It is very clear that Paul means in verses 34-35 to forbid female tongues-speakers and prophetesses from exercising their gifts in the church. Now the implication is immediate and important.

We know that there were female tongues-speakers and prophets in the early church. Clearly, they exercised their gifts in public somehow and somewhere (1Co 11:5; Act 2:17; 21:9). Paul's point here is to forbid the exercise of those gifts in the church. By implication and context, he also has in mind and forbids teaching by women that is not spoken through tongues or prophecy. Notice how the verb *speak* is used in these passages from 1 Corinthians 14:

1 Corinthians 14:6—Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine [teaching]?

1 Corinthians 14:9—So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.

1 Corinthians 14:19—Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.

And clearly, if Paul prohibits the extraordinary teaching, preaching, and leading in prayer associated with tongues-speaking and prophecy, he also forbids ordinary teaching, preaching, and leading in prayer to women. The greater here clearly includes the lesser. But here is the application: There is a special prohibition of the prophesying and tongues-speaking of women within the meetings of the church that does not apply in other public situations.

This phenomenon is not restricted to 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. It also becomes manifest in the other passage on the conduct of women in the assemblies of the church in the New Testament—1 Timothy 2:8-15. Here Paul is ordering the life of the church, as he makes clear in 1 Timothy 3:14-15. Thus, he takes up in chapter 2 the prayer meetings of the church and in chapter 3 the offices of the church. Speaking of the prayer meetings of the church, he gives

¹⁰⁸ **correlatively** – together.

several directions. One of these is that the men should pray (lead in prayer) in the church. By using the distinctive Greek noun that refers to an adult male, as opposed to a boy or a woman, Paul makes it clear that he does not want women to be leading in prayer in the church. Rather, his directive for them is that they should adorn themselves in modest, respectable, and unpretentious clothing. Then he goes on to confirm the way women should behave in church by ordering them to learn in quietness, that is, with a listening posture and not restlessly seeking to make their own contribution.

The application is again plain. Women are forbidden in church to do something that they are plainly allowed to do in other contexts.

I am aware that there is another exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:8 which says that men are to pray lifting up holy hands and women are to pray dressed respectably. This reading is not followed by any of the English translations. It contradicts the grammatical construction of the passage. It strangely suggests that women may not raise their hands when praying. It is also unnatural in light of what follows, where Paul tells women to learn quietly.

These directions for women in church are part of the regulative principle. Clearly, then, the regulative principle does *not* apply to all of life, but peculiarly to the meetings of the church. The public praying (leading in prayer) of women is contrary to the directive of 1 Timothy 2:8 and contrary to the directive of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. Speaking in tongues was, among other things, a form of prayer (1Co 14:13-14, 27-28). If women were forbidden to speak (pray) in tongues (the greater), then surely they are forbidden to lead in prayer or in ways that do not utilize such an extraordinary gifting (the lesser).

