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# Sola Scriptura

## And the Regulative Principle of Worship

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Edited by [Stephen Pribble](#)

## Introduction

*Sola scriptura* is one of the fundamental principles of the Protestant reformation. (One could even argue that the other great principal doctrines of the Reformation [such as *sola gratia*, *sola fide*] are logically dependent upon *sola scriptura*.) By making the Bible the sole standard and authority for faith and life, Protestants were able to refute all the Romish doctrines and practices that originated from human tradition. The Calvinistic reformers achieved a greater, more thorough reformation in the church because they applied *sola scriptura* more consistently, logically and effectively to doctrine, church government and worship than did their Anglican and Lutheran counterparts.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura*, with its teaching regarding the authority, completeness, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture, needs to be taught today with a renewed zeal and urgency. The reasons for this renewed zeal are not merely because of the current popularity of Romanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, modernism, neo-orthodoxy, the cults, the charismatic movement and the church growth movement. The chief reason is the current declension among the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations today, particularly in the area of worship. Not only are many Reformed and Presbyterian churches allowing human innovations in worship, but the regulative principle of Scripture, and the correlative doctrine of the sufficiency of the Bible in all matters of faith *including worship*, is openly rejected by many pastors and elders. The regulative principle of worship (which is *sola scriptura* applied to the worship conducted by the church) is one of the greatest achievements of the Calvinistic reformation. In order to shore up the foundation of Reformed worship we must go back to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. We pray that this study will be used for the reformation of the church.

Reformed believers today need to understand the theological

relationship that exists between *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle of worship. The reasons that such an understanding is necessary are manifold. First, the regulative principle of worship is directly related to *sola scriptura* doctrines such as the infallibility, absolute authority, sufficiency and perfection of Scripture. The Calvinistic reformers and the Reformed confessions often referred to *sola scriptura* passages (e.g., Dt. 4:2, Pr. 30:6) as proof texts for the regulative principle of worship. When *sola scriptura* is consistently applied to worship, the result is Puritan and Reformed worship. Second, opponents of the regulative principle often argue against it on the basis of the similarity between *sola scriptura* proof texts and regulative principle proof texts. Such argumentation usually follows one or two lines of thought. Some argue that the proof texts cited in favor of the regulative principle (e.g., Dt. 12:32) are really only teaching *sola scriptura*. In other words, it is exegetically illegitimate to use such passages for the strict regulation of worship. Others argue that the similar and even identical nature of the *sola scriptura* passages and the regulative principle passages does not prove a strict regulation of worship but actually proves the opposite. This argument is based on the following syllogism. *Sola scriptura* teaches that the Bible regulates all of life. Yet all of life contains many activities that are not strictly regulated (in other words, the Bible gives man a great deal of liberty in things indifferent [*adiaphora*]). Therefore, it follows that the regulative principle or *sola scriptura* as it applies to worship also leaves man a great deal of liberty in the sphere of worship. In this study we will examine the relationship between *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle in order to prove that *sola scriptura*, properly understood, leads directly to the regulative principle. Then we will refute many of the popular arguments used today against the regulative principle, including the argument based on the similarity between *sola scriptura* and regulative principle proof texts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many professing Christians today regard theological matters as of little or no importance. Some even regard theological debate and the refutation of false teaching as unloving, arrogant and insulting to brethren of different theological persuasions. Some believers make comments such as: “Should we not be building bridges rather than erecting walls and fortresses?” While there is no question that theological debate and refutation must be conducted in a spirit of Christian love and concern for professing Christians of different theological opinions, the idea that theological precision, debate and refutation are somehow bad or unworthy of our time is blatantly unbiblical for a number of reasons. First, every Christian, and

especially every minister, has a moral obligation to defend the truth, to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) and to convict those who contradict (Tit. 1:9). In a world full of heresy, apostasy and wolves in sheep's clothing, a lack of theological precision and an unwillingness to defend the truth on the part of ministers is unpastoral and inexcusable. Second, one of the great lessons of church history is that God has used heresy and theological controversy to corporately sanctify his church. Enemies of the truth, heretics and theological perverts have arisen and assaulted the church from within. Yet God in his infinite kindness and wisdom has used such occasions to advance his own cause and kingdom. Many crucial doctrines have been clarified and purified in the flames of controversy and persecution. Should we expect our times to be any different? James Begg writes (1875): "Our own day has furnished abundant illustrations of the general truth, thus so well stated, although the worst is probably yet to come. The point of attack from time to time is varied, but the struggle continues unabated. When Christian men and women have got somewhat accustomed to defend one true position, the assault is directed to another, and perhaps from a new quarter. Although we shall not venture to apportion the relative importance of great principles, it may safely be affirmed that nothing can be more important than questions connected with the acceptable worship of God" (*Anarchy in Worship* [Edinburgh: Lyon and Gemmell, 1875], 4). Third, the only method and ground for true biblical ecumenicity is not to ignore truth or theology but to vigorously study it, adhere to it, advocate it and defend it. Any type of "Christian" union or cooperation that ignores, downplays or alters the truth is destructive of the faith. Such a union arises not from the bedrock of Scripture but from the shifting sand of backslidden and apostate bureaucrats.

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## Introduction

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The doctrine of *sola scriptura*, with its teaching regarding the authority, completeness, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture, needs to be taught today with a renewed zeal and urgency. The reasons for this renewed zeal are not merely because of the current popularity of Romanism, Eastern Orthodoxy, modernism, neo-orthodoxy, the cults, the charismatic movement and the church growth movement. The chief reason is the current declension among the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations today, particularly in the area of worship. Not only are many Reformed and Presbyterian churches allowing human innovations in worship, but the regulative principle of Scripture, and the correlative doctrine of the sufficiency of the Bible in all matters of faith *including worship*, is openly rejected by many pastors and elders. The regulative principle of worship (which is *sola scriptura* applied to the worship conducted by the church) is one of the greatest achievements of the Calvinistic reformation. In order to shore up the foundation of Reformed worship we must go back to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. We pray that this study will be used for the reformation of the church.

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# I. What Is *Sola Scriptura*?

Before we consider the relationship between *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle, we need first to define *sola scriptura*. After a brief definition of this doctrine is given, we will then turn our attention to the Protestant confessional statements.

Briefly stated, the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* teaches that the Bible (the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments) is the divinely inspired word of God and therefore infallible and absolutely authoritative in all matters of faith and life. Because God's inscripturated word contains all the extant supernatural revelation of God, and because all forms of direct revelation have ceased (with the death of the apostles and the close of the canon), the Bible alone is the church's sole authority. Because Scripture is perspicuous (i.e., all the necessary teaching for salvation, faith and life are easily understood by the common people), there is no need for any additional sources of authority to infallibly interpret the Bible for the church. The church (whether popes, cardinals, bishops, church fathers, church councils, synods or congregations) does not have authority over the Bible, but the self authenticating Scriptures have absolute authority over the church and all men. Because of what the Bible is (as noted above), the church's job is purely ministerial and declarative. All men are forbidden to add or detract from the sacred Scriptures, whether by human traditions, or so-called new revelations of the Spirit, or by the decrees of councils or synods. The Bible is sufficient and perfect and does not need any human additions. Further, only that which is taught in Scripture can be used to bind the consciences of men.

## 1. The Reformed Confessional Understanding of *Sola Scriptura*

The Reformed confessions are in total agreement regarding *sola scriptura* or the regulative principle of Scripture.

### First Helvetic Confession (1536)

*Art. 1. Scripture.* The Canonical Scripture, being the Word of God, and delivered by the Holy Ghost, and published to the world by the prophets and apostles, being of all others the most perfect and ancient philosophy, doth perfectly contain all piety and good ordering of life.<sup>2</sup>

### French Confession (1559)

*Art. 5.* We believe that the word, contained in these books, came from one God; of whom alone, and not of men, the authority thereof dependeth. And seeing this is the

sum of all truth, containing whatsoever is required for the worship of God and our salvation, we hold it not lawful for men, no, not for the angels themselves, to add or detract any thing to or from that word, or to alter any whit at all in the same.<sup>3</sup>

## Belgic Confession (1561)

### *Article 7. The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to be the Only Rule of Faith*

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: *nay, though it were an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul saith. For since it is forbidden *to add unto or take away any thing from the Word of God*, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule which the apostles have taught us, saying, *Try the spirits whether they are of God*. Likewise, *If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.*<sup>4</sup>

## Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

### *I. Of the Holy Scripture Being the True Word of God...*

2. And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has all things fully expounded which belong to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this respect it is expressly commanded of God that nothing be either put to or taken from the same (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19).

3. We judge, therefore, that from these Scriptures are to be taken true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches; as also instruction in all duties of piety; and, to be short, the confirmation of doctrines, and the confutation of all errors, with all exhortations; according to that word of the apostle, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof," etc. (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Again, "These things write I unto thee," says the apostle to Timothy, "...that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God," etc. (1



Tim. 3:14-15).<sup>5</sup>

## *II. Of Interpreting the Holy Scriptures; and of Fathers, Councils, and Traditions....*

4. ...Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we can not admit any other judge than God Himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what [is] to be avoided. So we do not rest but in the judgment of spiritual men, drawn from the Word of God. Certainly Jeremiah and other prophets did vehemently condemn the assemblies of priests gathered against the law of God; and diligently forewarned us that we should not hear the fathers, or tread in their path who, walking in their own inventions, swerved from the law of God.

5. We do likewise reject human traditions, which, although they be set out with goodly titles, as though they were divine and apostolic, delivered to the Church by the lively voice of the apostles, and, as it were, by the hands of apostolical men, by means of bishops succeeding in their room, yet, being compared with the Scriptures, disagree with them; and that by their disagreement betray themselves in no wise to be apostolical. For as the apostles did not disagree among themselves in doctrine, so the apostles' scholars did not set forth things contrary to the apostles. Nay, it were blasphemous to avouch that the apostles, by lively voice, delivered things contrary to their writings. Paul affirms expressly that he taught the same things in all churches (1 Cor. 4:17). And, again, "We," says he, "write none other things unto you, than what ye read or acknowledge" (2 Cor. 1:13). Also, in another place, he witnesses that he and his disciples—to wit, apostolic men—walked in the same way, and jointly by the same Spirit did all things (2 Cor. 12:18). The Jews also, in time past, had their traditions of elders; but these traditions were severely refuted by the Lord, showing that the keeping of them hinders God's law, and that God is in vain worshiped of such (Matt. 15:8-9; Mark 7:6-7).<sup>6</sup>

## **The Westminster Standards (1646-1648)**

### **Shorter Catechism**

*Q. 2. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?*

A. The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.<sup>7</sup>

### **Larger Catechism**

*Q. 3. What is the word of God?*

A. The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.

## Confession of Faith

1.2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: ... All which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.

1.6. The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and 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.

## 2. Clarifications

According to the Reformed confessional statements the Bible is a perfect, complete and sufficient rule of faith and life. Now that the canon is closed and direct revelation has ceased, the inspired Scriptures are the *only* rule of doctrine and practice. Although the Bible is the only rule that God has given us to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him, there are a number of issues that need to be clarified before we proceed.

First, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is not a denial of natural revelation. The Bible itself teaches that there are things that man can learn about God and himself from nature (cf. Ps. 19; Rom. 1:20ff.). We should note, however, that: (1) Natural revelation was never intended to be used independently of direct revelation. Before the fall God spoke directly to Adam regarding the tree of good and evil. (2) When mankind fell in Adam, both the earth and the human race were affected by sin. Sin and the curse have rendered natural revelation unreliable as a source for ethics. (3) Scripture teaches that although natural revelation is enough to render the human race guilty and without excuse (Rom. 1:18), it is not sufficient to teach man about salvation, Christ and many other crucial doctrines. (4) Further, any doctrines or ethics that could be determined from natural revelation could not contradict and would have to be judged by the perspicuous and sufficient Holy Scriptures.

Second, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is not a denial of the progressive nature and diverse means of

divine revelation before the close of the canon. A fundamental teaching of the regulative principle of Scripture is that man is not to add or detract from God's word (Dt. 4:2). Yet prior to the completion of Scripture this command did not preclude God himself from adding his own thoughts to that which the people of God already had. It did, however forbid anyone to add or detract from the divine revelation which they did have, whether by false prophecy, divination, human tradition and the neglect of God's ordinances. Further, as Christians we look back to a completed and *written* revelation. (In times past men received visions, dreams and verbal communication from God, and not every revelation was committed to writing.) Note also that God could have preserved divine revelation by a supernatural preservation *apart* from committing revelation to written form if he had wanted to. However, in God's good pleasure and infinite wisdom he has committed everything that the church and the world needs to a written revelation. Since natural revelation is insufficient, direct revelation to the church has ceased, and God has committed his will to us "wholly unto writing," the Scriptures are our *sole* standard for faith and life.

Third, the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which says that "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture," is not a denial that there were many revelations and historical events that did not make it into the canon. The completed Scripture that God has given to the church is exactly what he wanted us to have. He could have given his people one hundred volumes containing more case laws, more detailed histories of the patriarchs, Moses, Israel, Jesus Christ and the acts of the apostolic church. But Jehovah gave us the 66 books alone, and this completed canon is perfect and in every way sufficient to answer its design. God has many secret things that belong to himself and his divine perfections which are infinite and could never fully and adequately be revealed to us even if a million inspired volumes existed. But in his mercy everything that we do need to know, love and serve him has been given to us in the Scriptures.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from the Latin by Peter Hall, *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992 [1842]), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 14, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1976), 287. Note: all quotations in this book from the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and

Shorter Catechisms are taken from this edition.

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## II. Aspects of *Sola Scriptura*

### 1. The Authority of Scripture

The regulative principle of Scripture rests upon the fact that the Bible is unique. The Bible *alone* is God's word. The Westminster Confession says, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God" (1.4). Scripture is inspired by God. Therefore, it is truth and it carries the authority of God himself. It alone among books carries an absolute authority.

There is only one God—the ontological trinity who is transcendent, who has created all things and who gives meaning to all factuality. Likewise, presently there is only one direct verbal or written source of divine revelation. There is only one book which tells us the mind and will of God. Because the Scripture is breathed out by God himself, it is self authenticating and absolute. Its authority does not depend on the church, or empirical evidences, or human philosophy. The church and all men are required to submit to the authority of Scripture without any quibbling or reservations, for it is the voice of the Almighty himself.

Because Scripture is God's Word, it is the final, definitive authority in all matters of faith and life. The Bible is the only absolute, objective standard by which ethics, doctrine, church government and worship are to be judged. The Westminster Confession says, "The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined; and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (1.10). Men who are sinful and fallible can and do receive a delegated authority from God. However, only God, who is the absolute sovereign and creator of all things, has the right to bind men to faith and duty.

### 2. The Sufficiency and Perfection of Scripture

An understanding of the sufficiency, perfection or completeness of Scripture (which is a crucial aspect of the Reformed understanding of *sola scriptura*) will lead us to a deeper understanding of the inseparable connection that exists between the regulative principle of Scripture and the regulative principle of worship. By the perfection of Scripture we mean that the Bible is fully sufficient unto the end for which it was designed by God. "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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Robert Shaw writes: “The Scripture is represented as *perfect*, fitted to answer every necessary end, Ps. xix. 8, 9; it is sufficient to make ‘the man of God perfect,’ and able to make private Christians ‘wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus.’—2 Tim. iii. 15-17. So complete is the Scripture, that its Author has peremptorily prohibited either to add to, or to diminish ought from it.—Deut. iv. 2; Rev. xxii. 18, 19.”<sup>8</sup> A. A. Hodge writes: “as a matter of fact, the Scriptures do teach a perfect system of doctrine, and all the principles which are necessary for the practical regulation of the lives of individuals, communities, and churches. The more diligent men have been in the study of the Bible, and the more assiduous they have been in carrying out its instructions into practice, the less has it been possible for them to believe that it is incomplete in any element of a perfect rule of all that which man is to believe concerning God, and of all that duty which God requires of man.”<sup>9</sup>

When we discuss the Scripture as the inspired final revelation of God that is sufficient and complete for salvation, service to God, faith and practice, we do not mean that there are no truths that can be ascertained outside of Scripture. We noted earlier that certain things about God and ourselves are learned from natural revelation. Further, one does not need the Bible to practice elementary logic, simple mathematics and basic surface observations. The achievements of unbelieving scientists, engineers, artists, architects, medical doctors and others in the world are proof of this assertion. However, even in these so-called “secular” areas of life unbelievers must conduct their affairs in accordance with biblical presuppositions in order to get anything done. In other words, the Bible not only tells us about God, ourselves, redemption and ethics, it also is the foundation of all meaning. Apart from divine revelation man cannot really understand or account for anything. Van Til writes: “Thus the Bible, as the infallibly inspired revelation of God to sinful man, stands before us as that light in terms of which all the facts of the created universe must be interpreted. All of finite existence, natural and redemptive, functions in relation to one all-inclusive plan that is in the mind of God. Whatever insight man is to have into this pattern of the activity of God he must attain by looking at all his objects of research in the light of Scripture. If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture.”<sup>10</sup> Further, there are no areas of ethical neutrality in the universe. Even in areas in which the Bible does not speak directly, such as structural engineering and rocket science, it does speak indirectly. All of life is to be lived for God’s glory, and even the most mundane activities are to be conducted according to general principles of God’s word.

By the “perfection and sufficiency” of Scripture the Reformed confessions mean that the Bible is such a perfect and complete guide to man regarding everything that God requires us to believe (salvation, doctrine, statutes, etc.) and everything that God requires us to do (ethics,

sanctification, worship ordinances, church government, etc.) that it does not need any supplementation from man. The Reformed confessions emphasize that the Bible is not one rule among many or simply the best or principal rule. It is the *only* rule of faith and practice. The First Helvetic Confession says: “The Canonical Scripture...*doth alone perfectly contain* all piety and good ordering of life” (Art. 1).<sup>11</sup> The Belgic Confession says: “We believe that those Holy Scriptures *fully contain* the will of God...*the whole manner of* worship which God requires of us is written in them...” (Art. 7).<sup>12</sup> The Second Helvetic Confession says: “And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has *all things fully expounded* which belong to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God...” (1:2). The Westminster Shorter Catechism says: “The word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is *the only rule* to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him” (A. to Q. 2). The Larger Catechism says: “The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the word of God, *the only rule* of faith and obedience” (A. to Q. 3). The Confession of Faith says: “The whole counsel God, concerning *all things necessary* for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...” (1.6, emphasis added).

Positively speaking, the Bible is the *only* rule for faith and obedience. Negatively speaking, men are expressly forbidden to add their own ideas, doctrine and/or precepts to the Scripture in any way. The French Confession says: “And seeing this is the sum of all truth, containing whatsoever is required for the worship of God and our salvation, we hold it not lawful for men, no, for the angels themselves, to add or detract anything to or from that word, or to alter any whit at all in the same” (Art. 5).<sup>13</sup> The Belgic Confession says: “it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: *nay, though it were an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul saith. For since it is forbidden *to add unto or take away any thing from the Word of God*, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. Neither do we consider of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule which the apostles have taught us...” (Art. 7)<sup>14</sup>. The Second Helvetic Confession says: “in this respect it is expressly commanded of God that nothing be either put to or taken away from the same [the Holy Scriptures] (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18-19).”<sup>15</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith says: “...unto which [Scripture] nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (1.6).

The fact that the Bible is sufficient, perfect and complete renders all attempts at supplementing its teachings regarding faith and ethics with ideas and rules that originate in man’s mind to be

unbiblical and foolish. Against spiritualistic enthusiasts, charismatics, diviners and all false prophets the Westminster Confession of Faith states that no “new revelations of the Spirit” are to be added to God’s word. Against the papists and all who intrude human traditions into the precepts, ordinances, worship or government of the church, the Reformed confessions condemn adding “the traditions of men” to the word of God. The doctrine of the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture protects believers from the tyranny of human requirements. No one (whether a bishop, church father, synod or council) is permitted to bind men’s consciences with any doctrine or requirement. Everything must be based on Scripture, either by direct command or by good and necessary consequence. Thus the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “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, in matters of faith and worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience...” (20.2). Regarding good works the Confession says, “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention” (16.1). Concerning worship the Confession says, “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 imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (21.1).

### **3. The Completeness and Finality of Scripture**

When the Reformed confessions assert the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture, and when the Westminster Confession speaks against “new revelations of the Spirit,” they are teaching the completeness and finality of Scripture. By Scripture we mean the completed canon (the 66 books of the Old and New Testament), the inscripturated word of God. At this point in salvation history (*after* the completion of Christ’s redemptive work, *after* the person and work of Christ has been explained by the New Testament prophets and apostles and the government, worship and doctrine of the new covenant church has been fully set forth by the Holy Spirit in Scripture) the revelatory process has ceased. Scripture could not have been completed until after Jesus accomplished his work on earth. Everything in Scripture is related in some manner to the person and work of Christ. Jesus is described as the climax and finality of God speaking to man (Heb. 1:1-2).

Our Lord told his disciples that it was to their advantage that he go away, for after his ascension he would send the Holy Spirit who would guide them into all truth (Jn. 16:7, 13-15). The Spirit-inspired apostles and New Testament prophets gave us the foundation (the N.T. canon) upon which the new covenant churches build (Eph. 2:20-21). Paul said that when the perfect comes (i.e., the completed N.T. revelation), prophecy and other modes of revelation



would cease (1 Cor. 13:8-12). It is a fact of history that divine revelation did cease when the last apostle died. Throughout history those who have claimed to have direct revelations from God (e.g., Montanists, Zwickau prophets, Irvingites, modern charismatics, etc.) have always been false prophets. Christ and the apostles predicted the rise of false prophets and warned us not to follow their counterfeit revelations (cf. Mt. 7:15-23; 24:11; 2 Pet. 2:1 ff.; 2 Th. 2:9-11; etc.).

The fact that revelation has ceased and that Scripture has been designed by God as fully sufficient to meet all our needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17) means that if we want to know God's mind and will, our only source for this knowledge is the Bible. John Murray writes:

Scripture occupies for us an exclusive place and performs an exclusive function as the only extant mode of revelation. It is granted by those with whom we are particularly concerned in this address that Scripture does not continue to be written, that it is a closed canon. Once this is admitted, then we must entertain what our opponents are not willing to grant, namely, that conception of Scripture taught and pre-supposed by our Lord and his apostles, and insist that it is this conception that must be applied to the whole canon of Scripture. Since we no longer have prophets, since we do not have our Lord with us as he was with the disciples, and since we do not have new organs of revelation as in apostolic times, Scripture in its total extent, according to the conception entertained by our Lord and his apostles, is the only revelation of the mind and will of God available to us. This is what the finality of Scripture means for us; it is the only extant revelatory Word of God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, n.d. [1845]), 16.

<sup>9</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 124.

<sup>10</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 124. Van Til quotes John Calvin, *Institutes*, I.VI.2.

<sup>11</sup> *Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, 14.

[13](#) *Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, 8.

[14](#) *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, 14, 16.

[15](#) *Ibid.*, 10.

[16](#) John Murray, “The Finality and Sufficiency of Scripture” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:19. Cults (e.g., Swedenborgianism, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, the Unification Church, etc.) are notorious for setting up a new (false) revelation that is then used as an absolute and superior standard to judge and reinterpret the Bible. Infallibility, absolute authority and sufficiency are shifted from the Bible to the latest revelation. This gives the cult leader or leaders total power over their deluded followers. The non-cessationist charismatic movement believes in continuing direct revelation from God. However, tongues, the word of knowledge and prophecy are *inconsistently* given a secondary status to the Bible. There are no attempts (by charismatics) to add new revelations to the canon of Scripture. Some intellectual charismatics have even developed the idea that prophecy now is different than Old Testament prophecy—that inaccuracies and mistakes are acceptable in new covenant post-apostolic prophecy. All such teaching is an implicit acceptance of the cessation position and *sola scriptura*. When Pentecostal preachers have insisted that their “prophecies” be written down and treated as the very word of God, they very often have become cult leaders. Modern charismatics claim to have direct revelation from God, yet in practice they treat those supposed revelations as what they actually are—the words of man.

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# III. The Jewish/Romanist Rejection of *Sola Scriptura*

The Bible and all the Reformed confessions condemn adding the traditions of men to the word of God. Unfortunately, the principle of *sola scriptura* has been violated throughout church history. Two prime examples of adding traditions to God's word are rabbinic Judaism and Roman Catholicism.

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that when Moses received the written law on Mt. Sinai, he also received a very lengthy unwritten (oral) revelation. This oral revelation was then supposedly passed down to Joshua, the seventy elders, the prophets and the great rabbinic teachers generationally, until it was committed to writing in the Talmud. Although there is no question that God instructed the church before the time of Moses by unwritten words, or that prophecy continued until the close of the canon, the idea of an unwritten divine tradition continuing *after* the close of the canon is clearly unscriptural. Even the Pharisaical idea of an authoritative unwritten tradition functioning as a co-equal authority to written revelation while the canon remained open is condemned by Scripture in many ways. First, while the Jews are repeatedly warned not to add or detract from God's inscripturated word (Dt. 4:2; Pr. 30:5-6; Josh. 1:7-8), there are no warnings or even any remarks regarding an unwritten revelational tradition. Second, commands and warnings regarding obedience, whether found in the law (e.g., Ex. 19:7-8; Dt. 31:9, 12, 46-47) or the prophets (Jer. 36:2, 32), refer either to what was already written or to what became inscripturated prophecy. There is not a shred of evidence in the Old Testament for an authoritative tradition. Biblical teaching assumes that there is not an independent source of oral communication standing alongside of the written revelation. Third, Jesus repeatedly condemned the Jews for adding human traditions and doctrines to God's word (e.g., Mt. 15:1-3). Fourth, the Talmud (which in English translation runs to 34 large volumes) is full of contradictions, unethical teaching and blasphemous nonsense. It explicitly contradicts many of the major teachings of the Bible. Modern Judaism is not a religion of the Old Testament but a religion founded upon human tradition. Like various cults, Judaism has transferred the infallibility, absolute authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures to a human collection of writings.

The Roman Catholic Church is very similar to Judaism on the issue of authority. Romanists teach that the Bible *and* tradition as interpreted by the Church are the final seat of authority in religion. The Council of Trent says: "Seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions" (4th sess.; 1546).<sup>17</sup> The Second Vatican Council says:

This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.... For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fulness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her (*Dei Verbum*, 8; 1962-1965).<sup>18</sup>

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that the church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”<sup>19</sup> The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the hierarchy (i.e., the bishops and the supreme Pontiff), with the help of the Holy Spirit, picks, authorizes and adds its own authoritative tradition to the written form of revelation. Romanists do not believe that the church hierarchy is making up doctrine but simply setting forth the oral teachings of Jesus and the apostles that were never inscripturated. These teachings were given to the bishops as a parallel source of authority.

Romanist teaching regarding the authority of tradition gives the church hierarchy an authority over the written word of God. Christ emphatically condemned the use of tradition as a source of authority (cf. Mk. 7:5-13), because whenever tradition is set up alongside of Scripture, it eventually is placed above Scripture, and is then used to interpret Scripture. Human tradition was the chief reason that the nation of Israel in the days of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages became apostate. Throughout its history the papal church multiplied traditions until both the gospel and apostolic worship were buried under a pile of will worship and false doctrine.

Why is the Romanist doctrine of an unwritten tradition (as a co-equal authority with Scripture that somehow is kept pure by the church hierarchy and then delivered to the laity throughout history) unbiblical? There are many reasons why the Roman Catholic doctrine of an authoritative tradition must be rejected. First, the doctrine of the perfection, completeness and sufficiency of Scripture renders an authoritative tradition or further revelation from God unnecessary. Second, God’s inscripturated word forbids adding or detracting from the completed canon. Third, many of the Romanist traditions that have been added as authoritative doctrine and practice explicitly contradict the clear teaching of the Bible. Fourth, many Roman Catholic traditions contradict each other. Fifth, most of the additions of the papal church had their origins long after the death of the apostles. Sixth, human tradition is dependent upon sinful, fallible men and thus is obscure, unprovable and indefinite.<sup>20</sup> An “authoritative” human tradition requires faith in sinful man’s fluctuating opinions. Only toward Scripture, which is perfect, complete, sufficient and perspicuous, can we direct our faith, for it is the very word of Christ and gives us a full assurance. Seventh, the Bible itself condemns all doctrines and worship practices that are not derived from the Scriptures. “In vain they worship Me, teaching

as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9; Isa. 29:13). Turretin writes:

Nor can it be replied that the Pharisaical traditions are rejected, not the apostolic. All doctrines taught by men and not contained in the Scriptures are rejected and the assumption is gratuitous that there are any apostolic traditions out of the Scriptures. Believers are called to the law and the testimony (Is. 8:20) and destruction is denounced against those who do not speak according to it. Nor can traditions be meant by the testimony because God everywhere rejects them. Either the law itself (often called “the testimony”) is meant as a testimony of God exegetically or the writings of the prophets which were added to the law.<sup>21</sup>

Roman Catholic apologists attempt to justify their doctrine of an authoritative tradition by appealing to certain passages of Scripture. A brief examination of some of these passages is needed to reveal their true meaning. As we consider these passages we must keep in mind that the apostles had a unique authority. The apostles’ *oral* teaching was authoritative and binding. Therefore, those men and churches who sat under the teaching of the apostles were obligated to obey the apostles’ Spirit-inspired instruction as the very word of God, a rule for faith and life. However, the fact that the apostles could orally teach inspired authoritative truth while they were still alive (and that the churches were morally obligated to obey their teaching) does not at all prove that there is an oral authoritative tradition that is somehow preserved among the Romanist hierarchy throughout history. Scripture alone must define the phrase “apostolic tradition.” Furthermore, why would the God of infinite wisdom commit some of his revelation to writing and the rest to oral tradition? While written revelation is easily preserved from corruption, oral tradition is easily corrupted and lost. Also, when a bishop or pope comes up with a new teaching from the supposed trough of unwritten apostolic tradition, how are we to determine whether or not he simply made up that doctrine out of his own imagination? Are we supposed to simply accept his own word on it? Is this not a blind faith in the words of men? The Romanist foundation of an authoritative tradition rests upon its doctrine of the special authority of the church (i.e., the sacerdotal hierarchy). It is a doctrine that in itself is totally contrary to the Bible. The only way that we can know with absolute certainty what the apostles taught is to read their inscripturated writings.

In 1 Corinthians 11:2 Paul says: “keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.” Is Paul here agreeing with the papal doctrine regarding a body of unwritten tradition transmitted by a succession of bishops from generation to generation? No, not at all. Paul is simply instructing the Corinthian believers to obey the doctrine and exhortations that he had given them when he was personally present among them. The word (*paradosis*) translated as “tradition” or “ordinance” (KJV), when used in reference to the rule of faith in the New Testament, *always* refers to the immediate instructions of inspired men. “When used in the modern sense of the word *tradition*, it is always in reference to what is human and untrustworthy, Gal. 1, 14. Col. 2,

8, and frequently in the gospels of the traditions of the elders.”<sup>22</sup>

A favorite proof text of Romanist apologists is 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught whether by word or by epistle.” Note that Paul refers to oral or spoken doctrine as well as written teaching. Doesn’t this passage perfectly fit the papal doctrine of a two-fold revelation: one written and one oral? No, absolutely not! Once again Paul is referring to inspired teaching given personally. This passage does not support the idea of a secret teaching handed down through the centuries by bishops. “Paul is not encouraging the Thessalonians to receive some tradition that had been delivered to them via second or third hand reports. On the contrary, *he was ordering them to receive as infallible truth only what they had heard directly from his own lips.*”<sup>23</sup>

In order to show the absurdity of the Romanist position let us consider one more point. Assume for a moment that the Roman Catholic position is true, that a large deposit of apostolic doctrine was given to the church orally for its own sanctification. This orally delivered doctrine is inspired, authoritative and thus all believers are required to obey it without reservation. If the church was given this great deposit of apostolic teaching, then why not simply write it all down so that everyone could immediately benefit from its divine wisdom? If this teaching is authoritative and required, why dish it out in little snippets over a period of almost two thousand years? Why not simply place it all out in the open for all to immediately benefit from it? Why did the church wait until A.D. 1079 to learn that God required the celibacy of the priesthood? Why wait until A.D. 1854 to learn about the immaculate conception of Mary? It is obvious from both the biblical and historical evidence that the papal doctrine of an authoritative tradition is merely a clever human attempt at justifying centuries of man-made doctrines and practices. The Romish doctrine of authoritative tradition is merely a human invention used to shift authority from the Bible to the church hierarchy. The reason that the pope and bishops dish out small amounts of the supposed oral apostolic tradition here and there throughout history is that it gives them incredible power. When some doctrine or practice is needed to control the laity and increase the hierarchy’s power, a new doctrine or practice is simply made up or discovered by a church bureaucrat and then imposed on the laity. This gives the Roman Catholic hierarchy a cult-like power over their flock. The fact that many Roman Catholic bishops and popes may have been very sincere in their beliefs does not detract from the fact that their doctrine of authoritative tradition is a doctrine of demons. Beware of false prophets; their doctrine can devour you (cf. Mt. 7:15).

As a result of such teaching regarding authority, the Roman Catholic Church has more in common with a pagan cult than apostolic Christianity. Turretin writes:

She [the Roman Catholic Church] is apostate and heretical, having failed from the faith once delivered to the saints and teaching various deadly heresies and

thrusting them forward to be believed under the pain of a curse. Such are the doctrines concerning justification by works and their merit, human satisfactions and indulgences, transubstantiation, and the sacrifice of the Mass, sin and free will, sufficient grace, the possible observance of the law, the ecumenical pontiff and primacy of the pope.... she is idolatrous and superstitious, both with respect to the object which she worships and with respect to the mode in which she worships. With respect to the object, inasmuch as besides God (who as alone omniscient, omnipotent and best ought to be the sole object of worship and invocation), she venerates and adores creatures also which are by nature not gods (Gal. 4:8): as the blessed virgin, angels, defunct saints, the consecrated host, the sacrament, the cross, the pope, the relics of Christ and of the saints. With respect of the mode, in the making, worship and adoration of effigies and images, so solemnly prohibited by the law of God. And these things appear not from the private opinion of teachers, but from the public sanctions and constant practice.<sup>24</sup>

If the papal church is to be cleansed of its damnable heresies and gross, blasphemous idolatries, it must return to the biblical doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The root must first be cured before the diseased and poisonous fruit is replaced.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent” in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1876, 1931]), 2:80.

<sup>18</sup> Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Herden and Herden, 1966), 116.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hodge writes: “It is of course conceded that Christ and his Apostles said and did much that is not recorded in the Scriptures; and it is further admitted that if we had any certain knowledge of such unrecorded instructions, they would be of equal authority with what is written in the Scriptures. But Protestants maintain that they were not intended to constitute a part of the permanent rule of faith to the Church. They were designed for the men of that generation. The showers which fell a thousand years ago, watered the earth and rendered it fruitful for men then living. They cannot now be gathered up and made available for us. They did not constitute a reservoir for the supply of future generations. In like manner the unrecorded teachings of Christ and his Apostles did their work. They were not designed for our instruction. It is as impossible to learn what they were, as it is to gather up the leaves which adorned and enriched the earth when Christ walked in the garden of Gethsemane. This

impossibility arises out of the limitations of our nature, as well as its corruption consequent on the fall. Man has not the clearness of perception, the retentiveness of memory, or the power of presentation, to enable him (without supernatural aid) to give a trustworthy account of a discourse once heard, a few years or even months after its delivery. And that this should be done over and over from month to month for thousands of years, is an impossibility. If to this be added the difficulty in the way of this oral transmission, arising from the blindness of men to the things of the Spirit, which prevents their understanding what they hear, and from the disposition to pervert and misrepresent the truth to suit their own prejudices and purposes, it must be acknowledged that tradition cannot be a reliable source of knowledge of religious truth. This is universally acknowledged and acted upon, except by Romanists. No one pretends to determine what Luther and Calvin, Latimer and Cranmer, taught, except from contemporaneous written records. Much less will any sane man pretend to know what Moses and the prophets taught except from their own writings” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 1:21).

[21](#) Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:139.

[22](#) Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1857], 206.

[23](#) John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of the Written Word” in Don Kistler, ed., *Sola Scriptura* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 177.

[24](#) Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:123-125.

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# IV. Protestant Inconsistencies

While, happily, all Protestants affirm *sola scriptura*, many Protestants teach and practice things which contradict the doctrine that Scripture is the sole standard for faith and life. An implicit denial of *sola scriptura*, whether by teaching or practice, can be found in Lutheran, Episcopal, evangelical and even Reformed churches. A brief examination of some of these inconsistencies will aid our understanding of this crucial teaching.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* is both affirmed and implicitly denied in the creedal statements of the Church of England (the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion [1563, American version 1801]) and the Lutherans (the Augsburg Confession [1530] and Formula of Concord [1576, 1584]). Article six of the Thirty Nine Articles contains a good statement regarding the Bible. “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”<sup>25</sup>

The Lutheran confession also contains a strong affirmation of *sola scriptura*.

I. We believe, confess, and teach that the only rule and norm, according to which all dogmas and all doctors ought to be esteemed and judged, is no other whatever than the prophetic and apostolic writings both of the Old and the New Testament, as it is written (Psalm cxix. 105): ‘Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.’ And St. Paul saith (Gal. i. 8): ‘Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed....’

In this way a clear distinction is retained between the sacred Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and all other writings; and Holy Scripture alone is acknowledged as the [only] judge, norm, and rule, according to which, as by the [only] touchstone, all doctrines are to be examined and judged, as to whether they be godly or ungodly, true or false.<sup>26</sup>

## 1. Episcopalianism

Unfortunately, the Lutheran and Episcopal symbols both contradict *sola scriptura* in their discussions of ecclesiastical ceremonies, church authority and tradition. The Thirty Nine Articles give the church an authority that is clearly incompatible with *sola scriptura*. Article 20—Of the Authority of the Church reads:

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.<sup>27</sup>

Article 34—*Of the Traditions of the Church* states:

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.

Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly (that others may fear to do the like), as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren.

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.<sup>28</sup>

The Thirty Nine Articles give the church a power *independent* of Scripture. Not only can the prelates determine or abolish rites or ceremonies as they please solely on their own authority without scriptural warrant, they also reserve to themselves the power to discipline believers who “openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church.” Although their creed does say that the church cannot “ordain any thing contrary to God's word written,” it nevertheless give the church hierarchy a power independent of Scripture. Thus while article six affirms *sola scriptura* in theory, articles 20 and 34 deny it in practice. The latter articles not only give the church power to determine or abolish rites or ceremonies as she pleases without any scriptural warrant whatsoever, they also give the church the authority to discipline believers who “openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church.” Article 20 does say that “it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written.” This statement, however (which follows the Lutheran confessions), would offer little comfort to the Puritans and Covenanters who were disciplined and persecuted for refusing to submit to man-made rites and ceremonies.

The Episcopal position on church authority and human tradition is derived from: (1) a deficient view of the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture; (2) a false understanding of the role of human reason in determining church ordinances; (3) a fallacious concept of the crown rights of the resurrected Christ.

When it comes to the government and worship of the church, Episcopalian theologians and apologists openly admit that Scripture is not a perfect rule for the church but only a partial rule. Anglicans (at least in such areas as worship and government) view the Bible as incomplete, vague and general. The Bible is like a defective map with some large roads noted yet with the details missing. If the map is to be really useful, the prelates must fill in the missing pieces. How are the details to be arrived at? The bishops will use their reason to glean from the traditions of the ancient church and add some lovely traditions of their own. The fact that God has made it abundantly clear that he despises human inventions in ethics or in worship is ignored (cf. Gen. 4:3-5; Lev. 10:1-2; Dt. 4:2; 12:32; Num. 15:39-40; 2 Sam. 6:3-7; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; 1 Kgs. 12:32-33; Jer. 7:24, 31; Isa. 29:13; Col. 2:20-23).

There is a great contrast between the Anglican and the Reformed understanding of *sola scriptura* and the sufficiency of Scripture. Reformed confessions regard the perfection and sufficiency of the Bible as extending not only to doctrine but also to worship and church government. If the worship and government that God has instituted in his word is sufficient, then obviously it does not need supplementation. Davies writes: “The main principle of the absolute authority of God’s word in the Scriptures for faith, ethics, and worship was expressed by all Puritans. To depart from this is the utmost human impertinence and pretentiousness, for it implies that one knows God’s will better than He does, or that the inherent weakness of original sin does not blind one’s judgment through egocentricity.”<sup>29</sup>

The Episcopal concept of church authority and tradition also derives from a wrong use of human reason. Sixteenth century Anglican apologists, in their attempt to refute the dogmatic biblicism of the Puritans, gave reason a role independent of Scripture in determining the worship and government of the church. The Puritans were not against the use of reason. However, for them reason was always to be submitted to Scripture and reason was to be used to deduce doctrine and practice from the Bible itself. It was not to be used independently of Scripture. The Westminster divines refer to explicit teachings from Scripture and those deduced from Scripture by good and necessary consequence (1.6). Anglican apologists (especially Richard Hooker) used reason to give church authorities autonomy from the strict parameters of the word in order to justify their human traditions. (Most of these traditions were a continuation of medieval Roman Catholic practices.) Regarding Richard Hooker (the greatest of Anglican apologists), Cook writes:

In the defense of Anglicanism, published in eight books between 1594 and 1600, Hooker identifies the real issue in the Anglican and Puritan controversy as the nature of the church. He seeks to repudiate Cartwright's position that the Scripture provides a prototype for the government of the church for all time. Endeavoring to shift the argument away from Scripture, Hooker contends for a principle of natural reason as having equal validity with that of divine revelation. He embarks on an essentially non-Reformed approach to truth, teaching that some spiritual laws are known by reason quite apart from Scripture. Here we have the Catholic mind at work, drawing its strength from Aquinas, operating quite comfortably within the English Church from which it has never been banished; creating, in fact, the characteristic Anglican mentality which has controlled the practice of the Church of England ever since.... There is nothing of *sola scriptura* in Hooker's contention that to appeal to the New Testament for the polity of the church is to say, in effect, that 'God in delivering Scripture to his Church should clearly have abrogated amongst them the law of nature; which is an infallible knowledge imprinted in the minds of all the children of men' [*Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk. II, Ch. 8, 6]. Reason is given a validity equal to that of Scripture 'inasmuch as law doth stand upon reason, to allege reason serveth as well as to cite Scripture; that whatsoever is reasonable the same is lawful whatsoever is author of it.'<sup>30</sup>

Closely related to the Anglicans' improper use of human reason is their defective understanding of original sin. Davies writes: "Anglicans found man to be deficient in spiritual capacity; his other powers were weakened, but not desperately wounded and in need of redemptive blood transfusions, as the Puritans claimed. Man's reason was, for the Anglicans, unimpaired; it had a natural capacity to distinguish between good and evil in a moral order. Cranmer assumed, for example, that men could choose the good without the help of sanctifying grace. Jewel affirmed that 'Natural reason holden within her bonds is not the enemy, but the daughter of God's truth.' Donne held that reason must be employed when the meaning of Scripture is unclear, but, 'Though our supreme court...for the last appeal be Faith, yet Reason is her delegate.'<sup>31</sup> As a consequence of such a defective view regarding the effects of the fall, Anglicans did not understand the danger of allowing sinful, fallen men the right to determine rites and ceremonies of the church. The Puritans recognized that the corruption of the human heart rendered man unable to determine *acceptable* forms of worshiping a thrice holy God. Even the regenerated mind cannot be trusted to autonomously determine worship ordinances, for it is still struggling with the remaining effects of the fall. The only safe thing to do under such circumstances is to study what God says and follow it. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (Pr. 3:5). Bushell writes:

The regulative principle may therefore be seen, in a particular sense, as a natural inference from the doctrine of total depravity. The two are tied together, for

example, in Exodus 20:25: ‘And if you make an altar of stone for me, you shall not build it of cuts stones, for if you wield your tool upon it, you will profane it.’ Any work of man’s own hands, that he presumes to offer to God in worship, is defiled by sin and for that reason wholly unacceptable.<sup>32</sup>

The church fathers and theologians of the medieval era, who added many human traditions to the worship of God, no doubt thought they were inventing things that would benefit and edify the church. The result, however, was the Romish whore, the church of the Antichrist. It is for this reason that the Scriptures repeatedly warn the covenant people not to add or detract from the laws, statutes and ordinances that Jehovah has prescribed. “When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Dt. 12:29-32).

The Anglican concept of church authority and tradition is an implicit rejection of the crown rights of Jesus Christ. Episcopalian theologians are not obedient to the great commission in which Jesus commanded the church to teach the nations “to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20). Their version of the great commission should read, “teach the nations to observe all things that I have commanded you and all things that the bishops decide are unto edification.” When prelates or anyone else places human laws, religious ordinances, ceremonies or rites alongside of God’s revealed will, then such men are giving themselves an authority that belongs solely to God. Only God has the authority to declare an act moral or immoral. Yet men and women have been disciplined and persecuted simply for refusing to submit to humanly-devised rites and ceremonies. Every use of human tradition in the worship of Jehovah is implicitly Romanist and tyrannical. Although evangelical congregations and backslidden Reformed churches may not use the rack, the boot, imprisonment, confiscation or banishment to punish modern Puritans, they do use many subtle and not-so-subtle forms of coercion, discipline and disapproval. Regardless of many churches’ disapprobation of biblical worship, we must never place our faith in the autonomous religious ordinances of finite sinful men.<sup>33</sup> It is wicked and foolish to look to human traditions in worship as if they were a part of God’s word. Biblical faith must be directed solely to Christ and His word, “for all our obedience in the worship of God is the obedience of faith. And if the Scripture be the rule of faith, our faith is not, in any of its concerns, to be extended beyond it, no more than the thing regulated is to be beyond the rule.”<sup>34</sup>

Jesus Christ is the only king and sole lawgiver to the church. Whenever men add human laws,

ordinances, rites or ceremonies to what Christ has authorized in his word, they deny believers the liberty they have in Christ. Owen writes:

That abridgement of the liberty of the disciples of Christ, by impositions on them of things which he hath not appointed, nor made necessary by circumstances antecedent unto such impositions, are plain usurpations upon the consciences of the disciples of Christ, destructive of the liberty which he hath purchased for them, and which, if it be their duty to walk according to gospel rule, is sinful to submit unto.<sup>35</sup>

Ironically (today), opponents of *sola scriptura* as applied to worship (i.e., the regulative principle of worship) have attempted to turn the tables against modern Puritans by arguing that the regulativists are the ones who deny believers liberty by not allowing non-regulativists the opportunity to introduce human innovations into the worship of God. The problem with such an argument is that liberty as defined by Scripture never means liberty from God's law or liberty to devise one's own worship ordinances or ceremonies apart from God's word. Biblical liberty refers to: (1) our freedom from obedience to the law as a means of justification before God (e.g., Rom. 3:28); (2) our deliverance from the power of sin in us (e.g., Rom. 6:6 ff.); (3) the abrogation of the ceremonial law and thus our freedom from it; (4) our freedom in areas that are truly *adiaphora*, that is, things indifferent (e.g., Rom. 14:20). Christian liberty never means that we are permitted to add to God's moral precepts or that we can add to the worship that God has prescribed. Such a notion assumes that the most important and reverent activity that Christians engage in (the worship of God) is somehow within the sphere of *adiaphora*. That idea is plainly unbiblical and absurd.

True freedom comes from a proper understanding of the Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the correlative doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. Of the Puritans Rawlinson writes:

Moreover, they believed with Calvin that if God had shown how he was to be worshiped by the clear light of His Word, it was sheer presumption, bordering on blasphemy, for men to add to what God had revealed. In 1605 William Bradshaw declared that Puritans 'hold and maintain that the word of God contained in the writings of the Prophets and Apostles, is of absolute perfection, given by Christ the Head of the Church, to be unto the same, the sole Canon and rule of all matters of Religion, and the worship and service of God whatsoever. And that whatsoever done in the same service and worship cannot be justified by the said word, is unlawful.' Such Bible passages as 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21; Matthew 15:9, 13 and Revelation 22:19 were used to justify this position, whilst from such passages as Acts 2:41-42; 1 Timothy 2:1ff.; Ephesians 5:19; Romans 10:14-15; 2 Timothy 1:13 and Matthew 18:15-18, it was argued that there were six ordinances

of Gospel worship—Prayer, Praise, Preaching, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, Catechising, and Discipline.<sup>36</sup>

Because consistently Reformed churches do not allow human traditions in worship, they never discipline people for adhering only to the worship prescribed in Scripture. It is only in churches that add human traditions that believers are ostracized and persecuted, and ministers are fired for holding to pure gospel worship. How can modern Puritans be accused of denying anyone’s liberty when all they are guilty of is following the laws and ordinances of Scripture without human admixture? “[T]he value of providing a biblical warrant for all the ordinances of Puritan worship was that this gave these ordinances an August authority for those who used them, as the Puritans did, in the obedience of faith.”<sup>37</sup> Those who add human inventions to the worship of God can never adequately deal with the issue of authority for their human innovations. There is no divine authority undergirding their practices, and there is no divine authority behind the coercion that is involved in their implementation and continuance. John Owen writes:

The principle that the church hath power to institute any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either to a matter or manner, beyond the observance of such circumstances as necessarily attend such ordinances as Christ Himself hath instituted, lies at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution, and wars, that have for long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world.<sup>38</sup>

Those who do not consider divine warrant an important issue for the government and worship of the church should remember that over 18,000 men, women and children who were dedicated Scottish Presbyterians (Covenanters) were murdered simply for refusing to submit to the human ordinances of Prelacy.

A consideration of non-authorized man-made worship reveals not only that such worship is by nature without divine authority and therefore tyrannical but also anthropocentric. What is the purpose of all the pomp, pageantry and spectacle of Anglican worship? Why the dramatic cathedrals? Why the stained glass, special holy days, special gestures and special priestly dress? The reason is *not* that God has commanded such things and thus takes delight in them. God is by no means impressed with fancy cathedrals, bells, smells and silly vestments. The whole purpose of the various man-made adornments (aside from high church sacerdotalism) is to have some psychological effect upon man. The popish paraphernalia and medieval trappings retained in Anglican churches were considered aids or helps to devotion. They were intended to strike awe, reverence and inspiration among the worshipers. The cathedral with its pomp and ceremony served a similar function to the LSD, reefer and light show that a hippie would experience during a rock concert. They set the mood and manipulate the heart. At bottom all

such human devices invented for human enjoyment and psychological effect reveal a serious lack of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to accompany pure gospel worship. The pomp and pageantry of Anglican worship is an implicit denial that the worship authorized and designed by Jesus Christ is adequate unto the end for which it was intended. George Gillespie warns that human ceremonies obscure true religion. He writes:

But among such things as have been the accursed means of the church's desolation, which peradventure might seem to some of you to have least harm or evil in them, are the ceremonies of kneeling in the act of receiving the Lord's supper, cross in baptism, bishoping, holidays, etc. which are pressed under the name of things indifferent; yet if you survey the sundry inconveniences and grievous consequences of the same, you will think far otherwise. The vain shows and shadows of these ceremonies have hid and obscured the substance of religion; the true life of godliness is smothered down and suppressed by the burden of these human inventions; for their sakes, many, who are both faithful servants to Christ and loyal subjects to the king, are evil-spoken of, mocked, reproached, menaced, molested; for their sakes Christian brethren are offended, and the weak are greatly scandalized; for their sakes the most powerful and painful ministers in the land are either thrust out, or threatened to be thrust out from their callings; for their sakes the best qualified and most hopeful expectants are debarred from entering into the ministry; for their sakes the seminaries of learning are so corrupted that few or no good plants can come forth from thence; for their sakes many are admitted into the sacred ministry, who are either popish and Arminianized, who minister to the flock poison instead of food; or silly ignorants, who can dispense no wholesome food to the hungry.<sup>39</sup>

For the opponents of the regulative principle of worship who accuse Puritan worship of being guilty of a “nominalistic minimalism” or a “color-blind iconclasm” we ask the following questions: What human improvements can be made to the singing of God's inspired Psalms? What (in the words of John Bunyan) ear-gate, mouth-gate and eye gate human additions are needed to supplement hearing God's word read and preached and looking and feasting upon the flesh and blood of the Son of God? What are fancy buildings, silly popish dress, ceremonies and Romish pomp compared to the ordinances given to us by our most blessed Lord and Savior? Is placing our faith in the infallible words of Christ not enough? Must we also place our faith in the words and inventions of men?<sup>40</sup>

## 2. Lutheranism

The Lutheran churches have also departed from *sola scriptura* in their understanding and regulation of public worship. The Augsburg Confession (A.D. 1530) reads:



And unto the true unity of the Church, it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by men should be alike every where, as St. Paul saith: ‘There is one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all’ (Art. 7, Of the Church).<sup>41</sup>

Concerning Ecclesiastical rites [made by men], they teach that those rites are to be observed which may be observed without sin, and are profitable for tranquility and good order in the Church; such as are set holidays, feasts, and such like. Yet concerning such things, men are to be admonished that consciences are not to be burdened as if such service were necessary to salvation. They are also to be admonished that human traditions, instituted to propitiate God, to merit grace, and make satisfaction for sins, are opposed to the Gospel and the doctrine of faith. Wherefore vows and traditions concerning foods and days, and such like, instituted to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins, are useless and contrary to the Gospel (Art. 15, Of Ecclesiastical Rites).<sup>42</sup>

*The Formula of Concord* (1576 [1584]), Article 10, *Of Ecclesiastical Ceremonies*, reads:

(Which are commonly called *adiaphora*, or things indifferent.) There has also arisen among the divines of the Augsburg Confession a controversy touching ecclesiastical ceremonies or rites, which are neither enjoined nor forbidden in the Word of God, but have been introduced into the Church merely for the sake of order and seemliness. (Sound doctrine and confession touching this Article.) I. For the better taking away this controversy we believe, teach, and confess, with unanimous consent, that ceremonies or ecclesiastical rites (such as in the Word of God are neither commanded nor forbidden, but have only been instituted for the sake of order and seemliness) are of themselves neither divine worship, nor even any part of divine worship. For it is written (Matt. xv. 9): ‘In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.’ II. We believe, teach, and confess that it is permitted to the Church of God any where on earth, and at whatever time, agreeably to occasion, to change such ceremonies, in such manner as is judged most useful to the Church of God and most suited to her edification.... V. We believe, teach, and confess that one Church ought not to condemn another because it observes more or less of external ceremonies, which the Lord has not instituted, provided only there be consent between them in doctrine and all the articles thereof, and in the true use of the sacraments.<sup>43</sup>

We repudiate and condemn the following false dogmas as repugnant to the Word

of God: I. That human traditions and constitutions in things ecclesiastical are of themselves to be accounted as divine worship, or at least as a part of divine worship. II. When ceremonies and constitutions of this kind are by a sort of coercion obtruded upon the Church as necessary, and that contrary to the Christian liberty which the Church of Christ has in external matters of this sort.<sup>44</sup>

The confessional Lutheran position on worship is basically one in which men can add to the worship of God as they please, as long as the human additions are not considered a part of worship. The church is permitted to add rites and ceremonies as long as they are not condemned by the word and are deemed profitable. The human traditions that are added, however, are “neither divine worship, nor even a part of divine worship.” According to Lutheran theologians the man-made rites and ceremonies are merely external matters and are not actually worship; therefore, they can be different in different places; they can be added to or detracted from at will; and they cannot be imposed upon the laity as compulsory.

The Lutheran understanding of worship was developed early in the Reformation and was directed primarily against Rome. For Luther and Melanchthon the main problem with papal rites and ceremonies was that they were compulsory and considered necessary for salvation. Luther writes:

On this same weak basis, the Romanists have attributed to the sacrament of ordination a certain fictitious “character,” which is said to be indelibly impressed upon an ordinand. I would ask whence do such ideas arise, and on whose authority and for what reason have they become established? Not that we are unwilling for the Romanists to be free to invent, to say, or to assert, whatever they like; but we also insist on our own freedom, lest they arrogate to themselves the right of making articles of the faith out of their own ideas, as they have hitherto presumed to do. It is sufficient that, for the sake of concord, we should accommodate ourselves to their ceremonies and idiosyncrasies; but we refuse to be compelled to accept them as necessary for salvation, which they are not. Let them do away with the element of compulsion in their arbitrary demands, and we will yield free obedience to their wishes in order that we may live in peace towards each other. For it is mean, iniquitous, and servile for a Christian man, with his freedom, to be subjected to any regulations except the heavenly and divine.<sup>45</sup>

In his *Apology* Melanchthon writes: “For Scripture calls traditions doctrines of demons, when it is taught that religious rites are serviceable to merit the remission of sins and grace (218, 4). If the adversaries defend these human services as meriting justification, grace and the remission of sins, they absolutely establish the kingdom of Antichrist (220, 18). Daniel (11, 38) indicates that new human services will be the very form and constitution of Antichrist

(221, 19).”[46](#)

The major differences between Reformed and Lutheran worship are the result of the different theological viewpoints of Luther and Calvin. One could add that with regard to church practice Luther was very conservative. For Luther the major doctrine to which practically every other teaching must be considered in order to be understood was justification by faith. It was the chief doctrine by which the church stood or fell. Therefore, when Luther turned to the reformation of the medieval style worship that he was accustomed to he used a scalpel and not an axe. Although Luther was a champion of *sola scriptura*, he never made the connection between Scripture alone and the need of divine warrant for worship ordinances, as did Calvin. When Luther looked at worship practice his major concern was, Is this practice motivated by a belief in justification by works? Does this ritual or practice detract in any way from the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ? With these criteria Luther eliminated many abuses (e.g., the Roman Catholic Mass, pilgrimages, the saints as mediators, the sacerdotal priesthood, etc.). Luther also held that any worship practice that contradicted the clear teaching of Scripture must be avoided. Therefore, the church service should be intelligible to the people. It should be conducted in their own language. Communion should be served in both kinds—the bread and the wine. Preaching should be emphasized so the flock will receive instruction and edification rather than a vain mumbling in Latin. Another important issue with Luther was the matter of Christian liberty. Human traditions in worship were *adiaphora* and should not be forced upon the people. Such coercion smacked of Romanism and merit-mongering.

Luther had a favorable view of church traditions. Human traditions in church should be respected and considered valuable as long as they do not contradict Scripture. This view of tradition is observed in Luther’s doctrine of the “orders.” Davies writes:

The implications of this doctrine were that God has so ordered the world that man must not live as a mere individual isolated from society, but as a being sharing certain communal relationships. Such communities ordained by God are the Church and the State. Since they depend for their continuance on the divine sanction, men ought to respect them. Therefore, except when they definitely contradict the revealed will of God, they are to be obeyed. Such a doctrine puts a heavy premium upon tradition and as such it may be regarded as the religious basis of Luther’s conservatism. It also helps to explain why the bishops have such an important part to play in deciding what particular liturgical reforms are desirable. Theoretically Luther left the choice of accepting or rejecting his liturgical reforms to the Christians of the local churches, but in practice the decision was left to the discretion of the bishop.[47](#)

The Lutheran confessions faithfully reflect Luther’s teaching regarding human ceremonies.

Church traditions (i.e., humanly devised rites and ceremonies not prescribed in Scripture) are permissible if: (1) they are not Romanizing (that is, no human merit is connected to the ceremonies), (2) the ceremonies do not violate the teaching of Scripture, (3) they are not over-multiplied to the point where believers think less highly of real biblical commandments (e.g., the Lord's supper), (4) they are not compulsory (that is, they are not to be conformed under pressure). In other words, they are not to be considered *necessary* acts of worship. (A necessary act of worship is that which is commanded by Scripture [e.g., the sacraments].)

Lutherans teach that the church is permitted to add rites and ceremonies only within the sphere of *adiaphora* (Gk. for "things indifferent"). Allbeck writes:

The Formula of Concord first marks out the boundaries of genuine *adiaphora*. True *adiaphora* are never contrary to God's Word, never unionizing, never Romanizing, never useless foolish spectacles, never essentially constitute the worship of God. Concerning their status, it is said that *adiaphora* may be changed by the church in the interest of good order, discipline, and edification. But there is always the necessity of clear doctrinal confession by word and deed. *Adiaphora* are matters of freedom. Compulsory *adiaphora* involve a contradiction of terms. When they cease to be free they must be resisted.<sup>48</sup>

The Lutheran understanding of *sola scriptura* does not permit the church to add its own doctrines to the teachings of Scripture, nor does it allow the church to add to "essential" or "commanded" worship (i.e., the sacraments). It does, however, give the church a very large role in determining rites and ceremonies simply by declaring the human additions to be within the realm of *adiaphora*. In theory the Lutheran statements regarding worship are superior to the Episcopalian teachings. At least the Lutherans do not regard their human additions as an actual part of worship. They also claim that the human rites and ceremonies are not compulsory like the worship ordinances commanded in Scripture. In practice, however, the Lutheran churches are no better than their Episcopal counterparts. Both deny the sufficiency of Scripture in the realm of worship. Both are guilty of allowing human corruptions to displace pure gospel worship. They both deny that the worship of God in the new covenant era is fixed or limited by the canon of Scripture. As a consequence both leave the parameters of acceptable worship in a state of flux. The boundaries of worship are always changing because they are determined not by Scripture alone but also by human tradition, and there are an infinite number of worship options available to man that do not violate the Lutheran principle of allowing anything not expressly forbidden.

There are a number of reasons why the Lutheran understanding of worship must be rejected as unscriptural and irrational. First, the idea that external rites or ceremonies are *adiaphora* is unbiblical. Every act in the moral and religious sphere is always either good or bad. The only

activities that may be considered *adiaphora* are matters that are truly circumstantial or incidental to the ceremonies such as setting up chairs, turning on lights, etc. Activities that are circumstantial do not need to be proven by Scripture. However, they do need to be conducted according to the general rules of the word. Williamson writes:

One must be careful to distinguish between the circumstances of worship and the worship itself. For example the Scripture does not prescribe the hour of the day at which public worship of the congregation is to be held. Neither has the Lord prescribed the shape, style, or size of the place of worship. In the nature of the case, such circumstances will vary from country to country, season to season, and place to place. There is a general rule, however, which requires that congregations assemble somewhere on the Lord's Day. The general rule controls the particular situation according to the circumstances. But when the congregation has assembled at the agreed place the worship must be then only that which God has commanded.<sup>49</sup>

The style of church architecture, lighting, heating, seating arrangements and length of service are circumstantial to the worship of God. However, sprinkling holy water, making the sign of the cross, disallowing meat on Fridays, using salt and cream during infant baptism, confirmation, Christmas and Easter celebration, special ceremonial priestly garments and kneeling at the Lord's supper are not circumstantial to worship but additions to the worship itself.

Man-made innovations in worship are strictly forbidden by Scripture. The Bible teaches that men are not to add or detract from God's moral precepts (cf. Dt. 4:2; Josh. 1:7-8; Pr. 30:5-6) and men are not to add or detract from the worship that God has instituted in His word (cf. Dt. 12:32; Lev. 10:1-2; 2 Sam. 6:3-7; Jer. 7:31; 19:5). The Lutheran idea that man-made rites or ceremonies are not worship is unbiblical and totally arbitrary. We know that God considers human rites or ceremonies to be unauthorized, unacceptable and sinful additions to worship. Jehovah killed Nadab and Abihu for conducting a humanly-devised ceremony (the burning of strange fire, Lev. 10:1, 2). Although Lutheran theologians do not regard humanly-devised acts of worship as real worship, God refers to all such human inventions as "will worship" (Col. 2:20-23). Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for the humanly-devised rite of religious hand washing (Mt. 15:1-3). The Jews received this rebuke from our Lord not because there is anything intrinsically immoral regarding hand washings but because the church does not have the authority to add her own religious ceremonies to what God has authorized in His word. Some have argued that Jesus was only condemning bad or unedifying human traditions being added to what God has commanded. The problem with this argument is that religious hand washings from a strictly ethical standpoint harm no one. Jesus picked the most innocent, innocuous religious human tradition possible to make the point crystal clear that no human additions are

acceptable to God no matter how small or “innocent.”

Second, the Lutheran assertion that man-made rites and ceremonies are not obligatory or compulsory is not the actual practice of the Lutherans or anyone else. Why? Because when human ceremonies are introduced into the public worship of God they are *always* practiced under some form of human compulsion. The moment that human traditions are introduced into the church service people are forced either to depart from that church to avoid the human additions or to commit sin by participating in unauthorized ceremonies. Whenever a church adds man-made ceremonies to the worship of God there is always ecclesiastical and social pressure to submit to the man-made ordinances. Church members are expected and urged to follow the church calendar, go to the Christmas and Easter service, sing uninspired hymns, listen to the musical groups, watch the children’s choir, participate in the altar call, etc. Even in many “Reformed” churches there is pressure or coercion applied to people so that they will conform to the various corruptions that have accumulated over the years. People have even been disciplined for refusing to participate in silly and Romish human inventions (e.g., uninspired hymns, holy days, children’s church, etc.).<sup>50</sup>

The Lutheran concept of non-compulsory human traditions may sound good as a theory, but in practice it corrupts the church and destroys Christian liberty. The Bible teaches that God alone speaking in His infallible word has an absolute, unqualified authority over men’s consciences. Thus, the Westminster Confession of Faith asserts: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing 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 implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also” (20.2). Believers in Christ are free not only from doctrines and commandments which are contrary to God’s word, such as confession to a priest, the Mass, celebrating holy days besides the Lord’s day, etc., they also are free from doctrines and commandments which are additions to the Bible, that is, they may not explicitly contradict Scripture but are not taught in Scripture; they are derived from human authority. “Any doctrine or commandment contrary to or besides His will in matters religious the Christian not only may but must disobey. Liberty of conscience means the liberty of the individual to obey God rather than man.”<sup>51</sup>

Although Lutherans insist (as noted above) that their human additions are not compulsory (in order to avoid the appearance of being Romanistic) they indeed are compulsory. Even the great Martin Luther was inconsistent. Davies writes:

Similarly, in liturgical matters, it may fairly be claimed that his doctrine of the Word of God was not logically developed. In extenuation it should be

remembered, however, that he was the first of the Reformers and that by the time of Calvin the situation was more stable and men had more time for reflection on the issues. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that in Luther's later years the Reformer displayed a growing conservatism. He desired more uniformity both in the use of ecclesiastical vestments and of liturgical forms. What had previously been optional, became obligatory.<sup>52</sup>

Are we supposed to believe that a Lutheran minister and his congregation would be left unmolested by church authorities if they decided to discard the church calendar, extra-biblical holy days, hymnals, organs, crosses and all other human innovations that lack divine warrant? Sadly, Lutheran congregants, like their Anglican counterparts, are expected to submit to the ceremonies and commandments of men with an implicit faith and blind obedience. Remember, "Whatsoever is not done in faith, nor accompanied with a personal persuasion of the obligation or lawfulness of it in the sight of God, is pronounced to be sin—Rom. xiv. 23."<sup>53</sup> Hodge writes: "[I]t is a great sin, involving at the same time sacrilege, and treason to the human race, for any man or set of men to arrogate the prerogative of God and to attempt to bind the consciences of their fellow men by any obligation not certainly imposed by God and revealed in his Word."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, when men participate in worship ordinances that originate in the mind of man—that are not based upon Scripture but ecclesiastical authority—they are not doing religious homage to God (who never appointed such rites or ceremonies) but to man. They are in principle bowing down to the autonomous authority of sinful men. Worshiping God without a divine appointment is an implicit acknowledgment of popery and prelacy. "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn. 5:21).

Third, the Lutheran position suffers from an irreconcilable internal contradiction. According to the Lutheran confessions men are permitted to add their own traditions, rites or ceremonies to the worship of God, only if the additions are edifying and are not regarded as compulsory. These qualifications raise an important question. If men have the ability to devise a tradition, rite or ceremony that truly sanctifies believers, should not that ceremony, if it really edified God's people, be mandatory? The Anglican articles which state that the church can make up rites or ceremonies that she regards as edifying and then impose them on the flock with ecclesiastical discipline if necessary is more logical. If a human tradition, rite or ceremony sanctifies then it should be mandatory. It is important to note, however, that the apostle Paul teaches that human commandments and ordinances do not edify or sanctify the church. He writes: "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col 2:20-23). Human rites and ceremonies are the commandments of

men. They appear to be wise and edifying; however, the truth is that they do not sanctify at all. The Holy Spirit does not use human traditions, rites or ceremonies to edify the church. He uses the word of God. “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). If we want to receive edification, then we must only follow God’s laws, statutes and religious ordinances. Papal, prelatric and/or fundamentalistic legalism does not edify.<sup>55</sup>

Fourth, the Lutheran assertion that man-made rites or ceremonies are not worship is fictitious nonsense. When ecclesiastical authorities devise a religious ceremony and then place it into the public worship service alongside of worship ordinances authorized in Scripture, they are implicitly teaching that the man-made ceremonies are of the same type and carry an equal authority to divinely instituted ordinances. When men intermingle human ceremonies with divine ordinances in the worship service, do they expect the worshipers to distinguish between the two (human and divine) as the service proceeds? Furthermore, if the man-made religious ceremonies are not worship, then what are they? What is their purpose? Why are they conducted during the worship service? Why are they listed in the church bulletin as part of the public worship of God? Frank Smith writes:

Note carefully that worship is an imposition, since we are required to gather with God’s people in order to engage in public worship. Therefore, which is the legalistic position (and the one opposed to Christian liberty)—the one which thinks it does not need biblical warrant to require this or that action to be performed in worship, or the one which makes strict appeal to Scripture and wishes not to impose anything upon God’s precious flock unless it is found in His Word? In passing, we would note that the Reformed faith is at once the most strict and narrow, and also the broadest and most universal, because of its unwillingness to impose upon people anything unless it is biblical.<sup>56</sup>

The Lutheran idea that their human additions to worship are not really worship shows the deceitfulness of the human heart. Men are so in love with their non-authorized human traditions that they will twist the plain meaning of words and resort to illogical and unsound arguments and exegetical gymnastics to justify their sinful practices. The Lutheran conception is very similar to the absurd Roman Catholic assertion that worship of the saints and the virgin Mary is not really worship. It is alleged that when Romanists bow and worship God, it is a special worship (*latría*). But when they bow down to and worship the saints and blessed virgin, it is *douλία* (or, for Mary, *hyperdouλία*). We must recognize that all such pharisaical-type distinctions are nothing more than clever excuses for departing from the worship that God has prescribed. Against all tyrannical usurpations and encroachments of the church Christ says: “And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9; cf. Isa. 29:13).



### 3. Evangelicalism

Evangelicals are also guilty of restricting the application of the Bible's authority. When it comes to worship, evangelicals do not believe that Scripture is sufficient. They would say that nothing sinful ought to be a part of worship. However, they believe that men have the authority to make up any form or content of worship that they think is useful. Unfortunately, the Lutheran or Episcopal understanding of worship has been embraced by the vast majority of professing Christians. This pragmatic understanding of worship has predictably led to liturgical chaos in evangelical churches. Whenever churches abandon *sola scriptura* in the sphere of worship and adopt pragmatism, the result is a worship service that becomes increasingly anthropocentric and pagan.

This fact has become increasingly evident in the last thirty years as churches have adopted the worship paradigm of the church growth experts. These "experts," who look to business, psychology and sociology for wisdom rather than the Bible, argue that the best method for attaining church growth is to make the church user-friendly to unbelievers. This tactic involves a de-emphasis on the preached word and the sacraments in favor of a service that titillates and entertains. The emphasis in most modern evangelical worship services is on entertainment. Such services do not feed the intellect but rather stir the emotions. Modern worship services have little in common with apostolic worship and much in common with Las Vegas, Hollywood and Broadway. In many churches people even applaud after a performance, as if they were at a play or concert.

As a result the modern evangelical worship service does not glorify God but instead glorifies man. It is basically a show for man, directed to man, with man-pleasing songs and lots of entertainment: comedian pastors, music soloists, rock groups, "gospel" bands, celebrity guest speakers, plays, skits, videos, singers, choirs, liturgical dancing and so on. Pragmatic man-centered worship has even influenced church architecture. The central feature of a Puritan meeting house was the pulpit on which rested a large Bible. The central feature of the modern mega-church is the stage. The men who designed Episcopal and Lutheran worship with all its man-made defects at least attempted to be reverent and majestic. Modern evangelical worship is usually neither; it is crass, tasteless pablum.

When we approach a thrice-holy God who is infinite in perfections, should not our sole concern be to learn what He has prescribed and then focus our attention on what pleases him rather than on what pleases us and makes us feel good? When we consistently adhere to *sola scriptura* and thus depend solely upon God's infallible and sufficient word to determine what is acceptable worship, we eliminate the possibility of popish, pagan, prelatric, or pragmatic will-worship from being intruded upon the church. Worship is arguably the most important activity engaged in by the church. Therefore, when we seek direction regarding worship, should we not

place our trust in God and his infallible word rather than the opinions of sinful man? “We have to do with a God who is very jealous; who will be worshiped as He wills, or not at all. Nor can we complain. If God be such a Being as we are taught in the Holy Scripture, it must be His inalienable right to determine and prescribe how He will be served.”<sup>57</sup> The idea that sinful men can add to, improve upon and make more sufficient the worship that God has authorized in his word is arrogant and foolish. Young writes:

The enlightened understanding is content to learn God’s precepts and the renewed will to walk in them, but the regenerate heart as such cannot desire to make the slightest addition to God’s commandments. Whenever true believers have acted inconsistently in this respect, they have invariably allowed great corruption to be introduced into God’s sanctuary.<sup>58</sup>

## 4. Reformed Declension

Many Reformed churches have also abandoned the Bible’s sole authority over worship. Many Reformed and Presbyterian denominations still officially hold to *sola scriptura* in the sphere of worship. The rule of Scripture over worship is called the *regulative principle of worship*. This principle declares that all the parts or elements of worship must have divine warrant, that is, everything that is a part of worship that holds a religious significance (i.e., things or acts that are not circumstantial) must be authorized either by a direct command in Scripture (e.g., “Do this in remembrance of Me,” Lk. 22:19); or by logical inference from Scripture (i.e., there may not be an explicit command but when several passages are compared they teach or infer a scriptural practice [e.g., infant baptism]); or by biblical historical example (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate public worship). Simply put, every worship practice must be proven from Scripture. This principle (if strictly followed) eliminates all human innovation, pragmatism and pagan syncretism from worship and thus leaves the church in the same state as it was in the days of the apostles.

Unfortunately, most Reformed churches today have departed from the regulative principle and thus allow many practices that have not been prescribed by the Bible (e.g., extra-biblical holy days such as Christmas and Easter, uninspired hymns, choirs, instrumental music, etc.). Many Reformed churches are following in the footsteps of Arminian, revivalistic, charismatic, and the church growth movement style of worship. An excellent example of the current deterioration is the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The following statistics document their declension. Twenty-five years ago the PCA had approximately 2% exclusive Psalms singing churches; 40% “traditional” (e.g., *Trinity Hymnal* with piano and organ); 50% “traditional” with a few “Scripture songs” and a variety of musical instrumentation; and only 8% had a “traditional/contemporary” mix. Today, approximately 70% of their churches have a “traditional/contemporary” mix. Hurst writes: “If [they] don’t have dance and drama, it’s only

because there is no one to lead it; women and young people may lead worship as individuals praying and reading Scripture, applause [is] acceptable for [a] job well done; music may take the form of [a] performance.”<sup>59</sup> Less than 1% of PCA churches today adhere to exclusive Psalmody (i.e., biblical worship).

Some conservatives within Reformed denominations have expressed a concern regarding the rapid trend away from “traditional” worship toward “contemporary” or “celebrative” worship in their denominations. These men attempt to stem the tide of new-fangled worship with discussions on how worship must be dignified, majestic and reverent. Their battle cry is “decently and in order.” While we heartily agree with our brothers regarding the need for reverence, decency and orderliness in the public worship of God, we disagree regarding the fundamental problem that is causing such a rapid declension in worship. To cure the disease, one must do more than attempt to alleviate the symptoms; one must go to the root of the problem. As long as Reformed denominations reject or redefine the regulative principle of worship, rendering it virtually useless, all efforts at serious reformation in worship will be defeated. Without a strict interpretation of the regulative principle, the debate over worship shifts from an exegetical discussion of what is warranted by Scripture to primarily a debate over human preferences. The beauty and wisdom of the regulative principle of worship is that it protects the church from our own sinful hearts. Worship that is fixed and founded deep upon the bedrock of Scripture is immune from the wind and waves of human opinion, fashion and fad.

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<sup>25</sup> *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:489 (all quotes are from the American revision of 1801).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:93-94, 96.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:500.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:508-509.

<sup>29</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996 [1970]), 1:258.

<sup>30</sup> Paul E. G. Cook, “The Church” in *Puritan and Anglican Thinking* (Northamptonshire, England: The Westminster Conference, 1977), 26.

<sup>31</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 1:54.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, 120. William Young writes: “The total corruption and deceitfulness of the human heart disqualifies man from judging what is to be admitted into the worship of God. It may be that before the fall, our first parents had written on their hearts the law of worship and by looking within the depth of their own beings, could read off the commandments of God. Yet even then, they were not without direct external communication of the will of Him who walked and talked with them in the garden.

“Since the fall, however, though the human conscience still witnesses in all men that worship is due to the supreme Being, no information can be gained from the heart of man as to how God is to be worshiped” (Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God* [Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992], 81).

<sup>33</sup> John Knox writes: “It is not enough that man invent ceremony, and then give it a signification, according to his pleasure.... But if that anything proceed from faith, it must have the word of God for the assurance; for ye are not ignorant, ‘That faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.’ Now, if ye will prove that your ceremonies proceed from faith, and do please God, ye must prove God in expressed words has commanded them: Or else shall ye never prove, that they proceed from faith, nor yet that they please God; but that they are sin, and do displease him, according to the words of the apostle, ‘Whatsoever is not of faith is sin’” (William Croft Dickenson, ed., *John Knox’s History of the Reformation in Scotland* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1950], 1:87).

<sup>34</sup> John Owen, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship” in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967), 13:473.

<sup>35</sup> John Owen, “A Discourse Concerning Liturgies” in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1965 [1850-53]), 15:55.

<sup>36</sup> Leslie A. Rawlinson, “Worship in Liturgy and Form” in *Anglican and Puritan Thinking* (Cambridge, England: Westminster Conference, 1977), 74.

<sup>37</sup> Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 1:71.

<sup>38</sup> John Owen, quoted in William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle” in *The Reformation of the Church* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 40-41.

<sup>39</sup> George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the*

*Church of Scotland* (Dallas, TX: Naphtali, 1993 [1637]), xxx.

[40](#) One of the most common misconceptions regarding the regulative principle of worship is that it was developed haphazardly as an overreaction to the abuses of Romanism. It is even argued by some that it was only good for that early period of the Reformation when many people were coming out of the papal church; however, now that Protestantism is settled and established it is too extreme and is no longer necessary. There are a number of reasons why the scenario noted above should be regarded as pure fiction. First, the idea that Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, Farel, Bucer and the early English Puritans were all pragmatists who were willing to twist Scripture for a good end is ludicrous. These were men who would rather be tortured and killed than compromise the truth of Scripture. For example, John Calvin spent his whole life preaching, writing commentaries and refining his *Institutes*. The regulative principle is clearly taught in his writings from beginning to end (see Appendix A). It is obvious to any student of history that he did not adopt his position on worship in a sloppy or haphazard manner. Third, the Lutherans also came out of Romanism yet rejected the regulative principle. If pragmatism was involved in adhering to the regulative principle, it was not exhibited by the Reformed churches or theologians. Humanly speaking, the Reformed churches would have been physically much safer from the assaults of Rome and her minions if they would have compromised their understanding of worship and joined the Lutherans. Fourth, the theologians of the Second Reformation period in both England (e.g., John Owen) and Scotland (e.g., George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford, James Durham), who studied the issue of worship in more detail than even Calvin or Knox, came to identical conclusions on the matter of worship. If anything, the men of the Second Reformation were even more consistent and stricter than some of the earlier theologians. Fifth, the undergirding principles that produced full-blown Romanism are still with us and pose a threat to Protestants. Although the physical danger is no longer with us in many countries, the spiritual danger of Popish doctrine is as great as ever.

[41](#) *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:12.

[42](#) *Ibid.*, 3:16.

[43](#) *Ibid.*, 3:160-163.

[44](#) *Ibid.*, 3:163-164.

[45](#) Martin Luther, “The Pagan Servitude of the Church” in John Dillenber, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writing Edited with an Introduction* (New York: Anchor, 1961), 343-344.

[46](#) Philip Melanchthon as quoted in J. L. Neve, *Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the*

*Lutheran Church* (Columbus, OH: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1926), 260-261.

[47](#) Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997 [1948]), 17.

[48](#) Willard Dow Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1952), 283.

[49](#) G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 164.

[50](#) Gordon Clark writes: “The twentieth century church in America seems to have fallen into a curious self-contradiction. The lust for power and control over men and organizations has produced an almost papal claim to authority on the part of bureaucratic ecclesiastical officials. When the majority speaks (and the officials manipulate the majority) it is the voice of God” (*What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Philadelphia, Pa: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965), 191). Sadly, many elders in “Reformed” denominations see their job as one of maintaining the status quo or current backslidden state of their church’s spiritual condition. Unfortunately this often means an unquestioning acceptance of all sorts of unbiblical human traditions. It often also means treating Christians concerned with reformation as kooks, as people who need to be kept quiet in order to maintain the defections of past generations.

[51](#) James Benjamin Green, *Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards* (Collins World, 1976), 155.

[52](#) Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 18.

[53](#) Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith*, 206.

[54](#) A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 267.

[55](#) Gordon Clark writes: “Strange to say, evangelicals, fundamentalists, pietists or other devout people, who would be horrified at the sign of the cross or bowing to images, have invented religious requirements and taboos of their own. There is a Bible school which insists that the girls put their hair up in buns, for a looser hair-do would be ‘worldly’” (*What Do Presbyterians Believe?* 192-193).

[56](#) Frank Smith, “The Singing of Praise” in *Worship in the Presence of God*, 223.

[57](#) Samuel H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 240.

[58](#) William Young, “The Second Commandment” in Frank Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God*, 81-82.

[59](#) Peter Hurst, “Lesson 4: Congregational Worship” in Byron Snapp, ed., *The Presbyterian Witness* (Hampton, VA: Calvary Reformed Presbyterian Church, fall 1997), XI.4, 13. All statistics used in this paragraph are taken from Hurst’s article.

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# V. Some Contemporary Objections to *Sola Scriptura* in the Sphere of Worship Considered and Refuted

Today, the most vocal critics of *sola scriptura* applied to the sphere of worship (i.e., the regulative principle) are men who consider themselves “truly Reformed.”<sup>60</sup> These apologists for declension and the status quo have come up with some interesting arguments that they think justify a wholesale abandonment of the regulative principle of worship in favor of a Lutheran/Episcopalian conception of worship. In order to sharpen our understanding of *sola scriptura*'s relationship to biblical worship, we will examine and refute such arguments.

## 1. The “False Understanding of Ethics and *Adiaphora*” Argument

The first argument used against the regulative principle of worship is based on a false understanding of the meaning and relationship of *sola scriptura*, the regulative principle and Christian liberty or *adiaphora*. Schlissel writes:

Some regulativists will attempt to broaden their appeal to the “principle” found in 12:32 by saying that it is found also in Deuteronomy 4:2. But this passage reads. “Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” If the Regulativist would bring this passage to bear on the question of worship, he has gone even further from the path leading to the light. *For this passage refers to all the Law of God, not simply to laws governing worship.* Very few regulativists would seriously argue that God’s intent here is to forbid Israel from doing *anything whatsoever* in *any* area of life that is not specifically commanded in the Law. I suppose those Amish who eschew buttons for want of finding them mentioned in Scripture might look somewhat favorable on this interpretation, but they’d be mighty lonely in so doing. Yet that is precisely the conclusion which cannot be evaded if 4:2 is cited as supportive of the Regulativist’s reading of 12:32. Deuteronomy 4:2 is a *general rule*, requiring a life that conforms to God’s disclosed will *in its entirety*. The NIV



Study Bible note is to the point: “The revelation of the Lord is sufficient. All of it must be obeyed and anything that adulterates or contradicts it cannot be tolerated.” God did not intend that the recipients of this verse (4:2) would *literally* do nothing not mentioned therein (e.g., no skateboarding, using electricity, driving automobiles, or eating lemon ices). Thus, 4:2 *as a parallel demonstrates that 12:32 is not to be taken in an absolute sense*. If you find a similar phrase used by the same author in the same book, you need to justify applying a radically different sense to each. If it is agreed that 4:2, referring to the whole Law, was not to be taken absolutely when it forbids additions and subtractions, neither is 12:32 to be taken as an abstract and absolute rule. Both are to be interpreted in terms of *the whole Word of God*, a Word that simply does not teach: if it is not commanded, it is forbidden.<sup>61</sup>

Schlissel’s statement is perhaps the most popular modern argument against the regulative principle. He argues that Deuteronomy 4:2 refers to the whole law which regulates all of life. Since all of life contains many activities that are not strictly regulated, that are left to the free choice of man (e.g., “Should I wear blue pants or grey pants?”). Therefore, the virtually identical regulative principle proof text passages such as Deuteronomy 12:32 must also be interpreted in such a manner that leaves man a great deal of liberty in the sphere of worship.

Schlissel’s argument against the regulative principle is founded upon a complete misunderstanding of Deuteronomy 4:2 and therefore should be rejected as unscriptural. His false understanding of this passage and its application to the area of worship is based on a glaring failure to distinguish between God-given ethics and areas of *adiaphora*. Schlissel’s assertion that Deuteronomy 4:2 “was not to be taken absolutely when it forbids additions and subtractions” is totally false. Deuteronomy 4:2 teaches that men are not permitted to add or detract from God’s commandments. In other words, God is the *sole* source of ethics for personal, family, institutional and civil life. Men do not have ethical autonomy. They do not have any authority to make up ethical absolutes, nor are they permitted to ignore or detract from God’s law in any way. R. J. Rushdoony has a clear understanding of the implications of passages such as Deuteronomy 4:2. He writes:

It must be recognized that in any culture *the source of law is the god of that society*. If law has its source in man’s reason, then reason is the god of that society. If the source is an oligarchy, or in a court, senate, or ruler, then that source is the god of that system.... Modern humanism, the religion of the state, locates law in the state and thus makes the state or the people as they find expression in the state, the god of the system.... Nothing is more deadly or more derelict than the notion that the Christian is at liberty with respect to the kind of law he can have.... Neither positive law nor natural law can reflect more than the sin and apostasy of man:

*revealed law* is the need and privilege of Christian society.<sup>62</sup>

Men do not have the authority to declare a thought, word or deed evil or sinful apart from proving such by a biblical commandment or deduction from the Bible.

Does the fact that there are many matters in life that are *adiaphora* or indifferent<sup>63</sup> (e.g., skateboarding, planting tomatoes, riding a bike, etc.) mean that Deuteronomy 4:2 was not meant to be taken strictly? Does it mean that men are permitted to add or detract from God's law? No, absolutely not! Likewise in the sphere of commanded or authorized worship men do not have liberty to add or detract one iota from the worship that God has instituted. However, men do have a great deal of liberty in areas that are circumstantial or incidental to worship itself. Schlissel's arguments fail to recognize the distinction between ethics and *adiaphora*, worship ordinances and the circumstances of worship.

If opponents of the regulative principle of worship want to use Deuteronomy 4:2 as a proof text against the Reformed understanding of a strictly regulated worship, they need to demonstrate that worship ordinances belong to the sphere of life that is *adiaphora*. Are the parts or elements of worship that are delineated in Scripture in the same category as riding a bike, or wearing blue pants instead of grey pants, or planting beefsteak tomatoes instead of early girl tomatoes? The answer is: obviously not. *Adiaphora* refers to matters that are indifferent to ethics (e.g., Should I boil my eggs or scramble them for breakfast?). That is, they involve activities that are neither commanded nor forbidden, and therefore the decision whether or not to commit the act or not commit the act does not involve sin or a violation of God's word. As long as men act in accordance with the general rules of Scripture (i.e., Is it done to God's glory [1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 4:7-9]? Does it cause a weak brother to sin [Rom. 14:21]? Can it be done in faith with a clear conscience [Rom. 14:14, 23]? Can I engage in this activity without coming under its power [1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; e.g., tobacco addiction]?), men have liberty to commit or refrain from the act.

Worship ordinances do not involve the liberty to do as one desires and therefore cannot be placed in the category of *adiaphora*. Are Christians free to omit or add to the elements of religious worship as they please? Can a church lawfully eliminate the Lord's supper and replace it with a new sacrament? Would the elders of a church be obedient to Christ if they replaced trinitarian baptism with a man-made ritual? Is it permissible to eliminate the Scripture reading and replace it with Shakespeare or a rock video? Would it be sinful to eliminate the preaching of God's word and replace it with a "Christian" movie or a "Christian" comedy hour or variety show? The answer to these questions is obvious (no, no, no and no). If one places worship ordinances in the category of *adiaphora*, then everything involved in public worship and even public worship itself is optional. Furthermore, one could have two, zero or 20 sacraments.

Because worship ordinances are required by Scripture, they should never be treated as *adiaphora*. Rather, they should receive the same treatment as God's moral law. *Areas of life that are adiaphora correspond not to worship ordinances but to the circumstances of worship* (e.g., Should we start the service at 10:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m.? Should the meeting house have blue carpeting or maroon carpeting? Should we use wooden pews or folding chairs? etc.). Ironically, Deuteronomy 4:2, when properly understood, is one of the strongest proof texts for the regulative principle of worship, for the regulative principle logically follows *sola scriptura*. Protestant reformer John Knox concurs:

And that is principal idolatry when our own inventions we defend to be righteous in the sight of God, because we think them good, laudable, and pleasant. We may not think us so free nor so wise, that we may do unto God, and unto his honor, what we think expedient. No! The contrary is commanded by God, saying, "Unto my Word shall ye add nothing; nothing shall ye diminish therefrom, that ye might observe the precepts of your Lord God" (Deut. 4:2). Which words are not to be understood of the Decalogue and Law Moral only, but of statutes, rites, and ceremonies; for equal obedience of all his Laws requireth God.<sup>64</sup>

## 2. The "All of Life Is Worship" Argument

An argument that is closely related to the argument from Deuteronomy 4:2 is one which claims that all of life is worship, and since life contains many activities that are not strictly regulated by Scripture, therefore worship is not strictly regulated either. Although, as Christians, everything we do is to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and thus we are to live to the Lord (Rom. 14:7-8) and present our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1), the idea that all of life is worship and therefore no distinction exists between public worship and activities like mowing the lawn is absurd. There are several reasons why we must regard "the all of life is worship" argument as unscriptural.

First, there are several passages from both the Old and New Testaments which teach and/or assume that public worship is special and set apart from everyday life.

*Psalm 22:22, 25.* "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You.... My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him."

*Psalm 27:4.* "One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple." David Dickson writes:

A third ground of confidence, is the conscience of his purpose to study to have constant communion with God, in the use of the means, and the conscience of his very earnest desire to have the benefit of all the public ordinances, in the fellowship of the church. Whence learn, 1. Hearty resolution to subject ourselves to all God's ordinances, and to follow the appointed means of communion-keeping with God, is a sound mark of solid faith; and the conscience of this resolution, serveth much to confirm our confidence in God, if we can say with the prophet, *this one thing have I desired, &c.* 2. In the using of the means and ordinances of God's house, the glory of the Lord may be seen, counsel and direction in all things may be had, with comfort and spiritual delight to our souls; for in the ordinances David was to *behold the beauty of the Lord, with delight, and to enquire in his holy temple.* 3. The desire of communion with God, and love to his ordinances, where it is sincere, should have the chief place in the heart, above all earthly desires and delights whatsoever: *one thing have I desired.* 4. A sincere desire must not be suffered to go away, but should be pursued resolutely, and recommended to God daily; *this I will still seek after,* saith he: and the means of communion with God in the public fellowship of the church must be constantly continued in, *even all the days of our life.*<sup>65</sup>

In his application of this passage to believers in the new covenant era Calvin writes: "The Word, sacraments, public prayers, and other helps of the same kind, cannot be neglected, without a wicked contempt of God, who manifests himself to us in these ordinance, as in a mirror or image."<sup>66</sup>

*Psalm 84:1-2.* "How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." Calvin writes:

David complains of his being deprived of liberty of access to the Church of God, there to make a profession of his faith, to improve in godliness, and to engage in the divine worship.... He knew that God had not in vain appointed the holy assemblies, and that the godly have need of such helps so long as they are sojourners in this world.<sup>67</sup>

Plummer writes: "The appointed worship of the true God has in all ages possessed great attractions for the regenerate."<sup>68</sup>

*Psalm 87:2.* "The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob." David Clarkson writes:

But it may be replied, the Lord had worship, not only in the gates of Zion, in the temple, but also in the dwellings of Jacob. We cannot suppose that all the posterity of Jacob would neglect the worship of God in their families; no doubt the faithful among them resolved with Joshua, “I and my house will serve the Lord.” Since, therefore, the worship of God was to be found in both, how can this worship be the reason why one should be preferred before the other? Sure upon no other account but this, the worship of God in the gates of Zion was public, his worship in the dwellings of Jacob was private. So that, in fine, the Lord may be said to love the gates of Zion before all the dwellings of Jacob, because he prefers public worship before private. He loved all the dwellings of Jacob, wherein he was worshiped privately; but the gates of Zion he loved more than all the dwellings of Jacob, for there he was publicly worshiped. Hence we have clear ground for this:

*Observation.* Public worship is to be preferred before private. So it is by the Lord, so it should be by his people. So it was under the law, so it must be under the gospel. Indeed, there is difference between the public worship under the law and gospel in respect of a circumstance, *viz.*, the place of public worship. Under the law, the place of public worship was holy, but we have no reason so to account any place of public worship under the gospel; and this will be manifest, if both we inquire what were the grounds of that legal holiness in the tabernacle or temple, and withal observe that none of them can be applied to any place of worship under the gospel.<sup>69</sup>

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-2.* “Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few” (KJV). This passage alone proves that public worship is unique and special. There is to be a solemn recognition of the special presence of God in public worship and thus great care must be taken to be sincere, reverent, composed, deliberate and attentive. Matthew Henry writes:

Address thyself to the worship of God with a solemn pause, and take time to compose thyself for it, not going about it with precipitation, which is called *hasting with the feet*, Prov. xix. 2. Keep thy thought from roving and wandering from the work; keep thy affections from running out towards wrong objects, for in the business of God’s house there is work enough for the whole man, and all too little to be employed.... When we are in the house of God, we are in a special manner before God and in his presence, there where he has promised to meet his people, where his eye is upon us and ours ought to be unto him.<sup>70</sup>

John Gill writes:

All which may denote the purity and cleanness of the conversation of the true worshipers of God; for, as the feet are the instruments of the action of walking, they may intend the conduct and behaviour of the saints in the house of God, where they should take care to do all things according to his word, which is a lamp to the feet, and a light unto the path.<sup>71</sup>

It is obvious from this and many other passages that public worship is to be treated by God's people far differently than attending a sporting even or going to a barbecue. Frank Smith writes:

One of the privileges of a worship service is that of coming into the special presence of God and communing with Him. Anything which detracts from this clearly should not be allowed. If we were to be in the royal presence of the Queen of England, it would not be proper protocol to interrupt that audience with the monarch in order to talk with one another. How much more important it is that we do not interrupt our audience with the King of kings by trivial items which center on ourselves.<sup>72</sup>

*Leviticus 23:3*. "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work in it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings." After Israel was settled in the land, this requirement of weekly public worship could only be put into practice if there were many congregations meeting throughout the land of Israel. These decentralized congregational worship services would of course not contain the ceremonial elements of tabernacle or temple worship (such as animal sacrifices). Matthew Henry writes:

It is a holy convocation; that is, "If it lie within your reach, you shall sanctify it in a religious assembly: let as many as can come to the door of the tabernacle, and let others meet elsewhere for prayer, praise, and the reading of the law," as in the schools of the prophets, while prophecy continued, and afterwards in the synagogues. Christ appointed the New Testament Sabbath to be a holy convocation, by meeting his disciples once and again (and perhaps oftener) on the first day of the week.... Note, God's Sabbaths are to be religiously observed in every private house, by every family apart, as well as by many families together in holy convocations.<sup>73</sup>

*Acts 15:21*. "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (cf. Ps. 74:8).

*Hebrews 10:24-25*. “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” Unlike everyday activities such as skateboarding, gardening and driving a car, public worship is not an area that believers can treat with indifference, for it is not an optional activity. Those who regard “all of life as worship” (like those who misinterpret Deuteronomy 4:2) completely misunderstand the difference between public worship, the commanded elements of that worship and matters indifferent or common to human actions and societies. Once an activity is commanded and set apart by God, we cannot treat that activity as optional or *adiaphora*. Singing praise to God in public worship is in an entirely different category than planting tomatoes, even though both are done to God’s glory.

Second, Christ the king and head of the church has appointed public officers with special public functions that require a special public use. “Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.... And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ’” (Eph. 4:8, 11, 12). The Bible has certain requirements for preaching, reading the Scriptures and administering the sacraments in public worship. These worship elements are *only* to be conducted by an ordained teacher or preacher and must not be treated as indifferent activities of everyday life. If there is no distinction between all of life and public worship, then why are public ordinances restricted to ordained officers in the church? If all of life is worship, then such rules and distinctions would be unnecessary.

Third, when the apostle Paul discusses the conduct of believers during public worship, he sets forth regulations that presuppose a sharp distinction between public worship and all of life. For example, women may speak at a barbecue and may teach their children during home school, yet they are strictly forbidden to speak or teach during the public worship service (cf. 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12-14). Regarding the Lord’s supper, Paul tells believers that they must conduct themselves in a proper manner when coming to the Lord’s table. They are to examine themselves and are to make sure that they have a special regard for their brethren (1 Cor 11:17-34). The regulations regarding this sacrament obviously do not apply to the local picnic or volleyball game. There is also a special decorum for public worship that is commanded by Paul. Men are not to wear head coverings in church while women are (1 Cor. 11:2-16). However, men may wear baseball caps at the ball park. If all of life is worship (as some assert), and thus worship is not to be strictly regulated by Scripture, then the apostle Paul’s inspired instructions regarding public worship would be superfluous.

Fourth, the term for church (*ekklesia*) often denotes a society of professing Christians who

constitute a local church that meets together for public worship in a particular location (Ac. 5:11; 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18; 16:19; Rom. 16:23; Gal. 1:2; 1 Th. 2:14; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2; Rev. 1:11; 20, etc.). Hodge writes:

God has commanded ecclesiastical communities with constitutions, laws and officers, badges, ordinances and discipline, for the great purpose of giving visibility to his kingdom, of making known the gospel of that kingdom, and of gathering in all its elect subjects.<sup>74</sup>

The New Testament church met together for public worship on the Lord's day (Ac. 2:1; 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:23, 26, 34, 35; 16:1, 2). Lord's day public worship was commanded by God (Lev. 23:3; Heb. 10:24-45). It is a period of time that is set apart from everyday life. Public worship consists of certain elements that are authorized by Scripture such as: reading the Scriptures (Dt. 31:9-13; Neh. 8:7-8; 13:1; 1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13); prayer (Ac. 4:31; 1 Cor. 11:13-15); preaching from the Bible (Ac. 17:13; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2); the administration of the sacraments (Mt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:18-34) and the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). It clearly would be inappropriate to treat public worship conducted by the church in the same manner as areas of life that are indifferent or *adiaphora*.

Fifth, the Bible teaches that there is a special presence of God in public worship. In a special sense Christ is speaking to his covenant people through the preached word. The people as a covenant body respond to God's word with prayer and praise. The confession of sins to God includes both individual and corporate sins. When the one body partakes of the Lord's supper (the bread and wine), there is a special blessing that is received from our Lord. Yet an unworthy partaking of the supper (e.g. when the corporate assembled body is disregarded, etc.) involves covenant sanctions and even death (1 Cor. 11:27-34). Cases of serious public sin and excommunication are to be announced during public worship where Christ is present in his court (Mt. 18:20), where the excommunicate is delivered to Satan by Christ's power (1 Cor. 5:4). Not only does the congregation receive a special blessing from the public means of grace and God's unique presence, but God is more glorified when he is praised by the corporate body of Christ. Clarkson writes:

The Lord has engaged to be with every particular saint, but when the particular are joined in public worship, there are all the engagements united together. The Lord engages himself to let forth as it were, a stream of his comfortable, quickening presence to every particular person that fears him, but when many of these particulars join together to worship God, then these several streams are united and meet in one. So that the presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river, a river that makes glad the city of God. The



Lord has a dish for every particular soul that truly serves him; but when many particulars meet together, there is a variety, a confluence, a multitude of dishes. The presence of the Lord in public worship makes it a spiritual feast, and so it is expressed, Isa. xxv. 6. There is, you see, more of God's presence in public worship, *ergo* public worship is to be preferred before private.<sup>75</sup>

One should not be surprised that God is present in public worship in a special manner, for nothing on earth more resembles the throne room of God in heaven than public worship. Heaven is described in Scripture as a place of continued public worship where an innumerable host of angels and saints behold the face of God and the Lamb (Rev. 1:9-12). "The innumerable company of angels, and the church of the first born, make up one general assembly in the heavenly Jerusalem, Heb. xii. 22, 23. They make one glorious congregation, and so jointly together sing the praises of him that sits on the throne, and the praises of the Lamb, and continue in this public worship to eternity."<sup>76</sup>

To argue that all of life is worship and thus public worship is not strictly regulated by God's word is akin to comparing the Lord's supper to that which is common or profane.

The public assembly is a covenantal gathering, a time and place for God to meet directly with His people. He lays down the law, and they are to bless Him in return.... Worship is special and it is dialogical in nature. It is also prescribed. The fact of being in God's presence means that not only are general principles to be observed, but the very elements of service have been written out beforehand.<sup>77</sup>

### **3. "The Regulative Principle of Worship Only Applies to the Temple" Argument**

Another popular argument against the regulative principle of worship is based on the idea that the regulative principle only applied to tabernacle and temple worship. This idea is based on the *context* of the classic regulative principle text, Deuteronomy 12:32, and the notion that God was very strict with the tabernacle/temple worship solely because the temple service typified the person and work of Jesus Christ. If one accepts this argument then one can conclude that: (1) The decentralized worship in Israel that occurred in the synagogue was not strictly regulated. In other words, the Israelites could do whatever they desired in worship as long as it did not violate the express teaching of Scripture (this is essentially the Episcopal-Lutheran conception of acceptable worship). (2) The regulative principle was abrogated with the death of Christ when his perfect sacrifice rendered the temple cultus unnecessary. (3) Therefore, the new covenant church has nothing to do with the regulative principle and has liberty to devise rites, ceremonies and holy days as it desires, as long as the human inventions do not violate or

contradict God's word.

The idea that the regulative principle only applied to the service of the central sanctuary must be rejected for a number of reasons. First, the notion that since Deuteronomy 12:32 is given in a section that deals primarily with the tabernacle, and thus *only* applies to the tabernacle is simply assumed without exegetical proof. Are we told anywhere in chapter 12 or anywhere in the whole Old or New Testament that the principle of no addition or subtraction is limited to the tabernacle or temple? No, we are not. But can we not *infer* from the context that this ultra-strict principle applied only to the tabernacle/temple? No. In fact the context proves the exact opposite. While it is true that chapter 12 contains a lengthy discussion of the central sanctuary (in particular the need to offer sacrifices and offerings at the central sanctuary) the context of Deuteronomy 12:32 also speaks to the matters of the repression of idolatry and syncretism with pagan worship that can occur not only at the tabernacle but throughout the whole land of Israel. Note the immediate context of the passage:

“When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Dt. 12:29-32).

The passage applies not just to behavior at the tabernacle but to worship practices throughout the whole land of Israel. If Deuteronomy 12:32 only applied to the central sanctuary, why would it be used as a foundational verse to suppress pagan idolatry throughout the land? Pagan Canaanite worship was decentralized with house idols, local pagan sacred sites, local high places and sacred groves. Are we supposed to believe that Deuteronomy 12:32 is only concerned with syncretism within the tabernacle proper? Is verse 31 only concerned with suppressing child sacrifice within the tabernacle? Of course not! The context of Deuteronomy 12:32 proves that it *cannot* be restricted to the tabernacle/temple.

Second, Deuteronomy 12:32 cannot be interpreted in isolation from the virtually identical *sola scriptura* passages that apply not only to the tabernacle/temple but to all of life. The *sola scriptura* passages teach that the church does not have autonomy or legislative authority with respect to doctrine, ethics or worship ordinances. Note the following passages. Deuteronomy 4:2. “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” Proverbs 30:5-6. “Every word

of God is pure.... Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.”

We have already noted in our discussion of Deuteronomy 4:2 that it is sinful for men to make up their own ethical rules. Church members would be justly angry and outraged if their pastor or session issued a decree that eating meat on Fridays, or wearing blue jeans, or riding a bike was now sinful and merited church censure. Deuteronomy 4:2 also forbids church authorities from detracting or adding to the worship prescribed in Scripture. The only way that Deuteronomy 4:2 can be circumvented by opponents of the regulative principle is to argue that the worship of God is not a prescribed matter of law but rather belongs to the sphere of things indifferent (*adiaphora*). The idea that the worship of Jehovah (the most sacred and important duty of the church) is *adiaphora* is impossible for two reasons. First, *adiaphora* refers only to indifferent matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden, that are not directly regulated by Scripture. Worship, however, is commanded by God. Second, areas of *adiaphora* are optional. Worship is not optional. Deuteronomy 12:32, which is virtually identical to 4:2, is given in the context of worship to emphasize: (1) Scripture’s sole authority over worship, (2) the covenant people’s lack of legislative authority to determine or make up their own worship and (3) the necessity of sticking strictly to what God’s word says to avoid human additions which because of man’s inherent depravity lead to syncretism and sin. The regulative principle is simply *sola scriptura* applied to the sphere of worship. Those who apply Deuteronomy 12:32 solely to the temple do so only because they do not understand Deuteronomy 4:2 and the full implication of *sola scriptura*.

Third, the idea that the regulative principle only applied to the temple ignores the fact that tabernacle/temple worship contained ceremonial and non-ceremonial ordinances. The sacrificing of animals, the burning of incense and the priestly and Levitical use of instruments during the sacrifice were ceremonial. But the reading of Scripture, prayer and the singing of praise were not ceremonial. This assertion is proved from the fact that Scripture reading (1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13), prayer (Mt. 6:9; 1 Th. 5:17; Ac. 4:31; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; Phil. 4:6; Jas. 1:5) and the singing of praise (Mt. 26:30; Ac. 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 13:15; Jas. 5:13) are all integral aspects of Christian worship *after* the dissolution of the temple and the abrogation of ceremonial ordinances. Therefore, it is overly simplistic and exegetically unsound to argue that the regulative principle was annulled with the ceremonial order. If the regulative principle applied to the temple worship, then it also regulated the non-ceremonial worship that occurred there.

Those who use the argument that the regulative principle applied solely to the temple and thus was abrogated with the ceremonial law are guilty of making a *total* antithesis between temple worship and synagogue/Christian public worship. One cannot deny that the temple cultus typified Christ and His work. However, one must not overlook the fact that the temple was also a place of worship (Jn. 4:21) and prayer (Mt. 21:13). A number of the crucial elements of

Christian public worship were first practiced in the temple. Bushell writes:

To the Old Testament Jew, the Temple ritual was the very epitome of worship, and all exercises of piety were in one way or another related back to that source. Liturgical practices in the synagogue in many instances corresponded directly to those of the Temple. Prayer, for example, was offered in the synagogue at the time of the Temple offerings. Outside, the Temple prayer was always offered facing the Temple or Jerusalem. The synagogues were considered sanctuaries in miniature, even to the point that the furniture in the synagogue (such as the Ark and the seven-branched candelabra) was patterned after that of the Temple. Considering, therefore, the importance of the Temple even for worship outside of Jerusalem, it would seem reasonable to postulate a greater degree of continuity between Christian worship practice and certain aspects of the Temple liturgy than most authorities are willing to admit. The paucity of references in the literature to the influence of the Temple liturgy on Christian worship is an unbalanced situation that needs very much to be corrected. It is our opinion that the Temple rather than the synagogue is the ultimate source of a number of the most important aspects of Christian worship. That many of these aspects may have been mediated by the synagogue is beside the point, at least in so far as our concern with the subject goes.<sup>78</sup>

While the attempts to limit the regulative principle to the temple are clever, they have absolutely no foundation in Scripture. The worship of the temple itself proves that the regulative principle cannot be restricted to ceremonial ordinances.

Fourth, there are a number of passages that apply the regulative principle outside the sphere of tabernacle/temple worship. If there is even one passage of Scripture that applies the regulative principle outside of tabernacle temple worship, then the assertion that the regulative principle applied only to the temple falls to the ground. We will examine three passages.

1. In Matthew 15:1-3 Jesus condemned the Pharisees for adding ritualistic washing *that occurred in the home and not in the temple* to the law. “Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, ‘Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?’” This passage poses a serious problem for those who teach that the regulative principle applied only to the temple, and thus man-made traditions are permissible as long as they do not violate the express teaching of Scripture. Where is the washing of hands condemned in God’s word? If human additions are permissible in the religious sphere, what could be any more innocent, pragmatic or practical than a simple hand washing? Yet our Lord not only refused to submit to

this man-made religious rite but also strongly rebuked the Pharisees for adding a human rule to God's word. "Washing of the hands is a thing proper enough; one could wish it were oftener practiced; but to exalt it into a religious rite is a folly and a sin."<sup>79</sup> The disciples of Christ were well trained, for they knew that any human tradition, no matter how good and innocent, must not be complied with when it is given a religious significance and status by man without divine warrant. "Note, illegal impositions will be laid to the charge of those who support and maintain them [human traditions in worship], and keep them up, as well as those who first invented and enjoined them."<sup>80</sup> "Antiquity and Fathers without Scripture is the old charter of superstitious formalists.... Hence learn: That God in wisdom brings men's ceremonies to a dispute and so to be refuted and condemned..."<sup>81</sup>

Jesus is a champion of the regulative principle. He rejects the most innocuous of religious traditions and also shows us how human traditions and laws drive out and thus set aside what God has condemned. Rutherford writes:

And when the Pharisees saw some of the disciples eat bread with unwashed hands, they found fault. The challenge was for an external omission of an outward observance which may be seen with the eyes. Ergo, these traditions are not condemned by Christ because they were contrary to God's word, or impious, but in this, that they were contrary because not commanded. For in the external religious act of washing hands, there was no impiety of a wicked opinion objected to Christ's disciples, about the piety of these traditions, nor about any inward opinion. Nor is there any question between the Pharisees and the Lord's disciples, whether the traditions of the elders should be esteemed the marrow and sum of all religions, as Vasquez saith; but only anent external conformity with walking in the traditions of the elders, or not walking, as is most clear in the text. It is true, Christ objected they accounted more of the traditions of men, nor of God's commandments, as papists and formalists do; but that was not the state of the question between the disciples of Christ and the Pharisees. 2. Christ rejecteth these traditions, by an argument taken from the want of lawful Author, while he calls them precepts of men, opposed to the commandments of God.<sup>82</sup>

People who oppose the regulative principle often attempt to circumvent the obvious import of these passages by appealing to the context. They argue that the example set forth by Christ in verses 4 and 5 (of the person who follows a human tradition in order not to provide for his parents in old age) informs us that Christ only had negative traditions in mind, that is, traditions which nullified, set apart or contradicted God's word. The problem with this interpretation is that it completely ignores verse 2 or the original confrontation that elicited Jesus' response in verses 3 to 9. Jesus gives an example of why adding human requirements to God's word is wrong. Human requirements eventually displace God's word. (Anyone with a

knowledge of Judaism or the history of the Christian church knows that our Lord's teaching is true.) The fact that Christ gives such an example does not detract at all from verse 2 where the most innocent and apparently harmless of human traditions (hand washing) is regarded as totally inappropriate. How does washing one's hands contradict, violate or set apart God's word? Jesus condemns the Pharisees for assuming (contrary to Scripture) that religious leaders have legislative authority in the church. When church leaders give themselves authority to invent out of their own imaginations doctrines or commandments, the eventual result is declension and even apostasy. Note also that in verse 9 Jesus unequivocally condemns all human doctrines and commandments in religion. "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9; cf. Isa. 29:13).

Further, the parallel passage in Mark 7 settles the matter once and for all, because in the Markian account Jesus *explicitly* identifies the traditions that he condemns as including religious washings.<sup>83</sup> "He answered and said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.' He said to them, 'All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition'" (vs. 6-9). "It is just as easy to destroy the authority of God's Word by addition as by subtraction, by burying it under human inventions as by denying its truth. The whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, must be our rule of faith—nothing added and nothing taken away."<sup>84</sup> Our Lord does not just condemn negative, bad or contradictory human traditions but all of them without exception. Spurgeon writes:

Religion based on human authority is worthless; we must *worship* the true God in the way of his own appointing, or we do not worship him at all. Doctrines and ordinances are only to be accepted when the divine Word supports them, and they are to be accepted for that reason only. The most punctilious form of devotion is *vain worship*, if it is regulated by man's ordinance apart from the Lord's own command.<sup>85</sup>

After briefly examining Christ's teaching in context one can only conclude that the argument that our Lord is only condemning certain bad religious traditions rather than any and all human traditions is eisegesis of the worst sort.

Attempts at circumventing passages such as Matthew 15:2-9 which prove the regulative principle are not new but are (in general matters) restatements of old popish and prelatical arguments long ago rejected by the Reformed churches. Note the words of Zacharias Ursinus (written in the 1570s and first published in the 1580s):

There are some who object to what we have here said, and affirm in support of will-worship, that those passages which we have cited as condemning it, speak only in reference to the ceremonies instituted by Moses, and of the unlawful commandments of men, such as constitute no part of the worship of God; and not of those precepts which have been sanctioned by the church and bishops, and which command nothing contrary to the Word of God. But that this argument is false, may be proven by certain declarations connected with those passages of Scripture to which we have referred, which likewise reject those human laws, which, upon their own authority, prescribe anything in reference to divine worship which God has not commanded, although the thing itself is neither sinful nor forbidden by God. So Christ rejects the tradition which the Jews had in regard to washing their hands, because they associated with it the idea of divine worship, although it was not sinful in itself, saying, ‘Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.’ ‘Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye make clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within ye are full of extortion and excess.’ (Matthew 15:11; 23, 25). The same thing may be said of celibacy and of the distinction of meats and days, of which he calls ‘doctrines of devils,’ although in themselves they are lawful to the godly, as he in other places teaches. Wherefore, those things are also which are in themselves indifferent, that is neither commanded nor prohibited by God, if they are prescribed and done as the worship of God, or if it is supposed that God is honored by our performing them, and dishonored by neglecting them, it is plainly manifest that the Scriptures in these and similar places condemn them.<sup>86</sup>

2. Another passage of Scripture which disproves the “temple only” theory is Colossians 2:20-23, “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—’Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” The apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit several years after the regulative principle was supposedly abolished, rigorously enforced the regulative principle.

Paul says that any addition to what God has commanded or authorized is self-imposed religion, or as the King James Version says, “will-worship.” The Greek word used by Paul (*ethelothreskeia*) signifies worship that originates from man’s own will. “This is worship not enjoined by God, but springing out of man’s own ingenuity—unauthorized devotion.... The worship referred to is unsolicited and unaccepted. It is superstition....”<sup>87</sup>

The gist is that these ordinances are forms of worship or religious service chosen by man according to the will of man, not means chosen by God. This is the essence of corrupt worship, when men seek to establish their own forms of religious service. We might call it *free-will worship*, since the advocates of man-made worship are claiming that men possess the right (or freedom) to institute acceptable means to worship God.<sup>88</sup>

Paul says that adding to God's Word is a show of false humility. Can man improve upon the worship and service that God has instituted? It is the height of arrogance and stupidity to think that sinful man can improve upon God's ordinances. "It is provoking God, because it reflects much upon His honor, as if He were not wise enough to appoint the manner of His own worship. He hates all strange fire to be offered in His temple. Lev. x 11. A ceremony may in time lead to a crucifix. Those who contend for the cross in baptism, why not have the oil, salt and cream as well?"<sup>89</sup> As Paul says, man-made rules and regulations are "of no value" to the believer (Col. 2:23).

Opponents of the regulative principle attempt to circumvent the teaching of Colossians in a similar fashion to the Matthew 15:2ff. passage. They argue that Paul is not condemning all human traditions but is merely concerned with suppressing certain types of asceticism. In other words, it is wrong to make rules that forbid the eating of meats and other foods, but it is entirely acceptable to invent worship practices, holy days and rites.

There are a number of reasons why Paul's condemnation of human requirements cannot be limited to certain ascetic eating practices. First, the broad context of the passage indicates that Paul emphatically rejects all human traditions in the religious sphere and not merely ascetic dietary laws. The likely problem at the Colossian church was the influence of an early form of ascetic Gnosticism. Paul does condemn Gnostic legalism in chapter 2. However, in his condemnation of this particular philosophy and the false ethical system that flows from it Paul condemns all forms of non-Christian philosophy and all worship and ethics that are founded upon human philosophy and the tradition of men. In this epistle Paul first points the Colossians to Jesus Christ. The Colossian believers need to be reminded that Christ is pre-eminent (1:18); that in Christ, who is the head of all, they are complete (2:10); that some have not been holding fast the Head (2:19); that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). Christ alone is the king and head of the church. He alone is our sanctification. Through Christ alone and his law-word come right doctrine, meaning and ethics. Thus Paul writes: "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). Calvin writes:



*According to the tradition of men.* He points out more precisely what kind of *philosophy* he reproves, and at the same time convicts it of vanity on a twofold account—because it is not *according to Christ*, but according to the inclinations of men; and because it consists in the *elements of the world*. Observe, however, that he places Christ in opposition to the *elements of the world*, equally as to the *tradition of men*, by which he intimates, that whatever is hatched in man’s brain is not in accordance with Christ, who has been appointed us by the Father as our sole Teacher; that he might retain us in the simplicity of his gospel. Now, that is corrupted by even a small portion of the leaven of *human traditions*. He intimates also, that all doctrines are foreign to Christ that make the worship of God, which we know to be spiritual, according to Christ’s rule, to consist in the *elements of the world*, and also such as fetter the minds of men by such trifles and frivolities, while Christ calls us directly to himself.<sup>90</sup>

Paul’s condemnation of philosophy that is according to the tradition of men is universal. One cannot argue that Paul in this passage condemns only ascetic Gnosticism yet does not also condemn the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Schliermacher, Marx and Dewey. For Paul there is no such thing as philosophical or ethical neutrality. A doctrine or practice is either according to Christ or it is not. And if it is not, then it comes from man’s autonomous devising and is (according to Paul) a tradition of men. Therefore, when Paul condemns human regulations in 2:20-23, he uses the same universal language. In verse 20 Paul asks those in error at Colossae the question (to paraphrase): “Why do you act like unsaved people who are still living in accordance with a pagan worldview and thus subject yourself to human regulations?” Then in verse 21 Paul gives specific examples. Are the man-made regulations mentioned in verse 21 the only human traditions that Paul forbids? No. Given the universal condemnation of human philosophy and tradition that both precedes and follows verse 21, the human requirements of verse 21 must be viewed as a few examples taken from the universal category of human philosophy and traditions. There is no way that Paul’s statement in verse 22, “according to the commandments and doctrines of men,” can be restricted to the regulations of ascetic Gnosticism anymore than the condemnation of human philosophy in verse 8 can be restricted to one Greek sect. Further, the statement in verse 22, “according to the commandments and doctrines of men,” mirrors the condemnation of Jewish traditions in doctrines and ethics found in Isaiah 19:13 and Matthew 15:2-9. The Bible condemns human additions and requirements, whether these man-made traditions in doctrines, ethics or worship are Jewish, Greek, Persian, Roman, German, English or American.

Second, the interpretation that says that Paul forbids the addition of some human philosophies and traditions into the doctrines, ethics and worship of the church, yet permits other human traditions, violates standard orthodox Protestant methods of interpretation. A study of both the Old and New Testaments proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God forbids additions or

subtractions to the doctrine, ethics and worship set forth in divine revelation (Dt. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Gen 4:3-5; Lev. 10:1-2; 2 Sam. 6:3-7; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; Jer. 7:24, 31, 19:5; Isa. 29:13; Num. 15:39-40; Mt. 15:2-9; Jn. 4:24; Rev. 2:18, 19; etc.). This assertion is simply the Reformed confessional understanding of *sola scriptura* which has been discussed in earlier portions of this study. The attempt to make Paul a good Episcopalian, Lutheran or Romanist on the issue of human tradition involves a willful ignorance of the overall teaching of Scripture. The human heart is so incredibly deceitful that through self-deception and the subtleties of human reason it develops loopholes for human autonomy where none exist. Therefore, our only hope for maintaining purity in doctrine, ethics and worship is to strictly adhere to and obey God's commands without departing to the right or to the left.

3. Another passage which disproves the "temple only" theory is John 4:21-24: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.'" When Jesus discussed worship with the Samaritan woman and contrasted old covenant worship with new covenant worship, he taught that worship in both dispensations was to be conducted upon the same principles. Note the phrase, "the hour is coming and now is" (v. 23). Although the death of Christ eliminated all the typical and ceremonial aspects of old covenant worship, the need to worship God "in spirit and truth" was not a new principle, for it was already in effect when Jesus spoke these words. According to Jesus, God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth, *not because the temple represents Christ and the gospel, but because of God's nature and character*. Bushell writes:

The Spirit that is the source of eternal life must also be the source of true worship. If we assume that the Spirit works only in and through His word, it is a fair inference from this principle that all true worship must be founded upon the Holy Scriptures.... Acceptable worship must be consonant with the character of God as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures, and must be in conformity with that sufficient rule at every point. Only that worship that proceeds ultimately from the Spirit through His word is pleasing to God.<sup>91</sup>

This passage of Scripture by itself refutes that idea that the regulative principle applied only to the temple, for when Jesus begins this discussion, it is clear that he was speaking of the temple worship in Jerusalem (v. 21). Therefore, when he says that the same worship principle of "spirit and truth" that is now operative in the old covenant era will also be operative in the new covenant era, he is connecting the strict worship principle that regulated the temple to the new covenant church. If believers of both old and new covenant eras want to worship God properly,

they must do so only in accordance with his nature and character. And the only way to approach God in a manner that pleases him is to approach him on his own terms in accordance with his own rules. This means that worship must be prescribed by Scripture and not by sinful men. God who is truth itself must be worshiped according to truth and not man's imagination. The Westminster Larger Catechism says: "The sins forbidden in the second commandment are: all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving any religious worship not instituted by God Himself..." (Larger Catechism answer 109). The idea that the regulative principle only applied to the tabernacle/temple worship has no biblical support, contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture and therefore must be rejected.

## 4. The "Circumstances of Worship" Argument

A common method of avoiding the full implication of *sola scriptura* in the sphere of worship is to confuse and blur the distinction between worship ordinances and the circumstances of worship. The statement of the Westminster Confession regarding circumstances of worship (1.6) is often used as a justification to introduce human traditions and innovations into the public worship of God. An opponent to the regulative principle writes:

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.<sup>92</sup>

It is common for opponents of the regulative principle (and for men who claim adherence to the regulative principle yet who refuse to apply it to certain areas of worship because of a love of human traditions) to add human innovations and traditions to the worship of God and then arbitrarily declare the additions to be circumstances of worship. This tactic, which leads to the corruption of worship, is simply a more sophisticated, up to date version of the Lutheran notion that their additions all belong to the sphere of *adiaphora*. This method of circumventing the regulative principle is not a direct frontal attack upon *sola scriptura* over worship but rather is clever side-stepping or back-door evasion of the regulative principle. In denominations that adhere to Reformed confessions (thus officially adhering to the regulative principle) yet have backslid and departed from biblical worship, apologists for declension and the status quo have developed some clever unbiblical arguments. Some popular examples of such argumentation are as follows.

1. Some argue that singing is not a separate element of worship but is merely a circumstance of

worship. Bahnsen writes, “Is singing a separate ‘element’ of worship or a ‘circumstance’ of worship? If the latter, it does not require biblical warrant according to the regulative principle. I have argued that singing is simply a means to (one circumstance through which to) pray, praise, exhort, or teach—rather than an element of worship itself.”<sup>93</sup> What Bahnsen is saying is that the general command to praise God is an element of worship, but how this command to praise is carried out is a mere circumstance of worship. Thus, a person could praise God through singing, or silent meditation, or speaking, or even through drama or dance, for the circumstances of worship are not strictly regulated by God’s word.

2. Many argue that musical accompaniment to the singing of praise in public worship is a circumstance of worship. Theologian John Frame gives a typical example of this argument. He writes:

Churches in the Covenanter tradition, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, often justify the use of pitch pipes as ‘circumstance,’ while rejecting the use of organs and pianos as unauthorized ‘elements.’ The logic of this distinction escapes me. If it is legitimate to use a pitch pipe to give the congregation the first note of a song, why shouldn’t we also give the congregation help with the second note, the third, and the rhythm?<sup>94</sup>

Others point out that the use of musical instruments in worship is “common to human actions and societies.” Therefore (they argue) it must be a circumstance of worship.

3. Many pastors and sessions in Reformed or Presbyterian denominations who have special Christmas and Easter services yet who understand that such services have no warrant in God’s word argue that choosing a text for a sermon is a circumstance of worship. Therefore, it is entirely permissible (as a circumstance of worship) for the pastor to preach on the incarnation on or near December 25. Thus, one can find many a Presbyterian church following a Romanist or Anglican church calendar with the excuse that doing so is only a circumstance of worship.<sup>95</sup>

In order to refute arguments intended to circumvent Scripture’s sole authority in authorizing worship elements, it is necessary to briefly consider the difference between the circumstances of worship and worship ordinances. The first difference is that *worship ordinances are prescribed or determined from Scripture*. Every part or element of worship must be based on either an explicit command from the Bible (e.g., “Do this in remembrance of Me” [Lk. 22:19]); or an approved historical example from Scripture (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate worship);<sup>96</sup> or by logical inference from the Bible (i.e., there may not be an explicit command but when several passages are compared they teach or infer a scriptural practice).<sup>97</sup> Because the elements of worship must be proved from Scripture,

they are finite in number; and, because the canon of Scripture is closed, the elements are fixed and unchanging. The circumstances of worship are not determinable from the Bible. Although public worship is required on the Lord's day (the Christian sabbath), the time to meet is not prescribed. Other circumstances of worship are: the type of building to meet in; the type of seating; the location of the meeting house; the particular psalm selections; the choice of what text to preach on; the choice of Scripture reading, etc. The circumstances of worship are determined by Christian prudence (i.e., sanctified common sense) according to the general rules of Scripture (e.g.: What time to meet would be the most convenient and edifying for the congregation? What Psalm selections are most appropriate for the sermon text? What type of building design will help the congregation focus on the preached word? etc.). Some circumstances are determined by the pastor (e.g., the sermon text); others by the session (e.g., the time to meet) and others by heads of households and individuals (e.g., Should I wear a blue, black grey or brown suit to church? etc.). Unlike worship elements, the circumstances of worship are virtually infinite in number and frequently change. Remember, if something in public worship is determinable by Scripture, then it cannot be a circumstance of worship. Furthermore, note that only God has the authority to take something that is a circumstance of worship and make it a worship ordinance. For example, there is nothing intrinsically special regarding any particular day of the week. Yet God has the authority to set aside a particular day and make it religiously significant. There is nothing religiously significant or special regarding any particular piece of land on the earth. Yet, in the old covenant era, God made Jerusalem and the temple a special religious place. Therefore, when men add their own holy day, or make up a holy place or object, or bring musical instruments or non-inspired hymns into the worship of Jehovah, they are usurping God's authority.

Once one understands that worship ordinances are commanded or prescribed by Scripture then he will not be misguided by those who attempt to blur the distinction between the elements or parts of worship and the circumstances of worship. For example (as noted above), many pastors today argue that the use of musical instruments in public worship is a circumstance of worship. To someone who is not familiar with the Bible this argument sounds plausible. After all, are not musical instruments used in all cultures and nations? Are they not also commonly used in religious ceremonies? The problem with this argument is that the use of musical instruments was commanded by God and only priests and Levites were authorized to play them in association with the temple cultus (Num. 10:18, 10; 1 Chr. 15:14-24, 23:5, 28:11-13, 19; 2 Chr. 5:11-14, 29:26; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:27, etc.). If musical instruments were only a circumstance of worship, and if any Israelite could play musical instruments in worship, then such commands would be totally unnecessary and out of place. Something incidental to worship *by nature* is incidental or discretionary in all circumstances.

Second, anything in worship which holds a religious or moral significance is an element or part of worship and therefore must have divine warrant. The circumstances of worship are

“common to human actions and societies.” Note the following illustrations for clarification. If a church in first-century Palestine had a bucket of water inside the door that believers used to rinse the dust off their feet before they sat down, then this rinsing of the feet would not be religiously significant. But if the elders of that church instructed church members to dip their hand in the water and make the sign of the cross or take some water and toss it in the air while saying a certain prayer, then they would be guilty of adding a human tradition to the worship of God. Many pastors have a glass of water on or near the pulpit to drink during the sermon. There is nothing religiously significant regarding a glass of water. However, if the pastor blesses the glass of water and then dips a baby rattle in it and starts sprinkling church members while mumbling in Latin, then he has added a human tradition to worship. Today there are many human additions to worship that clearly have crossed the line and are regarded as holding a special, sacred or religious significance (e.g., the sign of the cross, holy water, priestly garments, prayer candles, kneeling at communion, the altar call, religious drama, liturgical dance, the “Christian” calendar, saints’ days, holy days [apart from the Sabbath], etc.).

Third, worship ordinances are practices that are required by Scripture and therefore are not voluntary or optional. That is, they are biblically necessary. Church members do not have the option of eliminating the sermon, the Scripture reading or the sacraments, etc. (in fact, evangelicals often consider sects that omit such things as cults). Circumstances are not required or biblically necessary. Worship services are not dependent upon buildings, seating and pulpits. The circumstances of worship are matters that can be changed, eliminated or added without any consequence to public worship. No Christian would argue that the Lord’s supper was optional. Yet would anyone be taken seriously who argued that a music soloist, or a drama skit, or a puppet show, or a rock band, or an altar call, or an incense procession, or a whirling dervish were necessary aspects of worship? When churches take non-required and unnecessary human traditions and add them to the worship of God, they detract from what God has prescribed; mix that which is profane with that which is truly religiously significant; and offend God who has not appointed such things.

The attempt to broaden the definition of the circumstances of worship, or to blur the distinction between worship elements and circumstances, or to merge distinct elements into broad categories, is unscriptural and anti-Confessional.<sup>98</sup> One must never treat the elements of worship as abstractions that can be molded to fit one’s own preconceptions of what is permissible in worship. The proper biblical interpretive procedure lets the Bible tell us what the distinct elements of worship are and lets Scripture delineate the rules for each element. Although it is true that the elements of singing praise, preaching or teaching and prayer can have certain aspects in common (e.g., many psalms contains prayer, prayer can contain praise and sermons can contain praise and supplication, etc.), the idea that these distinct elements can be collapsed into one category (e.g., teaching) or that the specific rules given by Scripture for

one element can be applied to the other parts of worship completely breaks down when one examines the specific rules and context that the Bible gives to each separate ordinance. Note the follow examples.

1. One element is preaching from the Bible (Mt. 26:13; Mk 16:15; Ac. 9:20; 17:10; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 2 Tim. 4:2). Preaching involves reasoning from the Scriptures (cf. Ac. 17:2-3; 18:4, 19; 24:25) and explaining or expounding God's word (cf. Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). New covenant teachers did not speak by divine interpretation but interpreted divinely inspired Scripture. In the same manner the Old Testament Levitical teachers explained and interpreted the inscripturated law to the covenant people (cf. Neh. 8:7-8; Lev. 10:8-11; Dt. 17:8-13; 24:8; 31:9-13; 33:8; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:7-9; 19:8-10; 30:22; 35:3; Ezr. 7:1-11; Ezek. 44:15, 23-24; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:1, 5-8). There are specific biblical rules that apply to preaching that distinguish it from other elements such as praise and prayer. While both men and women can pray (Ac. 1:13-14, 1 Cor. 11:5) and sing praise (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 1:5) only men (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14) who are called by God and set apart to the gospel ministry can preach (Mt. 28:18-20; Ac. 9:15; 13:1-5; Rom. 10:14-15; Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 4:2, etc.). Therefore, the idea that singing praise is not an element of worship but only one way to teach or a circumstance of teaching is clearly unscriptural. If singing praise was simply one given method of teaching, then women would be forbidden to sing praise in church, for they are forbidden to teach in the public assemblies. Furthermore, if singing were a circumstance of worship, then it would be optional and could be excluded from public worship altogether.

2. Another part of worship is the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Unlike preaching, where the minister uses his own uninspired words to exposit Scripture, singing praise involves only the use of Spirit-inspired songs. In the Bible prophetic inspiration was a requirement for writing worship songs for the church (cf. Ex. 15:20-21; Jdg. 5; Isa. 5:1; 26:1ff; 2 Sam 23:1, 2; 1 Chr. 25:5; 2 Chr. 29:30; 35:15; Mt. 22:43-44; Mk. 12:36; Ac. 1:16-17; 2:29-31; 4:24-25). The writing of worship songs in the Old Testament was so intimately connected with prophetic inspiration that 2 Kings 23:2 and 2 Chronicles 34:30 use the term "Levite" and "prophet" interchangeably.

3. Reading the Bible is also a part of public worship (Mk. 4:16-20; Ac. 1:13; 13:15; 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:13). Obviously, Scripture reading requires reading from the Bible alone. Reading from the Apocrypha or Shakespeare or uninspired Christian poetry or theology books cannot be substituted for this element. Scripture reading, like preaching but unlike singing praise, is restricted to ministers of the gospel (Ex. 24:7; Josh 8:34-35; Dt. 31:9-13; Neh. 8:7-8; 13:1; 1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:3).

4. Another element of worship is prayer to God (Dt. 22:5; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Th. 5:17;

Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5). Unlike the elements of singing praise and reading the Scriptures, the Bible authorizes the use of our own words in prayer, as long as we follow the pattern or model given to us by Christ (cf. Mt. 6:9). God promises his people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

A brief consideration of the elements of worship noted above proves that the rules that apply to one element (e.g., prayer) cannot be applied to another element (e.g., singing praise or reading the Bible) without violating Scripture. Our consideration has also proved that collapsing various elements into broad categories violates God's word. The only reason people artificially construct such broad categories is to avoid the specific rules that God has instituted for each particular element of worship. Feminists do so to accommodate women reading the Scriptures and preaching in church. Others do so to allow a drama group to substitute for the sermon. There are also many who do so in order to substitute the uninspired songs of men for the inspired Psalms of God.

## 5. The “Jesus Accepted and Participated in Human Traditions” Argument

A popular argument against the regulative principle is that Jesus himself did not believe in it, for he accepted and even participated in man-made religious traditions. It is argued that Jesus celebrated the Passover according to the non-authorized Rabbinical tradition; that is, the Jewish Seder with all its human additions. Regarding the Jewish Seder (Hebrew for “order”) there is no question but that the Pharisees added their own rituals to the meal. Wilson writes:

The meal included various symbolic elements, each consumed at specified points throughout the evening. These included roasted lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, [*haroset*] (pastry mixture of nuts, fruit, and wine), and a raw vegetable dipped into a tart liquid. At various intervals four cups of wine, a symbol of joy, were consumed. The wine was probably mixed with water and heated (cf. *Pesachim* vii.13). Ritual hand-washings, prayers, and portions of the Hallel (Pss. 113-119) also punctuated the observance.<sup>99</sup>

What is the textual evidence that is offered as proof that Jesus participated in the various Rabbinical additions? The only “evidence” that is offered is the fact that Jesus drank wine. It is *assumed* that since Christ and the apostles had wine with their meal, that they must also have participated in a Seder with its additional rituals. Note: *Not one* of the Jewish additions—the rituals of the Seder—is mentioned in any of the various accounts of the Last Supper. When the virtually universal practice of the Jews in Jesus' day was to drink wine with their meals, is the Jewish Seder theory a necessary inference from the text or pure speculation? Is it theologically



and pastorally responsible to develop a theology of worship on pure speculation and guesswork?

But what about the use of wine? Some argue that since the use of wine is not commanded in the original institution of the Passover it therefore is a human innovation in a religious ritual. Is the use of wine a violation of the regulative principle? No, for the Passover was a meal, and the drinking of a beverage is an ordinary, necessary circumstance of eating (especially if one is eating roasted lamb, unyeasted bread and bitter herbs). During the feast of unleavened bread the Israelites were commanded to eat unleavened bread for seven days (Ex. 12:15ff.) Yet nothing is mentioned whatsoever of any beverages to be drunk. Obviously God was not requiring the Jews to die of thirst in the hot Egyptian climate. The fact that Christ and the disciples drank wine with (or after) their meal was not significant at all until Jesus made it a gospel ordinance in the Lord's supper. An argument from an historical account must be based on the written account itself, not on assumptions about what happened.

Not only is the "Jewish Seder" theory totally speculative, but it also violates standard Protestant methods of interpretation (i.e., the analogy of Scripture). Whenever an interpreter encounters a difficult or unclear passage, he must use the clearer portions of Scripture to interpret the less clear. Does it make sense to interpret Jesus' actions at the Last Supper in a manner that contradicts the clear teaching of both the Old and New Testaments? Are the *sola scriptura* or *regulative principle* passages unclear or difficult to understand? Should one choose an interpretation that makes Jesus look incompetent and hypocritical? Jesus frequently condemned the Pharisees for adding human traditions to God's word, including religious hand washings (Mt. 15:2ff.). Would our Lord participate in the Jewish Seder *which included ritual hand washings*<sup>100</sup> after he condemned the Pharisees in the strongest of terms for the exact same behavior?

Note also the foundation of the "Seder theory" is not the inspired Scriptures but the Jewish Mishnah. The Mishnah is a compilation of rabbinical oral traditions that date from around 200 B.C. until about A.D. 200. The Mishnah was compiled primarily by Rabbi Judah ("Ha Nasi" or the "Prince") along with other Jewish scholars around A.D. 189. Because most of what was written down at that time came by way of oral tradition, no one is sure how much the Mishnah accurately reflects Jewish traditions. Edersheim writes: "It has already been hinted more than once that the law laid down in the Mishnah frequently represents the theories and speculations of the Jewish doctors of the second century A.D., and not the actual practice of any given period. Several of their regulations deal accordingly with obsolete customs, and have little regard to the actual circumstances of the time."<sup>101</sup> While it is understandable that a Christian scholar would examine the Mishnah in an attempt to shed light upon the social milieu of first century Palestine, it is incredible that pastors and scholars of "Reformed" persuasion would look to such an untrustworthy and blasphemous document<sup>102</sup> to undermine *sola scriptura*.

Another popular argument is that Jesus celebrated Chanukah because he was present at its celebration according to John 10:22-23. "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch." Does this passage of Scripture prove or even imply that Jesus accepted and participated in human traditions in worship? No. There are many reasons why such a view must be rejected. First, one cannot ascertain from the text if Jesus even celebrated the Feast of Dedication. The passage does not say that Christ went to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of dedication, but merely that he was in Jerusalem at that time. Many excellent commentators (e.g., Hengstenburg, Meyer, Weiss and others) argue that Jesus had been staying in Jerusalem since the feast of tabernacles. Second, there is nothing significant regarding our Lord's presence in Jerusalem at the time of this feast, for it was not a feast that occurred only in Jerusalem. Chanukah was celebrated throughout the whole nation. John is not making a statement regarding Jesus' attitude toward Chanukah, but is merely giving an historical setting to the addresses that follow. Third, even if Christ went to Jerusalem to be there during the feast, the chapter as a whole indicates that he went there to teach. Gillespie writes:

[W]e must remember, that the circumstances only of time and place are noted by the evangelist, for evidence to the story, and not for any mystery. Christ had come up to the feast of tabernacles (John 7), and tarried still all that while, because then there was a great confluence of people in Jerusalem. Whereupon he took occasion to spread the net of the gospel for catching of many souls. And whilst John says, 'It was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication,' he gives a reason only of the confluence of many people at Jerusalem, and shows how it came to pass that Christ had occasions to preach to such a multitude; and whilst he adds, 'and it was winter,' he gives reason of Christ's walking in Solomon's porch, whither the Jews resort was. It was not thought beseeming to walk in the temple itself, but in the porch men used to convene either for talking or walking, because in the summer the porch shadowed them from the heat. Others think, that whilst he says, it was winter, imports that therefore Christ was the more frequently in the temple, knowing that his time was short which he had then for his preaching; for in the entry of the next spring he was to suffer.<sup>103</sup>

There is not one shred of evidence that our Lord participated in any man-made rituals. (Note: Paul preached at the Areopagus [Ac. 17:22ff.], not because he had a favorable attitude toward Greek philosophy, but because it provided an excellent evangelistic opportunity.)

Fourth, Jesus' presence does not prove that he celebrated the Feast of Dedication, for the celebration of Chanukah did not involve any holy convocations. Further, it was not a religious sabbath in which people were required to cease from their labors.

Fifth, most commentators who speculate regarding the apostle's mention of the feast argue that here Jesus dedicates himself to death (cf. Pink, Lightfoot, Stachen, etc.). In other words, the mention of the feast points to Christ, not human tradition.

Sixth (as noted above), one should never choose an interpretation that violates the analogy of Scripture. It is exegetically irresponsible to read into a text what is not there (eisegesis) and then use that speculative interpretation to overthrow the many clear passages of Scripture which unequivocally condemn human traditions in the religious sphere. Such a procedure is nothing more than self-deception, excuse making and a grasping after straw.

Another argument (that Jesus countenanced human traditions in worship) is based on the idea that our Lord gave his blessing to two Jewish ceremonies that were likely added after the close of the Old Testament canon. These rituals were associated with the feast of Tabernacles. It is argued that Jesus' strategically placed statements (that played off these ceremonies) prove that he did not condemn such human traditions. A brief examination of these passages will prove that such a conclusion is unwarranted.

This first passage is John 7:37-39. "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." F. F. Bruce give an explanation of the festival as it would have been celebrated in Jesus' day.

The festival lasted eight days, and on the eighth day was 'a holy convocation...a solemn assembly' (Lev. 23:36; cf. Num. 29:35ff.; Neh. 8:18). When the people thanked God at the celebration of Tabernacles for all the fruits of the past year—vine and olive as well as barley and wheat—they did not forget his gift of rain, apart from which none of those crops would have grown. An association of this festival with adequate rainfall is implied in Zech. 14:16f., and although the ceremony of water-pouring, well attested in connexion with Tabernacles for the two centuries preceding AD 70, is not mentioned in the OT (with the doubtful exception of 1 Sam. 7:6), it was probably of very considerable antiquity. This ceremony, which was intended to acknowledge God's goodness in sending rain and to ensure a plentiful supply for the following season, was enacted at dawn on the first seven days of the festival. A procession led by a priest went down to the pool of Siloam, where a golden pitcher was filled with water, and returned to the temple as the morning sacrifice was being offered. The water was then poured into a funnel at the west side of the altar, and the temple choir began to sing the Great

Jesus made his statement on the eighth day when no water was poured by the priests. Many commentators believe our Lord purposely timed his statement to dramatize and emphasize the need for true spiritual life-giving water.

The second passage is John 8:12. “Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, ‘I am the light of the world, He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.’” Some commentators believe that Jesus’ statement regarding “the light of the world” was a purposeful comparison of himself to the large brilliant golden lamps that were placed in the Court of Women and were lit at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles.

There are a number of reasons why the idea that these passages prove that Jesus accepted and approved of human traditions in worship must be rejected. First, neither of the passages in question say that our Lord approved of man-made traditions. The idea that Christ approved of human additions is simply assumed with no textual evidence. Is it not wise to follow what the Bible says instead of rejecting what it says in favor of what it does not say? Second, a theory, hypothesis or speculative interpretation should never be used to overturn the clear teaching of Scripture. The whole idea that Jesus was setting forth his approbation of human traditions is an argument from silence. It is not founded upon the text but on the uninspired Mishnah which was composed by unbelieving Jews in A.D. 189. (Commentators are not in agreement regarding these passages. In fact, most commentators do not believe that our Lord was comparing himself to certain rituals but rather was comparing himself to events in the book of Exodus (the water from the rock [Ex. 17:6; Nu. 20:7-11] and the pillar of fire [Ex. 13:21-22]).[105](#) Perhaps we should heed Hengstenberg’s comment. He writes: “It is needless to spend time in forming hypotheses, externally accounting for the saying of our Lord, by the rising of the sun, the kindling of the lamps in the temple, etc. If anything significant of this kind had taken place, the Apostle would not have left us to guess about it.”[106](#) Third, even if Jesus did make his statements to coincide with certain Jewish rituals, it does not mean that he approved of man-made additions. If a pastor (who happens to be anti-Christmas) passes out gospel tracts at the shopping mall in December, or preaches in the mall and refers to Christ’s work of redemption as a gift from God, it does not mean that he approves of Christmas. One should be careful not to read something into a passage that is not there. Fourth, a more logical and scriptural inference from these passages is not that he was approving of their additions but rather that he was teaching that the law and the prophets did not point to silly rituals but to himself.[107](#) Contrary to modern popular opinion, Jesus was neither a Pharisee or a papist.

But what about the argument that says, “If Jesus was a strict regulativist, would he not have physically attacked the priests and Levites of the temple who were adding to God’s word as he had earlier done with the money changers?” The argument that Christ would have attacked the

priests and Levites if he believed in the regulative principle is based on an ignorance of Scripture. Jesus did not come to earth as a civil judge (cf. Luke 12:13-14; John 8:1-11). His opinion of Pharisaical additions to God's law was well known through his teaching (e.g., Mt 5:17-6:8; 15:2-9; 23:1-36; etc.). If Jesus became angry and resorted to whips every time he encountered sin, he would have had little time to preach the gospel, which was his primary didactic mission. Further, the priests and Levites were not common merchants or money changers; they held positions of authority. If our Lord had attacked them, he would have: (1) been committing an act of revolution; (2) precipitated a riot at the temple; (3) prematurely endangered his own life and the lives of his disciples; and (4) possibly even been arrested by the Roman authorities. Jesus dealt with apostate priests and Levites in A.D. 70; however, while on earth he respected lawful governing authorities (cf. Mt. 23:2-3; Ac. 23:1-5). The opponents of the regulative principle are once again grasping after straw.

## 6. The “Feast of Purim” Argument

Perhaps the most popular argument in support of human traditions in worship is based on the Feast of Purim. It is argued that the Jews without any command or special revelation from God made up their own holy day; therefore, the church can make up its own holy days such as Christmas and Easter.

There are a number of problems with this argument. First, this argument assumes without evidence that Purim was a special holy day like Christmas. The biblical text makes it abundantly clear that Purim was not a special religious holy day but rather was a time of thanksgiving. The events of Purim are: “Joy and gladness, a feast and good day...and of sending portions to one another, and gifts to the poor” (Est. 8:17; 9:22 kjv). “There is no mention of any religious observance connected with the day.”<sup>108</sup> There were no special worship services, there were no ceremonies, there were no Levitical or priestly activities. Also, Purim—unlike Christmas and Easter—was not an admixture of pagan and popish monuments and paraphernalia with the religion of Jehovah. Purim should not be compared to popish holy days, such as Christmas, but to special days of rejoicing such as Thanksgiving day. The Westminster divines (who were champions of the regulative principle) used Purim as a proof text (Est. 9:22) authorizing occasional days of thanksgiving (cf. Confession of Faith 21.5, proof text a).

Second, Purim did not come about because the people or church officials got together and decided to make up a holy day. It came about because of a unique historical event in Israel's salvation history. The festival was decreed by the civil magistrate (the prime minister, Mordecai, and the queen, Esther). Religious leaders had nothing to do with it. After the civil decree, it was agreed to unanimously by the people. Thomas M'Crie writes:

Did Mordecai, in proposing it, act from the private notion of his own mind; and, in confirming it, did he proceed entirely upon the consent of the people? Or was he guided in both by divine and extraordinary counsel, imparted to him immediately, or by some prophetic person living at that time? That the vision and the prophecy were still enjoyed by the Jews dwelling in Persia, cannot be denied by those who believe the canonical authority of this book, and what is contained in that of Ezra. We have already seen reasons for thinking Mordecai acted under the influence of the faith of Moses' parents, from the time that he proposed his cousin Esther as a candidate to succeed Vashti the queen. There can be no doubt that he was raised up in an extraordinary manner as a saviour to Israel; and in the course of this Lecture we have seen grounds for believing that, in addition to his other honours, he was employed as the penman of this portion of inspired scripture. From all these considerations, it is reasonable to conclude that the feast of Purim was not instituted without divine counsel and approbation. Add to this, that the decree of Esther confirming it, it is expressly said, in the close of this chapter, to have been engrossed in this book, by whomsoever it was written.<sup>109</sup>

Note, the occasion and authorization of Purim are inscripturated in the word of God and approved by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Purim itself satisfied the requirement of the regulative principle as biblically defined.

Third, the notion that Purim proves that men are permitted to make up holy days whenever they desire cannot be true, for if it were, Scripture would contain a blatant contradiction. Not only would it contradict the passages which teach that we are not permitted to add to what God has authorized (e.g. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5; etc.); it also would contradict the book of Kings where God condemned King Jeroboam for setting up a feast day "in the month which he had devised in his own heart" (1 Kgs. 12:33). Not even kings have authority to make up their own holy days. M'Crie writes:

To seek a warrant for days of religious commemoration under the gospel from the Jewish festivals, is not only to overlook the distinction between the old and new dispensations, but to forget that the Jews were never allowed to institute such memorial for themselves, but simply to keep those which infinite Wisdom had expressly and by name set apart and sanctified. The prohibitory sanction is equally strict under both Testaments: 'What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.'

There are times when God calls, on the one hand, to religious fasting, or, on the other, to thanksgiving and religious joy; and it is our duty to comply with these calls, and to set apart time for the respective exercises. But this is quite a different

thing from recurrent or anniversary holidays. In the former case the day is chosen for the duty, in the latter the duty is performed for the day; in the former case there is no holiness on the day but what arises from the service which is performed on it, and when the same day afterwards recurs, it is as common as any other day; in the latter case the day is set apart on all following times, and may not be employed for common or secular purposes. Stated and recurring festivals countenance the false principle, that some days have a peculiar sanctity, either inherent or impressed by the works which occurred on them; they proceed on an undue assumption of human authority; interfere with the free use of that time which the Creator hath granted to man; detract from the honour due to the day of sacred rest which he hath appointed; lead to impositions over conscience; have been the fruitful source of superstition and idolatry; and have been productive of the worst effects upon morals, in every age, and among every people, barbarous and civilized, pagan and Christian, popish and protestant, among whom they have been observed. On these grounds they were rejected from the beginning, among other corruptions of antichrist, by the Reformed Church of Scotland, which allowed no stated religious days but the Christian Sabbath. [110](#)

## 7. The “Misrepresentation of the Regulative Principle” Argument

A rather common method of circumventing the regulative principle today is to give it a false definition that is scripturally and rationally indefensible. After defining the regulative principle in this manner, the opponents of *sola scriptura* over worship then proceed to make their false straw-man version of the regulative principle look totally absurd. The false version of the regulative principle that is used is: “If it is not commanded, it is forbidden.” In other words, there must be an explicit divine imperative for every worship ordinance in the church. Fundamentalist Baptists argue in this manner when they say, “Where are we commanded in the Bible to baptize infants?” Seventh-day Adventists follow this tactic when they say, “Show us where God commanded the apostolic church to rest and worship on Sunday instead of Saturday!” Anti-regulativists use arguments such as: (a) the worship of the synagogue was never commanded by God; (b) Christ and the apostles attended and approved of synagogue worship; therefore, Christ and the apostles rejected the regulative principle. [111](#)

Once a person understands the true definition of the regulative principle, he will immediately recognize that the objections to Reformed worship offered by Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and anti-regulativists are not based on Scripture, but on an ignorance of the regulative principle itself. Although it is not uncommon to see a regulativist give a statement such as “if it is not commanded, it is forbidden” as a brief statement or summary of the principle, the Westminster

Confession and virtually all Reformed authors define the regulative principle in a much broader fashion. The regulative principle refers *not just* to explicit commands of Scripture, but also to approved historical examples within the Bible and to good and necessary consequence, i.e., a particular worship practice or ordinance is inferred from many passages of Scripture.

The Confession and various Reformed authors will prove that the genuine, historic and confessional understanding of the regulative principle is broad and easily defended by Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1.6) says:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and 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.

For the Westminster divines, *sola scriptura* is the natural starting point for the regulative principle as a spring is to a stream. There can be no question whatsoever but that the phrase “good and necessary consequence” applies to the worship and government of the church. To argue otherwise would render the section on the “circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church” totally out of place.

John Owen, in his essay, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship,” deals with an opponent of Puritanism, Samuel Parker. Owen says that Parker considers the “foundation of all Puritanism” to be this principle: “That nothing ought to be established in the worship of God but what is authorized by some precept or example in the Word of God, which is the complete and adequate rule of worship.”<sup>112</sup> This accurate definition was formulated by Parker by reading the available Puritan literature of his day (the seventeenth century).

Robert Shaw writes:

In maintaining the perfection of the Scriptures, we do not insist that every article of religion is contained in Scriptures in so many words; but we hold that conclusions fairly deduced from the declarations of the Word of God are as truly parts of divine revelation as if they were expressly taught in the Sacred Volume. That good and necessary consequences deduced from Scripture are to be received



as part of the rule of our faith and practice, is evident from the example of our Saviour in proving the doctrine of the resurrection against the Sadducees,—Matt. xxii. 31,32; and from the example of Paul, who proved that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, by reasoning with the Jews out of the Old Testament Scriptures.—Acts xvii. 2, 3. “All Scripture” is declared to be “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;” but all these ends cannot be obtained, unless by the deduction of consequences. Legitimate consequences, indeed, only bring out the full meaning of the words of Scripture; and as we are endued with the faculty of reason, and commanded to search the Scriptures, it was manifestly intended that we should draw conclusions from what is therein set down in express words.<sup>113</sup>

Hetherington writes: “They [the Scottish Reformers] dared, therefore, to conclude that Divine authority might be rightfully claimed, not only for the direct statements contained in the Scriptures, but also for whatsoever could be deduced from Scripture by just and necessary inference.”<sup>114</sup>

Francis Petticrew writes:

A practice about a mere matter of detail, a mere circumstance, a thing held by the Church to be indifferent, immaterial, and on purpose left open, does not constitute common law. But a practice founded on a principle does to all intents and purposes constitute common law. And this is the character of the practice of this Church in excluding the use of instrumental music in the worship of God. That principle was substantially this, that for all the constituents of worship, you require the positive sanction of divine authority, either in the shape of direct command, or good and necessary consequence, or approved example; and that you are not at liberty to introduce anything else in connection with the worship of God, unless it comes legitimately under the apostolic heading of “decency and order.”<sup>115</sup>

James H. Thornwell writes: “We have not been able to lay our hands upon a single Puritan Confession of Faith which does not explicitly teach that necessary inferences from Scripture are of equal authority with its express statements: nor have we found a single Puritan writer, having occasion to allude to the subject, who has not explicitly taught the same things. The *principle of inference* they have unanimously affirmed. Our own Confession of Faith—and surely that is a Puritan document—does it, in a passage already cited.”<sup>116</sup>

John L. Girardeau writes: “A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements,

*is forbidden.*"[117](#)

A. A. Hodge writes:

That, while the Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice, and while nothing is to be regarded as an article of faith to be believed, or a religious duty obligatory upon the conscience, which is not explicitly or implicitly taught in Scripture, nevertheless they do not descend in practical matters into details, but, laying down general principles, leave men to apply them in the exercise of their natural judgment, in the light of experience, and in adaptation to changing circumstances, as they are guided by the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit.

This liberty, of course, is allowed only within the limits of the strict interpretation of the principles taught in the Word, and in the legitimate application of those principles, and applies to the regulation of the practical life of the individual and of the Church, in detailed adjustments to changing circumstances.[118](#)

B. B. Warfield writes:

It must be observed, however, that the teachings and prescriptions of Scripture are not confined by the Confession to what is "expressly set down in Scripture." Men are required to believe and to obey not only what is "expressly set down in Scripture," but also what "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." This is the strenuous and universal contention of the Reformed theology against Socinians and Arminians, who desired to confine the authority of Scripture to its literal assertions; and it involves a characteristic honoring of reason as the instrument for the ascertainment of truth. We must depend upon our human faculties to ascertain what Scripture *says*; we cannot suddenly abnegate them and refuse their guidance in determining what Scripture *means*. This is not, of course, to make reason the ground of the authority of inferred doctrines and duties. Reason is the instrument of discovery of all doctrines and duties, whether "expressly set down in Scripture" or "by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture": but their authority, when once discovered, is derived from God, who reveals and prescribes them in Scripture, either by literal assertion or by necessary implication. The Confession is only zealous, as it declares that only Scripture is the authoritative rule of faith and practice, so to declare that the whole of Scripture is authoritative in the whole stretch of its involved meaning. It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications. The reemergence in recent controversies of the plea that the authority of Scripture is to

be confined to its expressed declarations, and that human logic is not to be trusted in divine things, is, therefore, a direct denial of a fundamental position of Reformed theology, explicitly affirmed in the Confession, as well as an abnegation of fundamental reason, which would not only render thinking in a system impossible, but would discredit at a stroke many of the fundamentals of the faith, such e.g. as the doctrine of the Trinity, and would logically involve the denial of the authority of all doctrine whatsoever, since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the processes of the understanding. It is, therefore, an unimportant incident that the recent plea against the use of human logic in determining doctrine has been most sharply put forward in order to reject a doctrine which is explicitly taught, and that repeatedly, in the very letter of Scripture; if the plea is valid at all, it destroys at once our confidence in all doctrines, no one of which is ascertained or formulated without the aid of human logic.<sup>119</sup>

William S. McClure writes: “God’s commands are either explicit, clearly stated, or they are implicit, implied as a logical, necessary inference from authoritative example, such as that of Christ or His Apostles.”<sup>120</sup>

William Young writes: “The mode of prescription need not be that of explicit command in single text of Scripture. Approved example warrants an element of worship as surely as does an express precept. Moreover, good and necessary consequence may warrant acceptable worship. Without entering upon disputed questions as to the proper subjects of baptism, all would agree that Scripture warrants the admission of women to the Lord’s table, although no express command or approved example can be adduced.”<sup>121</sup>

Michael Bushell writes:

When we say that each element of worship requires a divine warrant, we do not mean that an explicit command in a single text is required in every instance. Commandment in the narrow sense of the term is not necessary to establish divine prescription. Approved example or inference from relevant scriptural data is sufficient to determine the proper manner of worship. The *Confession of Faith* clearly operates on the assumption that principles derived from the Word by “good and necessary consequence” are every bit as binding upon us as those “expressly set down in Scripture.” It is remarkable that there is so much confusion in Reformed circles concerning the validity of this essential principle.... The assumed validity and binding character of argument by inference from Scripture is an essential part of the life of every Christian and lies at the base of every statement of doctrine or belief that goes beyond the express words of Scripture. Certainly we

may want from time to time to question the validity of inferences which some people draw, but that is a different question altogether from that of whether or not the church *may* bind the conscience of a believer on the basis of an inference from Scripture.<sup>122</sup>

It is important that one understand the proper, broad interpretation of the regulative principle, for anti-regulativists often point to historical examples in the Bible as proof texts against *sola scriptura* over worship. When an anti-regulativist comes to a worship practice in the Bible that does not have a prior *inscripturated* divine imperative behind it, it is *assumed* that such practices must have originated from human tradition. When a Puritan or Reformed regulativist encounters a worship practice that is approved by God, yet is not accompanied by an explicit command, it is assumed (based on the analogy of Scripture) that such a practice is based on some prior revelation that did not make it into the canon. For example, John Owen writes:

For a long time God was pleased to guide his church in many concerns of his worship by fresh occasional revelations, even from the giving of the first promise unto Adam unto the solemn giving of the law of Moses; for although men had, in process of time, many *stated revelations*, that were preserved by tradition among them, as the first promise, the institution of sacrifices, and the like, yet as to sundry emergencies of his worship, and parts of it, God guided them by new occasional revelations. Now, those revelations not being recorded in Scriptures, as being only for present or emergent use, we have no way to know them but by what those to whom God was pleased to reveal himself did practice, and which, on good testimony, found acceptance with him. Whatever they so did, they had especial warrant from God for; which is the case of the great institution of sacrifices itself. It is a sufficient argument that they were divinely instituted, because they were graciously accepted.<sup>123</sup>

Opponents of the regulative principle argue that the Puritan or Reformed understanding of “approved historical examples” is an argument of begging the question (i.e., assuming that which one sets out to prove); or, that it is an argument from silence; or, that regulativists are guilty of forcing the evidence to fit their own faulty starting point. All these objections, however, are easily refuted if one understands necessary inference from Scripture and follows standard Protestant procedures of interpretation.

One of the most fundamental principles of biblical interpretation is that Scripture cannot contradict itself. Another important principle is that when two or more passages seem to contradict each other, the clearer portions of Scripture should be used to interpret the less clear. If one follows these interpretive rules, determining which understanding of an approved historical example is biblical will be simple.

Note the many reasons why the regulativist approach must be accepted. (1) There are several passages in the Bible which unequivocally condemn adding to God's law-word (e.g., Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5). (2) Man is not permitted autonomously to determine his own ethics, theology or worship. (3) There are also passages where both Christ (e.g., Mt. 15:2-9; Mk. 7:1-13) and Paul (e.g., Col. 2:20-23) condemn human traditions in worship. These passages are not hard to understand. Indeed, they are crystal clear, if one is willing to accept what they say. Given the clear teaching of Scripture regarding adding human traditions to ethics or worship, what interpretation should one choose when one encounters Jesus or the apostles engaging in worship that is not specifically discussed in the Old Testament Scriptures?

If one argues that Jesus by his attendance at synagogue was endorsing human traditions in worship, then one has chosen an interpretation which contradicts clear portions of Scripture. If one argues that the *sola scriptura* and regulative principle passages must be reinterpreted in light of passages such as Jesus attending synagogue worship or the change of public worship to Sunday, then one is guilty of using passages which do not even speak directly to the issue of human tradition in worship (and thus are not clear passages) to overthrow the clear passages that do speak directly to the issue of human additions. When regulativists approach passages where God accepts the worship offered, yet there are no accompanying divine imperatives, they do not simply argue from silence or impose an arbitrary starting point or assumption on the text. Instead, they stand upon the overall clear teaching regarding worship and therefore legitimately infer that what God accepts cannot be "the doctrines and commandments of men."

The regulativist position is not only supported by standard biblical hermeneutical procedures but is also supported by an inspired New Testament interpretation of an Old Testament worship practice that was not accompanied by any inscripturated divine commands. Genesis 4:3-5 says, "And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell." In this passage Abel's blood sacrifice is accepted, while Cain's bloodless plant offering is not. Note, there are no previously recorded divine imperatives regarding blood sacrifice in the book of Genesis. If one applies the same anti-regulativist interpretation to this passage that has been used of Jesus and the synagogue service, then one would have to conclude that God preferred Abel's human tradition over Cain's. The author of Hebrews implicitly rejects the anti-regulativist's interpretation when he says that "by faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain" (Heb. 11:4). Biblical faith presupposes divine revelation. Throughout Hebrews 11 true faith is spoken of as a belief in God's word that results in obedience to God's revealed will. Any idea that Abel's offering was based on reason alone, or that God's acceptance of the blood sacrifice was arbitrary or based on the subjective state of Abel's heart alone, must be rejected as

unscriptural. John Brown concurs.

Though we have no particular account of the institution of sacrifice, the theory of its originating in express divine appointment is the only tenable one. The idea of expressing religious feelings, or of expiating sin, by shedding the blood of animals, could never have entered into the mind of man. We read that God clothed our first parents with the skin of animals, and by far the most probable account of this matter is, that these were the skins of animals which He had commanded them to offer in sacrifice. We have already seen, in our illustrations of the ninth chapter, ver. 16, that all divine covenants, all merciful arrangements in reference to fallen man, have been ratified by sacrifice. The declaration of mercy contained in the first promise seems to have been accompanied with the institution of expiatory sacrifice. And expiatory sacrifice, when offered from a faith in the divine revelation in reference to it, was acceptable to God, both as the appointed expression of conscious guilt and ill desert, and of the hope of mercy, and as an act of obedience to the divine will. It would appear that this revelation was not believed by Cain, that he did not see and feel the need for expiatory sacrifice, and that his religion consisted merely in an acknowledgment of the Deity as the author of the benefits which he enjoyed. Abel, on the other hand, did believe the revelation. He readily acknowledges himself a sinner, and expresses his penitence and his hope of forgiveness in the way of God's appointment. Believing what God has said, he did what God had enjoined.<sup>124</sup>

The Hebrews 11:4 passage offers indisputable biblical proof that acceptable worship cannot be based on a human tradition which involves, not a faith in God and his infallible Word, but a faith in man's wisdom and imagination. Acceptable worship can only be based on faith in divine revelation. Therefore, when one notes that Noah offered *clean* animals, or that the apostles observed a first-day Sabbath, or that Jesus and Paul read and expounded the Scriptures in the synagogue (all without accompanying explicit divine imperatives), one should never assume that these accepted worship practices were based on human tradition. They were based on faith in the spoken word of God.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> One of the great problems that Reformed denominations have today is the existence of corrupt and dishonest ministers and elders. There are a number of ordained men today who, after having professed their allegiance to the Westminster Standards, work to undermine them in their writing and teaching. There are men who consider themselves Reformed who openly attack the regulative principle which is one of the pillars of the Calvinistic reformation. There are sessions that are introducing many innovations in public worship. The long-term goal of

some ministers and elders is a Presbyterian church with Episcopal worship built upon prelatial principles. To such men the words of James Begg are appropriate. He writes: “If it be true, it ought to be firmly maintained, and all worship for which a divine warrant cannot be pleaded, ought to be opposed and discarded. Till it is abandoned, every Presbyterian minister can only be an honest man by maintaining it. It is utterly vain, and worse, to dispose of our solemn obligations by vague and pointless declamation. The position taken up by the Presbyterian Church is either sound or unsound. ‘To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them.’ And the only class of men more inconsistent and criminal than those who leave such a matter in doubt, are those who, in accepting office, profess to hold the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church, and promise to maintain it, but who afterwards treat their solemn professions and vows with faithlessness and disregard.... Now we are not proving this [the regulative principle of worship] for the sake of the office-bearers of the Presbyterian Church. They have all solemnly vowed that, according to their convictions, these are the principles of Scripture which they will defend to the utmost of their power. To do anything else therefore, to make any other profession, without abandoning the office which they received in connection with their previous avowal, is simply an act of perjury, fitted to bring disgrace on the Christian Church, and to give the enemies of the truth cause to blaspheme. Every Presbyterian office-bearer is as much bound as we are to maintain and vindicate these principles, and neither directly nor indirectly to connive at their subversion. We live, however, unfortunately, in a day when ‘truce breaking’ is not uncommon; and when many, instead of following ‘no divisive courses,’ according to their solemn vows, seem to make the promotion of innovations in the worship of God one of their favourite employments. Religion is wounded in the house of her professed friends. We can imagine nothing more fitted to eat like a canker into the faith and morals of the community” (*Anarchy in Worship* [Edinburgh: Lyon and Gemmell, 1875], 10, 12-13).

[61](#) Steve Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle” (Part IV), *Messiah’s Mandate*.

[62](#) R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 [1973]), 4-5, 9-10.

[63](#) Regarding areas of life that are ethically indifferent or *adiaphora*, there are at least four biblical principles that must be followed. First, everything that we do, no matter how mundane, must be done to God’s glory. “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:7-8). Second, a matter that normally would be indifferent ceases to be indifferent if it would cause a weak brother to sin. “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is

offended or is made weak” (Rom. 14:21). Third, an activity that in itself is indifferent ceases to be indifferent if it cannot be done in faith with a clean conscience. “To him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean....he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:14, 23). Fourth, an act that normally is *adiaphora* ceases to be *adiaphora* if a person becomes enslaved to or comes under the power or control of that activity. “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Cor 10:23). There are many things that are lawful, such as Twinkies, Big Macs, candy bars, Coca-Cola and fine cigars, that can be abused and thus do not edify. Even organic brown rice can be abused and used in a sinful manner.

[64](#) John Knox, “A Vindication of the Doctrine That the Sacrifice of the Mass Is Idolatry” in *Works*, David Laing, ed. (Edinburgh: The Bannatyne Club, 1854), 3:37-38.

[65](#) David Dickson, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1959 [1653-55]), 1:141-142.

[66](#) John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:455.

[67](#) *Ibid.*, 3:353-354.

[68](#) William S. Plummer, *Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975 [1867]), 794.

[69](#) David Clarkson, “Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private” in *The Blue Banner* (Dallas, TX: First Presbyterian Church Rowlett, July/August, 1999), 1.

[70](#) Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 6:1006.

[71](#) John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1810]), 4:579.

[72](#) Frank Smith, “An Introduction to the Elements of Worship” in *Worship in the Presence of God*, 135.

[73](#) Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 1:536.

[74](#) A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1869]), 312.



[75](#) David Clarkson, 3.

[76](#) *Ibid.*, 6.

[77](#) Frank Smith, “What is Worship?” in *Worship in the Presence of God*, 14-15. David C. Lachman, in refuting the “spiritual gift” argument, makes an important observation that is germane to our discussion: “Much ingenuity has been exercised in attempting to justify various worship practices. Some have even argued that music is a spiritual gift, claiming that the lists of spiritual gifts given in Scripture are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. But such arguments generally contend only for a few other supposed gifts, usually including such artistic accomplishments as dance, drama and even magic. Beyond these and similar forms of entertainment, no one ever suggests that a surgeon perform some particularly difficult operation or a plumber clear a clogged drain as a part of worship, however talented they may be. Although all these may be legitimate parts of our lives, Scripture nowhere suggest that God is pleased by any of them when they are included as part of our worship. What we may well do to the glory of God in our lives in general is not thereby given any warrant to be intruded into our worship of Him” (“Christian Liberty and Worship” in *ibid.*, 99).

[78](#) Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 71-72.

[79](#) Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 201.

[80](#) Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 5:210-211.

[81](#) David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987 [1647]), 207.

[82](#) Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London: John Field, 1647), 138.

[83](#) The second half of verse 8 beginning with “the washing of” is not included in modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament (e.g., United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament [third edition]; the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament [26th edition]). Most modern translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, JB, NIV) reflect modern textual criticism by leaving out the second half of verse 8. The expanded reading of verse 8 is found in the *Textus Receptus* (or the Received Text) and the Majority Text (or the Byzantine/Traditional Text). The KJV and NKJV are based on the *Textus Receptus*. In short, the critical editions of the Greek New Testament (that virtually all modern translations are based upon) depend primarily on a few older manuscripts that were discovered chiefly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*). The majority texts are not as

old as those used in the critical editions; however, they are far greater in number and were used by Christ's church since at least as early as the fifth century. Modern scholarship regarding the majority texts (i.e., archeology, verification of various readings by older papyri, ancient versions and quotations from the early church fathers [e.g., the disputed ending of Mark was accepted as canonical by the second century A.D.]), serious problems with the presuppositions and methodology of the early critical scholars such as Wescott and Hort, and great variations between the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus manuscripts have pointed many Christians back to the Majority Text as superior to the modern critical text. This author accepts the KJV or NKJV reading of Mark 7:8 as reflecting the actual words of Jesus Christ. Accepting the regulative principle, however, is not dependant upon accepting the Majority Text reading of Mark 7:8.

[84](#) J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 101-102. Ryle (1816-1900) was an Anglican minister and bishop (of Liverpool) and therefore did not adhere to the regulative principle. Nevertheless, his remarks on Mark cited above are true.

[85](#) Spurgeon, *Matthew*, 203.

[86](#) Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [from the 1852 edition]), 518-519.

[87](#) John Eadie, *Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1884]), 199-200.

[88](#) Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1995), 56.

[89](#) Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986 [1692]), 63.

[90](#) John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 181.

[91](#) Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 149, 151-152.

[92](#) Steven Schlissel, "All I Really Need to Know About Worship I Don't Learn From the Regulative Principle" (Part IV) in *Messiah's Mandate*.

[93](#) Greg Bahnsen, "Exclusive Psalmody" in *Antithesis* 1:2 (March-April, 1990), 51. The argument that singing is not a separate element of worship was popularized by Vern S. Poythress, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and a PCA minister. In 1974 he

wrote, “We regard teaching-by-singing and teaching-in-the-narrow-sense as simply two forms of teaching, each particularly effective in meeting certain needs and expressing certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Each has its advantages and limitations, due to the nature of the medium of expression. We challenge the exclusive psalmist position to prove from Scripture, rather than assume, that teaching-by-singing and proclaiming are ‘two separate elements of worship.’ To us they appear little more ‘separate’ than preaching to a visible audience versus preaching over the radio” (“Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 [1974-75], 225-226). The latest expression of this argument comes from the pen of John M. Frame: “Even if we accept the division of worship into elements, it is not plausible to argue that song is an element of worship, independent of all others. As we saw in the preceding chapter, song is not an independent element, but rather a way of doing other things. It is a way of praying, of teaching, of confessing, etc. Therefore, when we apply the regulative principle to matters of song, we should not ask specifically what words Scripture commands us to sing, but rather, what words Scripture commands us to use in teaching, prayer, confession, etc.” (*Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principle and Practice of Biblical Worship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996], 124).

<sup>94</sup> John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 62, ftn. 1.

<sup>95</sup> If a pastor is preaching through a book of the Bible and in the natural course of his exposition he comes to a passage on the birth or incarnation of Christ on or near December 25th, then choosing that text is a circumstance of worship. But, if a pastor is preaching through a book and purposely changes the subject to the incarnation or birth of Christ on or near December 25th then he has deliberately regarded an extra-biblical holy day, and is using the choosing of a text as a circumstance, as an excuse. Some of the reasons that Reformed believers give for not celebrating Christmas are: (1) The Bible has only authorized the Lord’s day or the Christian sabbath as a special religious holy day. In it believers are to celebrate the *whole work of redemption*. (2) Jesus Christ was not born on December 25th and thus Christmas is a lie. Our Lord was born in the fall of the year. (3) It is immoral for Christians to syncretize biblical worship with paganism and popery. Believers should have nothing to do with remnants of paganism or the trinkets of Antichrist. (4) The Bible tells God’s people to “love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15). Christmas was the invention of rank pagans and apostate Romanists. It is loved and admired by pagans (sodomites, murderers, child molesters, Hollywood, etc.) all over the world as a special “holy day.” Therefore, it is unchristian and should be shunned by all believers.

<sup>96</sup> An instance of historical example is Lord’s-day public worship. There is no explicit command or divine imperative changing public worship from the seventh day (Saturday) to the first day (Sunday) of the week, recorded in Scripture. Yet in the New Testament, the change from the seventh day to the first day is recorded as an accomplished fact (Ac. 20:7, 1 Cor.

16:2, Rev. 1:10). Not every divine command or prophetic word has been inscripturated (i.e., included in the Bible). The universal practice of the apostolic church, such as Lord's-day public worship, is binding because of the unique authority given to the apostles, i.e., direct revelation. When the apostles died, direct revelation ceased and the canon was closed; now our doctrine, worship, and all historical examples are limited to the Bible, the word of God. Those who appeal to church traditions, invented after the closing of the canon, for authority in establishing worship ordinances, are, in principle, no better than Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kgs. 12:26-33).

97 “There is of course careful distinction to be made between the Word of God and inferences drawn from the Word of God. We may challenge the validity of inferences drawn from Scripture and attempt to determine whether they are indeed scriptural, but we may never in the same way challenge the validity of the explicit statements of Scripture. The words and statements of Scripture are absolutely authoritative. Their authority is underived and indisputable. The authority of valid inferences from Scripture, on the other hand, is derivative in nature, but one cannot argue that such inferences are therefore less authoritative than the express declarations of Scripture. They simply make explicit what is already expressed implicitly in Scripture” (Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 124). Some of the most important and foundational doctrines of Christianity are drawn from inferences of Scripture, such as the hypostatic union of the two natures in Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the trinity. That the use of “good and necessary consequence” or logical inference from Scripture to formulate doctrine is biblical can be seen in the following passages: Lk. 20:37ff., Mt. 22:31ff., Mk. 12:26, Mt. 19:4-6, 1 Cor. 11:8-10.

98 The Westminster Confession of Faith does not just set forth broad categories but rather gives well defined, distinct worship elements that all serve as the ordinary parts of religious worship. The Confession names “prayer with thanksgiving” (21:3); also “the reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence: singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due admiration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgiving upon several occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner” (21:5). The authors of the Confession clearly believed that scriptural authorization or proof was required for each separate part of worship. That is why each distinct element of worship is proof-texted by the Confession. The confessional view of the circumstances and elements of worship is supported and reflected in the writings of the greatest theologians of that time. George Gillespie (1613-1648) wrote: “Beside all this, there is nothing which any way pertaineth to the worship of God left to determination of human laws, besides the mere circumstances, which neither have any holiness in them, forasmuch as they have no other use and praise in sacred than they have in civil

things, nor yet were part-determinable in Scripture, because they are infinite; but sacred significant ceremonies, such as cross, kneeling, surplice, holidays, bishopping, etc., which have no use and praise except in religion only, and which, also, were most easily determinable (yet not determined) within those bounds which the wisdom of God did set to his written word, are such things as God never left to the determination of any human laws” (*A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded upon the Church of England*, Christopher Coldwell, ed. [Dallas, TX: Naphtali, 1993 (1637, 60)], xli). Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600-1661) wrote: “In actions or religious means of worship, or circumstances physical, not moral, not religious, as whether the pulpit be of stone or of timber, the bell of this or this metal, the house of worship stand thus or thus in situation” (*The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication* [London: John Field for Christopher Meredith, 1646], 109). William Ames (1576-1633) wrote: “The outward circumstances are those which pertain to order and decency. 1 Corinthians 14:40. Let all things be done decently and in order. But the general rule of these is that they be ordered in that manner which maketh most for edification. 1 Corinthians 14:26. Of this nature are the circumstances of place, time, and the like, which are common adjuncts to religious and civil acts. Therefore although such like circumstances are wont to be called of some rites, and religious or ecclesiastical ceremonies, yet they have nothing in their nature which is proper to religion, and therefore religious worship doth not properly consist in them” (*The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* [London: Edward Griffen for Henry Overton, 1642], 318). John Owen (1616-1683) wrote: “It is said men may add nothing to the substance of the worship of God, but they may order, dispose, and appoint the things that belong to the manner and circumstances of it, this is all that is done in the prescription of liturgies. Of circumstances in and about the worship of God we have spoken before, and removed that pretense. Nor is it safe distinguishing in the things of God where himself hath not distinguished. Indeed, there is nothing in its whole nature, as it belongs to the general being of things, so circumstantial, but that if it be appointed by God in his worship, it becomes a part of the substance of it; nor can anything that is so appointed ever by any be made a circumstance of his worship” (“A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition” in *Works* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965 (1850-53)], 15:40). Thomas Ridgely (1667-1734) wrote: “The first idea contained in them [worship ordinances], is that they are religious duties, prescribed by God, as an instituted method in which he will be worshiped by his creatures.... Now, the ordinances, as thus described, must be engaged in according to a divine appointment. No creature has a warrant to enjoin any modes of worship, pretending that these will be acceptable or well-pleasing to God; since God alone, who is the object of worship, has right to prescribe the way in which he will be worshiped. For a creature to institute modes of worship would be an instance of profaneness and bold presumption; and the worship performed would be ‘in vain’; as our Saviour says concerning that which has no higher sanction than the commandments of men” (*A Body of Divinity* [New York: 1855], 2:433).

*Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:677.

[100](#) Alfred Edersheim writes: “the ‘cup of blessing,’ which was the third, and formed part of the new institution of the Lord’s Supper, being mentioned in verse 20. In washing their hands this customary prayer was repeated: ‘Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments, and hast enjoined us concerning the washing of our hands.’ Two different kinds of ‘washing’ were prescribed by tradition—‘dipping’ and ‘pouring.’ At the Paschal Supper the hands were to be ‘dipped’ in water” (*The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], p. 239. Note Edersheim’s footnote to the quote above: “The distinction [between two types of ritual hand washings] is also interesting as explaining Mark vii 3. For when water was poured on the hands, they had to be lifted, yet so that the water should neither run up above the wrist, nor back again upon the hand; best, therefore, by doubling the fingers into a fist. Hence (as Lightfoot rightly remarks) Mark vii 3, which should be translated: ‘For the Pharisees...except they wash their hands with the fist, eat not, holding the traditions of the elders’” (*ibid.*, ftn. 4). Note, Mark 7:2ff. is a parallel account with Matthew 15:2ff. What all this means is that if Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Seder as it is set forth in the Mishnah (as many assert), then Christ was guilty of participating in the exact same ritual that earlier in the gospel accounts he and his disciples refused to do and which elicited a scathing condemnation of the Pharisees by our Lord. We regard such a scenario as exegetically and theologically impossible. There are other problems with the idea that Jesus followed the Seder according to Mishnah. For instance, the gospel accounts do not speak of four cups but merely one which was shared by all the disciples.

[101](#) Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1856]), 381.

[102](#) Note how the Mishnah perverts the meaning of Leviticus 18:21 and endorses idolatry. “**MISHNAH. HE WHO GIVES OF HIS SEED TO MOLECH INCURS NO PUNISHMENT UNLESS HE DELIVERS IT TO MOLECH AND CAUSES IT TO PASS THROUGH THE FIRE. IF HE GAVE IT TO MOLECH BUT DID NOT CAUSE IT TO PASS THROUGH FIRE, OR, THE REVERSE, HE INCURS NO PENALTY, UNLESS HE DOES BOTH. GEMARA. R. Abin said: Our Mishnah is in accordance with the view that Molech worship is not idolatry.... R. Simeon said: if to Molech, he is liable; if to another idol, he is not [Sanhedrin 64a]. R. Aha the son of Raba said: If one caused all his seed to pass through [the fire] to Molech, he is exempt from punishment, because it is written, of *thy seed* implying, but not all thy seed [Sanhedrin 64b]” (*The Babylonian Talmud* quoted in Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990], 1019). (In the Talmud, the Mishnah is always written in all capitals.)**

[103](#) George Gillespie, *English Popish Ceremonies*, 269-270.

[104](#) F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 181.

[105](#) Leon Morris writes: “Yet, just as the reference to the water in ch.7 seems to point us back to the rock in the wilderness rather than to the pouring of water from the golden pitcher, so the light may refer us to the pillar of fire in the wilderness. We have noted the reference to the manna in ch. 6, so that in three successive chapters the wilderness imagery seems consistently used to illustrate aspects of Jesus’ Person and work. It must always be borne in mind that light is a common theme in both Old and New Testaments, so that it is not necessary for us to find the source of Jesus’ great saying in any non-biblical places’ (*The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 437). R. C. H. Lenski writes: “Maimonides states that this ceremony took place every evening during the feast, others are sure that it occurred only on the first evening. The main difficulty in connecting the word of Jesus with this ceremony is that it leaves out an essential part of the figure. Those candelabra were stationary, and men danced in the courts, while Jesus speaks of a movable light: ‘he that *follows* me.’ We may say more. In 7:37, when Jesus calls those that ‘thirst’ and bids them come to him and ‘drink,’ he does not stop with the ceremony of drawing water from Siloah and pouring it out at the altar, in which no quenching of thirst by drinking is pictured; he reaches back to the original blessing received at Meribah where the thirsty actually received water to drink. He does the same here. One of the great blessings during the desert sojourn of Israel was the pillar of cloud and of fire, evidence of the presence of Jehovah with his people” (*St. John’s Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], pp. 593-594).

[106](#) E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980 [1865]), 1:429.

[107](#) Hengstenberg writes: “The feast was not only one of thanksgiving, it was also one of hope; and of this latter aspect of it, Isa. xii. 3 was the appropriate text. Jesus declares Himself to be the water of salvation, announced by the prophet Isaiah; and Isaiah himself gave the warrant for doing so. The connection of the springs of salvation with the person of the Messiah is plain from the relation of ch. xii. to ch. xi., where all the salvation of the future is bond up with the person of the Messiah. And what Isaiah said in ch. xii. concerning the waters of salvation, receives its consummation also in ch. iv. 1, to which the words ‘*ean tis dipsa poeto*’ definitely allude: comp. on ch. vi. 45, iv. 14” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1:405). Brooke Foss Westcott writes: Nothing can prove more clearly the intimate relation between the teaching recorded by St. John and the Old Testament than the manner in which Christ is shown to transfer to Himself the figures of the Exodus (the brazen serpent, the manna, the water, the fiery pillar)” (*The Gospel According to St. John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 277).

[108](#) J. P. Lewis, “Feasts” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 2:525.

[109](#) Thomas M’Crie, *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (New York: Robert Carter, 1838), 287-288.

[110](#) *Ibid.*, 298-300.

[111](#) Let us briefly examine the writings of an independent Calvinistic minister who opposes Reformed worship. He writes: “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!” (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).

[112](#) Samuel Parker quoted in John Owen, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship” in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:462.

[113](#) Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1845]), 16.

[114](#) W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1848), 1:15.

[115](#) Francis Petticrew, “Speech of the mover of the report to the General Assembly, 1873” in James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorized* (Belfast: C. Aitchison; J. Cleeland, n.d.), 4-5. Glasgow adds the following footnote: “Not religious circumstances entering into and blending with worship, but men’s mere social circumstances, as of times, places, persons, &c” (*ibid.*, 5).

[116](#) James H. Thornwell, “Boards and Presbyterianism” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1875]), 4:255.

[117](#) John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown,



PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1980 [1888]), 9.

[118](#) A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961 [1869]), 39.

[119](#) B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [1931]), 6:226-227 (originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* iv [1893], 582-655).

[120](#) William S. McClure, “The Scriptural Law of Worship” in John McNaugher, ed., *The Psalms in Worship* (Edmonton, AB: Canada; Still Waters Revival Books, 1992 [1907]), 33.

[121](#) William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, Va.: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.), 10.

[122](#) Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, 1993 [1980]), 122-123. Note also Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas*: “Whatever is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden. Anything that the church does in worship must have warrant from an explicit command of God, be deduced by good and necessary consequence, or be derived from approved historical example (e.g., the change of day from seventh to first for Lord’s Day corporate worship)” (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1996), 4.

[123](#) John Owen, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship” in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:467.

[124](#) John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1862]), 493-494.

[125](#) One objection to the Puritan and Reformed concept of approved historical examples from Scripture is that it is pharisaical and Romish. It is argued that when Reformed theologians assume that historical examples are based on prior revelation that was not inscripturated, they are advocating a form of binding and normative oral tradition. This comparison with Pharisees and Romanists is a clever yet unwarranted *ad hominem* attack. The Pharisees and Roman Catholics were and are guilty of adding their own doctrines and commandments to what the Bible teaches. They justify their additions to the Scripture by advocating a source of divine revelation which is *independent* of the Bible. The Jews have their Talmud (which in English translation runs to 34 large volumes) and the Roman Catholics have the church fathers, councils, decrees and papal declarations. Puritan and Reformed pastors and theologians add nothing of their own to the doctrine or commandment of Scripture. They do not believe in any *independent* sources of revelation outside of the Bible. They simply infer from the Bible itself

that in the few cases where God is described as accepting worship practices that are not accompanied with explicit instructions, the people involved (such as Abel [Gen. 4:4] or Noah [Gen. 8:20]) had based their practice on a previous communication by God. As noted above, the Reformed interpretation is a necessary inference from Scripture. Approved historical examples come only from the text of Scripture, and not from any Pharisaical or Romish type of independent oral tradition. It is one thing to infer a communication based on a particular text of Scripture, and quite another to posit with absolutely no biblical evidence that God spoke the whole Talmud to Moses on Mount Sinai. Opponents of the regulative principle are comparing apples to oranges, and they know it. Who has more in common with a Pharisee or Romanist? Someone who adds his own human traditions to what God has authorized? Or someone who refuses to add to God's word?

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# Summary and Conclusion

This study regarding *sola scriptura* and its relation to the regulative principle of worship has proved a number of important assertions. First, it has shown that the scriptural law of worship formulated by the Calvinistic reformers and set forth in all the Reformed creeds and confessions is thoroughly biblical. Reformed worship should be embraced by all professing Christians. Those men who mock the regulative principle and who urge Reformed believers to abandon this crucial pillar of the Reformation should not be heeded at all. (Indeed, they should be intellectually honest and join an Episcopal church.)

Second, an analysis of non-Reformed views of worship has uncovered a number of insurmountable theological, exegetical, logical and ethical problems that are intrinsic to all such theories:

1. The idea that men are permitted to add to the worship authorized by God in his word contradicts the express teaching of Scripture. There is simply no way that men can circumvent the plain meaning of the *sola scriptura* passages without ignoring or altering their obvious contextual and historical meaning. Jehovah says, “Do not add or detract from what I have commanded.” There is nothing complex or difficult or esoteric regarding the regulative passages. A charge that is so often made is that the regulative principle itself is a human addition to Scripture. This charge is totally unfounded. God says, “Do not add or detract,” and therefore regulativists refuse to add or detract. The regulative principle is simply a theological restatement of the plain teaching of God’s word. To those who regard the regulative principle as an unbiblical addition, we ask: How can a strict obedience to what the Bible teaches be wrong? Has the church been harmed when she followed the teaching of Scripture without turning to the right or to the left? Are regulativists guilty of sin when they refuse to obey the traditions of men that have no warrant from God’s word? Can a church member be disciplined for refusing to participate in a man-made ritual? If the answer to this question is yes, then please explain how a Christian can be disciplined when nothing in Scripture was violated. Romanists and prelatists have an answer to this question. However, we do not heed the words of Antichrist.

2. The idea that men are permitted to add their own innovations to authorized worship is also a denial of the sufficiency and perfection of God’s word. Are the ordinances that God has given to the church sufficient or are they inadequate? If one believes that they are not sufficient, then please identify what is lacking. If one believes that the Scriptures are sufficient, then why add worship ordinances that are not needed? Also, please explain how the doctrines and commandments of men can perfect God’s word and lead to edification. Did not the apostle

Paul warn the church that human commandments are not real wisdom and do not sanctify (Col. 2:23)? What would a great painter such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) have thought if imbeciles and children were given paints and then permitted to alter and “perfect” his paintings as they saw fit? Such acts would be the height of stupidity and arrogance. Yet men do far worse when they add to the holy, sufficient and perfect Scriptures of God.

3. Non-Reformed theories do not properly take into account God’s nature and character (e.g., his infinite holiness, majesty, righteousness, etc.), and man’s sinful nature. The idea that men (even regenerate men) after the fall can acceptably approach in worship a thrice-holy God on their own terms, according to their own rules, is contrary to Scripture and sanctified common sense. James Begg writes:

Man as a sinner, as all true Christians will admit, has no right to approach into God’s presence at all. The amity which previously existed in Eden was broken up by the Fall. God “drove out the man,” and He alone is entitled to say whether, and on what conditions, he shall ever again be permitted to approach His throne. It is manifest presumption on the part of fallen creatures to dictate to God either that there shall be worship at all or what form it shall assume. In entering the courts of earthly monarchs, even where a right to enter is conceded, every rule and form of the court must be carefully observed; and far more is this important in entering, by gracious permission, into the immediate presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords.[126](#)

The worship of Jehovah must be sincere, through Jesus Christ, and it must be of divine appointment. Fallen human reason should never have an *independent* creative role in determining doctrine, ethics, or worship ordinances. It must be totally dependent on Scripture.

4. It is impossible for men to impose human innovations in public worship without violating their congregants’ Christian liberty. All man-made rites and ceremonies in public worship invariably involve some type of human compulsion. Believers are commanded by God to attend Sabbath day public worship. When bishops, pastors or sessions place a man-made rite or ceremony in the public worship service, they force their congregants either: (a) to participate in non-authorized will worship or, (b) to separate themselves from the unbiblical corruptions. The non-regulativists’ idea that human traditions are permissible in public worship (from the standpoint of Christian liberty) can only be defended in two ways, both of which are unbiblical and arbitrary.

One method of defense is to argue that God has given the church a power independent of Scripture. In other words, not only can bishops, pastors and sessions add their own inventions to public worship, they also have an authority to order church members (under the threat of

discipline and excommunication, if necessary) to submit to the new human ordinances. This position is nothing less than popery and prelacy at its worst. (This author is unaware of any anti-regulativist “Reformed” or “Presbyterian” writers who have used such a blatantly Romanist argument.)

The most common defense is that humanly devised rites and ceremonies are within the sphere of *adiaphora* or matters indifferent. The problem with this view is that it is based on a false, arbitrary definition of *adiaphora*. What are indifferent matters? For something to be indifferent, it must be: (1) a matter that is not determinable or required by Scripture, (2) something that is truly circumstantial to worship and not an element or essential part of it, (3) something that is optional or voluntary or (4) something that is unnecessary (i.e., something that can be eliminated at any time, *unlike* prayer, preaching, the Lord’s Supper, etc.). When a congregation adds a human tradition to the public worship service, that practice cannot honestly be regarded as *adiaphora*, for, (1) as part of the service it is no longer optional or voluntary, unless one leaves or refuses to attend; (2) it is placed alongside of and receives the same treatment as commanded elements; (3) it is part of essential worship or (4) as part of public worship it is enforced by implicit and/or explicit compulsion. Although churches may refer to human traditions as *adiaphora* to justify their use in public worship, they never act as if the additions are indifferent in practice. When words are defined in an arbitrary manner, one can prove any proposition. The *adiaphora* argument is an excuse founded upon a lie.<sup>[127](#)</sup>

Third, an analysis of the most common objections to the regulative principle has shown that these objections are not based on a careful exegesis of Scripture but upon misunderstandings, misrepresentations and pure speculation. Some arguments are founded upon a misunderstanding of the *sola scriptura* passages and *adiaphora*. Others are based on a false definition of the regulative principle. Similarly, others are dependent upon a false understanding of the circumstances of worship. Most arguments, however, are based on pure speculation. Theories are developed using extra-biblical materials (e.g., the Mishnah) and then are imposed upon the passage of Scripture in question.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle of worship must be taught, emphasized, and rigorously defended in our day of declension, ignorance and apathy. The heroic struggle by men such as Calvin, Knox, Melville, the English Puritans and Scottish Covenanters for the reformation of worship must continue. This point cannot be too strongly pressed in the present day when biblical worship is attacked from all sides; when the greatest opponents of Reformed worship come from the supposedly Reformed and theonomic camp. Such men, in defiance of Scripture, seek to “improve” the worship of God by their own inventions. They seek to remove the liberty that we have in Christ from the doctrines, commandments and traditions of men. They arrogantly mock the Reformation attainments of our spiritual forefathers. These so-called teachers of the law offer us human autonomy and the

tyranny of church officials, all in the name of Christian liberty. What is the “weighty” evidence that is offered to lead us to abandon our creeds and confessions in favor of adding human traditions to worship? It is primarily speculations founded upon the Mishnah. A love of human traditions has caused many normally competent teachers and scholars to resort to exegetical gymnastics and twisted reasonings of the worst sort. Our best defense against all such Romanizing arguments is a vigorous offense. The great truth of *sola scriptura* taught and accompanied by the Spirit of God will penetrate the mists of confusion and ignorance, rending asunder the pillars of popery and prelacy. To secure this great end, let us earnestly work and pray.

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[126](#) James Begg, *Anarchy in Worship*, 4-5.

[127](#) There are other serious problems with the non-regulativist position that need to be addressed. A very serious problem that every Christian should note from Scripture and church history is that human additions to the ethics, worship, doctrine, or church government set forth in the Bible invariably drive out what God has warranted in favor of the man-made traditions. What happens is that men simply do not have the self restraint to carefully limit their own traditions. An innovation is added here and there and these new additions eventually become loved and “indispensable” to the church governors and their congregations. A few man-made traditions may not seem to be much of a problem at first, but one must keep in mind that the church is a very old institution. Over time man-made innovations accumulate until the doctrine and worship of a church are radically changed. Over many generations so many man-made doctrines, commandments and worship innovations are added to the church that pure gospel worship, and even the gospel itself, is obscured and even lost. This has happened in different degrees to Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, evangelicalism and even many Reformed churches. People who reject the regulative principle do not have any solid limiting factor upon their additions. How many innovations are acceptable? When should we stop adding more? Pastors who argue against the regulative principle say that there is no need for concern, “the session will keep the additions under control.” The truth, however, is that apart from the regulative principle it is almost impossible to get rid of human traditions. Once a tradition is loved and accepted by a congregation (e.g., Christmas), woe unto the pastor who attempts to rid the church of such non-commanded elements! The only dependable, safe method for avoiding man-made corruptions is to draw the line on worship content and ceremony where God draws the line. To allow sinful men to draw and redraw the line as they please has been a total disaster for the church. Jesus’ rebuke to the Pharisees has a very broad application: “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Mt. 15:6).

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# Appendix A

## John Calvin and the Regulative Principle

John Calvin (1609-1564) was the greatest theologian and expositor of Scripture of the Protestant Reformation. Through the theological academy at Geneva and his abundant writings, Calvin did more to shape the doctrine and worship of Presbyterian, Reformed and Puritan churches than anyone else. Calvin's teaching regarding worship is clearly reflected in all the various Reformed creeds and confessions: the French Confession (1559), the Scottish Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), and the Westminster Standards (1643-1648).

It is important that believers who take upon themselves the name of Reformed or Presbyterian have some acquaintance with Calvin's views on worship (in particular the regulative principle) for a number of reasons. First, we live in a time of serious declension regarding worship in many denominations that are considered Reformed. Many pastors, teachers and elders in "Reformed" churches either directly or through subterfuge reject Reformed worship in favor of a Lutheran or Episcopal conception. Second, because of this declension and ignorance there has been a *reductionism* of what it means to be Reformed. For both Calvin and Knox Reformed meant more than a biblical soteriology; it also meant a biblical conception of worship (i.e., the regulative principle). Today the word Reformed is used of anyone who merely accepts the five points of Calvinism. Thus, we have pastors and organizations today which boast of being "truly Reformed" or "neo-puritan" who a few centuries ago would have been considered anti-puritan and non-Reformed. Third, today many hold the opinion that purity of worship should not be a major concern of the church. People who concern themselves with such matters are often held in contempt. Yet Calvin regarded the true worship of God to be (as far as the Christian religion) is concerned second to none in order of importance. In "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" he writes: "If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshiped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain."[128](#)

What follows is a series of quotations from John Calvin that reveal his doctrine of worship. Calvin was the champion and chief expositor of what would be called the regulative principle of worship.



## Leviticus 10:1

*And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron.* A memorable circumstance is here recorded, from whence it appears how greatly God abominates all the sins whereby purity of religion is corrupted. Apparently it was a light transgression to use strange fire for burning incense; and again their thoughtlessness would seem inexcusable, for certainly Nadab and Abihu did not wantonly or intentionally desire to pollute the sacred things, but, as is often the case in matters of novelty, when they were setting about them too eagerly, their precipitancy led them into error. The severity of the punishment, therefore, would not please those arrogant people, who do not hesitate superciliously to criticize God's judgments; but if we reflect how holy a thing God's worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctioned at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole Law. This, therefore, was the reason of such great severity, that the priests should anxiously watch against all profanation. Their crime is specified, viz., that they offered incense in a different way from that which God had prescribed, and consequently, although they may have erred from ignorance, still they were convicted by God's commandment of having negligently set about what was worth of greater attention. The "strange fire" is distinguished from the sacred fire which was always burning upon the altar: not miraculously, as some pretend, but by the constant watchfulness of the priests. Now, God had forbidden any other fire to be used in the ordinances, in order to exclude all extraneous rites, and to shew His detestation of whatever might be derived from elsewhere. Let us learn, therefore, so to attend to God's command as not to corrupt His worship by any strange inventions. But if He so severely avenged this error, how horrible a punishment awaits the Papists, who are not ashamed obstinately to defend so many gross corruptions?<sup>[129](#)</sup>

## Leviticus 22:32

*Neither shall ye profane.* In forbidding the profanation of His name, He confirms in other words the foregoing sentiment; guarding by them His worship from all corruptions, that it may be maintained in purity and integrity. The same, too, is the object of the clause in apposition, which immediately follows; for they hallow God's name who turn not away from its rightful and sincere worship. Let this be carefully observed, that whatever fancies men devise, are so many profanations of God's name; for although the superstitious may please themselves by their imaginations, yet is all their religion full of sacrilege, whereby God complains that His holiness is profaned.<sup>[130](#)</sup>

## Numbers 15:39

And, first of all, by contrasting “the hearts and eyes” of men with His Law, He shows that He would have His people contented with that one rule which He prescribes, without the admixture of any of their own imaginations; and again, He denounces the vanity of whatever men invent for themselves, and however pleasing any human scheme may appear to them, He still repudiates and condemns it. And this is still more clearly expressed in the last word, when he says that men “go a whoring” whenever they are governed by their own counsels. This declaration is deserving of our especial observation, for whilst they have much self-satisfaction who worship God according to their own will, and whilst they account their zeal to be very good and very right, they do nothing else but pollute themselves by spiritual adultery. For what by the world is considered to be the holiest devotion, God with his own mouth pronounces to be fornication. By the word “eyes” he unquestionably means man’s power of discernment.[131](#)

## Deuteronomy 4:1

*Now, therefore, hearken, O Israel.* He requires the people to be teachable, in order that they may learn to serve God; for the beginning of a good and upright life is to know what is pleasing to God. From hence, then, does Moses commence commanding them to be attentive in seeking direction from the Law; and then admonishing them to prove by their whole life that they have duly profited in the Law. The promise which is here inserted, only invites them to unreserved obedience through hope of the inheritance. The main point is, that they should neither add to nor diminish from the pure doctrine of the Law; and this cannot be the case, unless men first renounce their own private feelings, and then shut their ears against all the imaginations of others. For none are to be accounted (true) disciples of the Law, but those who obtain their wisdom from it alone. It is, then, as if God commanded them to be content with His precepts; because in no other way would they keep His law, except by giving themselves wholly to its teaching. Hence it follows, that they only obey God who depend on His authority alone; and that they only pay the Law its rightful honour, who receive nothing which is opposed to its natural meaning. The passage is a remarkable one, openly condemning whatsoever man’s ingenuity may invent for the service of God.[132](#)

## Deuteronomy 12:32

*What thing soever I command.* In this brief clause he teaches that no other service of God is lawful, except that of which He has testified His approval in His word, and that obedience is as it were the mother of all piety; as if he had said that all modes of devotion are absurd and infected with superstition, which are not directed by this rule. Hence we gather, that in order to the keeping of the First Commandment, a knowledge of the true God is required, derived from His word, and mixed with faith. By forbidding the addition, or diminishing of anything, he plainly condemns as illegitimate whatever men invent of their own imagination.[133](#)

## 2 Samuel 6:6-12

Moreover, we must gather from it that none of our devotions will be accepted by God unless they are conformed to his will. This rule ruins all the man-made inventions in the papacy's so-called worship of God, which has so much pomp and foolishness. All of that is nothing but sheer trash before God, and is in fact an abomination to him. Hence, let us hold this unmistakable rule, that if we want to worship God in accordance with our own ideas, it will simply be abuse and corruption. And so, on the contrary, we must have the testimony of his will in order to follow what he commands us, and to submit to it. Now that is how the worship which we render to God will be approved.[134](#)

## Isaiah 29:14

On the second point, when God is worshiped by inventions of men, he condemns this “fear” as superstitious, though men endeavour to cloak it under a plausible pretense of religion, or devotion, or reverence. He assigns the reason, that it “hath been taught by men.” I consider *melummadah* to have a passive signification; for he means, that to make “the commandments of men,” and not the word of God, the rule of worshiping him, is a subversion of order. But it is the will of the Lord, that our “fear,” and the reverence with which we worship him, shall be regulated by the rule of his word; and he demands nothing so much as simple obedience, by which we shall conform ourselves and all our actions to the rule of the word, and not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

Hence it is sufficiently evident, that those who learn from “the inventions of men” how they should worship God, not only are manifestly foolish, but wear themselves out by destructive toil, because they do nothing else than provoke God's anger; for he could not testify more plainly than by the tremendous severity of this chastisement, how great is the abhorrence with which he regards false worship.[135](#)

## Jeremiah 7:21-24

He afterwards adds, that they *walked in their tortuous counsels*, and also, *in the wickedness of their evil heart*. This comparison aggravates their sin,—the Jews preferred to follow their own humour rather than to obey God and his commands. Had anything been set before them, which might have deceived them and obscured the authority of the law, there would have been some excuse: but when there was nothing to prevent them from obeying the command of God, except that they followed their own foolish imaginations, they were wholly inexcusable. For what excuse could they have made? That they wished to be wiser than God! How great a

madness was this, and how diabolical? But the Prophet leaves them nothing but this vain excuse, which doubled their guilt. They thought, no doubt, that their heart was well fitted for the purpose: but he does not here allow them to judge, but distinctly condemns them as they deserved.

We ought to take particular notice of this passage; for the majority of men at this day set up their own fictions against God's word. The Papists indeed pretend antiquity; they say that they have been taught by their ancestors; and at the same time they plead councils and the ordinances of the fathers: but yet there is not one of them, who is not addicted to his own figments, and who does not take the liberty, nay, an unbridled license, to reject whatever he pleases. Moreover, if the origin of the whole papal worship be considered, it will appear, that those who first devised so many strange superstitions, were only impelled by audacity and presumption, in order that they might trample under foot the word of God. Hence it is, that all things are become corrupt; for they brought in all the strange figments of their own brains. And we see that the Papists at this day are so perversely fixed in their own errors, that they prefer themselves and their own trumperies to God. And the same is the case with all the heretics. What then is to be done? Obedience, as I have said, is to be held as the basis of all true religion. *If, then, on the other hand, we wish to render our worship approved by God, let us learn to cast aside whatever is our own, so that his authority may prevail over all our reasons.*<sup>136</sup>

## Jeremiah 7:31

*Which I commanded them not, and which never came to my mind.* This reason ought to be carefully noticed, for God here cuts off from men every occasion for making evasions, since he condemns by this one phrase, "I have not commanded them," whatever the Jews devised. There is then no other argument needed to condemn superstitions, than that they are not commanded by God: for when men allow themselves to worship God according to their own fancies, and attend not to his commands, they pervert true religion. And if this principle was adopted by the Papists, all those fictitious modes of worship, in which they absurdly exercise themselves, would fall to the ground. It is indeed a horrible thing for the Papists to seek to discharge their duties towards God by performing their own superstitions. There is an immense number of them, as it is well known, and as it manifestly appears. Were they to admit this principle, that we cannot rightly worship God except by obeying his word, they would be delivered from their deep abyss of error. The Prophet's words then are very important, when he says, that God had *commanded* no such thing, and that it never came to his mind; as though he had said, that men assume too much wisdom, when they devise what he never required, nay, what he never knew.<sup>137</sup>

## Jeremiah 19:4-5

God first complains that he had been forsaken by them, because they had changed the worship which had been prescribed in his Law. And this is what ought to be carefully considered; for no one would have willingly confessed what Jeremiah charged upon them all; they would have said,—“We have not forsaken God, for we are the children of Abraham; but what we wish to do is to add to his worship; and why should it be deemed a reproach to us, if we are not content with our own simple form of worship, and add various other forms? and we worship God not only in the temple, but also in this place; and further, we do not spare our own children.” But God shows by one expression that these were frivolous evasions; for he is not acknowledged except what he orders and commands is obediently received. Let us know, that God is forsaken as soon as men turn aside from his pure word, and that all are apostates who turn here and there, and do not follow what God approves....

The Jews might have raised such an objection as the Papists do at this today,—that their modes of worship were not devised in their time, but that they had derived them from their ancestors. But God regarded as nothing those kings and the fathers, who had long before degenerated from true and genuine religion. It must be here observed, that true knowledge is connected with verity: for they who had first contrived new forms of worship, doubtless followed their own foolish imaginations; as when any one in the present day asks the Papists, why they weary themselves so much with their superstitions, good intention is ever their shield,—“O, we think that this is pleasing to God.” Therefore rightly does God repudiate their inventions as wholly vain, for they possess nothing solid or permanent.[138](#)

## Matthew 15:1

*Then scribes and Pharisees.* As the fault that is here corrected is not common but highly dangerous, the passage is particularly worthy of our attention. We see the extraordinary insolence that is displayed by men as to the form and manner of worshiping God; for they are perpetually contriving new modes of worship, and when any one wishes to be thought wiser than others, he displays his ingenuity on this subject. I speak not of foreigners, but of the very domestics of the Church, on whom God has conferred the peculiar honour of declaring with their lips the rule of godliness. God has laid down the manner in which he wishes that we should worship him, and has included in his law the perfection of holiness. Yet a vast number of men, as if it were a light and trivial matter to obey God and to keep what he enjoins, collect for themselves, on every hand, many additions. Those who occupy places of authority bring forward their inventions for this purpose, as if they were in possession of something more perfect than the word of the Lord. This is followed by the slow growth of tyranny; for, when men have once assumed to themselves the right to issue commands, they demand a rigid

adherence to their laws, and do not allow the smallest iota to be left out, either through contempt or through forgetfulness. The world cannot endure lawful authority, and most violently rebels against the Lord's yoke, and yet easily and willingly becomes entangled in the snares of vain traditions; nay, such bondage appears to be, in the case of many, an object of desire. Meanwhile, the worship of God is corrupted, of which the first and leading principle is obedience. The authority of men is preferred to the command of God. Sternly, and therefore tyrannically, are the common people compelled to give their whole attention to trifles. This passage teaches us, first, that all modes of worship invented by men are displeasing to God, because he chooses that he alone shall be heard, in order to train and instruct us in true godliness according to his own pleasure; secondly, that those who are not satisfied with the only law of God, and weary themselves by attending to the traditions of men, are uselessly employed; thirdly, that an outrage is committed against God, when the inventions of men are so highly extolled, that the majesty of his law is almost lowered, or at least the reverence for it is abated.<sup>139</sup>

## Matthew 15:9

*But in vain do they worship me.* The words of the prophet run literally thus: *their fear toward me has been taught by the precept of men.* But Christ has faithfully and accurately given the meaning, that *in vain is God worshiped*, when the will of men is substituted in the room of doctrine. By these words, all kinds of *will-worship*, as Paul calls it, (Col. 2:23) are plainly condemned. For, as we have said, since God chooses to be worshiped in no other way than according to his own appointment, he cannot endure new modes of worship to be devised. As soon as men allow themselves to wander beyond the limits of the Word of God, the more labour and anxiety they display in worshiping him, the heavier is the condemnation which they draw down upon themselves; for by such inventions religion is dishonoured.

*Teaching doctrines, commandments of men.* In these words there is what is called *apposition*; for Christ declares them to be mistaken who bring forward, in the room of *doctrine*, *the commandments of men*, or who seek to obtain from them the rule for worshiping God. Let it therefore be held as a settled principle, that, since *obedience* is more highly esteemed by God than *sacrifices*, (1 Sam. 15:22, 23) all kinds of worship invented by men are of no estimations in his sight; nay more, that, as the prophet declares, they are accursed and detestable.<sup>140</sup>

## Colossians 2:22-23

The sum is this—that the worship of God, true piety, and the holiness of Christians, do not consist in drink, and food and clothing, which are things that are transient and liable to corruption, and perish by abuse. For abuse is properly applicable to those things which are

corrupted by the use of them. Hence enactments are of no value in reference to those things which tend to excite scruples of conscience. But in Popery you would scarcely find any other holiness, than what consists in little observances of corruptible things.

A *second* refutation is added—that they originated with men, and have not God as their Author; and by this thunderbolt he prostrates and swallows up all traditions of men. For why? This is Paul’s reasoning: “Those who bring consciences into bondage do injury to Christ, and make void his death. For what is of human invention does not bind conscience....”

Observe, however, of what colours this *show* consists, according to Paul. He makes mention of three—self-invented worship, humility, and neglect of the body. Superstition among the Greeks receives the name of *ethelothreskeia*—the term which Paul here makes use of. He has, however, an eye to the etymology of the term, for *ethelothreskeia* literally denotes a voluntary service, which men choose for themselves at their own option, without authority from God. Human traditions, therefore, are agreeable to us on this account, that they are in accordance with our understanding, for any one will find in his own brain the first outlines of them.... For it should be a settled point among all the pious, that the worship of God ought not to be measured according to our views; and that, consequently, any kind of service is not lawful, simply on the ground that it is agreeable to us. This, also, ought to be a commonly received point—that we owe to God such humility as to yield obedience simply to his commands, so as not to *lean to our own understanding*, etc., (Prov. iii:5)....

Thus, at the present day, Papists are not in want of specious pretexts, by which to set forth their own laws, however they may be—some of them impious and tyrannical, and others of them silly and trifling. When, however, we have granted them everything, there remains, nevertheless, this refutation by Paul, which is of itself more than sufficient for dispelling all their smoky vapours.[141](#)

## **Institutes of the Christian Religion**

*Images and pictures are contrary to Scripture*

Now we ought to bear in mind that Scripture repeatedly describes superstitions in this language: they are the “works of men’s hands,” which lack God’s authority (Isa. 2:8; 31:7; 37:19; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:13); this is done to establish the fact that all the cults men devise of themselves are detestable.[142](#)

*True religion binds us to God as the one and only God*

But godliness, to stand on a firm footing, keeps itself within its proper limits. Likewise, it seems to me that superstition is so called because, not content with the prescribed manner and order, it heaps up a needless mass of inanities.<sup>143</sup>

### *Honoring images is dishonor to God*

For by his law it pleases him to prescribe for men what is good and right, and thus to hold them to a sure standard that no one may take leave to contrive any sort of worship he pleases.<sup>144</sup>

### *The sufficiency of the law*

On the other hand, the Lord, in giving the rule of perfect righteousness, has referred all its parts to his will, thereby showing that nothing is more acceptable to him than obedience. The more inclined the playfulness of the human mind is to dream up various rites with which to deserve well of him, the more diligently ought we to mark this fact. The best remedy to cure that fault will be to fix this thought firmly in mind: the law has been divinely handed down to us to teach us perfect righteousness; there no other righteousness is taught than that which conforms to the requirements of God's will; in vain therefore do we attempt new forms of works to win the favor of God, whose lawful worship consists in obedience alone; rather, any zeal for good works that wanders outside God's law is an intolerable profanation of divine and true righteousness.<sup>145</sup>

### *Spiritual worship of the invisible God*

In the previous commandment, he declared himself the one God apart from whom no other gods are to be imagined or had. Now he declares more openly what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be honored, lest we dare attribute anything carnal to him. The purpose of this commandment, then, is that he does not will that his lawful worship be profaned by superstitious rites. To sum up, he wholly calls us back, and withdraws us from petty carnal observances, which our stupid minds, crassly conceiving of God, are wont to devise. And then he makes us conform to his lawful worship, that is, a spiritual worship established by himself. Moreover, he marks the grossest fault in this transgression, outward idolatry.<sup>146</sup>

*(Traditions and human inventions in worship condemned in Scripture and by Christ himself, 23-26)*

*The appeal to the authority of the church contradicts the evidence of Scripture*



But how important do we think it that the Lord is deprived of his Kingdom, which he so sternly claims for himself? But it is taken away whenever he is worshiped by laws of human devising, inasmuch as he wills to be accounted the sole lawgiver of his own worship. So that now one may think this something negligible, let us hear how highly the Lord regards.

“Because,” he says, “this people...feared me by a commandment and doctrines of men,... behold, I will astound this people with a great and amazing miracle; for wisdom shall perish from their wise men, and understanding shall depart from their elders.” [Isa. 29:13-14 p.]

Another passage: “In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men” [Matt. 15:9]. And truly, when the Children of Israel corrupted themselves with many idolatries, the cause of all that evil is ascribed to this impure mixture: they have transgressed God’s commandments and have fabricated new rites....”

Thereupon, it is afterward said that they, frightened by that punishment, took up the rites prescribed in the law; but because they were not purely worshiping the true God, it is twice repeated that they feared him and feared him not [II Kings 17:24-25, 32-33, 41]. From this we gather that a part of the reverence that is paid to him consists simply in worshiping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own. And pious kings are often praised because they acted in accordance with all precepts, and did not turn aside either to the right or to the left [II Kings 22:1-2; cf. I Kings 15:11; 22:43; II Kings 12:2; 14:3; 15:3; 15:34; 18:3]. I say further: although in some contrived worship impiety does not openly appear, it is still severely condemned by the Spirit, since it is a departure from God’s precept. The altar of Ahaz, the pattern of which was brought out of Samaria [II Kings 16:10], could seem to enhance the adornment of the temple, since it was Ahaz’ intention to offer sacrifices there to the only God, which he was going to do more splendidly than on the old original altar. Yet we see how the Spirit loathes this insolence solely because the inventions of men in the worship of God are impure corruptions [II Kings 16:10-18]. And the more clearly God’s will is revealed to us, the less excusable is our wantonness in attempting anything.<sup>147</sup>

### *Perverse worship an abomination to God*

Many marvel why the Lord so sharply threatens to astound the people who worshiped him with the commands of men [Isa. 29:13-14] and declares that he is vainly worshiped by the precepts of men [Matt. 15:9]. But if they were to weigh what it is to depend upon God’s bidding alone in matters of religion (that is, on account of heavenly wisdom), they would at the same time see that the Lord has strong reasons to abominate such perverse rites, which are performed for him according to the willfulness of human nature. For even though those who obey such laws in the worship of God have some semblance of humility in this obedience of theirs, they are nevertheless not at all humble in God’s sight, since they prescribe for him these same laws which they observe. Now, this is the reason Paul so urgently warns us not to be deceived by the traditions of men [Col. 2:4 ff.], or by what he calls *ethelothreskeia*, that is,

“will worship,” devised by men apart from God’s teaching [Col. 2:23, 22]. It is certainly true that our own and all men’s wisdom must become foolish, that we may allow him alone to be wise. Those who expect his approval for their paltry observances contrived by men’s will, and offer to him, as if involuntarily, a sham obedience which is paid actually to men, do not hold to that path.[148](#)

### *Refutation of Romanist counterevidence*

In short, every chance invention, by which men seek to worship God, is nothing but a pollution of true holiness.[149](#)

*(Church laws and traditions, and the Christian’s conscience before God, 1-4)*

### *The basic question*

This is the power to be discussed, whether the church may lawfully bind consciences by its laws. In this discussion we are not dealing with the political order, but are only concerned with how God is to be duly worshiped according to the rule laid down by him, and how the spiritual freedom which looks to God may remain unimpaired for us.

It has become common usage to call all decrees concerning the worship of God put forward by men apart from his Word “human traditions.” Our contention is against these, not against holy and useful church institutions, which provide for the preservation of discipline or honesty or peace.[150](#)

### *Directions to determine which human constitutions are inadmissible*

Paul employs the former reason when he contends in the letter to the Colossians against false apostles who were trying to oppress the churches with new burdens [Col. 2:8]. He makes more use of the second reason in the letter to the Galatians, in a similar case [Gal. 5:1-12].

Accordingly, he argues in the letter to the Colossians that we are not to seek from men the doctrine of the true worship of God, for the Lord has faithfully and fully instructed us how he is to be worshiped. To prove this, he says in the first chapter that the gospel contains all the wisdom by which the man of God is made perfect in Christ [Col. 1:28]. At the beginning of the second chapter he states that all treasures of wisdom and understanding are hidden in Christ [Col. 2:3]. From this he subsequently concludes that believers ought to beware lest they be seduced from Christ’s flock through empty philosophy, according to the constitutions of men [Col. 2:8]. But at the end of the chapter he condemns with greater confidence all self-made religion, that is, all feigned worship, which men have devised for themselves or received from others, and all precepts they of themselves dare promulgate concerning the worship of God [Col. 2:16-23].[151](#)

*(Ecclesiastical constitutions authorizing ceremonies in worship are tyrannous, frivolous, and contrary to Scripture, 9-18)*

*The Roman constitutions are, according to the foregoing principles, to be rejected*

I am not yet touching on the gross abominations with which they have endeavored to overthrow all piety. But among them it would not be imagined to be such an atrocious crime to fail to observe in even the least little tradition if they did not subject the worship of God to their fictions. How do we sin, if today we cannot bear what Paul has taught to be unbearable—that the lawful order of divine worship is reduced to men’s decision? Especially, when they command men to worship according to the elements of this world, which Paul testifies to be against Christ [Col. 2:20]. Again, it is well known with what extreme rigor they bind consciences to observe whatever they command. When we contradict them, we make common cause with Paul, who on no account allows faithful consciences to be reduced to human bondage [Gal. 5:1].[152](#)

*The papal constitutions deny God’s law*

Moreover, this evil thing is added, that when religion once begins to be defined in such vain fictions, such perversity is always followed by another hateful depravity, for which Christ rebuked the Pharisees. It is that they nullify God’s commandment for the sake of the traditions of men [Matt. 15:3]. I do not wish to fight with words of my own against our present lawmakers; let them win, I say, if they can in any way cleanse themselves of Christ’s accusation.[153](#)

*Roman constitutions meaningless and useless*

I know that my description of them as foolish and useless will not be credible to the wisdom of the flesh, which takes such pleasure in them that it thinks the church utterly deformed when they are removed. But this is what Paul writes: “These have...an appearance of wisdom in counterfeit worship, in self-abasement,” and for that reason they seem by their severity to be able to tame the flesh [Col. 2:23 p.]. Surely a most salutary admonition, this, which ought never to escape us! Human traditions, he says, deceive under the appearance of wisdom. Whence this deceptive hue? From the fact that they have been feigned by men. Human wit recognizes there what is its own, and embraces it, once recognized, more willingly than something truly excellent but less in accord with its vanity.... Lastly, because they apparently try to restrain the delights of the flesh, and to subject it to the rigor of abstinence, they therefore seem to have been wisely contrived. But what does Paul say to these? Does he tear off these masks, that the simple-minded may not be deluded by false pretense? Since to disprove them he had deemed it enough merely to have said that they were the devisings of

men, he passes over all these things without refutation [Col. 2:22], as if he counted them of no value. Indeed, Paul knew that all counterfeit worship in the church was condemned, and that the more it delights human nature the more it is suspected by believers; he knew that that false image of outward humility is so far from true humility as to be easily distinguished from it; lastly, he knew that elementary discipline is no more to be esteemed than bodily exercise. He wished the very facts to serve as a refutation of human traditions for believers, for whose sake these were commended among the unlearned.[154](#)

### *General application of common insights*

For whenever this superstition creeps in, that men wish to worship God with their fictions, all laws enacted for this purpose immediately degenerate to these gross abuses. For God threatens no one age or another but all ages with this curse, that he will strike with blindness and amazement those who worship him with the doctrines of men [Isa. 29:13-14]. This blinding continually causes those who despise so many warnings of God and willfully entangle themselves in these deadly snares, to embrace every kind of absurdity. But suppose, apart from present circumstances, you simply want to understand what are those human traditions of all times that should be repudiated by the church and by all godly men. What we have set forth above will be a sure and clear definition: that they are all laws apart from God's Word, laws made by men, either to prescribe the manner of worshiping God or to bind consciences by scruples, as if they were making rules about things necessary for salvation.[155](#)

As for the present case, suppose that, tearing away all masks and disguises, we truly look upon that which ought to be our first concern and is of greatest importance for us, that is, the kind of church Christ would have that we may fashion and fit ourselves to its standard. We shall then easily see that it is not a church which, passing the bounds of God's Word, wantons and disports itself in the framing of new laws. For does not that law once spoken to the church hold good forever? "Everything that I command you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it." [Deut. 12:32.] And another passage: "Do not add to" the Word of the Lord, or take away from it, "lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar" [Prov. 30:6 p.]. They cannot deny that this was spoken to the church. What else, then, do they declare but its recalcitrance, for they boast that, after such prohibitions, it nonetheless dared add and mix something of its own with God's teaching? Far be it from us to assent to their falsehood, by which they bring so much insult upon the church! But let us understand that whenever one considers this inordinate human rashness—which cannot contain itself within God's commands but must, wildly exalting, run after its own inventions—the name "church" is falsely pretended. There is nothing involved, nothing obscure, nothing ambiguous in these words which forbid the church universal to add to or take away anything from God's Word, when the worship of the Lord and precepts of salvation are concerned.... The Lord, who long ago declared that nothing so much offended him as being worshiped by humanly devised rites, has not become untrue to

himself.[156](#)

*The Roman constitutions do not reach back to the apostles, or even to the “apostolic tradition”*

But to trace the origin of these traditions (with which the church has hitherto been oppressed) back to the apostles is pure deceit. For the whole doctrine of the apostles has this intent: not to burden consciences with new observances, or contaminate the worship of God with our own inventions. Again, if there is anything credible in the histories and ancient records, the apostles not only were ignorant of what the Romanists attribute to them but never even heard of it.[157](#)

## **Confession of Faith in the Name of the Reformed Churches of France (1662)**

### *Of the Service of God*

Now on our part, in accordance with his declaration, that obedience is better than sacrifice, (1 Sam. xv. 22,) and with his uniform injunction to listen to what he commands, if we would render a well regulated and acceptable sacrifice, we hold that it is not for us to invent what to us seems good, or to follow what may have been devised in the brain of other men, but confine ourselves simply to the purity of Scripture. Wherefore we believe that anything which is not derived from it, but has only been commanded by the authority of men, ought not to be regarded as the service of God....

The second axiom is, that when we presume to serve God at our own hand, he repudiates it as corruption. And this is the reason why he exclaims by his prophet Isaiah, (Is. xxix. 13,) that all true religion has been perverted by keeping the commandments of men. And our Lord Jesus Christ confirms the same by saying, (Matt. xv. 9,) that in vain would we know God by human tradition. It is with good reason, therefore, that his spiritual supremacy over our souls remains inviolable, and that at the very least his will as a bridle should regulate our devotions.[158](#)

### *Of Human Tradition*

We have in this matter such notable warnings from common experience, that we are the more confirmed in not passing the limits of Scripture. For since men began to make laws to regulate the service of God, and subject the conscience, there has been neither end nor measure, while, on the other hand, God has punished such temerity, blinding men with delusions which may make one shudder. When we look nearer to see what human traditions are, we find that they are an abyss, and that their number is endless. An yet there are abuses so absurd and enormous, that it is wonderful how men could have been so stupid, were it not that God has executed the

vengeance which he announced by his prophet Isaiah, (Is. xxix. 14,) blinding and infatuating the wise who would honour him by observing the commandments of men.[159](#)

### *Of Idolatrous Intentions*

Since men have turned aside from pure and holy obedience to God, they have discovered that good intention was sufficient to approve everything. This was to open a door to all superstitions. It has been the origin of the worship of images, the purchase of masses, the filling of churches with pomp and parade, the running about on pilgrimages, the making of vows by each at his own hand. But the abyss here is so profound that it is enough for us to have touched on some examples. So far is it from being permitted to honour God by human inventions, that there would be no firmness nor certainty, neither bottom nor shore in religion: every thing would go to wreck, and Christianity differ in nothing from the idolatries of the heathen.[160](#)

## **The Necessity of Reforming the Church (1544)**

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated 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: “Obedience is better than sacrifice.” “In vain to they

worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,” (1 Sam. xv. 22; Matth. xv. 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....[161](#)

Having observed that the Word of God is the test which discriminates between his true worship and that which is false and vitiated, we thence readily infer that the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption. For men pay no regard to what God has commanded, or to what he approves, in order that they may serve him in a becoming manner, but assume to themselves a license of devising modes of worship, and afterwards obtruding them upon him as a substitute for obedience. If in what I say I seem to exaggerate, let an examination be made of all the acts by which the generality suppose that they worship God. I dare scarcely except a tenth part as not the random offspring of their own brain. What more would we? God rejects, condemns, abominates all fictitious worship, and employs his Word as a bridle to keep us in unqualified obedience. When shaking off this yoke, we wander after our own fictions, and offer to him a worship, the work of human rashness, how much soever it may delight ourselves, in his sight it is vain trifling, nay, vileness and pollution. The advocates of human traditions paint them in fair and gaudy colours; and Paul certainly admits that they carry with them a show of wisdom; but as God values obedience more than all sacrifices, it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship, that is not sanctioned by the command of God....[162](#)

In regard to the worship of God, our adversaries next accuse us, because, omitting empty and childish observances, tending only to hypocrisy, we worship God more simply. That we have in no respect detracted from the spiritual worship of God, is attested by fact. Nay, when it had in a great measure gone into desuetude, we have reinstated it in its former rights....[163](#)

But the worst of all is, that though God has so often and so strictly interdicted all modes of worship prescribed by man, the only worship paid to him consisted of human inventions. What ground, then, have our enemies to vociferate that in this matter we have given religion to the wind? First, we have not laid even a finger on anything which Christ does not discountenance, as of no value, when he declares that it is vain to worship God with human traditions. The thing might, perhaps, have been more tolerable if the only effect had been that men lost their pains by an unavailing worship; but since as I have observed, God in many passages forbids any new worship unsanctioned by his Word; since he declares that he is grievously offended with the presumption which invents such worship, and threatens it with severe punishment, it is clear that the reformation which we have introduced was demanded by a strong necessity.

I am not unaware how difficult it is to persuade the world that God rejects and even abominates every thing relating to his worship that is devised by human reason. The delusion

on this head is owing to several causes,—“Every one thinks highly of his own,” as the old proverb expresses it. Hence the offspring of our own brain delights us, and besides, as Paul admits, this fictitious worship often presents some show of wisdom. Then, as it has for the most part an external splendour which pleases the eye, it is more agreeable to our carnal nature, than that which alone God requires and approves, but which is less ostentatious. But there is nothing which so blinds the understanding of men, and misleads them in their judgments in this matter, as hypocrisy. For while it is incumbent on true worshipers to give the heart and mind, men are always desirous to invent a mode of serving God of a totally different description, their object being to perform to him certain bodily observances, and keep the mind to themselves. Moreover, they imagine that when they obtrude upon him external pomp, they have, by this artifice, evaded the necessity of giving themselves. And this is the reason why they submit to innumerable observances which miserably fatigue them without measure and without end, and why they choose to wander in a perpetual labyrinth, rather than worship God simply in spirit and in truth....[164](#)

The mockery which worships God with nought but external gestures and absurd human fictions, how could we, without sin, allow to pass unrebuked? We know how much he hates hypocrisy, and yet in that fictitious worship, which was everywhere in use, hypocrisy reigned. We hear how bitter the terms in which the Prophets inveigh against all worship fabricated by human rashness. But a good intention, i.e., an insane license of daring whatever man pleased, was deemed the perfection of worship. For it is certain that in the whole body of worship which had been established, there was scarcely a single observance which had an authoritative sanction from the Word of God. We are not in this matter to stand either by our own or by other men’s judgments. We must listen to the voice of God, and hear in what estimation he holds that profanation of worship which is displayed when men, over leaping the boundaries of his Word, run riot in their own inventions. The reasons which he assigns for punishing the Israelites with blindness, after they had lost the pious and holy hypocrisy, and *will-worship*, (*ethelothreskeia*) meaning thereby a form of worship contrived by men.[165](#)

## **The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church (1548)**

We may add that the knowledge of this matter demands its own proper explanation. There are two principal branches. First, we must hold that the spiritual worship of God does not consist either in external ceremonies, or any other kind of works whatsoever; and, secondly, that no worship is legitimate unless it be so framed as to have for its only rule the will of him to whom it is performed. Both of these are absolutely necessary. For as we savor of nothing but earth and flesh, so we measure God by ourselves. Hence it is that we always take more pleasure in external show, which is of no value in the sight on God, than in that inward worship of the



heart, which alone he approves and requires. On the other hand, the wantonness of our minds is notorious, which breaks forth, especially in this quarter, where nothing at all ought to have been dared. Men allow themselves to devise all modes of worship, and change and rechange them at pleasure. Nor is the fault of our age. Even from the beginning of the world, the world sported thus licentiously with God. He himself proclaims that there is nothing he values more than obedience. (I Sam. xv. 22.) Wherefore, all modes of worship devised contrary to his command, he not only repudiates as void, but distinctly condemns. Why need I adduce proofs in so clear a matter? Passages to this effect should be proverbial among Christians.<sup>166</sup>

## **Brief Form of a Confession of Faith**

I confess that both the whole rule of right living, and also instruction in faith, are mostly delivered in the sacred Scriptures, to which nothing can, without criminality, be added, from which nothing can be taken away. I therefore detest all of men's imagining which they would obtrude upon us as articles of faith, and bind upon our consciences by laws and statutes. And thus I repudiate in general whatever has been introduced into the worship of God without authority from the word of God. Of this kind are all the Popish ceremonies. In short, I detest the tyrannical yoke by which miserable consciences have been oppressed—as the law of auricular confession, celibacy, and others of the same description.<sup>167</sup>

## **Letter to Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford, Duke of Somerset, Regent of England under the Minority of Edward VI (1548)**

Praise be to God, you have not to learn what is the true faith of Christians, and the doctrine which they ought to hold, seeing that by your means the true purity of the faith has been restored. That is, that we hold God alone to be the sole Governor of our souls, that we hold his law to be the only rule and spiritual directory for our consciences, not serving him according to the foolish inventions of men. Also, that according to his nature he would be worshiped in spirit and in purity of heart. On the other hand, acknowledging that there is nothing but all wretchedness in ourselves, and that we are corrupt in all our feelings and affections, so that our souls are a very abyss of iniquity, utterly despairing of ourselves; and that, having exhausted every presumption of our own wisdom, worth, or power of well-doing, we must have recourse to the fountain of every blessing, which is in Christ Jesus.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” in *Selected Works: Tracts and*

*Letters*, Henry Beveridge, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1844]), 1:126.

[129](#) John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:431-432.

[130](#) *Ibid.*, 1:344.

[131](#) *Ibid.*, 1:365.

[132](#) *Ibid.*, 1:344-345.

[133](#) *Ibid.*, 1:353.

[134](#) John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 246.

[135](#) John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:397-398.

[136](#) John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:397-398 (italics in original).

[137](#) *Ibid.*, 1:413-414.

[138](#) *Ibid.*, 2:438-439.

[139](#) John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:245-246.

[140](#) *Ibid.*, 2:253-254.

[141](#) John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 201-203.

[142](#) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.XI.4, Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:104.

[143](#) I.XII.I, 1:117.

[144](#) I.XII.3, 1:120.

[145](#) II.VII.5, 1:371-372.

[146](#) II.VIII.17, 1:383.

[147](#) IV.X.23, 2:1201-1202.

[148](#) IV.X.24, 2:1203.

[149](#) IV.X.26, 2:1204.

[150](#) IV.X.1, 2:1179.

[151](#) IV.X.8, 2:1186-1187.

[152](#) IV.X.9, 2:1187-1188.

[153](#) IV.X.10, 2:1188.

[154](#) IV.X.11, 2:1189-1190.

[155](#) IV.X.16, 2:1194.

[156](#) IV.X.17, 2:1195-1196.

[157](#) IV.X.18, 2:1197.

[158](#) John Calvin, “Confession of Faith” in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1844]), 2:147-148.

[159](#) *Ibid.*

[160](#) *Ibid.*, 148-149.

[161](#) “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” in *Selected Works*, 1:128-129.

[162](#) *Ibid.*, 1:132-133.

[163](#) *Ibid.*, 1:151.

[164](#) *Ibid.*, 1:152-153.

[165](#) *Ibid.*, 1:189.

[166](#) John Calvin, “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church” in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:260-261.

[167](#) John Calvin, “Brief Form of a Confession of Faith” in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:133.

[168](#) John Calvin, “To the Protector Somerset” in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, 5:189.

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# Appendix B

## The Neo-Presbyterian Challenge to Confessional Presbyterian Orthodoxy: A Biblical Analysis of John Frame's *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*

### Introduction

John Frame, a Presbyterian Church in America ordained minister, “worship leader” and professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando,<sup>169</sup> has written a book that both defends and sets forth the worship paradigm of most modern “conservative” Presbyterianism. (By conservative Presbyterianism we refer to those Presbyterian bodies that strictly adhere to biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, literal miracles, vicarious atonement, a literal resurrection and the five points of Calvinism.) Before analyzing many of the fundamental assertions of Frame’s book, this author would like to commend Frame for a number of things. First, the book, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, is well written and organized. Second, Frame has tackled a subject that is very important and hardly addressed in this century. Third, Frame is strongly committed to biblical inerrancy and the absolute authority of the Bible. Although Frame’s book has some commendable aspects, it must be condemned over-all as a serious departure from the standard, historical understanding of Reformed worship. What is particularly disturbing regarding Frame’s book is that he abandons the Westminster Standards, yet presents himself as a champion of the regulative principle taught in those Standards. Frame is either guilty of serious self-deception, or he is incredibly dishonest. In this brief analysis of Frame’s book we will consider: (1) Frame’s book as a justification of the status quo (i.e., neo-Presbyterian worship), (2) Frame’s misrepresentation of the position regarding worship of the early Presbyterians and Westminster Standards, (3) Frame’s redefinition of the regulative principle, (4) Frame’s bizarre, arbitrary and unorthodox exegetical methodology that he uses to justify many human innovations in worship, and (5) Frame’s case for modern “celebrative” worship.

### Defending the Status Quo

One of the purposes of Frame’s book is to justify the type of worship practiced by his and many other churches. He writes: “Part of my motivation was a concern to preserve for my local congregation and others like it the freedom to worship God in its accustomed style—one

that is nontraditional, but in my judgment, fully spiritual.”<sup>170</sup> Frame throughout the book refers to traditional vs. non-traditional worship. Although he never defines traditional worship, it is clear that he is not in favor of it. He says, “Historically oriented books typically try to make us feel guilty if we do not follow traditional patterns. Theological traditionalists also typically want to minimize freedom and flexibility. Even those who offer suggestions for ‘meaningful worship’ are often very restrictive, for they tend to be very negative toward churches that don’t follow their suggestions.”<sup>171</sup> This statement, which occurs in the preface of the book, is a classic case of what debaters call “poisoning the well.” According to Frame, there is traditional worship, which he implies is founded upon human tradition, and there is his type of worship which is truly free of human traditions and is biblical. We will see, however, that Frame proposes all sorts of things in worship that have no warrant from God’s word. If, by traditional, Frame was condemning uninspired hymns, musical instruments (e.g., the piano and organ) and extrabiblical holy days (e.g., Christmas and Easter), then he would be on the right track.<sup>172</sup> However, one will note as he reads Frame’s book that his problem with the typical old-fashioned corrupt “Presbyterian” worship is that it does not have enough human innovations. He is really in favor of more, not less, human autonomy.

As this study progresses we will see that there are two basic schools of thought regarding worship in “conservative” Presbyterian circles. There are strict, consistent regulativists who follow the original intent of the Westminster Standards. Such people worship exactly as Presbyterians did for over two hundred years (i.e., employing *a capella* exclusive psalmody without extra-biblical holy days). There are others (the vast majority) who have found ways to circumvent the regulative principle and bring in various human innovations. Frame, as part of the latter group, is simply being more consistent. That is primarily the reason that Frame’s Arminian-charismatic style of worship is being adopted throughout “conservative” Presbyterian denominations that have already abandoned biblical worship. Frame’s main disagreement with old-fashioned corrupt “Presbyterian” worship (e.g., *Trinity Hymnal* and a piano) is really one primarily of style or taste. (Although there are also still some major philosophical differences regarding the role of the mind in worship and mysticism.) Frame’s disagreement with the Westminster Standards and strict regulativists is fundamental and foundational. Thus, most of his book is directed against the Westminster Standards and the worship that it produced (exclusive *a capella* psalmody without extra-biblical holy days, etc.).

In a sense, Frame has done the church of Christ a great service by putting in written form for all to read and analyze a defense of neo-presbyterian worship. What is neo-presbyterian worship? It is Arminian-charismatic style worship conducted by Presbyterians who pretend to hold to the Westminster Standards in the sphere of worship. One can understand where Frame is coming from, from the following statement: “In a way, the volume seeks to summarize the thinking underlying the worship of the ‘New Life’ Presbyterian churches: New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California, where I worship, our ‘mother church’ of the

same name in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and others.”<sup>173</sup> The “mother church” to which Frame refers was founded in the 1970s by Orthodox Presbyterian pastor Jack Miller. The “mother church” in Glenside adopted the worship practices of Arminian-charismatic churches and discovered that the new worship practices were fun, attracted young people and led to church growth. It is important to note that the new “non-traditional” worship adopted by the original New Life Church in Glenside, which is now practiced in a many of the Presbyterian Church in American congregations and number of Orthodox Presbyterian churches, did not come into being from a careful exegesis of Scripture by Reformed pastors and theologians. It was simply borrowed lock, stock and barrel from Arminian charismatics who couldn’t care less if there was such a thing as the regulative principle. Frame, a “worship leader” in such a church, attempts in his book to harmonize such worship with the Reformed faith, twenty years after such worship was adopted. He has taken upon himself the task of harmonizing a non-Reformed, Arminian-charismatic worship paradigm with the strict regulativist paradigm of the Westminster Standards. In a moment we will see that this involves redefining the Reformed concept of “divine warrant” so broadly that almost anything is permitted in worship. Frame has the job of fitting a very large square peg (Arminian-charismatic worship) into a very small round hole (the Reformed-confessional doctrine of worship). Therefore, he spends a great deal of time with a hammer and chisel, making the small round hole very large and square. One must give Frame credit for the skill with which he so smoothly, cunningly and craftily completely redefines the regulative principle, all the while claiming total allegiance to the Westminster Standards.

Another stated purpose of Frame’s book is to soothe the guilty consciences of Reformed pastors who know enough theology and church history to recognize to a certain extent that they have departed from Reformed, confessional worship. He writes:

Presbyterian worship—based on the biblical “regulative principle,” which I describe in these pages—was in its early days very restrictive, austere, and “minimalist.” It excluded organs, choirs, hymn texts other than the Psalms, symbolism in the worship area, and religious holidays except for the Sabbath. Presbyterians in the “Covenanter” tradition, such as those in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and a few other denominations, still worship in this way, but they are in that respect a small minority of conservative Presbyterians today.

Nevertheless, the Puritan theology of worship that produced this minimalism is still taught in theologically conservative Presbyterian churches and seminaries as the authentic Presbyterian and Reformed view of worship. This is partly because that theology is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, to which these churches subscribe. But the Westminster standards actually contain

very little of the Puritan theology of worship. The Puritan and Scottish divines who wrote the Westminster standards were wise not to include in them all their ideas of worship. The principles responsible for liturgical minimalism come from Puritan and other Reformed texts that go above and beyond the confessional documents. Yet these extraconfessional texts themselves have considerable informal authority in conservative Presbyterian churches.

The result has been that although few conservative Presbyterian churches actually worship in the Puritan way, the Puritan theology of worship remains the standard orthodoxy among them. This discrepancy sometimes leads to guilty consciences. I have talked to pastors, for instance, who are unwilling to go back to exclusive use of the Psalms in congregational singing, yet feel awkward about singing hymns. They almost seem to think that they *ought* to worship as the Puritans did, even though they have no intention of doing so. They worry that this wavering amounts to an inconsistency in their commitment to the Reformed faith and to Presbyterian orthodoxy.

I believe that Presbyterians need to do some rethinking in this area. In my view, the Westminster Confession is entirely right in its regulative principle—that true worship is limited to what God commands. But the methods used by the Puritans to discover and apply those commands need a theological overhaul. Much of what they said cannot be justified by Scripture. The result of our rethinking, I hope, will be a somewhat revised paradigm for Presbyterian worship; one thoroughly Reformed in its assumptions, affirming the regulative principle and the statements of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, but allowing much greater flexibility than the Puritans did in applying God’s commands for worship. *Such a revised paradigm will relieve the guilty feelings mentioned earlier, not because it allows us to ignore God’s commandments, but because it helps us to understand more accurately what our Lord expects of us.*<sup>174</sup>

Frame’s book should be seen for what it is. It is first and foremost a defense of the departure and declension in the area of worship that has occurred over the past two hundred years in most Presbyterian denominations. Frame openly admits in the quote above that there is a “discrepancy” between what modern Presbyterians profess and what they actually practice. This discrepancy causes some Presbyterian ministers to feel guilty. Therefore (according to Frame), what these ministers need is a new “revised paradigm” that allows “much greater flexibility” (which amounts to “much greater human autonomy”), so that churches can worship in the corrupt, backslidden fashion they are accustomed to without “guilty feelings.” In order to soothe guilty consciences Frame wages guerilla warfare upon Reformed worship. He attacks the regulative principle by completely redefining it and gutting it. He then attacks the standard,



historic biblical positions held by Presbyterians until the declension began (e.g., exclusive Psalmody, the non-use of instruments in public worship, the non-celebration of pagan, papal holy days, etc.). The secondary purpose of Frame's book is to justify to his already backslidden (*Trinity Hymnal*, piano and organ) audience the superiority of Arminian-charismatic contemporary worship. We will see that what most modern Presbyterians need is not an apologetic for declension but rather a call to sincere repentance. There must be a return to the biblical attainments of our covenanted Presbyterian forefathers.

## Rewriting History

Before we turn our attention to Frame's treatment of the regulative principle we first must consider the misrepresentation of church history that is given to make it appear that his position is not contrary to the Westminster Standards. He writes: "[T]he Westminster Standards actually contain very little of the Puritan theology of worship. The Puritan and Scottish divines who wrote the Westminster Standards were wise not to include in them all of their ideas on worship. The principles responsible for liturgical minimalism come from Puritan and other Reformed texts *that go above and beyond the confessional documents*. Yet these extra-confessional texts themselves have considerable informal authority in conservative Presbyterian churches."<sup>175</sup>

The purpose of this statement is to make a distinction between the teaching of the Westminster Standards and "extra-confessional texts" (i.e., books, tracts, pamphlets, and sermons) by Puritans and other Reformed persons "that go above and beyond the confessional documents." According to Frame it is not the confession that produced "liturgical minimalism"<sup>176</sup> but rather Puritan extremists who went too far. Why does Frame separate the teachings of the Westminster Standards from the writings on worship of those Puritans and Presbyterians who wrote the Westminster Standards? The simple reason that Frame and other advocates of neo-presbyterian worship repeatedly misrepresent the teaching of the Westminster Standards is that they do not want to admit that their position is anti-confessional. Advocates of neo-presbyterian worship (e.g., uninspired hymns, musical instruments in worship and extra-biblical holy days [e.g., Christmas and Easter]) either ignore or misrepresent church history.

In order to prove that the distinction that Frame makes between the Westminster Standards and the Puritan and other Reformed texts that supposedly go beyond the Confession and produce "liturgical minimalism" is false, and that Frame's attack on this supposed minimalistic worship is anti-confessional, we will briefly consider three positions that Frame opposes yet were advocated by the Westminster Assembly: exclusive psalmody, the non-use of musical instruments in worship and the rejection of extra-biblical holy days.

In the Confession of Faith (21.5) we read regarding religious worship: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God.” According to the Confession what are Christians to sing during the ordinary religious worship of God? They are to sing Psalms. The question that is often raised concerning this section of the Confession is: does the term “psalm” refer to the book of Psalms, religious songs in general, including man-made hymns, or to all inspired Scripture songs? Advocates of neo-presbyterian worship like to point out the fact that the word psalm is not capitalized, as if this proves the word is used in some vague, generic sense. The problem with this argument is the simple fact that the authors the Westminster Standards only capitalized the word Psalms when it was used as a *title* of the whole book. Note the following quote from the Directory for the Publick Worship of God:

We commend also the more frequent reading of such Scripture as he that readeth shall think best for edification of his hearers, as the book of Psalms, and such like. When the minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended.... After reading of the word, (and singing of the psalm,) the minister who is to preach.... It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family.

In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.

That the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him or the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.<sup>[177](#)</sup>

The quote above proves that the word psalm or psalms refers not to worship songs in general whether inspired or uninspired but to the book of Psalms in particular.

Further examination of the *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly* proves that the only song book approved by the assembly for public worship was Mr. Rouse’s version of the book of Psalms.

Mr. Reynolds made a report of an answer to the Lords about Mr. Barton’s Psalms.

It was read and debated.... This answer to the House of Commons.

*Ordered*—That whereas the Honorable House of Commons hath, by an order bearing the date of the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1643, recommended the Psalms set out by Mr. Rouse to the consideration of the Assembly of Divines, the Assembly hath caused them to be carefully perused, and as they are now altered and amended, do approve of them, and humbly conceive that it may be useful and profitable to the Church that they be permitted to be publicly sung.<sup>(1)</sup>

*Ordered*—The Committee that perused the Psalms shall carry this up to the Honorable House of Commons.

Dr. Temple, Dr. Smith, Dr. Wincop, to carry up the answer to the House of Lords.<sup>178</sup>

A footnote tells us the response of the House of Lords.

<sup>(1)</sup>The House in consequence resolved ‘that this Book of Psalms set forth by Mr. Rouse, and perused by the Assembly of Divines, be forthwith printed.’—*Journals of House of Commons*, vol. iv. p. 342.<sup>179</sup>

The only debates that occurred in the Westminster Assembly regarding the singing of praise were over whether or not other translations of the book of Psalms should be sung in the churches. The assembly only authorized the Rouse version because “it is so exactly framed according to the original text” and for the sake of uniformity and edification.

The Committee made report of an answer to the House of Lords about Mr. Barton’s Psalms. It was read; and upon debate it was.

*Resolved* upon the Q., To be transcribed and sent to the Lords as the answer of this Assembly to their order. Mr. Carter, jun., enters his dissent to this vote of sending up this answer to the Lords.<sup>(1)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup>This answer is not inserted in the Minutes, but it has been preserved in the Journals of the House of Lords, and is as follows:—

TO THE RIGHT THE HOUSE OF LORDS ASSEMBLED IN PARLIAMENT.

The Assembly of Divines received April 9<sup>th</sup> from this Honourable House an Order,

bearing date March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1646, to certify this Honourable House why the translation of Psalms by Mr. Barton may not be used and sung in the churches, by such as shall desire it, as well as any other translation; do humbly return this answer: That whereas on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1645, in obedience to an order of this Honourable House concerning the said Mr. Barton's Psalms, we have already commended to this Honourable House one translation of the Psalms in verse, made by Mr. Rouse, and perused and amended by the same learned gentlemen, and the Committee of the Assembly, as conceiving it would be very useful for the edification of the Church in regard it is so exactly framed according to the original text: and whereas there are several other translations of the Psalms already extant: We humbly conceive that if liberty should be given to people to sing in churches, every one that translation they desire, by that means several translations might come to be used, yea, in one and the same congregation at the same time, which would be a great disruption and hindrance to edification.—*Journals of House of Lords*, vol. viii. pp. 283, 284.[180](#)

The last debate regarding whether or not Mr. Barton's translation of the Psalms (or any other version other than the Rouse version) occurred on Wednesday morning, April 22, 1646.[181](#) As noted in the quote above, it was resolved that only Mr. Rouse's version would be permitted in the churches. Only six months later, on Friday morning October 30, 1646, chapter 21—"Of Religious Worship" was voted on and agreed to by the assembly.[182](#) The idea (that is rather common today) that the word "psalms" in the chapter regarding religious worship includes uninspired hymns is clearly false. Did the Puritan and Presbyterians go beyond the Standards (as Frame asserts) in their insistence upon exclusive Psalmody? No, absolutely not! If neo-Presbyterians want to include hymns and campfire ditties in their worship services, their backslidden General Assemblies do allow it. They, however, should be open and honest and admit that they are anti-confessional on this matter.

In his *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (1845) Robert Shaw teaches that the "singing of psalms" in the *Confession of Faith* means the biblical Psalms.

3. Singing of psalms. This was enjoined, under the Old Testament, as a part of the ordinary worship of God, and it is distinguished from ceremonial worship.—Ps. lxi. 30, 31. It is not abrogated under the New Testament, but rather confirmed.—Eph. v. 19; Col. iii. 16. It is sanctioned by the example of Christ and his apostles.—Matt. xxvi. 30; Acts xvi. 25. The Psalms of David were especially intended by God for the use of the Church in the exercise of public praise, under the former dispensation; and they are equally adapted to the use of the Church under the present dispensation. Although the apostles insist much upon the abolition of ritual institutions, they give no intimations that the Psalms of David are unsuitable for

gospel-worship; and had it been intended that they should be set aside in New Testament times, there is reason to think that another psalmody would have been provided in their room. In the Book of Psalms there are various passages which seem to indicate that they were intended by the Spirit for the use of the Church in all ages. “I will extol thee, my God, O King,” says David, “and I will bless thy name for ever and ever.”—Ps. cxiv. 1.<sup>183</sup>

Not only is the teaching of the Confession of Faith and Directory of Public Worship clear on this issue, it is a fact of history that Presbyterians in Scotland, Ireland and North America were exclusive Psalm singers until the latter part of the eighteenth century. What is of particular interest regarding the abandonment of exclusive psalmody by the large Presbyterian bodies in the eighteenth century is that exclusive psalmody was not abandoned as a result of careful study and refutation by pastors, scholars and theologians. The departure of various Presbyterian denominations from exclusive psalmody (i.e., biblical worship) occurred primarily for three reasons.

(1) Various Presbyterian churches lost the biblical understanding of the regulative principle of worship and thus only applied it to the public worship service. “Private” gatherings, family and private worship were considered areas of life outside the strict parameter of divine warrant. Virtually all the innovations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came into the churches through practices that were *arbitrarily* placed outside of the “sola scriptura” (e.g., family worship, Sunday School, revival meetings, etc.).

(2) Many Presbyterians were influenced by the pietistic, sentimental revivalism that swept through the colonies in the eighteenth century. During this time a number of families and pastors began using Isaac Watts’ *Psalms of David Imitated* (1719) instead of the carefully translated 1650 psalter employed by Presbyterians of the day. Watts’ version of the Psalms was a radical departure from exclusive psalmody which went far beyond even a paraphrase of the Psalms. In many instances it amounted to uninspired hymns loosely based on the Psalms. One must never forget that Isaac Watts, in the preface to his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), openly admitted that he regarded the Psalms of David as defective, “opposite to the Gospel” and liable to cause believers to “speak a falsehood unto God.” Watts’ version of the Psalms became accepted by many families and various ministers and was a stepping stone to the blatant uninspired hymnody of Watts’ hymnbook.

(3) The innovations of the eighteenth century would not have taken root if the presbyteries in the colonies had done their job and disciplined ministers who had corrupted the worship of God and departed from Scripture and the Westminster Standards. There was an unwillingness to make purity of worship an issue of discipline. There were various battles over the Watts’ version from 1752 through the 1780s. The outcome, however, was always the same. The

presbytery or synod involved refused to take decisive action, thereby allowing the Watts imitations to continue. As a result, those unwilling to pollute themselves separated to smaller, more biblical Presbyterian bodies. The declension was codified in 1788 when a new directory for worship was adopted which changed the statement of the 1644 directory, “singing of Psalms,” to “by singing Psalms and hymns.”

Michael Bushell warns us to learn from the sins and mistakes of the PCUSA. He writes:

Under the pietistic and humanistic influences attending and following the Great Awakening, the American Presbyterian Church eventually came to the conclusion that the peace of the church was best to be served by allowing considerable diversity in the worship practices of the churches under its care. The worship practice of the Presbyterian church was, in effect, cut loose from the bonds of Scripture and allowed to run its own course. It was this situation as much as anything else that led eventually to the Presbyterian church’s defection to Modernism. If a church will not keep its worship pure and biblical, if it will not jealously guard its own practice when its people come before God in self-conscious praise and adoration, then it is not to be expected that it will long maintain its doctrinal purity. It is no small wonder that men have so little respect intellectually for the Scriptures when daily they ignore their clear commands concerning how their Author is to be worshiped. The worship of the Presbyterian church in this country is dictated now largely by the demands of convenience, not the demands of Scripture, and there is no basic difference between liberal and evangelical churches on this score, not at least as regards outward form. To our brethren in the various Reformed communions who would disagree with this, we would ask this simple question: “If the regulative principle were not taught in the Scriptures, what difference would it make in your worship?” The answer in most cases would have to be, “very little.” We would also ask our brethren whether they have sought self-consciously to apply the regulative principle to their worship practice. We have a suspicion that most of the people in our Reformed churches have never even heard of the regulative principle, much less sought to apply it. Our Reformed churches have inherited a pattern of thinking which will countenance virtually any practice in worship as long as it does not offend the wrong people. These are harsh words, but we are fully convinced that they are accurate.<sup>184</sup>

Another supposed “minimalistic” practice that Frame implies goes beyond the Westminster Standards was the non-use of musical instruments in worship. Was the non-use of musical instruments in worship only the opinion of some Puritans who went beyond the consensus of the Westminster Assembly? No. Absolutely not! A letter from the Scottish ministers and elders who were delegates to the Westminster Assembly to the General Assembly of Scotland (1644)

proves the opposite. It reads: “[W]e cannot but admire the good hand of GOD in the great things done here already, particularly; That the Covenant (the Foundation of the whole Work) is taken; Prelacie and the whole train thereof, extirpated; The Service-Book in many places forsaken, plain and powerful preaching set up; Many Colleges in Cambridge provided with such Ministers, as are most zealous of the best Reformation; Altars removed; The Communion in some places given at the Table setting; The great Organs of *Pauls* and of *Peters* in *Westminster* taken down; Images and many other monuments of Idolatry defaced and abolished.”<sup>185</sup> The General Assembly of Scotland responded to the letter from the commissioners by writing an official letter to the Church of England. It reads: “We were greatly refreshed to hear by Letters from our Commissioners there with you...of the great good things the Lord hath wrought among you and for you...many corruptions, as Altars, Images, and other Monuments of Idolatry and Superstition removed...the great Organs at *Pauls* and *Peters* taken down.”<sup>186</sup> The non-use of musical instruments in worship was the norm of Puritans and Presbyterians and was the main position of the Westminster divines. The non-musical instrument position among Presbyterians began to be abandoned in the 1880s.

A third practice which Frame would consider “minimalistic” and extreme is the non-celebration of holy days (e.g., Christmas and Easter) other than Sunday, the Christian sabbath. Is this position something that goes beyond the Westminster Assembly? No. The assembly made itself very clear on this matter. Its *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645) says, “There is no day commanded in the Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord’s day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called *Holy-days*, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued.”<sup>187</sup>

Frame apparently wants us to believe that there is the Westminster Standards, with which he is in agreement, and there are Puritan and other Reformed texts that go beyond the Confession and need to be corrected. Given the fact that the Assembly endorsed exclusive psalmody, the abolishment of musical instruments in worship, and holy days, we ask Frame to show us what are the “minimalist” views that go beyond the Confession that he is referring to. There were Puritans who argued that churches should stop saying the creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Confession, and the doxology. There also was disagreement over issues such as conventicles. However, division did not occur over these side issues. If these are the issues that Frame is referring to, one cannot tell by reading his book. The issues that do bother Frame, that he spends time refuting, were all matters which were endorsed by the Westminster Assembly. Therefore, it is fair to conclude that Frame’s book at many points is an attack on the Westminster Standards in particular and Reformed worship in general.<sup>188</sup>

## Frame’s Redefinition of the Regulative Principle

In this section we will prove that Frame completely redefines the regulative principle of worship. It is very important that Reformed believers who adhere to the Reformed symbols understand that Frame's concept of divine warrant has virtually nothing to do with the Westminster Standards. In fact, what Frame offers as an exposition of the regulative principle is totally unique. This author (who has studied this issue extensively) is unaware of any Reformed theologians, expositors or authors who have advocated views on the regulative principle or divine warrant that are even remotely similar to Frame's view. (The closest view perhaps is Steve Schlissel's "informed principle of worship" which is founded on an open rejection of the regulative principle.<sup>189</sup>) Frame should have followed his own advice on how to write a theological paper. He writes: "At the very least, it will involve exegetical research and intelligent interaction with biblical texts. Otherwise, the theological work can hardly make any claim to scripturality; and if it is not scriptural, it is simply worthless."<sup>190</sup> We will see that Frame's use of the biblical texts for divine warrant of such things as drama are not intelligent, not scriptural and completely worthless. Frame continues, "Additionally, there should usually be some interaction with other orthodox theologians to guard against individualistic aberration."<sup>191</sup> Frame's understanding of the regulative principle is clearly an individualistic aberration. This reviewer challenges Frame and the seminary professors who endorsed his anti-confessional book to produce one Reformed author who agrees with Frame's concept of divine warrant.

Frame lays the foundation of his own unique version of the regulative principle in chapters 4 and 5. In chapter 4 ("rules for worship") Frame discusses the regulative principle. In chapter 5 ("What to Do in Worship") he deals with the elements of worship. What Frame does in these chapters is very deceptive. First, he gives a fairly standard, orthodox definition of the regulative principle. (In this section, however, he does ignore how Puritans and Presbyterians defined methods of divine warrant.) After he identifies himself as a confessional Presbyterian who adheres to the regulative principle, he then proceeds to systematically redefine and destroy the historic confessional understanding of the regulative principle. A careful reading of Frame's book reveals that Frame believes the historic confessional understanding of the regulative principle is unbiblical and unworkable. Because Frame believes that the historic confessional understanding of the regulative principle is unbiblical and unworkable, he sets it aside and then proceeds to give his own unique version of it.

How does Frame replace the confessional regulative principle with his own unique version of it? There are a number of things that must be examined in our analysis of Frame's redefinition. First, Frame takes the position that the Bible does not offer specifics regarding worship but only generalities. This type of argument was common among Anglican theologians (e.g., Hooker) as they attempted to refute the Puritans. According to Frame, the specifics are left to man's discretion. Second, Frame gives a false portrayal of the Puritan-Presbyterian position regarding informal vs. formal meetings. He also makes no distinction between public, family



and private worship and ignores the distinction between extraordinary events and set times of worship. Frame wants to be able to mine the Scriptures for divine warrant in places that clearly have nothing to do with a public worship service. Third, Frame rejects the confessional view regarding the circumstances of worship in favor of what he calls “applications.” This departure from the Confession allows Frame to move away from specific warrant to warrant that is dependent on general rules or principles. Frame takes the rules that the Westminster divines applied *only* to circumstances or incidentals of worship and uses them as divine warrant for worship ordinances. Fourth, Frame rejects the Westminster Confession of Faith’s view regarding the elements of worship. Frame replaces the confessional view of separate elements that are each dependent on specific divine warrant in favor of a few general categories that men can apply as they see fit. As we consider Frame’s redefinition of the regulative principle we must not lose sight of the fact that Frame’s book is a defense of neo-Presbyterian (i.e., Arminian-charismatic style) worship. Frame’s clever redefinitions are directed at one goal. That goal is the removal of the strict, “minimalistic,” confessional concept of divine warrant in favor of a very broad, general, loose concept of divine warrant.

## Frame’s Lip Service to the Westminster Standards

If one reads Frame’s endorsement of the Westminster Standards and his initial definition of the regulative principle in isolation from the rest of his book, one would get the impression that Frame was a confessional or orthodox Presbyterian. Frame writes: “My own theological commitment is Presbyterian; I subscribe enthusiastically to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and I trust that that commitment will be quite evident in this book.”<sup>192</sup>

Note that Frame defends the Reformed understanding of worship against non-Reformed views. He writes: “Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, and Lutherans have taken the position that we may do anything in worship except what Scripture forbids. Here Scripture regulates worship in a negative way—by exercising veto power. Presbyterian and Reformed churches, however, have employed a stronger principle: whatever Scripture does not command is forbidden. Here Scripture has more veto power; its function is essentially positive. On this view, Scripture must positively require a practice, if that practice is to be suitable for the worship of God.”<sup>193</sup> Frame then quotes the classic regulativist statement from the Westminster Confession of Faith (21.1) and says, “The operative word is ‘prescribed.’ Eventually this restriction of worship to what God prescribes became known as the ‘regulative principle.’”<sup>194</sup> Frame continues, “Can any of us trust ourselves to determine apart from Scripture, what God does and does not like in worship? Our finitude and sin disqualify us from making such judgments.... Scripture itself condemns worship that is based only on human ideas.... Scripture, God’s word, is sufficient for our worship, as for all life.”<sup>195</sup> Frame refers to a number of standard regulative passages such as Leviticus 10:1-2, Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15:8-9, Mark 7:6-7 and Colossians 2:23.<sup>196</sup>

## Frame Reveals His True Colors

After reading Frame's statements regarding his commitment to the Westminster Standards and the regulative principle, one would naturally think that Frame was a champion of the regulative principle and the Reformed worship of Calvin, Knox, the Puritans and early Presbyterians. The truth of the matter, however, is that Frame's concept of the regulative principle and divine warrant as delineated in the rest of his book is an explicit rejection of the Westminster Standards and Reformed confessional worship.

One can begin to see Frame's real opinion of the regulative principle when he writes: "Unlike some Presbyterian writers, I believe that I understand, and understand sympathetically, why some sincere Christians prefer not to worship in the Presbyterian way. I recognize that there are real problems in the traditional Presbyterian view that need to be addressed from the Scriptures, and I intend to deal with these problems seriously."<sup>197</sup> Did we not just read about Frame's strong commitment to the Westminster Standards and the regulative principle of worship? If Frame adheres to the Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as he claims, then would he not believe that the Presbyterian way is the biblical way? Is he not admitting here that he believes there are problems with the Westminster Standards that need to be addressed by the Scriptures? In other words, the Westminster Standards are unscriptural and need to be altered in order to meet biblical teaching. Is it possible that Frame is not referring to the Standards themselves but to the corruption of the Presbyterian worship that has occurred since the second half of the eighteenth century? No. Since Frame spends a good deal of time defending the declension that has occurred, one can only come to the conclusion that Frame believes there are "real problems" with the Westminster Standards.

Frame also admits that his concept of the regulative principle leaves plenty of room for human autonomy. He writes: "The first key to meaningful worship is to do as God commands. Beyond that, of course, there is the question of how best to carry out those commands in our own time and place. This is the question of the "language" in which we should express our worship to God and in which we should seek to edify one another. But we must know what limits God has placed upon us before we can determine the areas in which we are free to seek more meaningful forms. One of my main concerns in this book is to define both the areas in which we are bound by God's norms and the areas in which we are set free (by those same norms!) to develop creative *applications* of those norms."<sup>198</sup> The key to understanding Frame's redefinition of the historic understanding of the regulative principle is the phrase "creative applications." (His unique view regarding "creative applications" will be dealt with below.)

Frame believes that the regulative principle does not lead God's people to any particular "style

of worship.” He writes: “In the remainder of this book, therefore, I will not urge anyone to conform to the Puritan style of worship or to any other style. In that respect, this book will be rather unusual, compared to most other worship books! Rather, I shall present the regulative principle as one that sets us free, within limits, to worship God in the language of our own time, to seek those applications of God’s commandments which most edify worshipers in our contemporary cultures. We must be both more conservative and more liberal than most students of Christian worship: conservative in holding exclusively to God’s commands in Scripture as our rule of worship, and liberal in defending the liberty of those who apply those commandments in legitimate, though nontraditional, ways.”<sup>199</sup> According to Frame the Bible does not offer any blueprints in the sphere of worship. It rather is vague and general and thus leaves the details to man (i.e., human autonomy).<sup>200</sup>

According to the Westminster Standards and Puritan thought, the regulative principle gives men freedom from human traditions and innovations in worship. Frame defines the regulative principle in a manner that gives freedom to innovate as long as some general guidelines are followed and the innovations are called “creative application.” He writes: “In my view, once we understand what Scripture actually commands for worship, we will see that it actually leaves quite a number of things to our discretion and therefore allows considerable flexibility. I believe that most books on worship, Presbyterian and otherwise, underestimate the amount of freedom that Scripture permits in worship.... This book, however, will stress that Scripture leaves many questions open—questions that different churches in different situations can legitimately answer differently.”<sup>201</sup> If the regulative principle restricts men to only those practices that are dependent upon divine warrant or scriptural proof, how can one argue that this principle gives men great freedom? If by freedom Frame means freedom from doctrine, commandments and innovations of man or a certain freedom in areas that are circumstantial to worship (e.g., seating arrangement, lighting, type of pulpit, etc.), then we would agree. But, Frame’s definition of freedom goes way beyond the Westminster Standards. He defines freedom as “creative application” of general principles that can lead to completely different types of worship. Note the phrases such as: “our discretion,” “considerable flexibility,” “creative application,” “many questions open,” “we are free to seek more meaningful forms,” etc. Frame wants worship that is based on human autonomy and that is full of innovations, but which in a very loose, convoluted manner is somehow connected with the general teachings of Scripture.

## **Frame’s “No Specifics” Regulative Principle**

Frame’s unique definition of the regulative principle is in part founded upon his understanding of synagogue and (apostolic) Christian meetings. He writes: “Jesus attended the synagogue regularly and taught there (Luke 4:15-16), so there can be no question as to God’s approval of the institution. It is interesting, however, to note that the synagogue and the temple were very

different in their scriptural warrant: God regulated the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle and the temple in detail, charging the people to do everything strictly according to the revealed pattern. He hardly said anything to Israel, however, about the synagogue (or, for that matter, about the ministries of teaching and prayer carried out on the temple grounds), leaving the arranging of its services largely to the discretion of the people. Of course, they knew in *general* what God wanted: he wanted his word to be taught and prayer to be offered. *But God left the specifics open-ended.*”<sup>202</sup> Frame argues that divine warrant is applicable only in a “general” manner. The specifics are “open-ended.” That is, the specifics are determined by man.

Frame asserts that the Christian meeting was like the synagogue in that scriptural warrant does not descend to the level of specific parts of worship. Therefore, various actions that are part of new covenant religious worship do not require “specific scriptural authorization.” He writes: “Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to prove that anything is divinely required *specifically* for official services.”<sup>203</sup> He adds, “The New Testament tells us a little more about the Christian meeting (which was more like the synagogue than like the sacrificial worship of the temple), but it gives us no systematic or exhaustive list of the events that were authorized for such services. Certainly it gives us no list of elements in the technical sense of Puritan theology—actions requiring *specific scriptural authorization* as opposed to circumstances or applications that do not.”<sup>204</sup>

After arguing that the regulative principle does not apply to specifics (which Frame knows is a non-confessional understanding of the regulative principle), he sets forth his own unique version of divine warrant. He writes: “Where specifics are lacking, we must apply the *generalities* by means of our sanctified wisdom, within *general principles* of the word.... The New Testament does not give us an exhaustive list of what was and was not done at early Christian meetings. However, as in the case of the Old Testament synagogue, we may, by appeal to *broad theological principles*, gain assurance as to what God wants us to do when we gather in his name.”<sup>205</sup> In the area of worship Frame believes that the Bible is not specific. It is incomplete, vague and general. The Bible is like a defective map with some large roads noted yet with the details missing. If the map is to be useful (or workable), men must use their “sanctified wisdom” to fill in the specifics, details or missing pieces. Frame has adopted a position that is closer to Episcopalianism than the strict regulativist position of the Westminster Standards. Although Frame does not say that men are permitted to make things up as long as their innovations are not contrary to Scripture, he does allow men a great area of autonomy as long as practice is loosely based on “the general principles of the word.”

There are a number of ideas in Frame’s statements that need further comment. First, Frame has adopted the anti-regulativist interpretation of the Jewish synagogue. He assumes that since there is not a set of inscripturated divine imperatives regarding the synagogue meetings,

therefore what occurred in the synagogues was left “to the discretion of the people.” Before Frame even begins his chapter on the regulative principle (i.e., “The Rules for Worship”) he argues that the regulative principle as historically defined at the most only applied to “the sacrificial worship of the tabernacle and the temple.”<sup>206</sup> Frame believes that the Westminster Standard’s teaching that *specific* warrant is required for every worship ordinance or element is wrong and unbiblical. If Frame’s understanding is correct, then there is no regulative principle. All of Frame’s talk regarding his strong commitment to the Westminster Standards is a sham.

Frame’s analysis of the Jewish synagogues does raise a few important questions. Does the fact that there is not a set of explicit commands in Scripture which regulate the synagogues prove that the Puritan-Presbyterian concept of divine warrant (that applies to specific parts or elements of worship) is unscriptural? Did the Westminster divines and our Puritan and Presbyterian forefathers make a serious blunder when they adopted the strict regulativist position and incorporated it into their confessions and catechisms? Is Frame a hero for boldly standing up and declaring “the emperor has no clothes”? The answer to all these questions is an emphatic “No!” One can assume (as do Frame and many others) that synagogues were not under the regulative principle (as historically defined) and that the Jews were making up the specifics of worship as they went along. The only problem with such an assumption, however, is that it contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture.

There are many passages in the Bible which unequivocally condemn adding to God’s law-word (e.g., Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5). Man is not permitted autonomously to determine his own ethics, theology or worship. There are also passages where both Christ (e.g., Mt. 15:2-9; Mk. 7:1-13) and Paul (e.g., Col. 2:20-23) condemn human traditions in worship. The Bible does not merely condemn additions or innovations in a general manner but deals with specific additions (e.g., offering the fruit of the ground instead of blood [Gen. 4:3-5]; strange fire [Lev. 10:1-2]; ritual hand washings [Mt. 15:2-9]; ascetic eating practices [Col. 2:21]. Note also that the regulative principle (as biblically defined, i.e., the Puritan version) is not restricted to the tabernacle or temple but is applied to individuals at home and church. Given the fact that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture and the clearer portions of Scripture should be used to interpret the less clear, does it make sense (hermeneutically) to assume that the synagogue meetings were not regulated by divine revelation of some sort? Taking the Scriptures as a whole, the Puritans believed that it would be contradictory for Christ and Paul to condemn specific religious additions in the home and church yet countenance additions in the synagogue. An aspect of “good and necessary consequence” (WCF 1.6, i.e., logical inference from Scripture) is what Puritans referred to as approved historical example. When one observes in Scripture that Abel (Gen. 4:4) and Noah (Gen. 8:20-21) offered acceptable sacrifices to Jehovah without any prior *inscripturated* divine imperatives, or that the universal practice of the new covenant church was not seventh but first day public worship apart from any *inscripturated* instructions to change the day, then one may logically infer that such

practices were based on some form of divine revelation that was not inscripturated.

The Puritan understanding of approved historical example is supported by Hebrews 11:4 which says, “by faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” Biblical faith presupposes divine revelation. Throughout Hebrews 11 true faith is spoken of as a belief in God’s word that results in obedience to God’s revealed will. Any idea that Abel’s offering was based on reason alone, or that God’s acceptance of blood sacrifice was arbitrary or based on the subjective state of Abel’s heart alone, must be rejected as unscriptural. Given the analogy of Scripture, the necessity of faith in acts of religious worship and the acceptance of certain practices by God in Scripture that appear without detailed instructions, the idea that the synagogue meetings were not regulated but were determined by “the discretion of the people” is unwarranted. To assume (as Frame does) that the Jews of the synagogue were making it up as they went along (“winging it”) is to assume something that contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture.

Second, Frame argues that like the Jewish synagogues, the Christian meetings were basically unregulated as to specifics (e.g., “The New Testament...gives us no systematic or exhaustive list of the events that were authorized for such services”<sup>207</sup>). Although it is true that in no place in the New Testament do we find a systematic list of what is to occur in public worship, that does not mean that the New Testament has nothing to say in the matter or that the various elements of worship cannot be determined from a study of Scripture. Whether or not the New Testament gives us a systematic list of worship ordinances for new covenant services is irrelevant. Many important doctrines and issues are set forth in Scripture in a very non-systematic manner. Frame is attempting to convince the readers of his book that a regulative principle that deals with specifics must be rejected. Once he has deconstructed the historic, traditional understanding of the regulative principle, then he will put in its place the general or “virtually anything goes” version. However, since the Bible clearly teaches that everything man does in worship (even to the specifics) must have divine warrant, we must not be deceived by Frame’s subterfuge. What about Frame’s claim that the New Testament does not give us an “exhaustive list of the events that were authorized for such services”? The New Testament does not need to give us an exhaustive list because if a practice is not found in the New Testament (or taught or inferred from the Old Testament) then it is already forbidden. The idea that there is not an “exhaustive list” presupposes a prelatical concept of worship and is an implicit denial of the sufficiency of Scripture in the sphere of worship.

Third, Frame teaches that divine warrant is not specific but general. He argues that since the Bible does not contain specifics regarding synagogue or New Testament Christian meetings, men are to seek divine warrant in “broad theological generalities.” Men are to use their sanctified wisdom to “apply the generalities.” People must follow the “general principles of the word.” When Frame speaks of divine warrant in terms of “broad theological principles,”

“generalities” and “general principles of the word,” he has rejected the Westminster Standards on this issue and has completely redefined the regulative principle. There is a great difference between specific warrant from Scripture for a particular practice and basing a practice on a “generality” or “broad theological principle.” Using Frame’s definition of the regulative principle one can have an infinite variety of worship options as long as a particular practice is loosely connected with a “generality” or “broad theological principle.” The strict, narrow version of the regulative principle advocated by the Reformed confessions produced a general uniformity of worship for many generations. Frame’s view leads to chaos and a multiformity of worship practices precisely because it leaves man a large area of autonomy. Frame, of course, does not call it autonomy. He uses phrases such as “creative application” and “considerable flexibility.”

In order to reveal how Frame’s concept of divine warrant can prove almost anything one wants, let us examine how Frame himself justifies certain practices in public worship. On page 56 he argues that greetings should be a part of the worship service. How does he prove that greetings are prescribed by God? Frame writes: “They [greetings and benedictions] were clearly part of church life, since they were a regular part of Paul’s letters (see Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Rom. 15:33; 1 Cor. 16:23-24; 2 Cor. 13:14). Since his letters were most likely read in church meetings (Col. 4:16; 1 Th. 5:27; Phm. 2), these greetings and benedictions were also a part of public worship.”<sup>208</sup> Normally if a Reformed person wanted to argue in favor of a special greetings time (i.e., handshake and hug time) during public worship he would look for a specific command or attempt to infer a greeting time from a scriptural historical example. Frame, however simply points out that Paul greeted churches in his epistles and his letters were read in the churches. The fact that all letters contain greetings and that it is doubtful that whole books of the Bible were read at each service is ignored. Following Frame’s logic one could argue: Boats are frequently mentioned in Scripture (e.g., 2 Sam. 19:18; Prov. 30:19; Isa. 33:21; Ezek. 27:5; Jon. 1:3-5; Mt. 4:21-22; Mk. 1:19; Lk. 5:3; Jn. 6:22; Ac. 27:16, 30, 32; etc.); since Scripture is read in the church meetings, boats also should be part of public worship.

A better example of Frame’s concept of “creative application” is the divine warrant he offers for the use of drama (i.e., skits or plays) in public worship. Frame’s argumentation in favor of drama gives us an explicit understanding of his unique definition of divine warrant. He even introduces his argumentation as an example of an application of a general principle. He writes:

Many churches are using drama today in an attempt to communicate the word of God more clearly than could be done through more traditional forms of preaching. Some Presbyterians oppose this, because there is no specific command in Scripture to use drama in this way. But we have seen that specific commands are not always needed. When God gives us a general command (in this case the command to

preach the word), and is silent on some aspects of its specific application, we may properly make those applications ourselves, within the general rules of Scripture. The questions before us, then, are whether drama is legitimately a form of preaching or teaching, and whether there are any scriptural teachings that would rule it out as a means of communicating the word. I would answer yes to the first question, and no the second.<sup>209</sup>

Note, once again that for Frame specific warrant is unnecessary. When Scripture is silent on “application” (i.e., when Scripture is insufficient or incomplete), man is to use his autonomous thought to remove God’s silence. In other words man must take what is insufficient and general and make it sufficient and specific.

What does Frame offer as divine warrant for drama in public worship? He argues that “preaching and teaching contain many dramatic elements”<sup>210</sup>; Jesus “taught parables, which often included dialogues between different characters”<sup>211</sup>; Paul’s letters “are often dramatic”<sup>212</sup> and “the book of Revelation is a dramatic feast”<sup>213</sup>; “the prophets sometimes performed symbolic actions”<sup>214</sup>; and, “the Old Testament sacrifices and feasts, and the New Testament sacraments are re-enactments of God’s great works of redemption.”<sup>215</sup>

When we read Frame’s application of his own version of the regulative principle we are astonished that this book was endorsed by four seminary professors from two different “conservative, Reformed” seminaries.<sup>216</sup> Why? Because Frame’s concept of divine warrant is so general, wide and arbitrary one could prove virtually anything. His concept of “proof” would make any cult leader smile.

If one thinks this is exaggeration, let’s apply Frame’s concept of divine warrant to other practices that some people would find “refreshing” in public worship. In the Bible we often encounter prophets that are depressed. There also are many books in the Bible that contain many sad and depressing elements. Therefore, we are authorized by God to have blues bands (with appropriate lyrics, of course) as part of public worship. Why not? As Frame asserts, is not singing simply one manner of teaching or preaching?

In the Bible we often read of military battles. The apostle Paul often portrays the Christian life as one of warfare. In the book of Revelation do we not have a great war portrayed between Christ’s people and the followers of the beast? Therefore, as a creative application of these general theological principles we can incorporate sword fights into public worship. No one would be hurt, of course. They would simply be dramatic re-enactments of the Christian life. The children would love it.



The “exegetical” methods that Frame uses to prove or justify certain worship practices are absurd. Frame goes to the Bible and takes things that have nothing to do with public worship and then makes an *arbitrary* application to the human innovation he desires. Does the fact that God required certain prophets to do some unusual and dramatic things tell us anything about how we are to conduct a public worship service? No, of course not; there is no connection whatsoever. Does the fact that preaching in Scripture can be dramatic somehow imply that God has authorized dramatic presentations in public worship? No, not at all. The connection is totally arbitrary. In fact, not one person throughout all of church history saw such a connection until Frame made it up. Does the fact that Jesus spoke in parables that had more than one character in them prove that dramatic presentations are biblical? No. Listen carefully. Don’t miss this. The characters in Jesus’ parables were not characters in a play or even real people. Christ was telling a story in his teaching. To argue that our Lord was authorizing dramatic presentations in public worship is pure fantasy. If Jesus was authorizing drama groups, the Spirit-inspired apostles didn’t see it, for dramatic presentations were excluded from apostolic worship. A legitimate application of Jesus’ preaching methodology would be the use of illustrations and stories in preaching. Does the fact that Revelation (according to Frame) is a dramatic feast tell us anything about public worship? No. Although the book does contain some worship scenes couched in apocalyptic imagery, there are no commands, historical examples or logical inferences pointing to dramatic presentations in the book at all.

The argumentation that Frame uses to “prove” the worship practices that he desires often reminds this author of the argumentation used by Vern Poythress (professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania) in his book *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*.<sup>217</sup> Given the many striking similarities, a quote from Greg L. Bahnsen’s analysis of Poythress’ work is in order. Bahnsen’s analysis fits Frame’s argumentation like a glove. When reading Bahnsen’s analysis, just substitute Frame’s name for Poythress’s. Bahnsen writes:

Poythress has a penchant for appealing to vague “motifs” in biblical passages and then telling us (*without* exegetical basis) that they are suggestive of some theological “connection” or “relation” (*without* definition). To deal with broad and ambiguous allusions is not precise enough to demonstrate any specific conclusion; because there are no control principles or predictability in how such vague notions will be taken, the door is left open too wide for the interpreter’s subjective creativity. And simply to assert that X is (somehow) “related” or “connected” to Y is trivial—not very informative. (Everything is related in some way to everything else, after all.) These vague connections play a determinative role where Poythress wants to draw significant theological conclusions.... The key to drawing artful “connections” everywhere in the Bible, of course, is to make your categories broad and vague enough to include just about anything.... What is the theologian supposed to do with such discussions? They aren’t arguments, really. They are

more like mood enhancers (“take a couple of Valium and enjoy the experience”). Seen in their least harmful light, I suppose such discussions may have homiletical or pedagogical value—as adductive or illustrative aids for conclusions established on more reliable exegetical grounds. They may even subjectively reinforce preconceived theological commitments, but they hardly function as objective proof in a theological argument, one subject to common rules of reasoning, predictable results, and public examination. Poythress is not the only author these days who enjoys this style of writing: stringing together a host of loose “connections” in a stream-of-consciousness style, often with organizing categories broad enough to include almost anything anyway, until one stipulates that he has reached a “conclusion”—one which is usually as vague and ambiguous as it is lacking in textual warrant. I would like to say that Poythress does it “better” than others, but there is really little way to judge (since there are so few objective criteria).<sup>218</sup>

If professing Christians want to use Frame’s concept of divine warrant to “prove” various practices in public worship, they are free to do so. However, they should be honest and admit that their version of the regulative principle has nothing to do with the Westminster Standards or Reformed theology on the subject. Frame’s arbitrary, loose manner of “proving” various practices from the Scriptures leaves Presbyterian and Reformed churches with no real restraints on worship except the prelatical (i.e., Episcopal-Lutheran) principle that anything goes as long as it is not expressly forbidden in the Bible.

Fourth, Frame rejects the Westminster Confession’s doctrine regarding the elements or parts of worship. He writes:

In response to this kind of question [i.e., the problem of generality and specificity], the Puritans developed the doctrine of “elements” or “parts” of worship. Worship, they believed, is made up of certain clearly distinguishable elements: prayer, the reading of Scripture, preaching, and so on. The regulative principle, they held, requires us to find biblical warrant for each of these elements. For them, that answered the question about the level of specificity. We need not find a biblical command to pray this or that particular prayer (assuming that the prayers under consideration are all scriptural in their content and appropriate to the occasion), but we do need a biblical warrant to include prayer as an element of worship.

But there are serious problems with this approach. The most serious problem is that there is no scriptural warrant for it! Scripture nowhere divides worship up into a series of independent “elements,” each requiring independent scriptural justification. Scripture nowhere tells us that the regulative principle demands that particular level of specificity, rather than some other.<sup>219</sup>

Note, that (once again) Frame argues against the Puritans rather than the Westminster Confession. He says that the Puritan position does not have biblical warrant, which is to say it is unbiblical. He ignores the fact that: (1) the authors of the Westminster Standards and the early Presbyterians were Puritans<sup>220</sup> and (2) the Westminster Confession (21.3-5) clearly teaches the Puritan position that Frame rejects. Given the fact that Frame says that he enthusiastically subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms on page xiv in his book, one should not be surprised that Frame is unwilling to admit that his enthusiastic subscription was false, that he subscribed with crossed fingers. Frame, of course, is free to reject the teaching of the Westminster Standards; however, since he does so, he should be honest and consistent and join an Episcopal church instead of deceitfully working to undermine an essential aspect of the Reformed faith.

As we consider Frame's attack on the confessional concept of elements or parts of worship, keep in mind that Frame's strategy throughout his analysis of the rules for worship is to make divine warrant broad enough to allow human innovations disguised as creative applications. Therefore, he must eliminate the confessional doctrine of elements of worship, each of which requires specific divine warrant. There are a number of arguments to consider in Frame's rejection of the elements of worship. First, Frame argues that Scripture nowhere teaches "that the regulative principle demands that level of specificity."<sup>221</sup> He adds, "The problem is that Scripture doesn't give us a list of elements required for Christian worship services."<sup>222</sup> Note Frame's disingenuous and inconsistent method of argumentation. When he disagrees with the Puritan confessional view, he demands credible evidence. He wants a command, an explicit statement or even a detailed list. Yet when he sets out to prove his own ideas regarding divine warrant he offers no solid exegetical argumentation, only bizarre loose connections and arbitrary applications. Does the regulative principle descend to the level of the elements of worship? Is it specific? Although there is no detailed list set forth in the New Testament of worship elements, the various elements or parts of religious worship are easily proved from divine imperatives and descriptions of worship services or approved historical examples found in Scripture. As we consider Frame's next objection to the idea of specific elements of worship, the scriptural evidence will prove that Frame is wrong. Furthermore, the biblical passages that teach the regulative principle itself demand specificity. If Old Testament believers used Frame's general flexible version of the regulative principle, it would have been very easy for the Jews to justify religious hand washings, ascetic eating practices (e.g., note the Seventh-day Adventist justifications for various eating practices), strange fire, etc.

Second, Frame wants to mix the various elements of worship into general categories. He writes, "Another problem with the concept of elements of worship is that the things we do in worship are not always clearly distinguishable from one another. Singing and teaching, for example, are not distinct from one another (Col. 3:16). And many hymns are also prayers and

creeds. Prayers with biblical content contain teaching. The entire service is prayer, since it is uttered in the presence of God, to his praise. The entire service is teaching, since it is all based on Scripture. Perhaps it would be better to speak of “aspects” of worship, rather than “elements” or “parts.”<sup>223</sup> Frame adds, “Since we cannot identify elements, we cannot say that song is an element and therefore requires specific divine commands governing its content. Even if we accept the division of worship into elements, it is not plausible to argue that song is an element of worship, independent of all others. As we saw in the preceding chapter, song is not an independent element, but rather a *way* of doing other things. It is a way of praying, confessing, etc. Therefore, when we apply the regulative principle to matters of song, we should not ask specifically what words Scripture commands us to sing, but rather, what words Scripture commands us to use in teaching, prayer, confession, etc.”<sup>224</sup> For Frame there are not specific elements of worship but only broad categories that have different aspects. Why does Frame attack the confessional doctrine of elements of worship? A major reason is that it enables him to apply biblical rules for one element to another. This is one of the common arguments against exclusive psalmody. If a person can make up his own words for prayer or preaching, then (according to Frame’s concept of aspects) one can make up his own words for singing praise.

Although it is true that elements of singing praise, preaching or teaching and prayer can have certain aspects in common (e.g., many psalms contain prayer, prayer can contain praise, and sermons can contain praise and supplication, etc.), the idea that these distinct elements can be collapsed into one category (e.g., teaching) or that the specific rules given by Scripture for one element can be applied to the other parts of worship completely breaks down when one examines the specific rules and context that the Bible gives to each separate ordinance. Note the following examples.

(1) One element is preaching from the Bible (Mt. 26:13; Mk 16:15; Ac. 9:20; 17:10; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 2 Tim. 4:2). Preaching involves reasoning from the Scriptures (cf. Ac. 17:2-3; 18:4, 19; 24:25) and explaining or expounding God’s word (cf. Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). New covenant teachers did not speak by divine interpretation, but interpreted divinely inspired Scripture. In the same manner the Old Testament Levitical teachers explained and interpreted the inscripturated law to the covenant people (cf. Neh. 8:7-8; Lev. 10:8-11; Dt. 17:8-13; 24:8; 31:9-13; 33:8; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:7-9; 19:8-10; 30:22; 35:3; Ezr. 7:1-11; Ezek. 44:15, 23-24; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:1, 5-8). There are specific biblical rules that apply to preaching that distinguish it from other elements such as praise and prayer. While both men and women can pray (Ac. 1:13-14, 1 Cor. 11:5) and sing praise (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 1:5), only men (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14) who are called by God and set apart to the gospel ministry can preach (Mt. 28:18-20; Ac. 9:15; 13:1-5; Rom. 10:14-15; Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 4:2, etc.). Therefore, the idea that singing praise is not an element of worship but only one way to teach or a circumstance of teaching is clearly unscriptural. If singing

praise were simply one given method of teaching, then women would be forbidden to sing praise in church, for they are forbidden to teach in the public assemblies. Furthermore, if singing were a circumstance of worship, then it would be optional and could be excluded from public worship altogether. Does the average conservative Presbyterian allow women to preach or teach in the public assembly? No, he does not. But isn't that because the Bible explicitly forbids women from teaching or even speaking in church? Yes, indeed it is. What this proves is that in practice those who adhere to Frame's unorthodox theories on worship must follow the distinction between elements of worship in order to conduct a worship service. Frame's rejection of distinct elements or parts of worship is simply a clever tactic to eliminate the specificity of the regulative principle.

(2) Another part of worship is the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Unlike preaching, where the minister uses his own uninspired words to exposit Scripture, singing praise involves only the use of Spirit-inspired songs. In the Bible prophetic inspiration was a requirement for writing worship songs for the church (cf. Ex. 15:20-21; Jg. 5; Isa. 5:1; 26:1ff; 2 Sam 23:1, 2; 1 Chr. 25:5; 2 Chr. 29:30; 35:15; Mt. 22:43-44; Mk. 12:36; Ac. 1:16-17; 2:29-31; 4:24-25). The writing of worship songs in the Old Testament was so intimately connected with prophetic inspiration that 2 Kings 23:2 and 2 Chronicles 34:30 use the term "Levite" and "prophet" interchangeably.

(3) Reading the Bible is also a part of public worship (Mk. 4:16-20; Ac. 1:13; 13:15; 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:13). Obviously, Scripture reading requires reading from the Bible alone. Reading from the Apocrypha or Shakespeare or uninspired Christian poetry or theology books cannot be substituted for this element. Scripture reading, like preaching but unlike singing praise, is restricted to ministers of the gospel (Ex. 24:7; Josh 8:34-35; Dt. 31:9-13; Neh. 8:7-8; 13:1; 1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:3).

(4) Another element of worship is prayer to God (Dt. 22:5; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Th. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5). Unlike the elements of singing praise and reading the Scriptures, the Bible authorizes the use of our own words in prayer, as long as we follow the pattern or model given to us by Christ (cf. Mt. 6:9). God promises His people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

A brief consideration of the elements of worship noted above proves that the rules which apply to one element (e.g., prayer) cannot be applied to another element (e.g., singing praise or reading the Bible) without violating Scripture. Our consideration has also proved that collapsing various elements into broad categories violates God's word. The only reason people artificially construct such broad categories is to avoid the specific rules that God has instituted for each particular element of worship. Feminists do so to accommodate women reading the Scriptures and preaching in church. Others do so to allow a dramatic presentation to substitute

for the sermon. There are also many who do so in order to substitute the uninspired songs of men for the inspired psalms of God.

Given the abundant scriptural evidence for the Puritan concept of elements or parts of worship, one can understand why the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith did not just give us broad categories but rather set forth distinct worship elements. The Confession names “prayer with thanksgiving” (21:3), “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence: singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgiving upon several occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner” (21:5). The work of the Westminster divines on worship was the culmination of over one hundred years of Reformed exegesis, debate and analysis of the matter. Their statements were simply a refined statement with some added details of the writings of the reformers and Reformed symbols that preceded its authorship. Frame’s arrogant and flippant disregard of the reformers and Reformed confessions, with no real evidence, is disturbing. That he is a minister in good standing in a denomination which claims adherence to the Westminster Standards and teaches at a Reformed seminary is even more disturbing.

Third, after rejecting the Westminster Standards on elements or parts of worship Frame leaves us with aspects of worship. What exactly is an aspect of worship? Although Frame does not define what he means by aspects, he apparently means “things to do” that are related to his general categories. Since the English dictionary gives as one of its main meanings for aspect as “part” we wonder what exactly is the difference between “element,” “part,” “things to do” and “aspect.” Perhaps a course in perspectivalism will aid our understanding.<sup>225</sup> “Perhaps with the acumen of the medieval schoolmen, Mr. Frame can explain to us the subtle difference between ‘things,’ ‘aspects,’ and ‘parts’ in worship.”<sup>226</sup>

## **Frame’s Rejection of the Circumstances of Worship**

Frame rejects the confessional concept of circumstances of worship in favor of what he calls applications. Once again we see Frame setting aside the Westminster Standards and over four hundred years of Reformed thought for his own unique concept. Note that, as before, Frame’s goal is to greatly broaden the concept of divine warrant. After quoting the Confession of Faith (“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” [1.6]) Frame writes:

Scripture, they believed, was sufficient to tell us the basic things we should do in worship. But it does not give us detailed direction in the area of “circumstances.”

What are these “circumstances”? The confession does not define the term, except to say that they are “common to human actions and societies.” Some of the Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians, trying to further explain this idea, taught that circumstances were secular matters, of no actual religious significance. But surely, in God’s world, nothing is purely secular; nothing is entirely devoid of religious significance. That follows from the fact that in one sense worship is all of life. The time and place of a meeting, for instance, are not religiously neutral. Decisions about such matters must be made to the glory of God. The elders of a church would not be exercising godly rule if they tried to force all the members to worship at 3:00 A.M.! Decisions about the time and place of worship can greatly affect the quality of edification (1 Cor. 14:26). Although it is “common to human actions and societies” to make decision about meeting times and places, the decision nevertheless has religious significance in the context of the church. The divines understood this, and so they insisted that all these decisions be made “according to the general rules of the Word.” But then, how are we to distinguish circumstances from substantive elements of worship?

Furthermore, there seem to be some matters in worship that are not “common to human actions and societies,” concerning which we must use our human judgment. For example, Scripture tells us to pray, but it doesn’t tell us what precise words to use in our prayers on every occasion. We must decide what words to use, within the limits of the biblical teachings about prayer. That is a decision of great spiritual importance. It does not seem right to describe this matter as a mere “circumstance.” Prayer is not “common to human actions and societies.” But in prayer we must use our own judgment within biblical guidelines; if we don’t, we will not pray at all.

I agree with the confession that there is room for human judgment in matters that are “common to human actions and societies.” But I do not believe that that is the only legitimate sphere of human judgment. In my view, the term best suited to describe the sphere of human judgment is not *circumstance*, but *application*. Typically, Scripture tells us what we should do in general, and then leaves us to determine the specifics by our own sanctified wisdom, according to the general rules of the Word. Determining the specifics is what I call “application.”

Unlike the term *circumstance*, the term *application* naturally covers both types of examples I have mentioned. Applications include such matters as the time and

place of worship: Scripture tells us to meet, but not when and where—so we must use our own judgment. Similarly, Scripture tells us to pray, but does not dictate to us all the specific words we should use—so we need to decide. As you can see, the sphere of application includes some matters that are “common to human actions and societies” and some matters are not.<sup>227</sup>

There are a number of things to note regarding Frame’s discussion of the circumstances of worship. First, Frame’s contention that some (unnamed) Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians regarded circumstances as secular is wrong and misleading. They did not regard the circumstances of worship as secular or religiously neutral. They did, however, regard them as things that were not specifically determinable by Scripture, that had a certain commonality with civil or secular affairs. For example, a civil meeting will have a beginning and end, chairs, lighting, a podium, a building and a speaker. However, these circumstances of worship are to be designed or conducted “according to the general rules of Scripture.” Frame (once again) asserts a false bifurcation of thought between certain (unnamed) Puritans/Presbyterians and the Westminster divines.

Second, Frame gives an over-simplification of the concept of circumstances in order to make the confessional understanding look incompetent and unworkable. Frame tells us that since the words we use in prayer are of “great spiritual importance” and prayer is not “common to human actions and societies”; therefore, we need to use a better, more workable concept than the term circumstances of worship. Frame’s alternative is “applications.”

Frame’s argument raises a number of questions. Is what believers do when they pray merely a circumstance of worship? Is prayer regulated only by the general rules of Scripture? Although it is true that believers are free to make up their own words in order to meet the various circumstances and contingencies of daily life, prayer itself is specifically regulated by Scripture. Jesus told the disciples to pray in a certain manner (Mt. 6:9). He told them not to “use vain repetitions as the heathen do” (Mt. 6:7). Further, we are told that the Holy Spirit will assist us when we pray (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27). Strictly speaking, prayer is not a circumstance of worship. The Westminster divines did not regard the content of prayer in the same manner as the type of seating, lighting, pulpit style, flooring, etc. Therefore, the idea that choosing one’s own words for prayer in worship renders the concept of circumstances of worship somehow unworkable is not true.

If one holds to the confessional understanding of the regulative principle, that all the parts or elements of worship require divine warrant, one must explain those things that are necessary to conduct a public meeting that are not specifically addressed in Scripture. Does the Bible tell us what type of building to meet in, or the type of chairs to use, or what type of pulpit should be used? Are there not areas related to a public worship service that do not directly affect the



content or parts of religious worship? The confessional answer that there are some circumstances relating to worship that are not themselves parts of worship or worship ordinances is unavoidable and obvious. If Frame observes that in certain areas or applications the concept of circumstances need clarification, that is one thing. But why does he insist on tossing it aside for his own concept of applications? The main reason is related to Frame's rejection of the confessional doctrine of elements or parts of religious worship, each of which requires divine warrant. Once one rejects the concept of worship elements, one is left only with broad categories. Believers are to determine out of broad categories the various "things to do" in worship. According to Frame the "things to do" can be determined by specific commands or according to "broad theological principles." What this means is that Frame has taken the concept of "the general rules of the word" that the Westminster divines *only* applied to the circumstances of worship and has applied it to worship itself. This incredible broadening of the concept of divine warrant renders the whole section in the Confession dealing with the circumstances of worship superfluous. Since Frame has already taken the Confession's "the general rules of the word" and applied it to worship itself, he must redefine the circumstances into applications. Why? Because the term "applications" is broad enough to cover everything relating to worship, whether worship ordinances or the circumstantial areas. In fact, everything in life that we do as Christians is an application of Scripture in some sense. Frame continues on his path of taking well thought-out clear distinctions found in the Westminster Standards and replacing them with very general concepts. Remember, the end game is human autonomy in worship.

## **Frame's Misrepresentation of the Puritan/Presbyterian Position Regarding Formal *versus* Informal Meetings**

Frame accuses "some theologians" and the Puritans of only applying the regulative principle to "formal" or "official" worship services. He writes:

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 service, not to other forms of worship.

But that distinction is clearly unscriptural. When Scripture forbids us to worship according to our own imaginations, it is not forbidding that only during official services. The God of Scripture would certainly not approve of people who

worshiped him in formal services, but worshiped idols in the privacy of their homes!

On the Puritan view, the regulative principle pertains primarily to worship that is officially sanctioned by the church. On this view, in order to show that, say, preaching is appropriate for worship, we must show by biblical commands and examples that God requires preaching in officially sanctioned worship services. It is not enough to show that God is pleased when the word is preached in crowds or informal home meetings. Rather, we must show that preaching is mandated precisely for the formal or official worship service. Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to prove that anything is divinely required specifically for official services.<sup>228</sup>

This is a total misrepresentation of the Puritan position. The truth of the matter is that the idea that the regulative principle only applied to public worship was not widely accepted until the late nineteenth century. As worship innovations and declension occurred throughout the nineteenth century and certain practices such as the use of musical instruments in family worship, the celebration of Christmas in the home and various Sunday school programs where women were allowed to speak, ask questions and even teach men became popular, a concerted effort was made to at least keep these innovations out of the “official service.” In fact, today an “ultra-conservative” Presbyterian is often defined as someone who wants to keep the celebration of papal-pagan holy days out of the public worship, yet who thinks celebrating such days in the home and decorating the home with the trinkets of Antichrist and pagan paraphernalia is perfectly acceptable. The Puritans and Presbyterians never allowed church members to violate the regulative principle in the home. People who celebrated Christmas or Easter were disciplined.

Although the Puritans, Presbyterians and Westminster divines strictly applied the regulative principle to all worship whether public, family, or private, that does not mean that each sphere had the exact same rules. For example, in family worship the father is to lead in teaching and Scripture reading (Dt. 6:7-9). But he is not permitted to dispense or partake of the public ordinances (i.e., baptism and the Lord’s supper) or exercise church discipline. It is very important that when we seek divine warrant for a practice in public worship, we distinguish between commands or historical examples in Scripture that apply to an individual, or family, or public meeting, or even an extraordinary event. Frame misrepresents the Puritan position not because he wants to abolish innovations in the home but because he wants to be able to mine the Scriptures for divine warrant in passages that clearly have nothing to do with public worship. What is a major justification that Frame offers for drama in public worship? The prophets sometimes did dramatic things. How does Frame justify liturgical dance in public worship? He points to several passages that refer to extraordinary national and local victory

celebrations (i.e., outdoor parades).<sup>229</sup> Frame's caricature of the Puritan position sets the stage for his redefinition of the regulative principle and his sloppy, no-real-connection proof-texting of various modern innovations.<sup>230</sup>

## Frame's Case for Contemporaneity in Worship

As we consider Frame's book we must never lose sight of the fact that his book is an apologetic for the charismatic-Arminian style of worship conducted in the "New Life" churches. This type of worship is commonly referred to as "contemporary" or "celebrative" worship. How does Frame justify this new type of worship from Scripture? His argument is founded upon the fact that tongues must be translated into an understandable language. He writes:

On the other hand, Scripture also tells us, and more explicitly and emphatically, that worship should be intelligible. It should be understandable to the worshipers, and even to non-Christian visitors (1 Cor. 14, especially vv. 24-25). And intelligibility requires contemporaneity. When churches use archaic language and follow practices that are little understood today, they compromise that biblical principle.... Another important consideration is that the style chosen must promote the intelligibility of the communication. We have seen that this is the chief emphasis of 1 Corinthians 14, which is the most extended treatment of a Christian worship meeting in the New Testament. Intelligibility of communication is crucial to the Great Commission and to the demand of love, for love seeks to promote, not impede, mutual understanding.

Intelligibility requires us, first, to speak the language of the people, not Latin, as the Reformers emphasized. But communication is more than language in the narrow sense. Content is communicated through body language, style, the choice of popular rather than technical terms, well-known musical styles, etc.<sup>231</sup>

Frame's argument for contemporary worship is another example of what he calls "creative application." A more accurate designation would be "arbitrary application." When the apostle Paul was dealing with a specific problem at Corinth (uninterpreted or non-translated tongues) was he also making a statement regarding musical styles, body language or contemporary song styles? No. Neither Paul or the Corinthians or any commentators past or present (with the exception of Frame) believe or teach that Paul was telling the church to make sure they had proper body language. Frame is once again grasping after straws. One could just as well apply Frame's concept of intelligibility to church architecture, Christian clothing, the pastor's car and furniture, etc., for the application is arbitrary. It is not rooted in standard Protestant biblical

exegesis.

How did “celebrative” or “contemporary” worship begin? Was there a group of Christians who out of a serious study of Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:24-25) decided that God required worship to be modernized to better speak to our childish, degenerate culture? No. Generally speaking, its rise in popularity is a combination of three historical developments. First, contemporary worship has its roots in Arminian pragmatic revivalism. Arminian revivalists learned that feminine, emotional, tear-jerking songs helped people make a “decision for Christ.” They also learned that entertainment, performances and organ interludes brought more people into the tent. Second, in the late 1960s and early 1970s many pot-heads and hippies became professing Christians. Many of these converted hippies (“the Jesus people”) incorporated the communal, simple, emotional style of singing they were accustomed to into their services. This new style of worship often consisted of one-verse choruses that were sung over and over again until people were worked into an emotional frenzy or meditative type of trance. Sadly, this emotionalism and trance-like state was and still is equated with the special presence of the Holy Spirit or a mystical communion with God. Believers need to understand that this new emotional, non-doctrinal type of worship has its roots not in the Bible but in hedonistic, counter-culture, mystical paganism. Peter Masters writes: “It was a form of worship fashioned and conceived in the womb of the hippie meditational mysticism, in which hippies in their hundreds and thousands would sit on California hillsides with eyes closed, swaying themselves into an ecstatic state of experience. Former hippies carried into their new Christian allegiance the method of seeking the emotional release or sensations to which they were accustomed, and no one showed them a better way.”<sup>232</sup>

Third, there was the rise of the church growth movement which offered a pious sounding but totally pragmatic justification for man-centered, entertainment-oriented worship. The fact that modern “celebrative” music was shallow, worldly and immature was not important because worship must be user-friendly. It must appeal to shallow, worldly and immature seekers. That is, it must be attractive to the flesh. In this paradigm, worship is not primarily considered to be directed to God but to man. Worship is treated as another evangelistic church-growth tool. Frame would not put the matter so crassly. But his concept of “intelligibility requires contemporaneity,” even to non-Christian visitors, says much the same thing. Thus, today churches often have child-like, repetitive songs coupled with rock bands, drama groups, comedian pastors, liturgical dance, videos and movies.

In another book on worship (*Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*), Frame argues in favor of super-simplified (i.e., dumbed-down) hymns on the basis of Old Testament saints such as Job, Moses and Isaiah. Job’s lengthy, detailed speeches are compared to traditional worship. When Job was finally confronted with God he spoke only a few simple words. Likewise, when Moses and Isaiah were in God’s presence they were in awe and had very little

to say.<sup>233</sup> Peter Masters' analysis of Frame's book advocating contemporary worship is right on the mark. He writes: "One of John Frame's many complaints about traditional worship is that it is far too complex. It has too many words, is too intelligent, and too scholarly. It is not for ordinary people. In supporting this complaint, the author pronounces himself in favor of minimal words. He wants to bypass rationality, and substitute feelings as the leading component in worship. He also insists that there is a physical dimension to worship, dancing and other activities being valid. He wants to get the senses and sensations strumming in order to touch God. The point in raising his book at this stage is to show how 'traditionalists' who adopt new worship eventually capitulate to the sensational-mystical-aesthetic philosophy of worship."<sup>234</sup>

The origins and arguments in favor of the modern "celebratory" worship raise a few very important questions. Why does modern worship have to cater or lower itself to the immaturity and degeneracy of modern culture? Isn't such thinking a type of relativism? If rap music becomes the predominate form of musical expression in society, will the advocates of "contemporaneity" use rap music in public worship? (Some churches already use "Christian" rap groups in their worship service entertainment segments.) Also, when Frame and others look to the Scriptures for proof or guidance regarding worship, why point to passages that have nothing to do with singing of praise when God has already told us exactly what he wants? God has written his own hymnal—the book of Psalms—and placed it in the middle of our Bibles, and commanded us to sing it. The only possible reasons that "celebrative" worship advocates ignore the obvious and rely on "creative application" is either a woeful lack of knowledge regarding Scripture or a blatant disregard of Scripture in favor of human autonomy in worship.

The fact that God himself has written and given the church a hymnbook (the Psalter) tells us a number of things regarding praise, all of which contradict the "celebrative" worship paradigm. First, note that the Psalms are saturated with deep theology and are doctrinally balanced, complex, non-repetitive, and often long.<sup>235</sup> David and the other inspired prophets who wrote the Psalms did not regard heavy doctrine and complexity of meaning as impediments to biblical worship. That is because biblical praise does not attempt to bypass the intellect in favor of an ecstatic experience. Our faith in Jesus Christ is strengthened by learning and understanding biblical doctrine, not by experiencing an emotional phenomenon devoid of cognitive input. There is certainly nothing wrong with experiencing emotions. The Psalms, far better than any uninspired hymnal, reflect the full range of human emotions from the deepest despair to the heights of joy and bliss. However, our emotions are to be founded upon biblical truth. The Holy Spirit uses God's word to convict and sanctify, not to stir some mystical emotional experience.

Remember that the "celebrative" worship paradigm is an outgrowth of the charismatic movement. Philosophically, it is rooted in an irrational type of Christian existentialism. What

charismatic churches often do is whip the people into an emotional frenzy by means of exciting music, visual-sensual programs, cheerleaders called “worship leaders” (whose primary function is to encourage the people to get more emotional and worked up), highly repetitive worship choruses, etc. Then when the people are having a wonderful experience they are told: “Now don’t you just feel the Spirit’s presence? Do you feel the power? This room is on fire!” These poor deluded souls are taught to equate an “empty-headed,” music-driven emotional experience with God’s presence. This non-rational, sensual, emotional technique of experiencing (what they think) is God’s special presence is mysticism. It is any wonder that many charismatic churches regard doctrine and solid exegetical preaching as unimportant; that the charismatic movement is leading many Protestants back to Rome? “Emotion-driven, mystical worship is a delusion, producing intensely emotional and subjective worshipers for whom personal enjoyment is the chief aim.”<sup>236</sup>

Second, the fact that God introduced the Psalms to a primitive, agricultural, mostly illiterate society completely disproves the idea that we need to dumb-down worship by using repetitive choruses, drama and musical performances. If one applied Frame’s “intelligibility” argument to the Israelites, would not their worship have to be even more simple and less complex than that of today’s computer programmers, engineers, pilots and computer scientists? After all, the vast majority of Israelites were simple peasant farmers and herdsman. Yet God gave them the complex, highly theological, lengthy, intellectually challenging book of Psalms. God did not expect the Israelites to put their minds on hold while they closed their eyes and repeated the same words over and over and over again like a stoned hippie or Hindu mystic. Biblical worship requires attentiveness of mind. It requires thinking, understanding and focus. Certainly a philosophy of worship that (if *consistently* applied) would require God’s people to set aside the perfect, sufficient, inspired book of Psalms cannot be true.<sup>237</sup>

Third, the “contemporaneity” argument is also disproved by the regulative principle. Did the Jews in the old covenant era go to the Canaanites, Philistines, Egyptians, or Assyrians in order to make sure that their worship was culturally relevant? Did the New covenant church seek out “contemporaneity” with Greek or Roman culture? No. They were to do only as God commanded precisely, i.e., to avoid syncretism with the pagan culture. “Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Dt. 12:30-32). Although Americans today are not sacrificing their children to Molech, many do serve at the altar of hedonism. Our culture does not look to the prophets of Baal but to sports, Hollywood and Las Vegas. This self-centered, entertainment oriented, hedonistic attitude has thoroughly penetrated many modern evangelical

churches. Modern celebrative music is not a better, more biblical way to worship God. It is a syncretistic worship. It is a mixture of the elements of worship with the American hedonistic worldview. Frame's rejection of the Puritan/Presbyterian/confessional understanding of the regulative principle and his alternative of "creative application" has one major objective: the justification of modern syncretistic worship.<sup>238</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the most important debates that is presently occurring between "conservative" Presbyterians is over the issue of the regulative principle and its application to worship. This theological battle is crucial, for its outcome will greatly affect the future course of Presbyterianism. The main battle that is taking place is *not* between status-quo traditionalists and charismatic-style celebratists but between strict confessionalists (i.e., those who still hold to a strict, consistently applied, historical understanding of the regulative principle) and all those who have rejected or reinterpreted the regulative principle in a non-confessional manner. Frame is without question one of the chief apologists for those who have rejected the confessional position and have charted a new course consistent with what is popular among non-regulativist, Arminian evangelicals. Although in our day we see a renewed interest in biblical worship (e.g., *a capella* Psalm singing) it appears that at present the main trend in worship in conservative Presbyterian denominations is toward the new "celebrative" worship advocated by Frame. This trend is to be expected. When denominations depart in practice from the regulative principle with uninspired hymns, musical instruments and extra-biblical holy days, the trend usually is toward consistency. In other words a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

The purpose of this review is to warn everyone who considers himself to be Reformed or Presbyterian that Frame is waging war against biblical worship and the Westminster Standards. Frame is subversive; he is using deception, ambiguity and deceit to persuade others to embrace human autonomy in worship. Note that Frame's subversion is deliberate and well-planned. Frame is not a novice, a theological amateur who simply made some mistakes because of immaturity and lack of knowledge. He has taught theology and apologetics at the seminary level for over 27 years. He knows full well that what he has proposed in his book is a radical departure from the Westminster Standards. He is an ordained minister and seminary professor who holds to the Confession of Faith with crossed fingers. Frame and others who have taken ordination vows to uphold the Westminster Standards, yet who now reject the teaching of the Standards have three choices: (1) they can be honest and consistent and resign from their positions as pastor, seminary professor or ruling elder and join a denomination that is Calvinistic in soteriology yet which openly and confessionally rejects Reformed worship (i.e., the regulative principle); (2) they can be dishonest, redefine the regulative principle in an anti-confessional manner and work to subvert a major Presbyterian distinctive and corrupt others;

or (3) they can repent, obey their ordination vows and return to the biblical worship of their spiritual forefathers.

Frame's subversion of the Westminster Standards, the endorsement of Frame's book by professors from two "conservative" Reformed seminaries, and the publication of his book by a purported "Presbyterian and Reformed" publisher reveal two things about the time in which we live. First, we live in a time of great declension. Most of what passes as conservative Presbyterian practice today in the area of worship is really much closer to Arminian evangelicalism and prelacy than the original intent of the Confession of Faith. Indeed, it is doubtful that someone such as John Knox, George Gillespie or Samuel Rutherford could get a teaching job at any of the "conservative" Presbyterian seminaries today; and, it is virtually certain that not one *major* Presbyterian publisher would publish any of their writings on worship. Why? Because the "conservative" Presbyterian seminaries and major Reformed publishers and most people in Presbyterian denominations do not really believe in confessional worship. "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophecy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so" (Jer. 5:30-31).

Second, we live in a time when confessional subscription is very lax, when ministers and elders can repudiate and break their ordination vows with virtually no disciplinary consequences. This situation raises some important questions. (1) If a man openly breaks his ordination vows and publicly teaches an unbiblical doctrine of worship, can the denomination and seminary which refuses to discipline such a man really claim to be Reformed? Are they not by their refusal to enforce their own standards accomplices in that man's deception and corrosive false teaching? Is not their inaction an implicit acceptance of heterodox views? "If Presbyterians took their creed seriously, Mr. Frame would be removed from both the seminary and the pastorate, and not allowed to teach."<sup>239</sup> (2) Further, is not a refusal to bring sanctions against such blatant violations of our standards also an unpastoral refusal to protect church members from false teachers? Is it not an implicit rejection of one of the main purposes of adopting a biblical, carefully-crafted creed? Gary North's analysis of the Presbyterian conflict in the PCUSA (c. 1880-1936) applies to our own time of loose subscriptionism and non-disciplined covenant breakers. He writes:

The age-old debate between a strict interpretation of a standard and loose interpretation was a big part of the Presbyterian conflict. To understand what was involved, consider a speed limit sign. It says "35" (either miles per hour or kilometers per hour). What if a man drives 36? Will he be ticketed by a policeman? Probably not. The policeman has limited amounts of time to pursue speeders. He has to chase the speeder, ticket him, and perhaps appear in court to defend his actions. In a world of limited resources, a person who speeds by driving



36 in a 35 zone is probably going to get away with it; the safety of the public is dependent on stopping activities of those other, life-threatening speeders. Only if the community is willing to hire many, many policeman and judges can it afford to ticket speeders who drive 36.

Now consider someone who drives 55 in a “25” speed zone for young school-age children. Will a policeman pursue him? Without question. The speeder is putting children at risk. That speeder is a serious lawbreaker. To refuse to pursue him, a policeman would be abandoning the very essence of law enforcement. His own job would probably be at risk for malfeasance. A city that will not bring employment sanctions against a traffic policeman who steadfastly refuses to pursue such speeders is saying, in effect: “Our posted signs mean nothing. Drive as fast as you want, day or night.” In other words, “Young children had better look out for themselves; we will not do it for them.”

Strict subscription, like speed limits, is designed to protect the vulnerable person who is under the protection of the law. As surely as a seven-year-old child walking to school is protected by a speed limit sign *and a court system prepared to enforce it*, so is a resident in a country protected by the strict interpretation of a written civil constitution *and a court system prepared to enforce it* and so is a Church member protected by strict subscription to a confession of faith *and a court system prepared to enforce it*.

Two conclusions follow: (1) law without sanctions protects no one; (2) law interpreted by loose construction protects no one predictably. This is true in ecclesiastical matters as it is in highway safety matters.

The child is under the protection of the law, the posted limit, the police, and the court, even though he did not publicly swear an oath of allegiance to obey the law. The speed limit sign is for his protection: the person at greatest risk from speeders. When he becomes a driver, he will be expected to obey the law.

In the Bible, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger are identified as the most vulnerable people in the community. The civil law is supposed to protect them. The minor or resident alien today is protected by the national constitution, even though he did not publicly swear an oath of allegiance to it, as the person most at risk of government tyranny.

The visitor or the non-voting Church member is protected by the confession of faith, even though he did not publicly swear allegiance to it. It protects his soul

from wolves in sheep's clothing: false shepherds. He will be expected to take public oath to uphold the confession if he ever becomes a church officer.<sup>240</sup>

Furthermore, what is the point of official adherence to a creed and requiring ordination vows to believe in and uphold the teaching of that creed, when ordained men who have sworn allegiance to that creed can openly deny and subvert some of its most important teachings? "The whole purpose of a creed is to 'lock-in' a particular theological viewpoint, to stand against the eroding tides of shifting fashion. Consequently, a creed must be understood in terms of its original intent or else it fails of its purpose...."<sup>241</sup> Men are free to disagree with the original intent of the Westminster Standards. However, if they have sworn allegiance to the Standards they have a moral obligation to make their disagreements known, resign from their position as pastor, elder, teacher or deacon and move on. Likewise, denominations and seminaries which claim allegiance to the Standards yet teach contrary to the Standards and refuse to discipline men for teaching contrary to the Standards have a moral obligation to (at the minimum) make changes in the Standards so that they are in accord with what is actually being taught and practiced. Ordained men, seminaries and denominations which pretend to adhere to the Standards when they really do not, are guilty of violating the ninth commandment. They are guilty of false advertising. What is occurring today is fraud on a massive scale. How can declension be stopped when the original intent of the Westminster Standards is ignored or set aside to accommodate heterodox views on worship, creation and women in office? Gentry writes: "[W]hen we witness the attempt at re-interpreting the clear language before us, deep and serious concerns boil up. Where will this methodology lead? What elements within the Confession are safe from the re-interpretive hermeneutic? And for how long are they safe once this interpretive approach is unleashed?"<sup>242</sup>

Lastly, if crucial sections of the Westminster Standards are ignored or completely redefined in a manner that contradicts the plain historical meaning of the Standards, will this not eventually lead to a shift in authority from the original intent of the Standards to an unwritten, historically relative, arbitrary standard? Yes, it certainly will. Every organization is going to have some sanctions. So it is never a question (in the long run) of sanctions *versus* no sanctions. What happens over a period of time is that the anti-confessional non-historical interpretation of the Confession becomes the status-quo. Soon, discrete sanctions are used against strict confessionalists (e.g., they are refused pulpits, teaching jobs, committee assignments and are shunned and have evil motives assigned to their theological positions [e.g., so and so only cares about theology not people; or, he is unloving; or, he is divisive; or, he is unconcerned about church growth, etc.]). Next, over a period of time strict confessionalists are even openly admonished and disciplined. Note, when negative sanctions are not imposed upon church officers who have abandoned the Westminster Standards, then a time will come when sanctions are "imposed in terms of a standard other than the Westminster Confession of Faith and its two catechisms."<sup>243</sup> Apart from a strict adherence to the Westminster Standards the

institutional question will be: *By What Other Standard?*<sup>244</sup> The time will come when those who adhere to the biblical worship of the confession will be marginalized and then driven out. For those who believe this scenario is far-fetched, keep in mind that this pattern has been repeated throughout church history.

It is our hope and prayer that Frame and all those who take the name Presbyterian and claim adherence to the Westminster Standards yet who attack the regulative principle (i.e., Reformed worship) and promote innovations in the worship of God would cease their attacks upon biblical worship and publicly repent of lying, breaking their vows, taking part in perverted worship, and causing others to corrupt the worship of God.

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<sup>169</sup> Frame taught for many years at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and Westminster West, Escondido, California.

<sup>170</sup> John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), xii.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>172</sup> In order to keep this review reasonably short this author will not refute Frame's arguments against the historic Reformed positions on exclusive psalmody, musical instruments in worship and the celebration of extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas and Easter). This author has already refuted Frame's arguments (which are typical of the modern Presbyterian status quo) in other works: *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas; Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God* and *A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody*. All these books are available free at [www.reformed.com](http://www.reformed.com). Other recommended works are: John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983 [1888]); Kevin Reed, *Christmas: An Historical Survey Regarding Its Origins and Opposition to It* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1983) and *Biblical Worship* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1995); Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1977); G. I. Williamson, *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, n.d.) and *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of God: Commanded or Not Commanded?* and D. W. Collins, *Musical Instruments in Divine Worship Condemned by the Word of God* (Pittsburgh: Stevenson and Foster, 1881).

<sup>173</sup> *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, xvi. This author attended the "mother church" in the late

1970s and met and talked with Dr. Miller, who was a very sincere, pious and godly man (he passed on to glory in 1995). In the area of worship, however, his efforts have done much to corrupt the church of Christ.

[174](#) *Ibid.*, xii-xii, emphasis added.

[175](#) *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

[176](#) Frame has borrowed the term “minimalist” from James Jordan’s *Liturgical Nestorianism* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1994). In his book Jordan accuses strict regulativists of being like Nestorians who denigrated human nature by “saying that God and man were not joined.” Aside from the fact that it was the Monophysites who denied and thus denigrated the true humanity of Christ by manner of a fusion of the two natures, Jordan’s argument has nothing to do with the debate over the regulative principle. It sounds creative and intellectual and that is enough for many of Jordan’s followers. That Frame would approvingly reference Jordan’s book is not surprising. Jordan has misrepresented and mocked the regulative principle for years. He also is well known for “interpretive maximalism.” Through his creative LSD hermeneutics he discovers hidden obscure meanings in a text. Both men, however, attack the regulative principle for different reasons. Frame wants charismatic-style worship while Jordan prefers a more high church liturgical style worship. Note the following quotes from his *Sociology of the Church* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, 1986): “Biblical teaching as a whole is quite favorable to Christmas as an annual ecclesiastical festival.... As I study Scripture, I find that Lutheran and Anglican churches are more biblical in their worship [than Baptist and Reformed], despite some problems” (210). “What I am saying is that the custom [of crossing oneself] is not unscriptural, and that the conservative church at large should give it some thought” (212). “This [the Scripture reading and sermon] is all designed to lead us to the second act of sacrifice: the Offertory. The Offertory is not a ‘collection,’ but the act of self-immolation.... Thus, the offering plates are brought down front to the minister, who holds them up before God (‘heave offering’) and gives them to Him” (27). “The whole-personal priesthood of all believers means not only congregational participation (which requires prayer books), but also holistic ‘doing.’ It means singing, falling down, kneeling, dancing, clapping, processions, and so forth” (32). “By requiring knowledge before communion, the church cut its children off from the Table.... If we are to have reformation, we must reject this residuum of Gnosticism and return to an understanding that the act of the eucharist precedes the interpretation of it” (38). Jordan, as Frame, argues from “large, over-arching principles of worship” (209) and thus often engages in speculative, creative application. If one disagrees with Jordan’s “high church” views he is arbitrarily labeled (with absolutely no proof whatsoever) as Neo-platonic, Nestorian, Gnostic, Nominalistic, Stoic, etc.

[177](#) *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 376, 393.

[178](#) Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines While Engaged in Preparing Their Directory for Church Government, Confession of Faith, and Catechisms (November 1644 to March 1649) from Transcripts of the Originals Procured by a Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 [1874]), 163.

[179](#) *Ibid.*

[180](#) *Ibid.*, 221-222.

[181](#) *Ibid.*, 221.

[182](#) *Ibid.*, 298.

[183](#) Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, [1845]), 224-225. Orthodox Presbyterian pastor G. I. Williamson concurs: “Another element of true worship is ‘the singing of psalms with grace in the heart.’ It will be observed that the Confession does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of modern hymns in the worship of God, but rather only the psalms of the Old Testament. It is not generally realized today that Presbyterian and Reformed churches originally used only the inspired psalms, hymns, and songs of the Biblical Psalter in divine worship, but such is the case. The Westminster Assembly not only expressed the conviction that only the psalms should be sung in divine worship, but implemented it by preparing a metrical version of the Psalter for use in the Churches. This is not the place to attempt a consideration of this question. But we must record our conviction that the Confession is correct at this point. It is correct, we believe, because it has never been proved that God has commanded his Church to sing the uninspired compositions of men rather than or along with the inspired songs, hymns, and psalms of the Psalter in divine worship” (*The Confession of Faith for Study Classes* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964], 167).

[184](#) Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 210-211. For a more thorough discussion of the abandonment of exclusive psalmody by the PCUSA, see Bushell, 198-212. The abandonment of exclusive psalmody by other Presbyterian denominations and Dutch Reformed churches is discussed in pp. 212-220. For further reading on the PCUSA and Watts’ *Psalms* see Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1851), part 2, 244-306.

[185](#) John Maitland, Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie and George

Gillepsie (the Scottish delegates to the Westminster Assembly, 1644).

[186](#) The General Assemblies [*sic*] Answer to the Right Reverend the Assembly of the Divines in the Kirk of England (1644). Samuel Gibson writes: “But it hath been often said, *Take away the Common Prayer Book, take away our Religion*. Nay, our Religion is in the Bible, there is our God, and our Christ, and our Faith, and our Creed in all points. The whole Bible was Paul’s belief; there are the Psalms of David, and his Prayers, and the Lord’s Prayer, and other prayers, by which we may learn to pray. We have still the Lord’s Songs, the Songs of Zion, sung by many with grace in their hearts, *making melody to the Lord*, though without organs. There we have all the commandments” (Samuel Gibson [minister, Church of England, Westminster divine], *The Ruin of the Authors and Fomentors of Civil Wars* [1645]).

[187](#) *Confession of Faith*, 394.

[188](#) What is particularly bizarre regarding Frame’s book is that in the paragraph immediately prior to the one in which he falsely claims that minimalistic worship was not a product of the Westminster Standards, but came from other Puritan and Reformed works that go *beyond* the Standards. He wrote: “Presbyterian worship—based on the biblical ‘regulative principle,’ which I describe in these pages—was in its early days very restrictive, austere, and ‘minimalist.’ It excluded organs, choirs, hymn texts other than the Psalms, symbolism in the worship area, and religious holidays except for the Sabbath” (p. xii). The regulative principle (that Frame says in its early days was very restrictive, austere, and minimalist) that produced the Presbyterian and Reformed worship that Frame describes, is set forth in the strictest manner in the Standards (e.g., WCF 1.6-7; 20.2; 21.1-5; LC 108, 109, 110; SC 50, 51, 52). Frame’s version of history makes no sense whatsoever. The Puritans and Presbyterians taught and practiced a strict regulativist type of worship, yet supposedly in their Standards they espoused something different. Such a version of events is totally absurd.

[189](#) See Brian M. Schwertley, *A Brief Critique of Steven Schlissel’s Article Against the Regulative Principle of Worship* ([www.iserv.net/~graceopc/pub/schwertley/schlissel.html](http://www.iserv.net/~graceopc/pub/schwertley/schlissel.html)).

[190](#) John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 371.

[191](#) *Ibid.*

[192](#) Frame, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, xiv-xv.

[193](#) *Ibid.*, 38.

[194](#) *Ibid.*, 39.

[195](#) *Ibid.*

[196](#) Frame, 39. Although Frame gives us a list of traditional regulative principle proof texts, note that he does not really believe that these passages actually prove the regulative principle. He tells us that he relies on more general principles; however, he does not tell us where or how these principles are derived from the Bible. He writes: “Some readers will note that although I earlier cited a list of passages such as Lev. 10:1-3 to show God’s displeasure with illegitimate worship, I have not used this list to prove the regulative principle, but have instead relied on more general considerations. It does not seem to me that that list of passages proves the precise point that ‘whatever is not commanded is forbidden.’ The practices condemned in those passages are not merely not commanded; they are explicitly forbidden. For example, what Nadab and Abihu did in Lev. 10:1 was not only ‘unauthorized,’ the text informs us, but also ‘contrary to [God’s] command.’ The fire should have been taken from God’s altar (Num. 16:46), not from a private source (compare Ex. 35:3)” [p. 47, endnote 2]. Frame’s analysis of the Nadab and Abihu incident is erroneous. The reason that the fire of Nadab and Abihu is called “strange” (KJV), “profane” (NKJV) or “unauthorized” (NIV) is not because it is expressly forbidden, but because as the text explicitly says, it was never commanded. The passages that Frame offers to disprove the traditional regulativist understanding of the passage do not prove his point at all. The Numbers 16:46 passage simply says that fire is to be taken from the altar and put on a censer. Neither in this or any other passage are people expressly told not to use fire from any other source. The point of the regulative principle is that when God says, “Take fire from the altar,” men must follow God’s direction without adding their own human rules or traditions. The passage that Frame offers as proof (Ex. 35:3) that fire from another source is expressly forbidden teaches that the people are not to kindle a fire in their dwellings on the Sabbath. It has nothing to do with the Leviticus 10:1 passage. That Frame would list a series of passages in a section on the regulative principle that he really doesn’t believe teaches the regulative principle is strange. However, since he heartily endorses the Westminster Standards’ teaching on worship and then explicitly rejects it later in the same book, we should not be surprised by such contradictions.

[197](#) *Ibid.*, xv.

[198](#) *Ibid.*, xv.

[199](#) *Ibid.*, 46.

[200](#) Frame has also adopted unbiblical views regarding women in public worship. He has

imbibed the teachings of James Hurley on this issue, which were set forth to circumvent the clear teaching of Scripture and accommodate the infiltration of feminism in the church. Frame writes: “In general, I agree with James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), and others, who argue that the only biblical limitation on women’s role is that women may not be elders. Hurley argues that the prohibition on women speaking in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 is not for the duration of the meeting, but for the authoritative ‘weighing of the prophets’ described in vv. 29-33, and that the teaching prohibited in 1 Tim. 2:12 is the authoritative teaching of the office of elder. However we may interpret these difficult passages, it is plain that under some circumstances women did legitimately speak in worship (1 Cor. 11:5) and that women were not entirely excluded from teaching (Acts 18:26; Titus 2:4) (p. 75, endnote 6).” There are a number of reasons why the teaching of Frame and Hurley must be rejected. First, nowhere in the Bible do we find a distinction between authoritative *versus* non-authoritative teaching in public worship. This kind of arbitrary, non-textually based distinction would have made the medieval scholastics proud. Second, Hurley ignores the fact that although women were not permitted to ask questions, speak or teach in the Jewish synagogues in the old covenant and apostolic era, men—the heads of households—were permitted to ask questions and make comments regarding the Scripture reading and exposition. Women had to ask their husbands at home. Why ignore the historical context (and cultural milieu) and read our modern feminist culture back into the text? The answer is simple. Hurley’s arguments are more a justification of existing practice (i.e., the current declension) than objective exegesis. Third, at no point in the passage (1 Cor. 14:34-35) or the context are we told that women keeping silent applies only to the evaluation of prophets. Hurley’s conclusion is speculation—a speculation not made by virtually any commentator, theologian or preacher until the rise and popularity of feminism in the 1970s. Fourth, Hurley’s speculative conclusion contradicts the explicit teaching of 1 Tim. 2:12 where there is no possibility that Paul is only speaking about the evaluation of the prophets. Fifth, the reasons that are given in Scripture for women not speaking, teaching or asking questions in church (e.g., [1] God’s ordained order of authority [1 Cor. 11:3]; [2] Adam was created first [1 Tim. 2:14]; [3] the woman [Eve] originated from the man [Adam] [Gen. 2:21-22; 1 Cor. 11:8]; [4] the woman-wife was created as a help-meet to the man-Adam [Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:9]; [5] Eve was deceived and fell into transgression [1 Tim. 2:14]; [6] the covenant headship of the husband [1 Cor. 14:34-35]) obviously apply to all forms of teaching or speaking in public worship. They cannot arbitrarily be applied to only one type of speaking or teaching. This point is strongly supported by Paul’s statements regarding women being submissive and asking their own husbands at home. Paul is setting forth and supporting the biblical teaching regarding covenant headship. Hurley artificially applies these broad overarching principles to a tiny sliver of public worship (the evaluation of prophets) that no longer even applies to the modern church, for prophecy has ceased. Sixth, the alleged major difficulty of reconciling 1 Cor. 11:5 (where women are said to pray and prophecy) with 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (where women are forbidden to speak in church and are commanded to keep silent) has been resolved in ways that do not



violate the analogy of Scripture and are much more exegetically responsible than Hurley's speculation. Three possible interpretations are: (1) When Paul refers to women praying and prophesying in 1 Cor. 11:5, the term prophesying refers to women singing the Psalms which are prophetic Scripture. (2) Paul's discussion of women praying and prophesying in public worship is merely hypothetical, for he later forbids the practice altogether in 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (cf. Calvin's commentary on the passage). (3) Paul under inspiration regards women setting forth direct revelation from God to be an exception to regular speaking (e.g., making comments or asking questions) or teaching (i.e., the uninspired exposition of Scripture). In other words, since prophecy is God himself speaking without human exposition, a woman prophesying is not herself exercising authority over a man. The passages that Frame uses (Ac. 18:26; Tim. 2:4) for women teaching have nothing to do with public worship. The first passage refers to Priscilla's and her husband's private instructions of Apollos. The second passage refers to older women who in their inter-personal relationships with younger women are to teach them how to be good wives and homemakers.

[201](#) *Ibid.*, xvi.

[202](#) *Ibid.*, 2, emphasis added.

[203](#) *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis added.

[204](#) *Ibid.*, 54.

[205](#) *Ibid.*, 54-55, emphasis added.

[206](#) *Ibid.*, 23.

[207](#) *Ibid.*, 55.

[208](#) *Ibid.*, 56.

[209](#) *Ibid.*, 92-93.

[210](#) *Ibid.*, 93.

[211](#) *Ibid.*

[212](#) *Ibid.*

[213](#) *Ibid.*

[214](#) *Ibid.*

[215](#) *Ibid.*

[216](#) Richard L. Pratt, Jr. and Steve Brown from Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. and D. Clair Davis from Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

[217](#) Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991.

[218](#) Greg L. Bahnsen, *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 299-300, 302-303.

[219](#) *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, 52-53.

[220](#) John Coffey writes: “In describing Scots like Rutherford as Puritan we are following the example of their contemporaries. When James VI revisited Scotland in 1617 he recalled that many English Puritans had yielded under royal pressure, and declared ‘Let us take the same course with the Puritans here.’ Peter Heylyn too, did not hesitate to speak of ‘the Presbyterian or Puritan Faction in Scotland.’ Rutherford himself noted that ‘we be nicknamed Puritan’ and complained that ‘a strict and precise walking with God in everything’ was scorned as ‘Puritan.’ The nickname was given throughout the English-speaking world to people who were felt to be excessively zealous and strict in their religion, people whose intense desire to obey Scripture often brought them into conflict with royal ecclesiastical policy” (*Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford* [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 18).

[221](#) *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, 53.

[222](#) *Ibid.*

[223](#) *Ibid.*, 54.

[224](#) *Ibid.*, 123-124.

[225](#) Frame offers a few other arguments against the confessional concept of elements or parts

of worship. One is what he calls the practical snags argument. He points out that there have been disagreements over the years regarding what are elements and what are not (p. 53). He fails to point out, however, that the disagreements that he refers to are all of recent origin and were primarily dredged up to circumvent exclusive psalmody. Then he brings up the fact that the Puritans disagreed over issues like reading written prayers and reciting the Apostle's Creed. However, he ignores the fact that these were individual disagreements. The Puritans and Presbyterians were in unanimous agreement regarding the statements on worship in the Westminster Standards. Does the fact that professing Christians disagree over the abiding validity of the ten commandments mean that we should jettison the ten commandments and replace them with something different? Of course not. The fact that people disagree over certain issues is irrelevant to whether or not a theological position is correct. This issue must be determined by solid exegetical evidence and not LSD hermeneutics. Frame also raises the issue of a marriage worship service. Since there is no such thing as a marriage worship service in Scripture, Frame's consideration is not germane to the discussion. If Frame wants us to reject the Westminster Standards and over 400 years of Reformed thought on the subject of worship, he is going to have to offer something more substantial. A good starting point would be some good old-fashioned biblical exegesis. We are still waiting.

[226](#) Kevin Reed, "Presbyterian Worship: Old and New" in Brian M. Schwertley, *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1999), 139.

[227](#) *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 40-41.

[228](#) *Ibid.*

[229](#) See *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 131.

[230](#) As Frame misrepresents the Puritan's understanding of the scope of the regulative principle he also misrepresents the Westminster Confession. He writes: "I am aware that traditional Presbyterian statements of the regulative principle typically draw a much sharper distinction than I have drawn between worship services and the rest of life. The Westminster Confession, for example, states that in all of life we are free from any 'doctrines and commandments of men' that are 'contrary to' God's word, but that in 'matters of faith, or worship,' we are also free from doctrines and commandments that are 'beside' the word (20.2)" (43). In this section on liberty of conscience the phrases "contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship" go together and are connected by the verb "are" to "the doctrine and commandments of men." The Confession is not making two separate statements—one regarding all of life and another regarding only matters of faith. Anything contrary to or beside God's word in all matters of faith or worship does not have God's authority. Shaw writes: "In this section the doctrine of liberty of conscience is laid down in most explicit terms. The conscience, in all

matters of faith and duty, is subject to the authority of God alone, and entirely free from all subjection to the traditions and commandments of men. To believe any doctrine, or obey any commandment, contrary to, the Word of God, out of submission to human authority, is to betray true liberty of conscience” (*Exposition of the Confession of Faith*, 205). A. A. Hodge writes: “God has authoritatively addressed the human conscience only in his law, the only perfect revelation of which in this world is the inspired Scriptures. Hence God himself has set the human conscience free from all obligation to believe or obey any such doctrines or commandments of men as are either contrary to or aside from the teachings of that Word” (*The Confession of Faith*, 265).

[231](#) *Worship and Spirit and Truth*, 67, 83.

[232](#) Peter Masters, “Worship in the Melting Pot: Is New Worship Compatible with Traditional Worship?” in *Sword and Trowel* no. 3 (London, England, 1998), 13. This author is indebted to Masters for his many insights into the “new worship.”

[233](#) When we read passages about a prophet entering into God’s presence and being awe-struck and speaking few words, does this mean that God is telling us by way of “creative application” that He would like worship songs written that consist of one sentence? No, not at all. A legitimate application of such texts would be that we worship an infinitely holy, awesome God. Therefore, when we approach him in worship we need to be very careful to do so according to his rules. Our God is a consuming fire. Also, the worship of such a God (Jehovah) ought to be done in a serious, majestic manner. Churches which practice the new “celebrative” worship with the jokes, skits, entertainment, vain repetition “Romper-Room” choruses, rock bands and campfire antics, are neither serious, respectful or majestic. “But, brother, these people are sincere.” Indeed, many are; however, sincerity which is not based on truth is worthless.

[234](#) Masters, 15.

[235](#) People who argue in favor of repetitive choruses sometimes will point to the Psalms as a justification of short repetitive phrases in worship song. The truth of the matter is that the Psalter is nothing like modern choruses at all. Instead of choruses that are repeated over and over, the Psalms contain what is called a refrain. In Psalm 136 at the end of each verse we find the refrain “For His mercy endures for ever.” Unlike modern choruses, the refrain is given at the end of a new and different thought. Every verse of Psalm 136 is different. Thus the mind is focused in thanksgiving upon God’s attributes and redemptive acts instead of the vain repetition of modern choruses where the exact same thing is repeated over and over like a Hindu mantra.

237 A common charge against Puritan or truly Reformed worship by high church liturgists and charismatic-style celebratists is that Puritans view worship as a purely mental activity or a purely intellectual exercise. They argue that Puritans neglect the whole man (body and soul) in worship, that what we need is a “ceremonious view” of worship. Then it is often argued that the holistic view entails gestures, dance, ceremony and ritual, with the eucharist, not the sermon, being the centerpiece of Christian worship. We are told that there must be act as well as thought. Another charge that is leveled is that Puritan worship is really a result of Greek philosophy and not a careful exegesis of Scripture. Are these charges accurate? No. They consist of a straw-man caricature of Reformed worship and blatant misrepresentations. Do Puritans view worship as a purely intellectual, mental affair? No. That accusation simply is not true. For example, the Puritans believe and practice the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, where specific acts and elements are signs and seals of spiritual realities. In the Lord’s supper (for example) all the senses are in operation. There is the hearing of the word, the tasting and touching of the bread and wine. There is the visual-sensual experience of looking at the elements. The issue between strict regulativists and high church liturgists is not purely mental vs. whole-man worship. The real issues are: (a) the Puritans want to limit worship to only what is authorized by Scripture, while the liturgists want human additions (e.g., pageantry and ritual); and (b) regulativists understand the centrality of the preached word. It is not that Puritans set aside emotion and the “whole man.” Following Paul and others they recognize that proper emotion and visible ordinances must be based on faith and understanding; otherwise, one is left with empty ritualism and mysticism. Paul says that prayer or singing without understanding is useless and does not lead to edification (cf. 1 Cor. 14:12-19). The apostle presupposes that for sanctification to occur there first must be comprehension by the mind.

What about the common accusation that the Puritans have followed Greek philosophy in their conception of worship? Anyone who is familiar with the writings of John Calvin, John Knox, John Owen, George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford and others know that such an accusation is totally false. These men derived their philosophy of worship directly from a careful exegesis of Scripture. Note also that the accusers always make their assertions with zero evidence. It is ironic that a strict application of the regulative principle is the only philosophy that disallows the intrusion of human philosophy into the sphere of worship. We ask our brothers who are dissatisfied with the simplicity of pure gospel worship (or what they denigrate as minimalistic worship) to show us, based on the real exegesis of Scripture (without creative application and LSD hermeneutics), where Calvin, Knox and the Westminster divines went wrong. We will not be dissuaded by smoke and mirrors.

238 People who are in favor of “celebrative” worship sometimes portray strict regulativists as theological snobs, unloving or even as influenced by neo-platonism or nominalism. The truth

of the matter is that strict regulativists simply want to preserve biblical (i.e., Reformed) worship from worship that is idolatrous, Pelagian and Arminian. When people ignore or set aside what God has commanded in favor of autonomy in worship, they are implicitly saying that God can be approached in worship on man's terms. That man through his own creativity, effort, and mystical experience can lift himself up to God. Such thinking is the essence of paganism and Romanism. The Bible, however, teaches that God alone initiates mediation and sets forth the worship between himself and his people. Jehovah sets the rules and controls worship. It is the height of arrogance for sinful men to approach God in worship on their own terms. Such men may be friendly and sound very pious, humble and loving. But their doctrine and actions reveal them to be (at least in the area of worship) false teachers and prophets of declension.

[239](#) Kevin Reed, "Presbyterian Worship" in *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, 143-144.

[240](#) Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1996), 10-11.

[241](#) Ken Gentry, Jr., "In the Space of Six Days: On Breaking the Confession with the Rod of Irons" (*Chalcedon Report* [Vallecito, CA, April 2000]), 17.

[242](#) *Ibid.*

[243](#) North, *Crossed Fingers*, 9.

[244](#) *Ibid.*

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