

# **Foundation for Reformation:**

## **The Regulative Principle of Worship**

**by**

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# The Regulative Principle of Worship (I)

Two essential questions concerning worship have been debated for hundreds of years by churches. The first question asks: How is God to be worshipped? That is, what is the proper and acceptable way to worship God? Even kings of the earth have their “protocol” as to the manner in which they are to be approached. In the ancient world, to violate that protocol could jeopardize one’s life. For example, one appearing in the court of King Ahasueras (cf. the book of Esther) could literally lose his life if he failed to follow the acceptable protocol. Is it then strange to consider that if earthly kings who rule by God’s authority and are His ministers of justice demand such honor that the King of kings Himself should be treated with less honor? For He too has a “protocol” as to how He must be approached and worshipped by His people.

The second question asks: What are the limits of authority possessed by church officers in imposing liturgical forms of worship on members of a church? That is, when a church gathers to worship God and church officers lead the congregation in the worship of God, how far can elders legitimately go in establishing various forms of worship for the congregation?

Let me illustrate the importance of these questions. Today we are celebrating together the Lord’s Supper which is an element within the worship of God and a glorious means of God’s grace to His people. But suppose before receiving the Lord’s Supper each one were given a straight pin, and I insisted that each of you prick your finger as an aid to your understanding that when Christ died for you He suffered for you. The slight pain you might feel in the prick of the finger is simply a finite reminder of the infinite pain Christ suffered as He bore the infinite wrath of an absolutely holy God. My intentions might be sincere, but is such an act of worship acceptable to God? Do I have the legitimate authority to introduce what I consider to be profitable into the worship of the Most High God? Such is the rationale for the introduction of many practices into a worship service. One can well imagine that if such a man-made tradition of pricking oneself before the Lord’s Supper should be practiced within a church that in all probability it could become an actual element of worship within many churches one hundred years from now. In like manner, one of the man-made traditions that had been instituted in sixteenth century England insisted that each communicant in the Lord’s Supper come forward and kneel before the elements out of reverence for Christ’s atoning death. One could literally multiply such instances of human innovation in the worship of God. The essential questions that must be asked about all such human invention in divine worship are these: Will God receive such sincere yet innovative acts into His worship? Is it within my authority as a minister of Jesus Christ to compel you to worship God in a way which I believe will promote your spiritual growth in Christ?

On May 19, 1662, a bill was adopted by Parliament entitled “The Act For Uniformity in the Prayers and Ceremonies of the Church of England.” This piece of legislation required all ministers to follow the liturgical forms of worship (prayers, ceremonies, etc.) found in the Book of Common Prayer. Dr. John Owen in his masterful response to this ecclesiastical tyranny wrote *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies And Their Imposition*. Nearly 2,000 faithful ministers were expelled from the Church England (among whom was John Owen) for refusing to allow any man-made religious act, gesture, or ceremony to bind their consciences. And dear ones, we who are ministers or elders of Jesus Christ fall into the same error as the Parliament of England whenever we introduce into the worship of God any religious ceremony or gesture that is not authorized by the Word of God. We are imposing that man-made form of worship on

people. And if the people of God should rightly refuse to participate at that point, then they have been excluded from worship by our seeking to lord it over their conscience. We have denied them their true Christian liberty. We have become ecclesiastical tyrants.

Dear ones, the single answer to both of the questions asked earlier is the Regulative Principle of Worship. The Regulative Principle of Worship is God's ordained law for worship. "A law for worship?" someone might ask. "That sounds rather legalistic. I think we should be free in our worship of God—we should be led by the Spirit." However, that person or that church that follows such "a rule of the Spirit" has in reality established his or their own law for worship just as much as the one who follows the Regulative Principle of Worship. You see there is no neutrality in the way in which we approach God in worship. Either we approach the living God according to His revealed Word (i.e. the Regulative Principle of Worship), or we approach Him according to our revealed word. Someone's word is going to expressly guide us in worship. The only question is, whose word will guide us? God's or man's? Regardless of the reason given (whether to be free in worship, or whether to be led of the Spirit, or whether to attract more people, or whether to make people feel good, or whether to help people to know and feel the presence of God), and regardless of the motive in introducing the man-made tradition (whether sincerity, or whether joy, or whether supposed faith and love), any act of worship not instituted by God in His Word is instituted by man's authority and therefore usurps Christ's authority in His church. So you see dear ones, it is not a question of whether there should be standards, or rules for worship. The question is simply, "whose standards or rules should always be followed in worship?" The Regulative Principle of Worship declares that only the Spirit of God speaking in His Holy Word can give us the acceptable way in which God is to be worshipped.

#### 1. Definition

The Regulative Principle of Worship as found in God's Word is accurately summarized for us in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21:1:

But the acceptable way of worshiping 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 Scripture.

In like manner, carefully note the answer given to question 109 of the *Larger Catechism* ("What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?"):

The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself; tolerating a false religion; the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever . . . corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever . . . all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.

A short summary of the Regulative Principle of Worship is simply this: What Scripture does not authorize it forbids. Most churches (Romish churches, Orthodox churches, Anglican churches, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and most Reformed and Presbyterian churches) are operating on an altogether different principle from the one just stated. The principle they are operating on is: What Scripture does not forbid, it permits. Since Christ in the New Covenant has not expressly forbidden drama, dancing, candles, incense, musical instruments, uninspired hymns, crossing oneself, banners, crosses, images etc. within the house of God, the vast majority of churches today permit these (to lesser or greater degrees) and many more practices into their worship services. However, the Regulative Principle of Worship would prevent all the above practices into the worship of God because they are all without the authorization of Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant.

In other words, every religious practice or symbol in the worship of God's people must have a divine warrant from God's Word either by (1) command; or by (2) authorized example of the apostles; or by (3) good and necessary inference. Let us briefly consider how these three means of establishing divine warrant operate in Scripture.

(1) Divine warrant established by command is plain enough. When the inspired apostle commands Timothy: "Preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2), we rightly conclude that preaching from the Scripture each Lord's Day is a commanded element of worship. Again when the Lord commands: "This do as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:25), we have the express prescription from Christ to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a required element of worship.

(2) Divine warrant established by authorized example of the apostles also requires our obedience in matters related to worship. For example, there is no explicit command for New Covenant believers to gather to worship God on the first day of the week. However, as we search the Scripture, God makes it clear to us by authorized example that since Christ was raised on the first day of the week ("Now when He rose early on the first day of the week . . ." Mk.16:9), and since Christ met with His apostles on the first day of the week (Jn. 20:19), and since the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on the first day of the week as they were gathered to worship (Acts 2:1, cf. Lev. 23:15-16), and since it was the practice of apostolic churches to meet for worship on the first day of the week ("Now on the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread . . ." Acts 20:7), and since it was the practice of apostolic churches to collect their offerings for the poor and needy on the first day of the week ("on the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside . . ." 1 Cor. 16:2), we conclude that the Word of God requires worship for all New Covenant believers on a first day Sabbath rather than on a seventh day Sabbath. If, for example, we should find in the New Covenant an approved example of the apostles burning incense in the worship of God, that would be sufficient warrant to require the burning of incense in worship on the Lord's Day. The authorized example of the apostles is as morally binding as an express command from the lips of Christ.

(3) Thirdly, divine warrant for liturgy in worship is established by good and necessary inference. In fact, divine warrant established by good and necessary inference requires our obedience as much as a direct command from God. For example, there is no explicit command in the New Testament, nor is there even an explicit authorized example of an infant receiving water baptism, and yet by good and necessary inference from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, we conclude that God requires all New Covenant believing parents to bring their infant children to Christ in order to have the covenant sign of water baptism placed upon their heads. We derive such a good and necessary

inference from these truths: (1) God established His covenant with Abraham and his seed; (2) God gave circumcision as the visible sign of the covenant to Abraham and his seed; (3) the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed continues into the New Covenant period; (4) Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to the infants of believing parents; (5) the children of believing parents are addressed as “holy”; and (5) whole households were baptized in the New Covenant period just as households were circumcized in the Old Covenant period. The good and necessary inference of infant baptism has the exact same authority from God as does a command from God. Or consider this good and necessary inference. All churches that I know of include women in the Lord’s Supper and yet it is not based on an explicit command nor even on an authorized example from Scripture, but rather on a good and necessary inference drawn from the truth that since God has authorized women to be baptized in the New Covenant (Acts 16:15; Gal. 3:27-28), those women who profess faith in Christ may also be admitted to the Lord’s Table.

## 2. A Caveat

Let me give a word of caution at this point. If all churches were today to affirm with us the Regulative Principle of Worship, there would still not be absolute uniformity of practice in worship by next Lord’s Day (there would no doubt be a much greater degree of uniformity in worship, but not necessarily perfect agreement). Why? Because the Regulative Principle of Worship establishes that Scripture alone can authorize what is acceptable worship, however, the faithful, painstaking work of biblical exegesis must tell us what the Scripture declares. And it is no doubt due to our own ignorance and sin that we might still disagree as to what the Scripture actually declares, though holding firmly to the Regulative Principle of Worship. For example, does Scripture require the receiving of tithes during the worship service? Or does Scripture require a common cup for the Lord’s Supper? Or does Scripture require communicants in the Lord’s Supper to be seated around a table? Honest and faithful advocates of the Regulative Principle of Worship have disagreed on issues such as these just mentioned and more. Thus, those who are firmly and honestly committed to the Regulative Principle of Worship (not simply a lip service to it but a conviction to it) must graciously continue to challenge one another with Scriptural insights concerning worship. The easy and most simple way to deal with these difficult issues of worship would be to follow the inclusive principle of whatever is not forbidden by Scripture is permitted. That inclusive, latitudinarian principle allows for human innovation in worship. That principle is pleasing to human resourcefulness. That principle is pleasing to the senses of man (sight, smell, and hearing). That principle is pleasing to the emotions and will of man. But the Regulative Principle of Worship is an exclusive narrow principle (whatever is not positively authorized by Scripture is forbidden). That principle requires that a man take up his cross, crucify himself, and follow Christ. That principle does not have as its end the pleasure of men, but rather the pleasure of God Almighty. That principle is not followed by us because it simplifies matters or makes our job easier, but rather it is followed because it is biblical and brings pleasure to God.

Though this illustration is not original with me (it comes from Pastor Richard Bacon), it helps us to understand the nature of the Regulative Principle of Worship. Suppose you were dining in a restaurant and the waiter came to take your order. After looking over the menu, your eyes fell on exactly the meal you wanted: prime rib. Having given the waiter your order, suppose he returned with a chicken dinner. Will you not tell the waiter that you did not order chicken, you ordered prime rib? But what if the waiter reasoned with you, “I thought a lean chicken dinner would be better for you, and at the very least it would bring me greater pleasure to know I brought you what I deemed was best.” Most of us can clearly see the problem here. Who is suppose to be serving whom? I dare say you would tell him to take back the chicken and bring you the prime rib you ordered. If you (a mere fallible creature)

would not appreciate such innovation in something as ordinary as a meal, should it appear strange to you that the Most High God would not take pleasure in your innovation in worship regardless of how much it blessed you? He will only receive in worship what He has ordered! Nothing more or nothing less is acceptable to a holy God.

### 3. The Biblical Warrant For The Regulative Principle of Worship From the Old Testament

#### A. Deuteronomy 5:8-10:

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

Not only does the second commandment forbid the use of images in worship; not only does the second commandment forbid the making and representing of any of the three persons of the Godhead by means of images; but the second commandment also forbids the religious making, or using of all man-made actions, gestures, symbols, or ceremonies in God's worship. God teaches us in the second commandment that when man brings what he has made (whether actions, gestures, symbols, or ceremonies) into worship, he forms an image according to his own authority by which to worship God. God calls that idolatry. Ministers or elders may even have good intentions in introducing such man-made innovations into the worship of God (e.g. "to teach the illiterate by visual aids", or "to make worship more meaningful by involving more of the physical senses of people in worship", or "to use more of the gifts of people in worship", or "to aid us in the worship of God" etc.), but God declares: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and **lean not unto your own understanding**" (Prov. 3:5, emphasis added). God declares, "There is a way which seems right unto men, but the ways thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12). All man-made innovations into worship are lifeless images that are both deaf and dumb, they simply reflect back to us what we want them to say. They make us feel good, but they are an abomination to God for He has not ordered them. That is why the Psalmist concludes concerning those who make their own images for worship: "Those who make them are like them" (Ps. 115:8). But the Word of God, on the other hand, is living and powerful (Heb. 4:12). Therefore, Scripture does not tell us what we want to hear, it speaks the words of life and leads us into the paths of righteousness.

Before leaving this text, don't overlook the sobering warning issued by our jealous God (jealous for worship that is authorized by Himself alone, and not invented by man): "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me." Who are those who hate God according to this text? It is not only the atheists and humanists. It is all those who (regardless of their profession) bring to worship anything that is instituted by man rather than by God. The infinitely wise and holy God has stated what He accepts in worship, but man continues to bring what he in his wisdom deems to be best. The church is suffering under God's holy wrath, but we are so blind that we cannot distinguish cursing from blessing. But the second commandment does not end on that note. The living God has promised blessing to all who love Him: "showing mercy to thousands." How do they evidence their love for the Lord God? They keep His commandments, and specifically they keep this second commandment by not introducing into worship anything that is not authorized by God Himself.

### B. Leviticus 10:1-3:

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, **which He had not commanded them**. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD spoke, saying: **‘By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy;** and before all the people I must be glorified’” (emphasis added).

Carefully note that the nature of the sin committed by Nadab and Abihu was that they offered profane fire before the Lord “which He had not commanded them.” God did not say they offered profane fire “which was forbidden them.” The fact that He had not commanded the use of the strange fire meant it was forbidden (God’s silence in the matter meant an express prohibition of all profane fire). According to Leviticus 16:12 it would appear that the coals for the incense offering were to come from the fire on the altar of burnt offering. The priest then brought the coals from the altar of burnt offering into the Tabernacle, and on the altar of incense he spread the coals out mixing the coals and the incense which then filled the Holy Place. Apparently in a rather spontaneous act of worship (with perhaps “good intentions” cf. Lev. 9:22-24) they took fire from another source to praise God. God had just consumed the burnt offering by a miraculous display of fire, and all the people were in an enthusiastic state of shouting and falling on their faces before the Most High God. Leviticus 10:1 immediately follows with “Then.” It may be that in all of the excitement, Nadab and Abihu, quite overcome by the demonstration of God’s awesome power took fire from the quickest and nearest source available to them and immediately went into the Tabernacle to offer incense to the Lord God. They took liberties in worship which God had not given them, and they were slain. They added to the worship of God an act that was not specifically authorized by God. They brought their own man-made worship into the house of God, and His anger burned against them.

### C. Objection

“But God has obviously relaxed His standards for He does not slay people on the spot for taking liberties in worship today. Why be so nit-picky today? We are under grace not law.” I would have you remember that neither does God make a habit of immediately slaying those who lie to Him today though He did so to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Yet would anyone care to argue that lying to God is not as heinous to God today as it was to Him in Acts 5? Paul teaches, “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance” (Rom. 2:4). God’s kind patience in forbearing with sin is not to be misunderstood as an approval of sin. It is God’s objective Word and not my subjective feelings that assure me of God’s approval of my worship.

### D. Objection

“You are just interested in the externals of worship, the right form for worship. What about the heart?” It is true that true worship is not just interested in forms or in externals. True worship must be concerned with worshipping God in spirit and in truth, just as true love is evidenced in word as well as in deed, and just as true faith is evidenced in not only inward conviction but in outward deeds. Dear ones, we are idolaters, guilty of breaking the second commandment if we worship the living God using the right forms, but worship using right forms devoid of love, adoration, praise, and the fear of God. But we are also idolaters if we are guilty of worshipping God with much love and praise, yet add to or subtract from the authorized forms of worship established in God’s Word.

True worship is only and ever acceptable before God on the basis of the finished work of Christ. Even when we come to the Lord bringing to Him what He has authorized in His Word with hearts filled with thankful praise and passionate faith, our offerings are yet contaminated with the remnants of sin. We can never offer to God a perfect act of worship that He would receive on the merits of our own righteousness. Our obedient worship, offered with sincere faith is only acceptable unto God for the sake of a perfect Redeemer who makes intercession for us without ceasing. You are acceptable before God only because you are in Christ, and all your lawful worship is acceptable before God only because you are in Christ.

During the bloody reign of Mary Queen of England, brave and courageous men, women, and children were burned at the stake because they refused to bow before the popish mass and other man-made ceremonies. To these faithful martyrs, this truth was precious and one for which they were willing to die:

God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 20:2).

Let the Spirit of God burn into our bosom this word: “What ever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32).

Amen.

# The Regulative Principle of Worship (II)

The great Scottish reformer, John Knox, summarized the Regulative Principle of Worship as, “All worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry”(Works, Vol. III, pg. 34). For Knox and the other reformers, one was not required to construct an image and bow down on hands and knees before it in order to be guilty of idolatry. No, Calvin, Knox, Gillespie, Rutherford, Owen etc. understood idolatry to be anything that man constructs or invents by his own vain imagination, which is without God’s positive sanction, and which is brought into the worship of God.

This Lord’s Day, we continue our study of that great biblical principle that guides God’s people as they stand upon holy ground before the living God to worship and adore Him: the Regulative Principle of Worship. There are at least four legitimate ways by which one might seek to establish warrant for the Regulative Principle of Worship.

## (1) By way of **Christian Liberty**.

Church officers cannot legitimately bind the consciences of worshippers to perform any religious act, gesture, or ceremony that is not prescribed by God’s Word because God alone is lord of the conscience. To do so without the authorization of God is to practice ecclesiastical tyranny.

## (2) By way of **Abuses**.

Abuses and further abuses in worship will inevitably follow in churches that do not diligently adhere to the Regulative Principle of Worship (seeking biblical warrant for every religious act, gesture, symbol, and ceremony in the worship of God). Such abuses include establishing various aids to worship such as visual images of the persons of the Godhead, the saints, crosses, candles, banners, dramas, dancing; or auditory images such as instruments, bands, orchestras, choirs, and other special music; or olfactory images radiating aromas and appealing to the sense of smell such as incense. If New Covenant worship which has surpassed the types and shadows of Old Covenant worship (Heb. 7:18-19, 22; 8:4-6,13; 9:1-5; 10:1,9) does not warrant a practice, gesture, symbol, or ceremony, then we have no warrant to use it in the worship of God. How many churches today are upset about the use of bands in a worship service, and yet they can no more find support for their piano or organ in the New Covenant than those can who use guitars, drums, etc. Others are critical of the crucifix in worship while they have no more New Covenant warrant for their crosses, banners or Christmas trees in worship. The only principle that can prevent such abuses in the worship of God is a principle that outlaws all acts, gestures, symbols, and ceremonies that do not have the warrant of New Covenant revelation: the Regulative Principle of Worship.

## (3) By way of **Biblical Texts**.

Specific biblical texts demonstrate that God abominates all human invention in worship (Gen. 4:1-15; Lev. 10:1-3; Ex. 40:16-32; Deut. 5:8-10; 1 Chron. 13:5-10; Mk. 7:1-13; Jn.4:19-24; 1 Cor. 7:23; 2 Cor. 1:24; Col. 2:8,20-23; Heb. 8:5-6; 10:1-10 etc.).

#### (4) By way of **Theological Principles**.

Consider how the following theological principles lay a foundation upon which the Regulative Principle of Worship is built.

##### A. **The Sufficiency of Scripture**

Question: Is God's Word adequate and complete in giving to man all that man needs to know as to how he must please God? Absolutely, for God declares through the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine (i.e. teaching), for reproof (i.e. conviction of sin), for correction (i.e. setting one straight in the truth), for instruction in righteousness (i.e. training him in all that God requires of him)." Now that is quite comprehensive. But note the purpose or end God has in view in giving to you the Scripture, "that the man of God may be complete (Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich's Lexicon states concerning the Greek word used here for complete, "Complete, capable proficient= able to meet all demands.") thoroughly equipped for every good work" (including how to worship God). Since the apostle Paul addressed these words to a young evangelist (Timothy is a "man of God" in the narrow sense of a minister of God), all ministers and elders are herein specifically addressed. The principle of worship that man can add to worship what God does not specifically prohibit teaches that Scripture is not sufficient for worship, worship needs man's innovative ideas in order to aid us in our worship of God. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* denies that we need anything beside Scripture in our worship of God: "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines or commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to His Word, or beside it [that is in addition to His Word--GLP], in matters of faith or worship" (20:2).

##### B. **The Sovereignty of God**

The Regulative Principle of Worship declares that God alone is sovereign in worship. The Regulative Principle of Worship simply applies the principles of Calvinism (i.e. God's sovereign Lordship) to worship, whereas the view that what God doesn't forbid in worship is permitted is applying the principles of Arminianism (i.e. man's sovereign lordship) to worship. Just as fallen man naturally seeks to impose his will in salvation (e.g. "I can cooperate with God in salvation", or "I have a natural freedom to choose Christ"), so fallen man naturally seeks to impose his will in worship ("I can cooperate with God in worship by adding what I desire so long as God doesn't specifically forbid it"). But just as God condemns a man-centered salvation, so God condemns a man-centered worship (Col. 2:23 specifically condemns all will-worship i.e. all worship instituted by man).

##### C. **The Deceitfulness Of Your Human Heart**

God declares, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked who can know it" (Jer. 17:9). Even the regenerate hearts of sincere believers are subject to being deceived by pride. That is why God continually instructs believers, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and **lean not to your own understanding**" (Prov. 3:5, emphasis added); or "**He who trusts in his own heart is a fool**" (Proverbs 28:26, emphasis added); or "My thoughts are not **your thoughts**, nor are **your ways** my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts [higher--GLP] than your thoughts" (Is. 55:8-9, emphasis added). That certainly includes all of the thoughts and ways of man in regard to worship. Dear ones, you nor I are trustworthy in offering our own thoughts or ways to God in worship.

#### **D. The Sufficiency Of Christ As Prophet, Priest, and King Of His Church**

In passing from all the God-ordained ceremonies of worship of the Old Covenant (all of which pointed to Christ and the New Covenant), Christ did not leave the matter of worship up to man to decide what was appropriate for New Covenant worship. Christ is not only a sufficient Savior in redeeming all His elect, He is also a sufficient Prophet in giving to us all the words of God concerning New Covenant worship. He is a sufficient Priest in presenting us and our worship acceptable and pleasing to a holy God. And He is a sufficient King in ruling over His church in its doctrine (no man-made doctrines), in its government (no man-made offices), in its discipline (no man-made laws), and in its worship (no man-made worship practices). What Christ, your perfect Prophet, Priest, and King, has not instituted by Himself or through His apostles in the New Covenant revelation is not allowed in New Covenant worship. All that pertains to the ceremonial law has been abolished in Christ. This is the clear teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (7:5-6):

This covenant [i.e. the covenant of grace--GLP] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fulness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.

#### **1. Further Biblical Warrant For The Regulative Principle of Worship From The Old Testament**

Now I want to continue with a bit more support from the Old Testament to further establish the biblical warrant for the Regulative Principle of Worship. Last week I brought forth the second commandment in Deuteronomy 5:8-10, and the account of Nadab and Abihu whom God destroyed for adding to God's command in worship (Lev. 10:1-3).

##### **A. Genesis 4:1-8**

Turn with me now to the account of the first recorded worship service in biblical revelation: Genesis 4:1-8. Why did God not accept Cain's offering? I submit to you that though Cain did not have true biblical faith (Heb. 11:4), neither did he bring the specific offering in worship which God commanded him to bring. In other words, Cain manifested his unbelief by adding to the instituted worship of God. Now there is no specific prohibition of offering the fruit of the ground mentioned in the text previous to Cain bringing his bloodless sacrifice to the Lord. The text would lead one to conclude that Cain sincerely believed he was bringing an acceptable offering to God as an act of worship rather than

bringing an offering God had previously forbidden. Cain, however, was sincerely wrong (“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” Prov. 14:12). The text says, “The Lord respected (i.e. looked with favor upon) Abel and his offering, but He did not respect (or look with favor upon) Cain and his offering” (Gen. 4:4-5). An angry attitude on Cain’s part is mentioned **after** Cain’s offering was not accepted by God, but not before. Furthermore, in verse 7 when God warns Cain concerning his anger, God admonishes him, “If you **do** well, will you not be accepted” (emphasis added)? The implication is that he did or acted contrary to God’s command in bringing his offering in worship, not that he was insincere in bringing his offering (the same thing is inferred in Heb. 11:4 and 1 Jn. 3:11,12 where the act or sacrifice of Cain is noted). The fact that Abel acted in faith (as taught in Heb. 11:4) necessarily implies that God must have given specific instruction as to the acceptable sacrifice that God required in worship. Abel obeyed the command of God, Cain added to the command of God in worship. Cain added something of his own invention to the worship of God, and neither he nor his offering was acceptable before God. Worship is never a matter of preference. Worship is always a matter of requirement. Like Cain many ministers and elders today believe they have discretionary power to introduce acts, gestures, symbols, and ceremonies of mere human preference into the worship of God. The Word of the Lord is as true today to ministers as it was to the rulers of Jerusalem: “When you come to appear before Me, Who has **required** this from your hand to trample My courts” (Is. 1:12, emphasis added)? The question is not, “Who has **allowed** this in My courts?” To the contrary the only biblical question is this: “Does God **require** this or that in worship?” Because Cain believed he had discretionary power to exercise his preference in bringing the kind of offering he desired to God in worship, he was sadly disappointed, became envious, then angry, and killed his brother. How many fights in churches would never begin if members were not fighting over mere preferences of men as to what would be best to use in worship. When you simply argue your opinion against someone else’s opinion it is either majority rules or the guy with the biggest club rules, but not God’s authoritative Word that rules. From the very beginning with the first family, the first expression of the visible church, and the first record of a worship service--the Regulative Principle of Worship rules.

### **B. Exodus 25:8-9; 40:16-32**

It is not only religious actions, gestures, and ceremonies that were regulated by God’s command, but every aspect of the tabernacle and all its religious symbolic furniture and even clothing of the priests. Nothing was left to man’s imagination in the worship of God (cf. 1 Chronicles 28:11-19). Note how many times God commands that all things related to the worship of God be done “according to all that I show you”, or “according to all that the LORD had commanded him” (some 37 times from Ex. 25-40 there is mentioned the fact that all matters related to worship were done according to the commandment of God or Moses, God’s prophet).

Some ministers have objected that all religious acts, gestures, symbols, and ceremonies do not fall under the scrutiny of the Regulative Principle of Worship. “Only the elements or ordinary parts of worship are to be judged by the Regulative Principle of Worship (such as prayer, the reading of Scripture, the preaching of God’s Word, the administration of the sacraments). However, the religious actions (or circumstances) ministers use to perform these elements of worship fall under a discretionary power rather than a strict adherence to the Regulative Principle of Worship.” In response, it is true that there are certain circumstances “concerning the worship of God” (*circa sacra*) which being “common to human actions and societies” are not regulated by the specific authorization of God in Scripture, but rather by “the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word” (cf. *Westminster confession of Faith*, 1:6). This would have in view circumstances such as the location and

times of your services, etc. However, all circumstances (religious acts, gestures, symbols, and ceremonies) used in worship (*in sacra* as distinguished from *circa sacra*) to perform religious worship must have divine authorization. If such is not the case, then the images of the Romish church as aids to worship cannot be legitimately condemned for they are not elements of worship but merely circumstances of worship. Furthermore, whether something in worship is considered to be an element of worship or a circumstance in worship is really irrelevant if it is indeed prescribed by God in Scripture. Specific instructions concerning the construction of the Tabernacle, the construction of the furniture within the Tabernacle, the garments of the priests, the consecration of the priests, the various offerings, and Sabbath regulations are all detailed in Ex. 25-40. Much that is itemized would fall into the category of circumstances of worship rather than elements of worship, and yet God specifically prescribed all of these circumstances. As we carefully consider Ex. 25-40, it becomes very clear that God is jealous for worship that is according to His will even in what many might call “details.” Granted, all of these “details” specifically associated with the Old Covenant Tabernacle have passed away in the New Covenant, and yet the principle that all circumstances “in worship” (*in sacra*) must have divine authorization is equally required of New Covenant worship as it was of Old Covenant worship. Only those circumstances that are common to human actions and human gatherings (e.g. the specific number of points in the minister’s sermon, the specific number of psalms and prayers used in worship, the kind of seats used in worship, the color of the carpet or tile in the place of worship, the location and time of worship etc.) are not required to be regulated by the specific prescription of God. What about the singing of psalms as opposed to the singing of uninspired hymns? What about the use of instruments in worship? What about the use of crosses, banners, candles, incense, and special robes for ministers? Questions such as these are not common to all human actions and all human gatherings, but have a specific religious character to them and thus must be regulated by the specific authorization of the New Covenant.

### **C. 1 Chronicles 13:5-10**

Apart from a proper understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship (i.e. what God has not instituted is forbidden in worship), there is no reason given for the severe actions of God in slaying Uzza and chastening David who authorized the moving of the Ark of God. Uzza was certainly not slain for having evil intentions (at least nothing in the text would lead us to that conclusion). If anything, one might say Uzza’s intentions were noble--he cared for the Ark of God and sought to protect it. Here on a joyous day of great celebration for God’s people, at a time when the Ark of God was being brought to the city of Jerusalem in order that God’s people might honor God by inquiring of God at it (1 Chron. 13:3), God abruptly interrupted their mobile worship service by striking Uzza dead. Why? Prescribed circumstances in regard to the Ark of the Covenant were violated. The violation of God’s Regulative Principle was at least in three areas: (1) Uzza was apparently not a Levite (he was the son of Abinadab from Kirjath Jearim of the tribe of Judah, cf. 2 Sam. 7:1; 1 Chron. 2:50; 1 Chron 13:6-7) and according to Numbers 4:15 God commanded Levites to move the Ark (cf. 1 Chron. 15:2); (2) The Ark of God was not to be carried on a cart as the heathen Philistines had done in 1 Samuel 6:10-11 (Israel was not to follow the ways in which the heathens served their gods, Deut. 12:30-32). God had specifically commanded the Ark to be carried on the shoulders with poles (Ex. 25:12-15); and (3) The Ark of God was touched by Uzza, whereas God had commanded that no one touch it (Num. 4:15). God did not accept the act of worship that accompanied the moving of the Ark because He does not accept man’s innovation in worship. David had added to God’s command and there were severe consequences to pay for it. Remember that God did not specifically forbid anyone from another tribe to carry the Ark (he simply commanded that the Levites carry it), nor did he specifically forbid the Ark to be carried on a cart He simply commanded that it be carried with poles).

Using the principle that most churches follow today (namely, what God does not specifically forbid is permitted in worship), these churches would have approved of Uzza's action and perhaps even joined him in moving the Ark to their own destruction. David learned the hard way that nothing is to be added to, nor subtracted from God's prescriptions as they relate to worship. As David organized a second procession of worship to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, he corrected his previous errors with the attending result that much blessing and joy was experienced by God's people and most importantly God was honored and treated as holy (1 Chron. 15:1-15).

## 2. Objection

Now as we pass from the Old Testament and come to the New Testament, many might be tempted to say, "God has now loosened His rigid standards with regard to New Covenant worship. The Old Testament was an age of strict adherence to the law, but with the coming of Christ there is grace and freedom to worship the Lord as we please. God is not so nitpicky now."

In answering this objection, consider the following principles.

A. There have indeed been changes made from Old Covenant worship to New Covenant worship. But it is Christ our Prophet, Priest, and King who has made them, not man. The ceremonial laws had much to say about worship. The temple, the priesthood, the feast days, and the sacrificial system spoke of Christ and His work in ushering in a New Covenant. Thus, all those ceremonial acts of worship in the Old Covenant were "shadows" of things to come (Heb. 10:1), so that when the body (Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant) that cast the shadow was come, it would be dishonoring to Christ and His finished work and would be an express violation of the New Covenant to continue with the Old Covenant shadows. However, that doesn't mean Christ has now left worship in the New Covenant up to man to invent or that His standards are now less strict.

B. The New Covenant believer is not less responsible to worship God as He commands, but rather more responsible. The Hebrew believers in the Epistle to the Hebrews were tempted to forsake the worship of God, but the inspired writer warns them that the New Covenant increases their responsibility rather than decreasing it (Heb. 2:1-4; 12:25-29). Christ declared, "to whom much is given, much will be required" (Lk. 12:48). The coming of Christ has brought tremendous blessings to you, dear ones, but His coming has also brought greater knowledge and understanding of God's will, and therefore greater responsibility.

C. The four theological truths (mentioned earlier) upon which the Regulative Principle of Worship is built have not been altered from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant in the least. (1) God's Word is still sufficient, and particularly sufficient for worship of the Most High God. Man is still insufficient to know precisely how God calls His people to approach Him in worship. (2) God is still absolutely sovereign over all things, including His worship. Arminianism in worship (will-worship) is no more acceptable in the New Covenant than it was in the Old Covenant. (3) The heart of regenerate men is as prone to deception in the New Covenant as it was in the Old Covenant, so that the Christian can no more lean upon his own understanding in the New Covenant than he could in the Old Covenant. (4) Christ is no longer a Prophet, Priest and King to be anticipated as He was in the Old Covenant. He is the realized Prophet, Priest, and King over His church in the New Covenant. Let us no more think we can introduce human innovation into worship than we can introduce human innovation into salvation.

D. The second commandment which prohibits all man-made invention in worship is perpetual and inviolable, just as the other nine commandments are (Deut. 5:6-22). One might as well try to change the

morally binding nature of the first commandment (“Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.”) as to try to change the morally binding nature of the second commandment. The Law of God comes as a package: You cannot violate one without violating all (“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” Jms. 2:10). Furthermore, you cannot selectively pick and choose which commandments to obey, thus avoiding the “details” of the Law (“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” Mt. 5:19).

### **3. There is warrant for the Regulative Principle of Worship from the New Testament just as there was in the Old Testament.**

#### **A. Mark 7:6-9**

The Pharisees had questioned the Lord as to why He did not follow the oral tradition of the elders which had been handed down to them for generations. Christ specifically calls worship that institutes the doctrines, traditions, or commandments of men, vain or meaningless worship. God does not accept it. Thus, any time a religious act, gesture, symbol, or ceremony is introduced into divine worship apart from the commandment of God, at that point the tradition of men has made void the commandment of God (“Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” Mt. 15:6). And for having added tradition to the commandment of God, the Prophet, Priest, and King of the church calls these church leaders “Hypocrites” (Mt. 15:7).

#### **B. John 4:19-24**

In the Lord’s conversation with the Samaritan woman, note that the conversation turns to the issue of worship. Did it make any difference to God where God’s people worshipped in the Old Covenant? Even though the specific location of divine worship was not an element of worship but rather a circumstance of worship, it was a prescribed circumstance of worship (they were to worship in Jerusalem, Jn. 4:20-22). The Lord herein condemns all will-worship in one statement when He declares: “You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship” (Jn. 4:22). Because the Samaritan woman did not know and follow the commandments of God in her worship (regardless of her or any other Samaritan’s sincerity), Christ could say that she did not know what she was worshipping. Now the Samaritans did have the five books of Moses to guide them in their worship. However, their worship was not true worship if for no other reason than this: they did not worship the Lord in His appointed temple in Jerusalem. Carefully note that the Lord teaches that “true worshippers” (Jn. 4:23) will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. In fact, Christ puts it even more strongly when He categorically states: “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him **must** worship in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:24, emphasis added). The worship of “true worshippers” must be characterized by spiritual (that is Spirit created) praise and adoration for God (not just empty forms); but it must also be characterized by truth (that is worshipping God according to the specific forms He has authorized in the Scripture alone). The Lord makes it very clear that worship is not an either-or proposition: Either worship God in spirit or worship Him in truth. Those who emphasize only the inward aspects of worship fall under the condemnation of our Lord as much as those who emphasize only the outward aspects of divine worship. Both are necessary if we are to be among those whom Jesus designates as “true worshippers.”

#### **C. 1 Corinthians 7:23; 2 Corinthians 1:24 (cf. Rom. 14:23)**

These passages proclaim a common and precious truth: no man (whether minister, elder, bishop, or pope) can bind the conscience of another man to perform an act of worship which God has not

positively authorized in His Word (by precept, approved example, or good and necessary inference), for God alone is Lord of the conscience (i.e. only God's Word can bind the corporate conscience of a church to use specific religious acts, gestures, symbols, or ceremonies in worship). For a leader in the church to impose any unauthorized religious act into worship is to play the part of God (a role one should not presume to play without considering how God treats all such pretenders, e.g. Cain in Gen. 4:1-8; or Nadab and Abihu in Lev. 10:1-3; or Korah in Num. 16:3ff; or Saul in 1 Sam. 13:8-13; or Uzza in 2 Sam. 6:6-7; or Jeroboam in 1 Kgs. 13:1-5; or Uzziah in 2 Chron. 26:16-21; or the Pharisees in Mt. 15:1-9). Furthermore, for a member of a congregation to submit to any unauthorized religious act, gesture, symbol, or ceremony in divine worship is to proclaim that Jesus is not Lord, but rather the minister, elder, bishop, or pope is Lord. Such a professing Christian has become enslaved to man. However, we maintain with our *Confession of Faith* that "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it [in addition to it--GLP], in matters of faith or worship."

#### D. Colossians 2:8,20-23

The emphasis of the great apostle throughout this chapter is on forsaking the traditions and commandments of men, and rather clinging to Christ and His commandments, for "in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge . . . in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Col 2:3,9-10). Dear ones, you are not complete in yourself or in any man-made ceremonies in worship. You are complete, made full and acceptable through His work on your behalf. He is the head of the church, not you or me. He is our Prophet, Priest, and King. He alone directs our worship and presents it acceptable to the Father. Paul infers that to practice any "will-worship" (or "self-imposed religion" Col. 2:23) "according to the commandments and doctrines of men" (Col. 2:22) is to undermine the finished work of Christ (Col. 2:11-23) and to seek to usurp the headship over the church that rightly belongs to Christ (Col. 2:8-10,18-19). Self-imposed worship (i.e. any religious act, gesture, symbol, or ceremony in worship) is expressly condemned by Christ and His apostles. It is in fact false worship which no Christian should tolerate in the house of God without a verbal protest to the leadership and separation from this false worship until there is biblical reformation in worship ("The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself" (*The Larger Catechism* , Question 109).

As a father, I have a prescribed protocol for any young men to follow who would want to court my daughters. Now some may think I'm too rigid in my standards. However, the issue is simply this: Any young man who would come to my daughter must first come through me. And he must please me. I must find him acceptable. A young man who disregards my standards and comes as he pleases will not find acceptance with me. This is the God-ordained duty of a father who loves his daughters. All the words of love a young man might have for my daughter will not impress me in the least, unless he comes to me in the way I have authorized. Now if I, as a sinful father, have the right and responsibility to establish an authorized protocol for courtship--how much more the eternal and infinitely holy God has the right and responsibility to establish a divine protocol for acceptable worship of His glorious Son. Dear ones, never forget what God told Aaron after slaying his sons who added to God's authorized commands in worship, "By those who come near Me, I **must** be regarded as holy" (Lev. 10:2, emphasis added). And thus, John Knox was absolutely correct, "All worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry." Amen.