

Hope Reformed Presbyterian Church

Baker's Dozen Series

The Scriptural Basis for the Regulative Principle of Worship

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How are we to worship God? That is the question that we shall consider. And I believe the answer is already implied in our firm adherence to the Bible as the inspired word of God, and as *the only infallible rule of our faith and practice*. The remainder of my presentation will therefore be an attempt to demonstrate two things from the Scriptures: [1] the first is *the fact that there is a regulative principle taught therein*, and [2] the second is *what that principle means—and how it ought to be applied*—today, in our churches.

In a paper on this subject a few years ago Professor Norman Shepherd referred to the already existent literature on the subject of the regulative principle. He correctly stated that this literature “abounds with references” to certain “Biblical examples. There is therefore” he said, “no need to discuss these examples in detail...”¹ Well, I could agree with that statement in the context of a gathering of well-informed scholars. But I really don't think many scholars are even interested in this vital subject. And, anyway, my concern is not so much with the scholars as it is with the rank and file membership of our churches. Are *they* really familiar with what the Scripture says on this subject? It's my experience, after nearly forty years in the pastor ministry, in four Reformed denominations, that they are *not* well informed concerning this matter.² I will therefore, without apology, center my attention today on precisely these once well-known examples.

A. The Old Testament

We begin, then, by considering a few examples of what the Old Testament teaches. [1] And the first is found in Genesis 4, where we read of the worship of Cain and Abel.

The passage tells us that Cain's worship was rejected by God, while that of Abel was accepted. It also tells us that God's reason for rejection Cain and accepting Able was *not* only a difference within the two brothers. It was not *only* that something was wrong with the subjective attitude of Cain, as compared with the attitude of Abel. There was *also* a

vital difference in the objective content of their worship. That is why God had respect not only to Abel *but also to the offering he brought to Jehovah.*³ Abel offered what God was pleased to receive, whereas Cain was unwilling to do so. The reason for this, in my view, is that Abel paid attention to the revelation that God had given up to that time in history, while Cain treated it lightly. It's possible, of course, that God gave a direct revelation to Abel. But I think it's more likely that he acted on the basis of the same revelational data that we ourselves have in the first three Genesis chapters. When God covered the nakedness of Adam and Eve with animal skins, it is self evident that the animals must have first been killed for this purpose [Gen. 3:21]. From this Abel could have deduced⁴ that his only hope of acceptance with God was by the sacrifice of a dying substitute. But even if we take the view that Abel just happened to hit on 'the right way of worship' by intuition, it still leads to the same conclusion. For as soon as God accepted Abel and his sacrifice—*while rejecting Cain and his offering*—by that very fact He made it perfectly clear that the acceptable way of worship was the way of Abel. But even though Cain knew this, he wasn't willing to worship God in that *acceptable* way. It's no exaggeration at all, then, when we say that this was Cain's downfall: *he was not willing to limit himself to a way of worship that had divine approval.*⁵ We therefore see a clear principle here: ***worship which is not sanctioned by God is forbidden.***

[2] In the second place I would ask you to take note of the fact that this very same principle is taught in the second commandment.

The second commandment reads: "*You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*" In the *first* commandment God declares himself to be the only true God, who alone ought to be worshiped. In the *second* He tells us "the kind of worship with which he ought to be honored, that we may not dare to form any carnal conceptions of him."⁶ For as Calvin has said: "although Moses only speaks of idolatry [here], yet there is no doubt that by *synecdoche*, as in all the rest of the Law, he condemns all fictitious services which men in their ingenuity have invented."⁷

[3] As a third example we briefly consider the construction of the tabernacle in the time of Moses.

And here let me say, it would be hard to think of a way to give greater weight to this principle, than what we find in this account of the revelation of—and preparation for—the worship of God's old covenant people. (1) Every student of the five books of Moses knows how detailed that revelation was. It is no exaggeration to say that every aspect of the construction of the tabernacle was prescribed by God, and that *nothing* was left to man's imagination. Did not God say to Moses: "*See that you make them—and by 'them' he means every item in the Tabernacle—according to the pattern shown you on the mountain*"? [Ex. 25:40] It is true, of course, that God made use of men in the construction of the Tabernacle. But it is *not* true, as is commonly assumed, that the

Tabernacle a product of the mere natural creative and artistic impulse of the people God used to construct it. No doubt these men did have natural creative talent. But that was not enough; the Bible is very clear about that. The things that went into the Tabernacle were produced (like the Bible itself) by special divine inspiration: “*See, I have chosen Bezaleel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts [and] I have appointed Aholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, to help him. Also I have given skill to all the craftsmen to make everything I have commanded. . . They are to make them just as I commanded you*” [Ex. 31:2-11]. How remote this is from the argument so often heard, today, to the effect that art work by people in the Church is justified (and sanctified!) by the ‘art work’ in the Tabernacle of Moses. The truth is that there was no ‘art work’ in the Tabernacle, unless by ‘art work’ we mean a uniquely inspired and infallible kind, and that kind of art is no longer given.

What we’ve said about the Tabernacle was also true of the more elaborate Temple. Nothing was left to man’s innovation. When “*David gave Solomon his son the pattern of the porch of the temple, its buildings, its storehouses, its upper rooms, its inner rooms, and the room of the mercy seat, and the plan of all that he had by the Spirit*” (I Chron.. 28:11) there was nothing in it of his own concoction. To the contrary, “*all this, said David, have I been made to understand in writing from the hand of the Lord, even all the works of this pattern*” (v. 19).

Now why was this so important? Why did **everything** have to conform to a pattern revealed first to Moses, and later to David? The reason is self-evident: **God will not be worshiped in any other way than as he has commanded**. As Calvin once said: “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.”⁸ But the truth is that “there is nothing more perilous to our salvation than a preposterous and perverse worship of God.”⁹

[4] We find another instructive passage in Leviticus 10—in the story of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron.

They died, we read, when “*fire went out from the Lord and devoured them*” (Lev. 10:2). And why did this happen? Scripture says it happened because they “*offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had **not commanded***”¹⁰ [v. 1]. Now it doesn’t say this happened because they were not sincere—or because they lacked ‘good intentions;’ it doesn’t even say it happened because they did something God had expressly forbidden. No, what it says is that they did this *without first making sure they had a warrant to do it*. And it’s meant to teach us that *worship which is not commanded by God himself is, therefore, forbidden*.

[5] And what about the Rebellion of Korah.

Moses and Aaron were appointed by the Lord to mediate between God and his people. But Korah—and those who followed him—didn’t like this exclusive appointment.¹¹ *They*

wanted to break out of this ‘narrow’ idea that there’s only one right way; namely, the way that *God* has appointed. So they rebelled against this restriction. But the well known result demonstrates, again, how offensive this was to Jehovah.

All the way through the Old Testament we find abundant proof of the magnitude of this evil: whenever men were not satisfied to worship God in the way appointed by Him—whenever they brought in their own inventions—God always made it perfectly clear that He was greatly displeased with their worship.

[6] Take King Saul, for example.

Saul had no authorization, by God, to partake of the priestly office (I Sam. 13:11ff). Yet he claimed, because of the pressure of circumstance, that he “felt compelled to offer the burnt offering” at Gilgal (v. 12). It may well be, for all we know, that he acted with what many today would call ‘the best of intentions.’ Yet we know that God found it offensive. Samuel said that he “*acted foolishly*” because he did not limit himself to what God had commanded (v. 13). It was, in fact, because of this that God removed the kingdom from Saul and gave it to David (v. 14). Does this not make it perfectly clear that this principle holds a place of the highest importance with the God of the Bible?

[7] And, consider what happened to Uzzah.

When David first attempted to bring the long neglected ark to Jerusalem, the oxen suddenly stumbled. At that moment Uzzah reached out his hand to steady the ark so as to keep it from falling. How very natural, we might be inclined to say, and what an innocent action. But the Scripture says “*God struck him down there for his irreverence*” (2 Sam. 6:7). We may not find the reason appealing, but it is clearly stated in Scripture. Uzzah died because—as David explained later on—“*we did not inquire of [God] about how to do it in the prescribed way*” (I Chron. 15:13). It happened, in other words, because they failed to concern themselves with what God had expressly commanded. But how different it was when “*the Levites carried the ark of God. . . as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord*” (I Chron. 15:14). Again we see the same principle clearly revealed: *what is not commanded by God is therefore forbidden.*¹²

[8] And consider King Jeroboam.

When he became king he wanted to consolidate his hold on the ten tribes that rebelled against the house of David. And in order to do this the scripture says he “*appointed*” or “*instituted*” a kind of worship which was of “*his own choosing*” (I Kings 12:32,33). For this reason a man of God from Judah was sent to denounce this unauthorized worship. And that is not all, because Jeroboam was always spoken of, after that time, as the one who “*caused*” Israel to sin as a corporate body (I Kings 15:30). We hardly exaggerate, then, when we say this was the source out of which came Israel’s ultimate downfall. The worship which had been appointed by God was replaced by a new form of worship. It was worship *not* commanded by God, and was *therefore* forbidden.

[9] And recall the sin of King Uzziah.

The Scripture says “*he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar*” (2 Chron. 26:16). Azariah the high priest courageously intervened to oppose Uzziah’s act of invented worship. And he was vindicated by the intervention of God, for the King was instantly smitten with leprosy, as a sign of God’s judgment. Again, it is clear that what is not commanded *by* God is an abomination *to* him.

[10] And then there is King Ahaz.

The Bible says Ahaz “*burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his sons in the fire, following the detestable ways of the nations*” (2 Chron. 28:3). The thing that probably makes *us* cringe, as we read this story, is that these were helpless little children. But that was not the main reason why this practice was condemned by the Lord, through Jeremiah the prophet. No, the primary reason—which is far more important—was stated in this way by the prophet: “*they have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command nor did it enter my mind*” [Jer. 7:31].¹³ How could God make it any clearer? Worship which is not commanded by God is *therefore* forbidden.

Here, then, is the uniform principle taught in the Old Testament Scriptures, summed up in these words of Moses: “*Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you*” (Deut. 4:2). This applies to the whole of our lives, of course, and not just to the sphere of worship. But nowhere else is it as vital, as it is in this sphere, to exclude every human invention.

B. The New Testament

But the question that we must now consider is this: *is this also New Testament teaching?*

[1] I want to begin with the words of Jesus himself, concerning Jewish tradition.

He denounced the Scribes and Pharisees because they had “*a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe [their] own traditions*” (Mk. 7:9). And because of this fact our Lord went on to say this concerning their worship: “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain: their teachings are but rules taught by men*” (Mk. 7:6,7 [quoted from Jeremiah 29:13]). No doubt this was offensive to them. But that isn’t what matters. What matters is that *God* was offended. And according to Jesus the *cause* of offense was two-fold in nature: (1) first, there was a setting aside of what God had commanded, and [2] second, there was a diligent observance of what was *not* commanded by God; namely, man-made traditions. We see, then, that even traditions that are highly esteemed among men are offensive to God unless they are what He has commanded.¹⁴

[2] The second example I want to consider is Christ and the Samaritan Woman.

No one ever expounded the regulative principle with more force and clarity than Jesus did, in his meeting with the Samaritan woman (John 4:22-26). Here, as Calvin points out, our Lord “divides the subject into two parts. First, he condemns the forms of worshipping God which the Samaritans used as superstitious and false, and declares that the acceptable and lawful form was with the Jews. And he puts the reason for the difference that the Jews received assurance from the Word of God about his worship, whereas the Samaritans had no certainty from God’s lips. Secondly, he declares that the ceremonies observed by the Jews hitherto would soon be ended.” Concerning the first point—where our Lord said “*you Samaritans worship what you do not know*”—Calvin drew this conclusion: “all so-called good intentions are struck by this thunderbolt, which tells us that men can do nothing but err when they are guided by their own opinion without the Word or command of God.” He then goes on to the second point, saying: “we differ from the fathers only in the outward form [of worship], because in their worship of God [in Old Testament times] they were bound to ceremonies which were abolished by the coming of Christ.” So, if we ask what it means to worship God “in spirit and in truth” this is the answer of Calvin: “it is to remove the coverings of the ancient ceremonies and retain simply what is spiritual in the worship ...” The trouble is that “since men are flesh. . .they delight in what corresponds to their natures. That is why they invent many things in the worship of God. . .[when] they should consider that they are dealing with God, who no more agrees with the flesh than fire does with water.” To worship God in spirit and in truth, then, is to worship God in the way that He *now* commands us. And “it is simply unbearable” as Calvin says, “that the rule laid down by Christ should be violated.”¹⁵ Those who want to worship the true God, acceptably, *must* do so in spirit and in truth—*because that, and only that, is what He has commanded.*¹⁶

[3] Consider the Great Commission

The regulative principle is clearly implied in these words of Jesus: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them to obey everything I **have**¹⁷ commanded you*” (Mt. 28:18-20). This, in our view, is exactly what the Apostles did. They taught what Christ had commanded them, not what he had commanded *plus* their own inventions. Knowing that all authority belonged to Him, they knew there was no place for their own innovations. In the words of Calvin, “he sends away the Apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver, from hand to hand (as we say), what he has entrusted to them.”¹⁸ Now of course we can say that these words apply to our entire existence as Christians. But the point is that nothing is of greater concern to God than the worship that He has commanded.

[4] Paul’s View of the Scriptures

This principle is also clearly implied in Paul’s view of the Scriptures: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16,17). It is not our contention that when Paul wrote these words he was thinking, specifically, about worship. But surely it is self-evident that the Apostle’s statement

would not be true if there is any aspect of worship which is not clearly—and fully—revealed to us in the Bible.

There's no need to labor the point. But it will not, perhaps, be superfluous to briefly consider what the Apostles did in the Apostolic Church when this principle was disregarded, or threatened.

[5] Paul's rebuke of the Galatians

In Paul's letter to the Galatians there is a clear mention of unauthorized worship. "*But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain*" (Gal. 4:9-11). The people to whom Paul wrote this letter were probably observing the special days and seasons appointed by God in the Old Testament ceremonial system (Ex. 23:14-17, 34:18, etc.). But, if that is the case, it only makes the force of the Apostle's objection all the stronger when applied to special days that God never commanded. When Christ came the Old Testament ceremonial system of worship was superseded. Included in this were the annual sacred days, and even the Jewish Sabbaths. For the Galatians to go on celebrating these days was to act as if they were still waiting for the advent of the Messiah. And you can see the application. If the Apostle found it necessary to say this to people who continued to observe days which had once been commanded, but were now obsolete, what would he say to people, to day, who observe special holy days that God never commanded?¹⁹

At this point we need to take note of what Paul said about this in Romans 14. Here the Apostle instructed the strong to be patient with the weak, because the weak did not yet understand the liberty they had in Jesus. As a matter of fact they were no longer under any obligation to observe *even* the special days that God had, once, appointed through Moses. But the problem was that some of the members of the Church in Rome did not yet understand this. And, as long as it was only a particular member of the Church who was afflicted with this lamentable weakness, Paul was willing to patiently bear with him. He was willing, in other words, to tolerate church membership for a person who felt constrained—by a misinformed conscience—to observe these days. In Galatians 4, however, the Apostle had a different concern in view. In this instance *the Church as a whole had submitted itself to a yoke of bondage*. The Galatian church, as a corporate body, had yielded to the demands of 'the weak' by observing these days in an institutional manner. And when this happened the Apostle was quite uncompromising in his opposition. The reason is that it is wrong for the Church make a part of its corporate worship anything that Christ has not commanded. It is one thing, in other words, to tolerate *weakness* in individual members. But it is something else again when this errant view is imposed on the whole congregation. [Yet this is exactly what we see today in most Reformed Churches.]

[6] Paul's warning to the Colossians

Consider also the Church of Colossae. To this Church the Apostle wrote: “*Let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath*” (2:16). He also warned them not to be defrauded by those who sought to induce them to delight “*in self-abasement and the worship of angels*” (2:18). “*These things*” says Paul “*have, to be sure, the appearance²⁰ of wisdom in self-made religion.*” But the reality is that these things are “*of no value*” (v. 23). Here, again, we have an application of the principle which says ‘what is not commanded is therefore forbidden?’

[7] The Book of Hebrews

The whole book of Hebrews is, among other things, an extended application of the regulative principle. It argues that the whole system of worship, commanded by God under the Mosaic administration of God’s covenant, is now obsolete (8:13). And what do we have in its place? The answer is that we have ‘the real thing’—not the old “*copies*” of heavenly things, but—“*the heavenly things themselves*” (9:23). Whereas the people of God, in the time of Moses, came to an earthly mountain (12:18), we “*come to Mount Zion...the city of the living God...the heavenly Jerusalem*” and so on (12:23). The church today, in other words, is supposed to live in the realm of heavenly realities, and not any longer in the realm of shadowy symbolism. What would we think of a mother who neglected her own real baby to go up to the attic to play with the dolls of her childhood? Yet that is exactly what we are seeing in many once great Reformed denominations—as they go back to the weak and beggarly elements of ceremonial and symbolic worship. As believers under the New Covenant we are supposed to worship in the realm of ‘spirit and truth,’ not in the realm of the *material* and *representational*, as our Old Testament brothers and sisters did.

Many churches today, that call themselves Reformed, are clamoring for a return to ceremonial worship. They call this ‘liturgical revival.’ If such churches were really serious in their claim to be Biblical, they would be consistent enough to go all the way, by adopting the *whole* Old Testament system. They would then have a choir made up of people from the tribe of Levi. They would gather an entire orchestra instead of just a combo of their own choice. They would even advocate the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. And, if they did, I could at least respect them for being consistent. But, of course, the truth is that these ‘weak and beggarly elements’ of Old Testament ceremonial worship have no legitimate place in the new covenant Church. We don’t need choirs, orchestras, purple robes, candles, incense, dancing, or dramatic performance. Why? Because these shadowy representations only get in the way of the reality of our New Testament privilege; the privilege of going each Lord’s Day—in the faithful observance of the commanded exercises of God’s Worship—right into the heavenly places and the presence of Jesus. May the Lord revive and reform His church again so that it will stop going *back* to the weak and beggarly, and *return* to the simplicity and beauty of spiritual worship.

What then should our attitude be in the face of this awesome privilege? Are we at liberty to do as we please, to fashion our own ‘style’ of worship, whereas the people of God in Old Testament times had to be sure that they worshipped God only as He commanded?

No, the truth lies in the opposite direction: *we—above all—*should abhor and shun all these innovations. Is this not what underlies the following warning? “See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for ‘our God is a consuming fire.’” (12:25,28,29 NIV). If we dare to invent our own way of worship, when God has told us from heaven what He requires of us, our sin will be much greater than that of Israelites under the old covenant administration. The way of worship under the new covenant has now been instituted by Jesus. Unlike the worship of the old covenant, it will never be superseded until our Lord returns. How audacious and daring it would be, then, for any of us to presume to change what He has commanded!

Other Biblical Principles

We rest our case—primarily—on the kind of Biblical data that we have tried to summarize briefly above. But it is worthy of notice that the regulative principle also agrees with many other vital Biblical principles of the Reformed Faith. We therefore include, at this point, a very brief resume of these principles as they bear on this issue.

[1] The ‘Sola Scriptura’ Principle

It is the teaching of the Reformed Confessions that the Bible is ‘the only infallible rule of faith and practice,’ and that the Bible, alone, is sufficient.’ This certainly implies that every part of divine worship must be authorized in the Scriptures.

[2] The Doctrine of Christ’s Headship

Christ is the only King and head of the Church. He is, therefore, the only lawgiver. Surely this implies that He alone has the right to determine the content of worship. The regulative principle is the application of the principle of the sole headship of Christ within the realm of worship.

[3] The Doctrine of Liberty

It is the teaching of the Bible—and the Reformed Confessions—that “*God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that He has left it free from doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his word, or beside it, if matters of faith or worship.*”²¹ Whenever a Reformed church adopts a practice which our Lord has not commanded a tyranny is imposed on the consciences of the Lord’s people.

[4] The Doctrine of Man’s Total Depravity

Man is, by nature, corrupted (or depraved) in every aspect of his being. Because of the effects of sin in man’s mind and heart, nothing that man invents for himself, in the sphere of worship, could possibly be entirely free of contamination and worthy of being offered

to the Lord. Even the Apostles, who were divinely inspired, did not presume to originate anything in the worship of God themselves, but passed on to us what they were given.²² How, then, could we possibly be so vain as to think that *we* could improve on what *they* conveyed to us?

It is our conviction that the doctrines mentioned above are true and central to the Church's faithful biblical witness. It is also self-evident that these doctrines imply the regulative principle of worship. If we hold to the regulative principle we can begin to do justice to these other biblical teachings. But if we do not, it is hard to see how we can even begin to do justice to these other doctrines of Scripture.

How This Principle Was Originally Applied in the Reformed Churches

It is clear, from the great Reformed Confessions and Catechisms, that the Reformed Churches—in the fervor that characterized them in the beginning—were determined to worship God in the way that He has commanded [without any additions invented by men, and without any subtractions]. What, then were some of the ways in which this principle came to expression? What were some of the corruptions found in the worship of the medieval church which now were excluded?

[1] The Observance of Days other than the Lord's Day

“During the early days of the Reformation some Reformed localities observed only Sunday. All special days sanctioned and revered by Rome were set aside. Zwingli and Calvin both encouraged the rejection of all ecclesiastical festive days. In Geneva all special days were discontinued as soon as the Reformation took a firm hold in that city. Already before the arrival of Calvin in Geneva this had been accomplished under the leadership of Farel and Viret. But Calvin agreed heartily”²³ In the light of the position of the Reformers “we are not surprised that the Synod of Dort, 1574, held that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed”²⁴ The same position was also taken by John Knox, and the Reformed Church of Scotland. However, in the Netherlands “early Reformed Synods yielded increasingly to pressure from without regarding the observation of ‘Christian festivals.’ The government of the Netherlands made something like legal holidays out of these festivals, and so the Churches, although not favoring the observation of these days, for practical reasons ruled as they did. To prevent people from spending these days in worldliness they introduced Church services for these festive occasions.”²⁵

It was, in other words, the intention and desire of the Reformed Churches, at first, to faithfully adhere to the regulative principle in this matter. But then because of pressure from without the principle was compromised for ‘expedient’ reasons.

[2] Special Music

The regulative principle not only brought the Reformers to emphasize congregational singing. It also led them to do away with everything that savored of artistic performance

in worship. Choirs were regarded as unacceptable. So were solo performers. And, of course, the organ was silenced. To many today this sounds utterly astounding. After all, they say, doesn't the Bible itself mention the use of an organ?²⁶ The answer, of course, is that it does (at least it does if we consult the old King James Version). But surely it ought to be obvious that this kind of appeal to the 150th Psalm settles nothing. If we hold to the regulative principle we are clearly shut up to one of two choices: [1] we must *either* recognize, as Calvin did, that the organ (like the sacrifice of bulls and goats, and the harp, lyre, cymbals, etc.) was a part of ceremonial worship, which now has been cancelled, [2] *or* we ought to be consistent enough to insist on having all of these instruments in our worship today (and, according to Psalm 150:4, we will also need dancing).²⁷

We cannot go into detail here. But it may be worthwhile to give a very condensed summary of the biblical reasons Calvin (and others) gave for rejecting the organ. [1] The only thing that could possibly be called 'instrumental music,' in the time of Moses, was the use of two trumpets authorized by God [Num. 10:2]. It was clear even then, however, that the trumpets were not used to accompany singing. They were used to summon the people. [2] The use of musical instruments was first authorized when the plan for Temple was revealed [I Chron. 23:1-6, & 29:25,26]. [3] Only those who were of the tribe of Levi were allowed to play these instruments, or sing in the choir [I Chron. 15:16-24, II Chron. 5: 12,13]. [4] And, the only time these instruments were used, or that the choir sang, was during the time of the sacrifice [2 Chron. 29:25-28]. Is it any wonder that Calvin said this "unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law and of the service of God under that dispensation of shadow and figures; but they are not now to be used in public worship?"²⁸ To put it in our own way, the orchestra and choir of ceremonial worship served exactly the same purpose that a musical score does, today, in a motion picture. They were there to heighten the effect of the sacrifice in a synthetic manner. Surely we do not need the synthetic any more—not after the real thing has come to pass in the death of the Lord Jesus.²⁹

[3] The Use of the Psalter

It cannot be argued that the exclusive use of the Psalms in worship was ever entirely universal in the Reformed Churches. Some, including Calvin's church in Geneva, sang at least a few other songs (such as a version of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer). But even so, the centrality of the inspired Psalms in Reformed worship was such that they received the overwhelming emphasis. And to this day, in some churches of the Reformed family, it is still the inspired Psalter which is sung exclusively, on the ground that these alone are commanded.

This is a subject that I began to study many years ago, and from my research I am struck by two things: [1] I have never seen any exegetical proof that God wants us to produce our own hymns and sing them to Him in worship instead of the Psalms. As a matter of fact the arguments that I have seen, defending the prevailing practice today, always seem to me to stand on a Lutheran foundation. Instead of attempting to prove that the present practice is what God *commands*, there is usually a subtle shift to the argument that 'it is not *forbidden*.' But this utterly fails to meet the criterion set down in the Scripture. [2] A

second thing is this: it is simply an historical fact that the great change the Reformed Churches made, in substituting uninspired hymns for the inspired psalms, was not the result of new discoveries in the content of Scripture. It was not a *reluctant* change compelled by careful exegesis (at least this is true in the several instances of this innovation in the history of the Reformed Churches known to the writer). No, the change came, rather, by way of giving in to increasing popular demand. I once had opportunity to discuss this subject with an elderly minister of the (old) United Presbyterian denomination. I asked him what brought that Church to change its stand on the exclusive use of psalms in worship, as it did in the 1925 creedal revision. His answer was interesting. He said the church had already started, some years earlier, to celebrate such days as Christmas. Then, he said, after these had become well-entrenched, the pressure began to grow to bring in—by popular demand—music ‘appropriate’ for these celebrations.

[4] Pictures (and Visual Symbols)

We should certainly mention the use of religious statues, pictures and symbols. These were also rejected firmly by Reformers such as Knox, Zwingli and Calvin. The Heidelberg Catechism says: “God neither *can* nor *may* be visibly represented” and that “we must not be wiser than God, who will not have His people taught by dumb images, but by the living preaching of His Word” [Q’s 97 and 98]. Even so recently as a hundred years ago Reformed people still understood the regulative principle enough to remain negative toward these representations. However, in an address entitled ‘The Antithesis between Symbolism and Revelation,’—presented to the Presbyterian Historical Society—Abraham Kuyper warned of a subtle trend already at work then, which was weakening this sense of awareness. Kuyper spoke of “the symbolical tide...undermining in the most dangerous way the very foundation of all Calvinistic Churches.” Kuyper put it like this: “the principle of Symbolism and that of Calvinism are just the reverse of one another.” And faithful adherence to the regulative principle is the only safeguard against it.

The Present Practice of Reformed Churches

I came to feel the weight of the Biblical, Confessional and Historical data supporting the regulative principle soon after I graduated from Seminary in 1952. But, for many years, it was almost impossible to interest anyone in a serious discussion of the regulative principle of divine worship. I believe the primary reason for this has been, quite simply, inertia. When people are comfortable with things as they are it is hard to get them to reconsider. After all, why create problems? For many, therefore, the strongest possible argument is a simple statement confirming the status quo. I was forced to the reluctant conclusion, therefore, that the regulative principle was quite dead in most Reformed denominations. Churches still gave lip service to it. But what convinced me that this principle no longer ‘lived’ in most Reformed Churches was the kind of reasons—or arguments—put forth in defense of present-day practice. Some do not even pretend to rest on Biblical data. Others appeal, in a more general way, to the supposed principles of Scripture.

[1] One of these is the argument from *analogy*. The argument is that since we are not given certain prescribed *prayers* in the Bible, neither should we feel confined to the inspired *psalms*. The problem I have with this argument is that I find no basis for it in Scripture. To the contrary, what I find is that God has given a different command for these two elements of worship. Jesus did not leave his disciples without specific instruction concerning prayer. To the contrary, what he did was to teach them what is commonly called ‘the Lord’s Prayer,’ saying: □*In this manner, therefore, pray:*” [Mt. 6:9]. This prayer is a pattern, in other words, and the disciples were instructed to follow it. And that is not all. “*We do not know what we should pray for as we ought,*” says the Apostle, “*but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God*” [Ro. 8:26,27]. So we not only have a general pattern that we are commanded to follow, but we also have a specific promise of the help of the Spirit—on the spot, so to speak—as we follow that pattern. But there is no such provision for ‘on the spot help’ in composing songs for worship. To the contrary, the same Apostle commanded the Ephesian and Colossian believers—not to compose their own spiritual psalms, hymns and songs, but—to sing the ones they already had in the Bible.³⁰

The argument from analogy is not valid. Suppose, for instance, that I argue that all may preach because all sing. Or, for that matter, that only a few may sing because only a few are permitted to preach. The argument is that since the preacher does not confine himself to the very words of Scripture, in preaching, there is no need to do so when it comes to singing. What this overlooks is the fact that ministers are commanded to expound—to explain—the text of the Scripture in preaching. But nowhere is the same command given with respect to singing.

[2] Perhaps the most convincing argument against the exclusive use of psalms in worship is the argument from the history of salvation. It is argued that, in the past, whenever there was a great new era of revelation it called forth an outpouring of new songs. This being the case, it is argued, there is now great need for new songs additional to those in the Psalter to celebrate the content of the greatest revelation of all which came in the incarnation of Christ. My problem with this argument is that *if it was true the New Testament itself would have a new book of praise*. After all, if there was *need* for such, surely the Apostles would have been the first to realize it. And, being divinely inspired men, who could have better supplied the need? Yet the amazing fact is that we do not have a New Testament book of Psalms. Instead, Paul instructs the Ephesian and Colossian believers to sing the one they already had in their Septuagint version of the Bible.

This argument too is erroneous. It assumes the very thing that needs proof. It assumes that the old testament Psalter is inadequate under the new covenant. It assumes the need for something better. And then, further, it assumes the competence of uninspired men today to supply this assumed need. I cannot see that any of these assumptions are valid.

Conclusion

Does all this sound pessimistic? It would if there was no improvement in sight. But there is. In recent years—in my experience at least—some of our younger people sense that something is seriously wrong. They sense the need for a valid principle of discrimination, by which to distinguish between things that are holy and good, and things that are worthless and vile. In recent times there has been a great sense of uncertainty—because everything seems to be in a state of flux—in the realm of worship. What is really pleasing to God, and what should be rejected? When people want to innovate this, or that, in the worship of God do we have convincing answer? My point is that the situation today is driving us—whether we like it or not—to reconsider the stand of our fathers. Could it be that they were right after all, when they stressed this principle so strongly? Well, the encouraging thing is that there are those in the rising generation who are taking a new and serious look at this question. And the result is that they are beginning to come back to this biblical standard.

Things not commanded by God are now so deeply entrenched in Reformed Churches, that it will take a new reformation to change them. But isn't it time that we who are Reformed pastors at least begin raising the issue?

¹ Quoted from *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship*, a Symposium, published by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (hereafter RPCNA), n.d., p. 50

² There may even be some here who do not know that the great subordinate standard of many of our Reformed Churches, the Westminster Confession of Faith (Ch. XXI, iv), prescribes “the singing of psalms” in public worship.

³ “And the Lord respected Abel and his offering.” (Gen. 4:4) “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain...” (Heb. 11:4)

⁴ The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of those truths which “by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture” (I,vi). We see no reason why the same principle would not have been operative in Abel’s time, too, on the basis of such revelation as had been given by God.

⁵ “For since the Apostle refers the dignity of Abel’s accepted sacrifice to faith, it follows, first, that he had not offered it without the command of God (Heb. 11:4). Secondly, it has been true from the beginning of the world, that obedience is better than sacrifices, (I Sam. 15:22) and is the parent of all virtues. Hence it also follows, that man had been taught by God what was pleasing to Him.” (Quoted from *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Baker Book House, 1984, Vol. 1, pp. 192,193)

⁶ John Calvin in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk. II, Ch. VIII.*

⁷ Calvin’s *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, Second Volume, p. 107 (in Volume II of the Baker Book House reprint).

⁸ *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 1, Part 1. p.34. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids Mich. 49506.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 115.

¹⁰ “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 worthy of greater attention...Let us learn, therefore, so to attend to God’s command as not to corrupt His worship by any strange inventions.” (Calvin, Op. Cit. Vol. 2, pp. 431,432)

¹¹ “Four worthless men wickedly endeavor to overthrow Moses and Aaron; and straightway two hundred and fifty persons are ready to follow them...hence we must be the more cautious, lest any bugbears (larvae) should deceive us into making rash innovations.” (Calvin, Op. Cit. Vol. 3, p. 100).

¹² “David’s intention was right enough, no fault can be found with that; but right things must be done in a right way...All the way through this incident, we see that there was no taking heed to the commands of God, and to the rules which He had laid down. *The people brought will-worship to God*, instead of that which He had ordained. What do I mean by will-worship? I mean, any kind of worship which is not prescribed in God’s own Word...Inasmuch, therefore, as these people did not show any reverence for God by consulting His record of the rules which He had laid down for their guidance,—seeming to think that, whatever pleased them must please Him,—whatever kind of worship they chose to make up would be quite sufficient for the Lord God of Israel,—therefore, it ended in failure...How I wish that all religious denominations would bring their ordinances and forms of worship to the supreme test of the New Testament...But, alas! they know that so much would have to be put away that is now delightful to the flesh, that, I fear me, we shall be long before we bring all to worship God after His own order.” From a Sermon on *The Lesson of Uzzah* by C. H. Spurgeon.

¹³ Commenting on this statement Calvin says: “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.” (Op. Cit. Vol. IX, p. 414)

¹⁴ “By these words [‘in vain do they worship me, etc.’], all kinds of *will-worship*, (εὐελοqrhskeia,) as Paul calls it, (Col. 2:23,) are plainly condemned. For, as we have said, since God chooses to be worshipped in no other way than according to his own appointment, he cannot endure new modes of worship to be devised.” (Calvin, Op. Cit. Vol. XVI, [Second Volume] p. 253)

¹⁵ All these quotations are from Vol. XVII, pp. 150-164, of Calvin’s Commentaries.

¹⁶ “If worship must be consonant with the nature of God, it must be in accord with what God has revealed himself to be and regulated as to content and mode by the revelation God has given in holy Scripture. The sanction enunciated (‘in spirit and truth’) excludes all human invention and imagination and warns us against the offence and peril of offering strange fire unto the Lord.” (John Murray in *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship*, RPCNA, n.d., p. 93).

¹⁷ Italics mine. “Jesus does not suggest in these words...that we are permitted to teach what he has not forbidden, but rather implies that we will neither add to nor take from what He has commanded.” (Norman Shepherd, in *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship*, RPCNA, n.d. p. 44)

¹⁸ Loc. Cit. p. 390.

¹⁹ “Do we wonder that Paul should be afraid that he had laboured in vain, that the gospel would henceforth be of no service? And since that very description of impiety is now supported by Popery, what sort of Christ or what sort of gospel does it retain? So far as respects the binding of consciences, they enforce the observance of days with not less severity than was done by Moses. They consider holidays, not less than the false prophets did, to be a part of the worship of God...The Papists must therefore be held equally censurable with the false apostles; and with this additional aggravation, that, while the former proposed to

keep those days which had been appointed by the law of God, the latter enjoy days, rashly stamped with their own seal, to be observed as most holy.” (Calvin, Op. Cit. Vol. XXI. p. 125)

²⁰ “Observe” says Calvin “of what colours this *show* consists, according to Paul. He makes mention of three—self-invented worship, humility, and neglect of the body....Paul, however, bids farewell to those disguises, for *what is in high esteem among men is often an abomination in the sight of God.* (Luke XVI, 15)...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...any kind of service is not lawful, simply on the ground that it is agreeable to us.” (Calvin’s *Commentaries*, Vol. XXI, pp. 201,202 on Colossians).

²¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, XX, ii.

²² Note, for example, Paul’s statement in I Cor. 11:23, “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you...etc.”

²³ (Monsma & Van Dellen, *The Church Order Commentary*, Zondervan Pub. Co., 1941, p. 273).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 274.

²⁶ Psalm 150, verse 4 (KJV). However, the New King James Version, substitutes the word ‘flutes’ for ‘organs.’

²⁷ There is also a reference to dancing in Psalm 150, verse 4.

²⁸ Calvin’s *Commentaries*, Vol. V, on Psalm 71:22.

²⁹ “Thus we may justly say that the worship of the Law was spiritual in its substance, but, in respect of its form, it was somewhat earthly and carnal; for the whole of that economy, the reality of which is now fully manifested, consisted of shadows.” (Calvin’s *Commentaries*, Vol. XVII, Part 2, p. 164.)

³⁰ It is a noteworthy fact that these three terms (ψαλμος, υμνοις, ωδαις) were used in the Septuagint version (LXX) of the Old Testament, which was the Bible used in the Apostolic Churches, in the titles of the Psalms.
