

# **Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America**

## **Report of the Study Committee on the Doctrine of Worship**

July 2002

### **On the Regulative Principle of Worship**

#### **Brief summary – report 2001**

In our last report to the Synod we developed the biblical-theological view of the *assembly* in Scripture (Deut 5:22; 9:10; Ps 22:22-25; Ps 35:18; Ps 40:9-10; Ps 89:5-7; Ps 107:32; Ps 111:1; Ps 149:1; Hebrews 2:11-13; Hebrews 12:22-29 and 1Peter 2:4-10). The nature and role of the assembly in both the Old and New Testaments demonstrate that worship occupies the central place in the life and work of the church. The theology of the assembly shows that Christian worship is covenantal in form.

In the midst of the assembly stands Christ himself as priest, sacrifice, and mediator (Heb 2:11-13; Heb 8:1-6; Heb 9:11-15). Thus, Christian worship is centered on the Lord Jesus Christ and is governed by his word and Spirit. Jesus taught that one of God's primary purposes in redemption is to gather worshipers who honor him according to his word: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (Jn 4:23). Although all of life is lived before God, when we worship, we come into God's presence in a special way. (Ex 19:11,17; 1Kings 8:10-13,29; Isa 6:1; Hab 2:20; 1Cor 3:16,17; 2Cor 6:16,17; Heb 12:23; 1Pet 2:5.) The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) shows that through worship the church partakes of the means of grace appointed by Christ.

The purposes of Christian worship are to glorify God (both in heaven and on earth) and to build up the church on earth through the appointed means of grace. Because of the vital and central place of worship, the church needs to give careful attention to what is done in worship, and especially in public worship.

#### **The Regulative Principle of Worship**

The Reformed understanding of the practice of biblical worship is usually summarized by the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). The clearest statement of this principle is found in WCF 21.1, and is commented upon in the Testimony of the RPCNA 21.1-3. This principle is at the heart of Scripture's doctrine of worship. The reasons given in the literature for the theological necessity of this principle include the following: the distance between God and man, the need to preserve the purity of the gospel, the need to guard the liberty of conscience of the Christian worshiper, the limited delegated authority of the church on earth, the unity of the church expressed in her worship.

## The Distance between God and man

Because God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his holiness, humans, who are creatures as well as sinners, must be careful to draw near to God only in the way appointed by God. "God is in heaven, and you on earth" (Eccl. 5:1,2).

1. The Gospel. One reason for the careful regulation of worship is to protect the gospel of Christ from distortion. Thus, the Levitical code was very specific (Heb 9:1-10), and in the New Covenant we are warned not to depart from the means that Christ has instituted to bring us close to God (Heb 10:19-22; 12:22-29). But the protection of the purity of the gospel is not the only reason God gives for the careful regulation of his worship.

2. God's zeal. In Deuteronomy the *stated* reason is the covenant relationship between God and his people, and the absolute lordship of God involved in that relationship (see Deuteronomy as a whole, especially 4:36-40, 5:6,7; 12:31-32). The reason stated for God's judgment on unauthorized worship practices is not that such practices obscure the gospel, but that they are an affront to God's zeal regarding his own worship. "By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy" (Lev 10:3).

3. The New Testament. This need for caution and reverence is not eliminated under the New Covenant: "Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28,29). God initiates the covenant relationship with his people, and, in his holy sovereignty, he determines the terms of that covenant, including the way in which the people approach him in worship.

## The RPW and the Second Commandment

Although the Regulative Principle more broadly governs the life of the church -- its doctrine, authority, and government -- the special significance of the governance of worship is shown by the fact that a distinct command of the Decalogue is given for it. In the light of Scripture as a whole, the interpretation of the Second Commandment given in the Larger Catechism [Q. 108-9] is valid: it requires "the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word" and forbids "any religious worship not instituted by God himself." The "reasons annexed" are significant: they include "God's sovereignty over us, and propriety [ownership] in us, his fervent zeal for his own worship, and his revengeful indignation against all false worship" [Q. 110].

The Second Commandment applies in every worship setting: corporate, family, and individual. However, only the worship of the church assembled is a covenant memorial where all of the means of grace are dispensed. This has been the case since the end of the age of the patriarchs. The worship of the family and of the individual is primarily a meditation on God's word accompanied by prayer and praise. Those leading family or group worship do not have the authority to dispense the Sacraments, pronounce the benediction, or exercise ecclesiastical discipline. The worship of the church properly takes place under the direction of the elders assembled for that purpose.

## Liberty of Conscience

In light of Christ's headship over the church, the elders must be careful to maintain the liberty of conscience of the members: they are God's people and subject to him. The church's authority in matters of faith and worship is not legislative, but solely ministerial. When the elders of the church call the people together to worship, determine what shall be done in worship, and direct the people to participate, they must not, in Christ's name, impose practices on people that are not authorized in Scripture (Matt 15:9; Matt 28:18-19).

We recognize that liberty of conscience has a broader application than to the practices of the church when it assembles for worship. In the broader sphere, the rulers of the church are not to require belief in anything not taught in the Word, and are not authoritatively to command people to do anything not based on the Word. But if this limitation of church power applies in the areas of belief and behavior outside of the worship assembly, it applies *a fortiori* in the area of public worship, which God guards with holy jealousy.<sup>1</sup> Church authority is limited by the word of God, especially in matters of faith and worship. This follows from God's holy authority. This limit on church authority protects the gospel from adulteration by unbiblical worship practices, and it guards the liberty of conscience of the believer, who is thereby assured his freedom to worship God in the church assembly as God himself has appointed.

## Unity of the Church

Churches whose worship practices conform to the RPW will enjoy and demonstrate unity in their most central purpose on earth. Worship governed by the Scripture will be simple, centered on Christ through the means of grace instituted in his word, and guarded against innovation and the creative temptation that has led to the evident break between much of contemporary Protestant worship practices and the worship of Christian churches in the past. Christ prayed that we would be one. We can only be one to the measure that Christ unites us. When our worship is Christ-centered, directed by his word, and blessed by his Spirit, we will grow together. He has commissioned us to obey everything that he has commanded.

At the time of the Reformation, it was necessary for Christian leaders to guard the liberty of conscience of worshipers against the tyranny of a powerful national church. Today we must guard the liberty of conscience of worshipers against corporate individualism: every church claims the right to worship as it sees fit, and the measure of lawful worship is being redefined through practice, not principle. We must not forget that it is Christ who is at the center of the worship of the church, and that the church's worship is a response to his call to come before God. The church enters into the heavenly sanctuary and bows before her Lord. This is not a place for self-expression or creativity. This is a place for holy reverence and joyful submission to his revealed will.

## Our Confessional Standards

Some would like us to rephrase the statement in our Testimony 21.2, eliminating the negative clause "in harmony with the Scriptural principle that whatsoever is not

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<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that Deut. 4:2 and 12:32 are to be related.

commanded in the worship of God, by precept or example, is forbidden.” This statement restates the WCF clause (21.1) “or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.” It is the judgment of this committee that the statement in our Testimony will be implied even if it were to be removed. If we agree that God governs his church and her worship by his word, it follows that what he has not commanded concerning his worship is not part of his worship (thus the language of the WCF here).<sup>2</sup>

All Christians recognize that many otherwise lawful things cannot be done in worship. Husbands and wives will not kiss in worship, pastors will not recite their poems instead of reading a text of Scripture in worship, the congregation will not end prayer with “Hip, hip, hooray!” Because we could multiply the examples of otherwise lawful practices that are inappropriate in worship, and because we could find ourselves in interminable debates about what these are, and why they are inappropriate, the negative statements in the WCF and in our Testimony protect the church from endless sinful disputes and divisions. We go to God’s Word to learn how he wants to be worshiped, and we limit ourselves joyfully to his sovereign good pleasure. Isaiah 55:9 “For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of these considerations, your committee concurs with our confessional standards and does not recommend any constitutional change. The principle that should govern church worship may be stated as follows:

When the church assembles at the call of the elders for the purpose of worshiping God, the leader(s) and people should engage in the worship practices which are authorized in Scripture, to the exclusion of worship practices devised by human thought or custom.

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<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the circumstances in which worship takes place are not themselves acts of worship.

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