

The Regulative Principle of Worship (adapted from committee paper section 3)

Preliminary Observations:

- (1) Lord's Day Worship of the Church: A foretaste of Heaven; a "holy dialogue" with our God
- (2) An analogy for The Regulative Principle: Dressing for the Queen

General Concept:

God is a Spirit, and those that worship Him are commanded to worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24)

We must have the truth revealed to us in order to worship properly.

The indwelling of the Spirit leads us into the truth of the Scriptures regarding worship.

On the Regulative Principle of Worship

The Reformed understanding of the practice of biblical worship is usually summarized by the term *Regulative Principle of Worship* (RPW). The RPW flows from an understanding of several scriptural principles: (1) God's holiness and man's standing as creature, (2) the need to preserve the purity of the gospel, (3) the Second Commandment, (4) liberty of conscience of the worshipper, (4) limited authority of the Church on earth, and (5) unity of the Church expressed in worship.

3.1. God's Holiness and the Gospel

God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his holiness. Therefore, we may draw near to him only in the way he appoints. "God is in heaven, and you on earth" (Eccl 5:1-2).

3.1.1. The Gospel

Much of the detailed OT worship regulation involves the Levitical sacrifices. These ceremonies were shadows of the throne room of God, into which Christ has now entered as the true High Priest. The shadows have been discontinued; in the NT, the same zealous care is now expressed with reference to the Gospel of Christ. – Lev. 10:1-12; Heb. 2:1-4; Gal 1:8-9; Acts 4:10-12

Worship must be directed to and through Christ; worship which glorifies Him will be in accord with His commandments.

3.1.2. God's Holiness

An explicit reason for the careful regulation of God's worship (Deut. 12:29-13:5) is the covenant relationship between God and his people (Deut 4:36-40), and the absolute lordship of God involved in that relationship (Deut 5:1-7).

"By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy" (Lev 10:3).

NT worship is likewise covenantal, and God continues to determine the way in which he is to be approached and worshipped: Heb. 10:11-22; Heb 12:18-29. God's holiness has wider implications also; his Word also governs all aspects of our lives.

3.2. The Second Commandment

Whereas the first commandment forbids worshipping false gods, the second commandment forbids worshipping the true God in a false manner. In the light of Scripture as a whole, the *Larger Catechism* (Q. 108-9) gives us this interpretation of the Second Commandment: 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 Second Commandment applies in every setting, but the gathered worship of the Church is distinct from other settings in which worship takes place, e.g. individuals, families. The worship of the Church properly takes place as the Church assembles for worship under the direction of the elders, according to the order Christ has established for His Church. The Lord's Day is the day set apart for covenant renewal and gathered worship in the NT church.

3.3. Liberty of Conscience and Church Power

Church elders do not have unlimited power; they govern under Christ and are subject to Him.

When the Church is called together for worship, elders may only direct them to do those things which Christ commands: Matt 15:1-9; Matt 28:18-20. Christians worship with a clear conscience when they know that they are being obedient to Christ. Thus - elders may not call for practices not authorized in Scripture. Why? Because this would violate the believer's liberty of conscience (note: not the same as "individual tyranny" – the assumption here is that the believer's conscience is really functioning *in submission to the Word of Christ*).

Liberty of conscience has a broader application: church rulers may not require belief in anything not taught in the Word, or command people to do anything without a Scriptural basis. Since this limitation of church power applies in the areas of belief and behavior outside of the worship assembly, it must certainly apply to public worship, which God guards with holy jealousy. Church authority is limited by the Word of God, especially in matters of faith and worship. God desires worshippers who worship Him in "spirit and truth."

3.4. Unity of the Church

Christ is at the center of the Church's worship; therefore, the worship of the Church is a response to Christ's call to enter the heavenly sanctuary and bow before her Lord and King. This is not a place for self-expression, novelty, or creativity; rather, it is a place for holy reverence and joyful submission to God's revealed will.

Worship practices which conform to the RPW promote unity in the worship of the churches.

Worship governed by the Scriptures will be centered on Christ Jesus through the means of grace instituted in his word. Christ prayed that we would be one, a prayer that includes not only the Church living at any given time on earth but the Church through all of time (John 17:20). Although the language, mode of dress, selection of tunes, etc. can vary according to particular circumstances, the content of the Church's worship is unified when it is guarded by the Word of Christ.

3.5. Our Confessional Standards

Testimony 21.2, "Worship is to be offered in harmony with the Scriptural principle that whatsoever is not commanded in the worship of God, by precept or example, is forbidden." This rephrases the *Confession's* clause (21.1) "or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." "Commanded" or "prescribed" include approved examples and sound deductions from Scripture (*Confession*, 1.6). If we agree that God governs his Church and her worship by his word, it follows that what is forbidden in the public worship of God are worship practices devised by human thought or inherited by custom alone.

All Christians recognize that many things that are otherwise lawful cannot be done in worship.

We go to God's Word to learn how he wants to be worshiped, and we limit ourselves joyfully to his sovereign good pleasure.