

# Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, Appendix A

## John Calvin and the Regulative Principle

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

It is important that believers who take upon themselves the name of Reformed or Presbyterian have some acquaintance with Calvin's views on worship (in particular the regulative principle) for a number of reasons. First, we live in a time of serious declension regarding worship in many denominations that are considered Reformed. Many pastors, teachers and elders in "Reformed" churches either directly or through subterfuge reject Reformed worship in favor of a Lutheran or Episcopal conception. Second, because of this declension and ignorance there has been a *reductionism* of what it means to be Reformed. For both Calvin and Knox Reformed meant more than a biblical soteriology; it also meant a biblical conception of worship (i.e., the regulative principle). Today the word Reformed is used of anyone who merely accepts the five points of Calvinism. Thus, we have pastors and organizations today which boast of being "truly Reformed" or "neo-puritan" who a few centuries ago would have been considered anti-puritan and non-Reformed. Third, today many hold the opinion that purity of worship should not be a major concern of the church. People who concern themselves with such matters are often held in contempt. Yet Calvin regarded the true worship of God to be (as far as the Christian religion) is concerned second to none in order of importance. In "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" he writes, "If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshiped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain."<sup>1</sup>

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

### **Leviticus 10:1**

*And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron.* A memorable circumstance is here recorded, from whence it appears how greatly God abominates all the sins whereby purity of religion is corrupted. Apparently it was a light transgression to use strange fire for burning incense; and

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, Henry Beveridge, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1844]), 1:126.

again their thoughtlessness would seem inexcusable, for certainly Nadab and Abihu did not wantonly or intentionally desire to pollute the sacred things, but, as is often the case in matters of novelty, when they were setting about them too eagerly, their precipitancy led them into error. The severity of the punishment, therefore, would not please those arrogant people, who do not hesitate superciliously to criticize God's judgments; but if we reflect how holy a thing God's worship is, the enormity of the punishment will by no means offend us. Besides, it was necessary that their religion should be sanctioned at its very commencement; for if God had suffered the sons of Aaron to transgress with impunity, they would have afterwards carelessly neglected the whole Law. This, therefore, was the reason of such great severity, that the priests should anxiously watch against all profanation. Their crime is specified, viz., that they offered incense in a different way from that which God had prescribed, and consequently, although they may have erred from ignorance, still they were convicted by God's commandment of having negligently set about what was worth of greater attention. The "strange fire" is distinguished from the sacred fire which was always burning upon the altar: not miraculously, as some pretend, but by the constant watchfulness of the priests. Now, God had forbidden any other fire to be used in the ordinances, in order to exclude all extraneous rites, and to shew His detestation of whatever might be derived from elsewhere. Let us learn, therefore, so to attend to God's command as not to corrupt His worship by any strange inventions. But if He so severely avenged this error, how horrible a punishment awaits the Papists, who are not ashamed obstinately to defend so many gross corruptions?<sup>2</sup>

### **Leviticus 22:32**

*Neither shall ye profane.* In forbidding the profanation of His name, He confirms in other words the foregoing sentiment; guarding by them His worship from all corruptions, that it may be maintained in purity and integrity. The same, too, is the object of the clause in apposition, which immediately follows; for they hallow God's name who turn not away from its rightful and sincere worship. Let this be carefully observed, that whatever fancies men devise, are so many profanations of God's name; for although the superstitious may please themselves by their imaginations, yet is all their religion full of sacrilege, whereby God complains that His holiness is profaned.<sup>3</sup>

### **Numbers 15:39**

And, first of all, by contrasting "the hearts and eyes" of men with His Law, He shows that He would have His people contented with that one rule which He prescribes, without the admixture of any of their own imaginations; and again, He denounces the vanity of whatever men invent for themselves, and however pleasing any human scheme may appear to them, He still repudiates and condemns it. And this is still more clearly expressed in the last word, when he says that men "go a whoring" whenever they are governed by their own counsels. This declaration is deserving of our especial observation, for whilst they have much self-satisfaction who worship God according to their own will, and whilst they account their zeal to be very good and very right, they do nothing else but pollute themselves by spiritual adultery. For what by the world is considered to be the holiest devotion, God with his own mouth pronounces to be fornication. By the word "eyes" he unquestionably means man's power of discernment.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 3:431-432.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 1:344.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 1:365.

### **Deuteronomy 4:1**

*Now, therefore, hearken, O Israel.* He requires the people to be teachable, in order that they may learn to serve God; for the beginning of a good and upright life is to know what is pleasing to God. From hence, then, does Moses commence commanding them to be attentive in seeking direction from the Law; and then admonishing them to prove by their whole life that they have duly profited in the Law. The promise which is here inserted, only invites them to unreserved obedience through hope of the inheritance. The main point is, that they should neither add to nor diminish from the pure doctrine of the Law; and this cannot be the case, unless men first renounce their own private feelings, and then shut their ears against all the imaginations of others. For none are to be accounted (true) disciples of the Law, but those who obtain their wisdom from it alone. It is, then, as if God commanded them to be content with His precepts; because in no other way would they keep His law, except by giving themselves wholly to its teaching. Hence it follows, that they only obey God who depend on His authority alone; and that they only pay the Law its rightful honour, who receive nothing which is opposed to its natural meaning. The passage is a remarkable one, openly condemning whatsoever man's ingenuity may invent for the service of God.<sup>5</sup>

### **Deuteronomy 12:32**

*What thing soever I command.* In this brief clause he teaches that no other service of God is lawful, except that of which He has testified His approval in His word, and that obedience is as it were the mother of all piety; as if he had said that all modes of devotion are absurd and infected with superstition, which are not directed by this rule. Hence we gather, that in order to the keeping of the First Commandment, a knowledge of the true God is required, derived from His word, and mixed with faith. By forbidding the addition, or diminishing of anything, he plainly condemns as illegitimate whatever men invent of their own imagination.<sup>6</sup>

### **2 Samuel 6:6-12**

Moreover, we must gather from it that none of our devotions will be accepted by God unless they are conformed to his will. This rule ruins all the man-made inventions in the papacy's so-called worship of God, which has so much pomp and foolishness. All of that is nothing but sheer trash before God, and is in fact an abomination to him. Hence, let us hold this unmistakable rule, that if we want to worship God in accordance with our own ideas, it will simply be abuse and corruption. And so, on the contrary, we must have the testimony of his will in order to follow what he commands us, and to submit to it. Now that is how the worship which we render to God will be approved.<sup>7</sup>

### **Isaiah 29:14**

On the second point, when God is worshiped by inventions of men, he condemns this "fear" as superstitious, though men endeavour to cloak it under a plausible pretense of religion, or devotion, or reverence. He assigns the reason, that it "hath been taught by men." I consider *melummadah* to have a passive signification; for he means, that to make "the commandments of men," and not the word of God, the rule of worshiping him, is a subversion of order. But it is the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 1:344-345.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 1:353.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 246.

will of the Lord, that our “fear,” and the reverence with which we worship him, shall be regulated by the rule of his word; and he demands nothing so much as simple obedience, by which we shall conform ourselves and all our actions to the rule of the word, and not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.

Hence it is sufficiently evident, that those who learn from “the inventions of men” how they should worship God, not only are manifestly foolish, but wear themselves out by destructive toil, because they do nothing else than provoke God’s anger; for he could not testify more plainly than by the tremendous severity of this chastisement, how great is the abhorrence with which he regards false worship.<sup>8</sup>

### **Jeremiah 7:21-24**

He afterwards adds, that they *walked in their tortuous counsels*, and also, *in the wickedness of their evil heart*. This comparison aggravates their sin,—the Jews preferred to follow their own humour rather than to obey God and his commands. Had anything been set before them, which might have deceived them and obscured the authority of the law, there would have been some excuse: but when there was nothing to prevent them from obeying the command of God, except that they followed their own foolish imaginations, they were wholly inexcusable. For what excuse could they have made? That they wished to be wiser than God! How great a madness was this, and how diabolical? But the Prophet leaves them nothing but this vain excuse, which doubled their guilt. They thought, no doubt, that their heart was well fitted for the purpose: but he does not here allow them to judge, but distinctly condemns them as they deserved.

We ought to take particular notice of this passage; for the majority of men at this day set up their own fictions against God’s word. The Papists indeed pretend antiquity; they say that they have been taught by their ancestors; and at the same time they plead councils and the ordinances of the fathers: but yet there is not one of them, who is not addicted to his own figments, and who does not take the liberty, nay, an unbridled license, to reject whatever he pleases. Moreover, if the origin of the whole papal worship be considered, it will appear, that those who first devised so many strange superstitions, were only impelled by audacity and presumption, in order that they might trample under foot the word of God. Hence it is, that all things are become corrupt; for they brought in all the strange figments of their own brains. And we see that the Papists at this day are so perversely fixed in their own errors, that they prefer themselves and their own trumperies to God. And the same is the case with all the heretics. What then is to be done? Obedience, as I have said, is to be held as the basis of all true religion. *If, then, on the other hand, we wish to render our worship approved by God, let us learn to cast aside whatever is our own, so that his authority may prevail over all our reasons.*<sup>9</sup>

### **Jeremiah 7:31**

*Which I commanded them not, and which never came to my mind.* This reason ought to be carefully noticed, for God here cuts off from men every occasion for making evasions, since he condemns by this one phrase, “I have not commanded them,” whatever the Jews devised. There is then no other argument needed to condemn superstitions, than that they are not commanded by

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1992), 246.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:397-398 (italics in original).

God: for when men allow themselves to worship God according to their own fancies, and attend not to his commands, they pervert true religion. And if this principle was adopted by the Papists, all those fictitious modes of worship, in which they absurdly exercise themselves, would fall to the ground. It is indeed a horrible thing for the Papists to seek to discharge their duties towards God by performing their own superstitions. There is an immense number of them, as it is well known, and as it manifestly appears. Were they to admit this principle, that we cannot rightly worship God except by obeying his word, they would be delivered from their deep abyss of error. The Prophet's words then are very important, when he says, that God had *commanded* no such thing, and that it never came to his mind; as though he had said, that men assume too much wisdom, when they devise what he never required, nay, what he never knew.<sup>10</sup>

### **Jeremiah 19:4-5**

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

The Jews might have raised such an objection as the Papists do at this today,—that their modes of worship were not devised in their time, but that they had derived them from their ancestors. But God regarded as nothing those kings and the fathers, who had long before degenerated from true and genuine religion. It must be here observed, that true knowledge is connected with verity: for they who had first contrived new forms of worship, doubtless followed their own foolish imaginations; as when any one in the present day asks the Papists, why they weary themselves so much with their superstitions, good intention is ever their shield,—“O, we think that this is pleasing to God.” Therefore rightly does God repudiate their inventions as wholly vain, for they possess nothing solid or permanent.<sup>11</sup>

### **Matthew 15:1**

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

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1:413-414.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 2:438-439.

their inventions for this purpose, as if they were in possession of something more perfect than the word of the Lord. This is followed by the slow growth of tyranny; for, when men have once assumed to themselves the right to issue commands, they demand a rigid adherence to their laws, and do not allow the smallest iota to be left out, either through contempt or through forgetfulness. The world cannot endure lawful authority, and most violently rebels against the Lord's yoke, and yet easily and willingly becomes entangled in the snares of vain traditions; nay, such bondage appears to be, in the case of many, an object of desire. Meanwhile, the worship of God is corrupted, of which the first and leading principle is obedience. The authority of men is preferred to the command of God. Sternly, and therefore tyrannically, are the common people compelled to give their whole attention to trifles. This passage teaches us, first, that all modes of worship invented by men are displeasing to God, because he chooses that he alone shall be heard, in order to train and instruct us in true godliness according to his own pleasure; secondly, that those who are not satisfied with the only law of God, and weary themselves by attending to the traditions of men, are uselessly employed; thirdly, that an outrage is committed against God, when the inventions of men are so highly extolled, that the majesty of his law is almost lowered, or at least the reverence for it is abated.<sup>12</sup>

### **Matthew 15:9**

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

*Teaching doctrines, commandments of men.* In these words there is what is called *apposition*; for Christ declares them to be mistaken who bring forward, in the room of *doctrine*, *the commandments of men*, or who seek to obtain from them the rule for worshipping God. Let it therefore be held as a settled principle, that, since *obedience* is more highly esteemed by God than *sacrifices*, (1 Sam. 15:22, 23) all kinds of worship invented by men are of no estimations in his sight; nay more, that, as the prophet declares, they are accursed and detestable.<sup>13</sup>

### **Colossians 2:22-23**

The sum is this—that the worship of God, true piety, and the holiness of Christians, do not consist in drink, and food and clothing, which are things that are transient and liable to corruption, and perish by abuse. For abuse is properly applicable to those things which are corrupted by the use of them. Hence enactments are of no value in reference to those things which tend to excite scruples of conscience. But in Popery you would scarcely find any other holiness, than what consists in little observances of corruptible things.

A *second* refutation is added—that they originated with men, and have not God as their Author; and by this thunderbolt he prostrates and swallows up all traditions of men. For why?

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:245-246.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 2:253-254.

This is Paul's reasoning: "Those who bring consciences into bondage do injury to Christ, and make void his death. For what is of human invention does not bind conscience...."

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

Thus, at the present day, Papists are not in want of specious pretexts, by which to set forth their own laws, however they may be—some of them impious and tyrannical, and others of them silly and trifling. When, however, we have granted them everything, there remains, nevertheless, this refutation by Paul, which is of itself more than sufficient for dispelling all their smoky vapours.<sup>14</sup>

## Institutes of the Christian Religion

### *Images and pictures are contrary to Scripture*

Now we ought to bear in mind that Scripture repeatedly describes superstitions in this language: they are the "works of men's hands," which lack God's authority (Isa. 2:8; 31:7; 37:19; Hos. 14:3; Mic. 5:13); this is done to establish the fact that all the cults men devise of themselves are detestable.<sup>15</sup>

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

But godliness, to stand on a firm footing, keeps itself within its proper limits. Likewise, it seems to me that superstition is so called because, not content with the prescribed manner and order, it heaps up a needless mass of inanities.<sup>16</sup>

### *Honoring images is dishonor to God*

For by his law it pleases him to prescribe for men what is good and right, and thus to hold them to a sure standard that no one may take leave to contrive any sort of worship he pleases.<sup>17</sup>

### *The sufficiency of the law*

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<sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 201-203.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.XI.4, Ford Lewis Battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:104.

<sup>16</sup> I.XII.1, 1:117.

<sup>17</sup> I.XII.3, 1:120.

On the other hand, the Lord, in giving the rule of perfect righteousness, has referred all its parts to his will, thereby showing that nothing is more acceptable to him than obedience. The more inclined the playfulness of the human mind is to dream up various rites with which to deserve well of him, the more diligently ought we to mark this fact. The best remedy to cure that fault will be to fix this thought firmly in mind: the law has been divinely handed down to us to teach us perfect righteousness; there no other righteousness is taught than that which conforms to the requirements of God's will; in vain therefore do we attempt new forms of works to win the favor of God, whose lawful worship consists in obedience alone; rather, any zeal for good works that wanders outside God's law is an intolerable profanation of divine and true righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

### *Spiritual worship of the invisible God*

In the previous commandment, he declared himself the one God apart from whom no other gods are to be imagined or had. Now he declares more openly what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be honored, lest we dare attribute anything carnal to him. The purpose of this commandment, then, is that he does not will that his lawful worship be profaned by superstitious rites. To sum up, he wholly calls us back, and withdraws us from petty carnal observances, which our stupid minds, crassly conceiving of God, are wont to devise. And then he makes us conform to his lawful worship, that is, a spiritual worship established by himself. Moreover, he marks the grossest fault in this transgression, outward idolatry.<sup>19</sup>

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

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

But how important do we think it that the Lord is deprived of his Kingdom, which he so sternly claims for himself? But it is taken away whenever he is worshiped by laws of human devising, inasmuch as he wills to be accounted the sole lawgiver of his own worship. So that now one may think this something negligible, let us hear how highly the Lord regards. "Because," he says, "this people...feared me by a commandment and doctrines of men,...behold, I will astound this people with a great and amazing miracle; for wisdom shall perish from their wise men, and understanding shall depart from their elders." [Isa. 29:13-14 p.] Another passage: "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men" [Matt. 15:9]. And truly, when the Children of Israel corrupted themselves with many idolatries, the cause of all that evil is ascribed to this impure mixture: they have transgressed God's commandments and have fabricated new rites...."

Thereupon, it is afterward said that they, frightened by that punishment, took up the rites prescribed in the law; but because they were not purely worshiping the true God, it is twice repeated that they feared him and feared him not [II Kings 17:24-25, 32-33, 41]. From this we gather that a part of the reverence that is paid to him consists simply in worshiping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own. And pious kings are often praised because they acted in accordance with all precepts, and did not turn aside either to the right or to the left [II Kings 22:1-2; cf. I Kings 15:11; 22:43; II Kings 12:2; 14:3; 15:3; 15:34; 18:3]. I say further: although in some contrived worship impiety does not openly appear, it is still severely condemned by the Spirit, since it is a departure from God's precept. The altar of Ahaz, the pattern of which was brought out of Samaria [II Kings 16:10], could seem to enhance the

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<sup>18</sup> II.VII.5, 1:371-372.

<sup>19</sup> II.VIII.17, 1:383.

adornment of the temple, since it was Ahaz's intention to offer sacrifices there to the only God, which he was going to do more splendidly than on the old original altar. Yet we see how the Spirit loathes this insolence solely because the inventions of men in the worship of God are impure corruptions [II Kings 16:10-18]. And the more clearly God's will is revealed to us, the less excusable is our wantonness in attempting anything.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Perverse worship an abomination to God*

Many marvel why the Lord so sharply threatens to astound the people who worshiped him with the commands of men [Isa. 29:13-14] and declares that he is vainly worshiped by the precepts of men [Matt. 15:9]. But if they were to weigh what it is to depend upon God's bidding alone in matters of religion (that is, on account of heavenly wisdom), they would at the same time see that the Lord has strong reasons to abominate such perverse rites, which are performed for him according to the willfulness of human nature. For even though those who obey such laws in the worship of God have some semblance of humility in this obedience of theirs, they are nevertheless not at all humble in God's sight, since they prescribe for him these same laws which they observe. Now, this is the reason Paul so urgently warns us not to be deceived by the traditions of men [Col. 2:4 ff.], or by what he calls *ethelothreskeia*, that is, "will worship," devised by men apart from God's teaching [Col. 2:23, 22]. It is certainly true that our own and all men's wisdom must become foolish, that we may allow him alone to be wise. Those who expect his approval for their paltry observances contrived by men's will, and offer to him, as if involuntarily, a sham obedience which is paid actually to men, do not hold to that path.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Refutation of Romanist counterevidence*

In short, every chance invention, by which men seek to worship God, is nothing but a pollution of true holiness.<sup>22</sup>

#### *(Church laws and traditions, and the Christian's conscience before God, 1-4) The basic question*

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

It has become common usage to call all decrees concerning the worship of God put forward by men apart from his Word "human traditions." Our contention is against these, not against holy and useful church institutions, which provide for the preservation of discipline or honesty or peace.<sup>23</sup>

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

Paul employs the former reason when he contends in the letter to the Colossians against false apostles who were trying to oppress the churches with new burdens [Col. 2:8]. He makes more use of the second reason in the letter to the Galatians, in a similar case [Gal. 5:1-12]. Accordingly, he argues in the letter to the Colossians that we are not to seek from men the

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<sup>20</sup> IV.X.23, 2:1201-1202.

<sup>21</sup> IV.X.24, 2:1203.

<sup>22</sup> IV.X.26, 2:1204.

<sup>23</sup> IV.X.1, 2:1179.

doctrine of the true worship of God, for the Lord has faithfully and fully instructed us how he is to be worshiped. To prove this, he says in the first chapter that the gospel contains all the wisdom by which the man of God is made perfect in Christ [Col. 1:28]. At the beginning of the second chapter he states that all treasures of wisdom and understanding are hidden in Christ [Col. 2:3]. From this he subsequently concludes that believers ought to beware lest they be seduced from Christ's flock through empty philosophy, according to the constitutions of men [Col. 2:8]. But at the end of the chapter he condemns with greater confidence all self-made religion, that is, all feigned worship, which men have devised for themselves or received from others, and all precepts they of themselves dare promulgate concerning the worship of God [Col. 2:16-23].<sup>24</sup>

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

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

I am not yet touching on the gross abominations with which they have endeavored to overthrow all piety. But among them it would not be imagined to be such an atrocious crime to fail to observe in even the least little tradition if they did not subject the worship of God to their fictions. How do we sin, if today we cannot bear what Paul has taught to be unbearable—that the lawful order of divine worship is reduced to men's decision? Especially, when they command men to worship according to the elements of this world, which Paul testifies to be against Christ [Col. 2:20]. Again, it is well known with what extreme rigor they bind consciences to observe whatever they command. When we contradict them, we make common cause with Paul, who on no account allows faithful consciences to be reduced to human bondage [Gal. 5:1].<sup>25</sup>

*The papal constitutions deny God's law*

Moreover, this evil thing is added, that when religion once begins to be defined in such vain fictions, such perversity is always followed by another hateful depravity, for which Christ rebuked the Pharisees. It is that they nullify God's commandment for the sake of the traditions of men [Matt. 15:3]. I do not wish to fight with words of my own against our present lawmakers; let them win, I say, if they can in any way cleanse themselves of Christ's accusation.<sup>26</sup>

*Roman constitutions meaningless and useless*

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

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<sup>24</sup> IV.X.8, 2:1186-1187.

<sup>25</sup> IV.X.9, 2:1187-1188.

<sup>26</sup> IV.X.10, 2:1188.

to have said that they were the devisings of men, he passes over all these things without refutation [Col. 2:22], as if he counted them of no value. Indeed, Paul knew that all counterfeit worship in the church was condemned, and that the more it delights human nature the more it is suspected by believers; he knew that that false image of outward humility is so far from true humility as to be easily distinguished from it; lastly, he knew that elementary discipline is no more to be esteemed than bodily exercise. He wished the very facts to serve as a refutation of human traditions for believers, for whose sake these were commended among the unlearned.<sup>27</sup>

#### *General application of common insights*

For whenever this superstition creeps in, that men wish to worship God with their fictions, all laws enacted for this purpose immediately degenerate to these gross abuses. For God threatens no one age or another but all ages with this curse, that he will strike with blindness and amazement those who worship him with the doctrines of men [Isa. 29:13-14]. This blinding continually causes those who despise so many warnings of God and willfully entangle themselves in these deadly snares, to embrace every kind of absurdity. But suppose, apart from present circumstances, you simply want to understand what are those human traditions of all times that should be repudiated by the church and by all godly men. What we have set forth above will be a sure and clear definition: that they are all laws apart from God's Word, laws made by men, either to prescribe the manner of worshiping God or to bind consciences by scruples, as if they were making rules about things necessary for salvation.<sup>28</sup>

As for the present case, suppose that, tearing away all masks and disguises, we truly look upon that which ought to be our first concern and is of greatest importance for us, that is, the kind of church Christ would have that we may fashion and fit ourselves to its standard. We shall then easily see that it is not a church which, passing the bounds of God's Word, wantons and disports itself in the framing of new laws. For does not that law once spoken to the church hold good forever? "Everything that I command you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it." [Deut. 12:32.] And another passage: "Do not add to" the Word of the Lord, or take away from it, "lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar" [Prov. 30:6 p.]. They cannot deny that this was spoken to the church. What else, then, do they declare but its recalcitrance, for they boast that, after such prohibitions, it nonetheless dared add and mix something of its own with God's teaching? Far be it from us to assent to their falsehood, by which they bring so much insult upon the church! But let us understand that whenever one considers this inordinate human rashness—which cannot contain itself within God's commands but must, wildly exalting, run after its own inventions—the name "church" is falsely pretended. There is nothing involved, nothing obscure, nothing ambiguous in these words which forbid the church universal to add to or take away anything from God's Word, when the worship of the Lord and precepts of salvation are concerned.... The Lord, who long ago declared that nothing so much offended him as being worshiped by humanly devised rites, has not become untrue to himself.<sup>29</sup>

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

But to trace the origin of these traditions (with which the church has hitherto been oppressed) back to the apostles is pure deceit. For the whole doctrine of the apostles has this intent: not to burden consciences with new observances, or contaminate the worship of God with

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<sup>27</sup> IV.X.11, 2:1189-1190.

<sup>28</sup> IV.X.16, 2:1194.

<sup>29</sup> IV.X.17, 2:1195-1196.

our own inventions. Again, if there is anything credible in the histories and ancient records, the apostles not only were ignorant of what the Romanists attribute to them but never even heard of it.<sup>30</sup>

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

### *Of the Service of God*

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

The second axiom is, that when we presume to serve God at our own hand, he repudiates it as corruption. And this is the reason why he exclaims by his prophet Isaiah, (Is. xxix. 13,) that all true religion has been perverted by keeping the commandments of men. And our Lord Jesus Christ confirms the same by saying, (Matt. xv. 9,) that in vain would we know God by human tradition. It is with good reason, therefore, that his spiritual supremacy over our souls remains inviolable, and that at the very least his will as a bridle should regulate our devotions.<sup>31</sup>

### *Of Human Tradition*

We have in this matter such notable warnings from common experience, that we are the more confirmed in not passing the limits of Scripture. For since men began to make laws to regulate the service of God, and subject the conscience, there has been neither end nor measure, while, on the other hand, God has punished such temerity, blinding men with delusions which may make one shudder. When we look nearer to see what human traditions are, we find that they are an abyss, and that their number is endless. An yet there are abuses so absurd and enormous, that it is wonderful how men could have been so stupid, were it not that God has executed the vengeance which he announced by his prophet Isaiah, (Is. xxix. 14,) blinding and infatuating the wise who would honour him by observing the commandments of men.<sup>32</sup>

### *Of Idolatrous Intentions*

Since men have turned aside from pure and holy obedience to God, they have discovered that good intention was sufficient to approve everything. This was to open a door to all superstitions. It has been the origin of the worship of images, the purchase of masses, the filling of churches with pomp and parade, the running about on pilgrimages, the making of vows by each at his own hand. But the abyss here is so profound that it is enough for us to have touched on some examples. So far is it from being permitted to honour God by human inventions, that there would be no firmness nor certainty, neither bottom nor shore in religion: every thing would go to wreck, and Christianity differ in nothing from the idolatries of the heathen.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> IV.X.18, 2:1197.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, "Confession of Faith" in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1844]), 2:147-148.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 148-149.

## The Necessity of Reforming the Church (1544)

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which he everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed. For there is a twofold reason why the Lord, in condemning and prohibiting all fictitious worship, requires us to give obedience only to his own voice. First, it tends greatly to establish His authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions. Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what he wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with his command. Justly, too, does he, in express terms, define our limits, that we may not, by fabricating perverse modes of worship, provoke His anger against us.

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct: "Obedience is better than sacrifice." "In vain to they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men," (1 Sam. xv. 22; Matth. xv. 9.) Every addition to His word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere "will worship" (*ethelothreskeia*) is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate....<sup>34</sup>

Having observed that the Word of God is the test which discriminates between his true worship and that which is false and vitiated, we thence readily infer that the whole form of divine worship in general use in the present day is nothing but mere corruption. For men pay no regard to what God has commanded, or to what he approves, in order that they may serve him in a becoming manner, but assume to themselves a license of devising modes of worship, and afterwards obtruding them upon him as a substitute for obedience. If in what I say I seem to exaggerate, let an examination be made of all the acts by which the generality suppose that they worship God. I dare scarcely except a tenth part as not the random offspring of their own brain. What more would we? God rejects, condemns, abominates all fictitious worship, and employs his Word as a bridle to keep us in unqualified obedience. When shaking off this yoke, we wander after our own fictions, and offer to him a worship, the work of human rashness, how much soever it may delight ourselves, in his sight it is vain trifling, nay, vileness and pollution. The advocates of human traditions paint them in fair and gaudy colours; and Paul certainly admits that they carry with them a show of wisdom; but as God values obedience more than all sacrifices, it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship, that is not sanctioned by the command of God....<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works*, 1:128-129.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 1:132-133.

In regard to the worship of God, our adversaries next accuse us, because, omitting empty and childish observances, tending only to hypocrisy, we worship God more simply. That we have in no respect detracted from the spiritual worship of God, is attested by fact. Nay, when it had in a great measure gone into desuetude, we have reinstated it in its former rights....<sup>36</sup>

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

I am not unaware how difficult it is to persuade the world that God rejects and even abominates every thing relating to his worship that is devised by human reason. The delusion on this head is owing to several causes,—“Every one thinks highly of his own,” as the old proverb expresses it. Hence the offspring of our own brain delights us, and besides, as Paul admits, this fictitious worship often presents some show of wisdom. Then, as it has for the most part an external splendour which pleases the eye, it is more agreeable to our carnal nature, than that which alone God requires and approves, but which is less ostentatious. But there is nothing which so blinds the understanding of men, and misleads them in their judgments in this matter, as hypocrisy. For while it is incumbent on true worshipers to give the heart and mind, men are always desirous to invent a mode of serving God of a totally different description, their object being to perform to him certain bodily observances, and keep the mind to themselves. Moreover, they imagine that when they obtrude upon him external pomp, they have, by this artifice, evaded the necessity of giving themselves. And this is the reason why they submit to innumerable observances which miserably fatigue them without measure and without end, and why they choose to wander in a perpetual labyrinth, rather than worship God simply in spirit and in truth....<sup>37</sup>

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

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 1:151.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 1:152-153.

blindness, after they had lost the pious and holy hypocrisy, and *will-worship*, (*ethelothreskeia*) meaning thereby a form of worship contrived by men.<sup>38</sup>

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

We may add that the knowledge of this matter demands its own proper explanation. There are two principal branches. First, we must hold that the spiritual worship of God does not consist either in external ceremonies, or any other kind of works whatsoever; and, secondly, that no worship is legitimate unless it be so framed as to have for its only rule the will of him to whom it is performed. Both of these are absolutely necessary. For as we savor of nothing but earth and flesh, so we measure God by ourselves. Hence it is that we always take more pleasure in external show, which is of no value in the sight on God, than in that inward worship of the heart, which alone he approves and requires. On the other hand, the wantonness of our minds is notorious, which breaks forth, especially in this quarter, where nothing at all ought to have been dared. Men allow themselves to devise all modes of worship, and change and rechange them at pleasure. Nor is the fault of our age. Even from the beginning of the world, the world sported thus licentiously with God. He himself proclaims that there is nothing he values more than obedience. (I Sam. xv. 22.) Wherefore, all modes of worship devised contrary to his command, he not only repudiates as void, but distinctly condemns. Why need I adduce proofs in so clear a matter? Passages to this effect should be proverbial among Christians.<sup>39</sup>

## Brief Form of a Confession of Faith

I confess that both the whole rule of right living, and also instruction in faith, are mostly delivered in the sacred Scriptures, to which nothing can, without criminality, be added, from which nothing can be taken away. I therefore detest all of men's imagining which they would obtrude upon us as articles of faith, and bind upon our consciences by laws and statutes. And thus I repudiate in general whatever has been introduced into the worship of God without authority from the word of God. Of this kind are all the Popish ceremonies. In short, I detest the tyrannical yoke by which miserable consciences have been oppressed—as the law of auricular confession, celibacy, and others of the same description.<sup>40</sup>

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

Praise be to God, you have not to learn what is the true faith of Christians, and the doctrine which they ought to hold, seeing that by your means the true purity of the faith has been restored. That is, that we hold God alone to be the sole Governor of our souls, that we hold his law to be the only rule and spiritual directory for our consciences, not serving him according to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 1:189.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, "The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:260-261.

<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, "Brief Form of a Confession of Faith" in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:133.

the foolish inventions of men. Also, that according to his nature he would be worshiped in spirit and in purity of heart. On the other hand, acknowledging that there is nothing but all wretchedness in ourselves, and that we are corrupt in all our feelings and affections, so that our souls are a very abyss of iniquity, utterly despairing of ourselves; and that, having exhausted every presumption of our own wisdom, worth, or power of well-doing, we must have recourse to the fountain of every blessing, which is in Christ Jesus.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> John Calvin, “To the Protector Somerset” in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, 5:189.