

Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God, Appendix B Presbyterian Worship: Old and New

A Review and Commentary by Kevin Reed¹ upon *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, (John Frame [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996]).

John Frame's *Worship in Spirit and Truth* is a Sunday School manual purporting to summarize biblical principles and practices of worship. Yet it really constitutes an abandonment of both scriptural and confessional views on worship.

Reviewing a book like this is a frustrating exercise in several respects.

First, there is the matter of definitions. Frame claims to embrace the regulative principle, the *Westminster Confession*, and other historic formulations of reformed worship. Yet, upon close examination, the reader will find that Frame has actually departed from the historic parameters of Reformed worship

Second, Frame's methods of establishing his own practices of worship are cursory at best. Numerous proof texts are parenthetically scattered throughout the pages of his book; yet, he does not provide a careful exegesis of these scripture references to demonstrate how they support his more controversial conclusions. Perhaps we cannot expect a detailed exposition of the Bible in a slim Sunday school manual. Nevertheless, readers should ponder the scriptures carefully, instead of assuming that the parenthetical texts actually provide support for the propositions adjacent to them.

Third, Frame raises so many issues with respect to both the doctrine and practices of worship, that it would take a book-length response to sort through all his aberrations and reply to them thoroughly.

Since we are called to be judicious stewards of our resources, we shall not waste precious time chasing Frame down every rabbit trail. Yet, because of the misconceptions created by Frame's remarks on the regulative principle and the *Westminster Confession*, we will review the historical development of the regulative principle of worship. We will then address some of the troubling implications of Mr. Frame's position, especially as it undermines the teaching of the *Westminster Confession*.

Readers interested in the *biblical* foundation for the regulative principle should study the Reformation documents and writings referenced in the following discussion; examine the accompanying proof-texts in the original sources (especially in a complete edition of the Westminster Standards), to see the scriptural basis for the reformed view of worship. Also, since the present reviewer has already written a brief summary of his own understanding of the scriptural teaching on worship,² we will not rehearse that same discussion here.

The Regulative Principle in Reformation Theology

The regulative principle did not burst forth *ex nihilo* during the Puritan era; its ultimate foundation comes from scripture. The Protestant Reformers defended both the authority and sufficiency of scripture, and they sought to apply the *sola scriptura* rule to the subject of worship.

¹ Used by permission.

² See *Biblical Worship* by Kevin Reed (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1995).

The Preface to the French *Confession* of 1559 illustrates the connection between the regulative authority of scripture and the proper worship of God:

We owe such respect and reverence to the word of God as shall prevent us from adding to it anything of our own, but shall make us conform entirely to the rules it prescribes. And inasmuch as the Roman Church, forsaking the use and customs of the primitive church, has introduced new commandments and a new form of worship of God, we esteem it but reasonable to prefer the commandments of God, who is himself truth, to the commandments of men, who by their nature are inclined to deceit and vanity.³

Article 5 of this confession stresses the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Article 24 rejects a variety of Popish practices, especially:

purgatory, monastic vows, pilgrimages, the prohibition of marriage, and of eating meat, the ceremonial observance of days, auricular confession, indulgences, and all such things by which they hope to merit forgiveness and salvation. These things we reject, not only for the false idea of merit which is attached to them, but also because they are human inventions, imposing a yoke on the conscience.⁴

Similar testimony will be found in a confession drafted by John Calvin for the Reformed churches of France (1562). The *Confession* states:

Now on our part, in accordance with his declaration, that obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22), 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 to 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.⁵

The Confession continues with a specific application of the regulative authority of Scripture with respect to practices of worship:

³ English translation is published in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931 [6th edition]; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:357. Likewise, the Scottish First Book of Discipline (1560) draws a direct connection between the authority of scripture and ecclesiastical ordinances related to worship. In an explanation to the first heading of doctrine in the Book, the Scottish church declares: "We affirm that, *All scripture inspired of God is profitable to instruct, to reprove, and to exhort*. In which books of Old and New Testaments we affirm that all things necessary for the instruction of the kirk, and to make the man of God perfect, are contained and sufficiently expressed. By the contrary doctrine, we understand whatsoever men, by laws, councils, or constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as be vows of chastity, forswearing of marriage, binding of men and women to several and disguised apparels, to the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat for conscience sake, prayer for the dead; and keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of apostles, martyrs, virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our lady. Which things, because in God's Scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the civil magistrate." *The First and Second Books of Discipline* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1993), pp. 25-26.

⁴ Article 24; as published in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:373-74, emphasis added.

⁵ *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (1844; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 2, p. 147.

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 the 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: everything would go to wreck, and Christianity differ in nothing from the idolatries of the heathen.⁶

The Geneva Bible (1560) contains marginal notes reflecting a Reformed understanding of worship. For example, a note on Matthew 15:9 says, “God will not be honoured according to man’s fantasy, but detesteth all good intentions which are not grounded on his word.”

Therefore, we see that at the heart of Reformed worship is the concept that God may not be worshiped by means of human devising, even upon the pretense of good intent; rather, genuine worship must be offered by the means which God has enjoined in his word.

To illustrate how the regulative principle provides the basis for practices of corporate worship, we turn to the Genevan Order—a directory for worship which was adopted by the congregation of English exiles living in Geneva at the time of Calvin.⁷

In the Preface to the Order, a connection is drawn between the sufficiency of Scripture, and the worship of the church:

We, therefore, not as the greatest clerks of all, but as the least able of many, do present unto you which desire the increase of God’s glory, and the pure simplicity of his word, a form and order of a reformed church, limited within the compass of God’s word, which our Saviour has left unto us as only [alone] sufficient to govern all our actions by; so that whatsoever is added to this word by man’s device, seem it never so good, holy, or beautiful, yet before our God, who is jealous and cannot admit any companion or counsellor, it is evil, wicked, and abominable.⁸

Therefore, the worship practices of the church, here styled “ceremonies,” are restricted to those modes enjoined by Scripture:

For as ceremonies grounded upon God’s word, and approved in the New Testament, are commendable (as the circumstance thereof does support), so those that man has invented (though he had never so good occasion thereunto), if they are once abused, import a necessity, hinder God’s word, or be drawn into a superstition, without respect ought to be abolished.⁹

⁶ *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 148-49.

⁷ *The Genevan Book of Order: The Form of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments, etc., Used in the English Congregation at Geneva (1556; rpt. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1993)*. The congregation was pastored by John Knox. It is important to stress that this order is not a liturgy. The Scottish historian, C. G. M’Crie notes: ‘The expression “Liturgy” applied to the Form of Prayers was both unfortunate and infelicitous. For whether the term be taken in the more restricted technical sense in which it is applied to the Communion service at the altar, or in the wider and more popular acceptation according to which it describes prescribed and obligatory forms or offices of worship, it is altogether inapplicable to any Presbyterian service-book, which never aims at being more than a directory, with forms for optional use.’ C.G. M’Crie, *The Public Worship of Presbyterian Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1892), p. 106.

⁸ *The Genevan Book of Order*, page 25.

⁹ *The Genevan Book of Order*, page 27.

Having stated these general principles, the Genevan Order goes on to summarize the basic practices of worship which will be found in Christian worship:

We have contented ourselves with that wisdom which we have learned in God's book, where we are taught to preach the word of God purely, minister the sacraments sincerely, and use prayers and other orders thereby approved, to the increase of God's glory, and edification of his holy people. As touching preaching, forasmuch as it is allowed of all godly men, we may at this time leave the probation [proof] thereof. And also for the ministration of the two sacraments, our book gives sufficient proof.¹⁰

Following this statement, there is a brief defense of congregational psalm-singing, which was a practice recently restored among Protestant congregations.

The contents of Genevan Order reflect the principles outlined in the Preface. The order allows only such elements of worship as may be established by God's word. The weekly service on the Lord's day is composed of the following items: (1) a congregational prayer for confession of sin; (2) congregational singing of a psalm, followed by (3) a prayer before the sermon; (4) the sermon (coupled with the reading of scripture); after the sermon, (5) a prayer for the whole estate of Christ's Church; (6) congregational singing of another psalm; (7) the minister pronouncing a blessing (taken from scripture) upon the congregation. Forms are also provided for the more occasional aspects of public service, such as baptisms and the administration of the Lord's Supper.

Although the Order contains a number of prayers and admonitions for worship, it includes an explanatory note making it clear that ministers are not bound in a slavish adherence to the book:

It shall not be necessary for the minister daily to repeat all these things before mentioned, but beginning with some manner of confession, to proceed to the Sermon; which ended, he either uses the prayer for all estates before mentioned, or else prays, as the Spirit of God shall move his heart, framing the same according to the time and matter which he hath entreated of.¹¹

Elsewhere in Reformed creeds, readers will find ample testimony to the regulative principle. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) states it in a nutshell:

Question 96. What does God require in the second commandment?

Answer. That we in nowise make any image of God, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word.

So far, we have restricted our citations to public formularies and documents drawn from the era of the Reformation. These quotations are representative of many other public testimonies, as well as the opinions of individual Reformers.

Calvin considered the subject of worship to be foundational to the Christian faith. In his tract *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, the Genevan reformer states that the entire substance of Christianity may be comprised under two principal heads: "first, of the mode in

¹⁰ *The Genevan Book of Order*, page 30.

¹¹ *The Genevan Book of Order*, page 63.

which God is truly worshipped, and secondly, of the source from which salvation is obtained.”¹² Elsewhere, he writes, “to debate about the mode in which men obtain salvation, and say nothing of the mode in which God may be duly worshipped, is too absurd.”¹³

Calvin says that “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.” The reformer continues:

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 honor 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 do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,” (1 Sam. 15:22; Matt. 15:9). Every addition to his word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere “will worship” (*ethelothreeskeia*) is vanity [Col. 2:23]. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.¹⁴

Among the reformers, none was so forceful as John Knox. Speaking plainly on the subject, Knox said: “All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without his own express commandment, is idolatry.”¹⁵ Knox’s views led him to oppose both the worship of Rome, and many elements of the Anglican liturgy.

In another succinct statement, the Scottish reformer said: “I feared not to affirm, that of necessity it is, that such as hope for life everlasting avoid all superstition, vain religion, and idolatry. Vain religion and idolatry I call whatsoever is done in God’s service or honour, without the express commandment of his own word.”¹⁶

It should now be clear that the regulative principle, although not called by that term, was a concept already widely understood among Protestants; it was not a latter-day invention of the Puritans.¹⁷

¹² *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544; rpt. Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), p.15; or, as published in *The Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (1844; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 1, p. 126.

¹³ The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church (1548) in *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 3, p. 260.

¹⁴ *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 18; or, as published in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 1, pp. 128-29. Cf. *Necessity*, pp. 23-24, 47-50, 96-97; in *Selected Works: Tracts*, vol. 1, pp. 132-33, 151-53, 189-90. Also, see the forthcoming book, *Come Out From Among Them: ‘Anti-Nicodemite’ Writings of John Calvin* (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press). Also note: Calvin’s *Commentary* on Deuteronomy 12:29-31; Calvin’s letters, to Somerset (22 Oct. 1548; *Letters*, vol. 2), to King Edward (Jan. 1551; *Letters*, vol. 2), to the Frankfurt church (*Letters*, vol. 3, pp. 117-19), to Richard Cox (as reprinted in Knox’s *Works*, vol. 4, pp. 58-60).

¹⁵ *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* (1550); in *Works*, vol. 3, p. 34; *Selected Writings* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1995), vol. 1, p. 23. Readers interested in Knox’s teaching about worship should obtain the *Selected Writings of John Knox*, and give special attention to the first 100 pages of the volume. See also the essay on “The Biblical Law of Worship,” in the volume, *John Knox: The Forgotten Reformer* by Kevin Reed (Presbyterian Heritage, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Appellation from the Sentence Pronounced by the Bishops and Clergy: Addressed to the Nobility and Estates of Scotland (1558), in *Works*, vol. 4, p. 468; *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, p.474.

¹⁷ Two forthcoming publications will amply demonstrate the opinions of the preeminent Reformers: *Come Out From Among Them: ‘Anti-Nicodemite’ Writings of John Calvin* (with an introductory essay tracing Calvin’s concern for

Note specifically that the Reformation documents clearly show that the regulative principle grows out of the *sola scriptura* rule of Protestant theology. The central idea is that the church must restrict its worship to the means enjoined by Scripture, and may not worship God “in any other way than he has commanded in his word” (to borrow the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*). It is further noted that good intention is not a sufficient basis for adopting methods of worship which are human innovations.

The Westminster Standards

Having traced the regulative principle within earlier Protestant formularies, we now come to a brief consideration of the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Standards were produced amidst a convulsive period in English history. By the mid-1600s, matters of worship had been brought to the forefront of theological controversy in England. Thus, the doctrine of the Westminster Standards is quite exact and discriminating when touching the subject of worship.

Following Reformation theology, the Westminster divines begin with an assertion about the authority and sufficiency of scripture. The Confession illustrates the connection between the *sola scriptura* principle and the proper worship of God.

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added (1:6).

More specifically touching the subject of worship, the Confession states:

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture. (21:1, emphasis added).

Note that the crucial word in that last sentence is the term prescribed. The text does not say that men are free to utilize any mode of worship unless it is prohibited in Scripture; but it expressly says that worship is limited to ways prescribed in Scripture. This marks an essential difference between the Reformed regulative principle, and the looser notions of Anglicans and Lutherans.¹⁸

The Confession then describes various “parts” of worship which are enjoined by Scripture:

prayer, with thanksgiving the reading of the scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; all are parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings,

worship throughout his tracts and treatises); *John Knox: The Forgotten Reformer* (by Kevin Reed), chapter 2, “*The Biblical Law of Worship*.”

¹⁸ *The Shorter Catechism* states the matter succinctly: “The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word” (Answer 51).

upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner (21:3-5).¹⁹

When speaking more particularly of the sacraments (in relation to the covenant of grace), the Confession notes certain distinctions between the Old Testament ordinances and worship in New Testament. Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory; yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles (7:6).

Thus, even a cursory glance at the Westminster Standards reveals the scope of the regulative principle of worship. The proper exercises of worship are restricted to those "parts" of worship specifically enjoined in Scripture. Later writers sometimes refer to the parts of worship as "elements," just as earlier writers sometimes spoke of "ways" or "modes" of worship. Regardless of the specific terminology used, the concept is clear enough: the only proper means of worship are those which God has established in the scriptures for our present use.

Men are not free to invent new methods of worship for themselves, nor to impose such innovations on others. "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship" (WCF 20:2).²⁰

For the sake of clarification, the Westminster divines added the following statement, which is often abused:

There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (1:7).

This statement actually constitutes another restriction: that is, it serves as a reminder that even in circumstantial matters not expressly covered in Scripture, the church is still to be governed by the "general rules of the Word." Nevertheless, some modern authors try to use this statement as an escape clause, by claiming that numerous aspects of worship are merely circumstantial matters left to the broad discretion of the church.

Other writers have covered this subject thoroughly,²¹ so we will not provide a lengthy discussion of the topic here. But we pause to note that "circumstances" described in this statement are matters "common to human actions and societies": meaning that they pertain to the corporate organization of any society, whether secular or sacred.

For example, to convene its assemblies, every society must have a method of establishing a time and place for meeting. Thus, the church, in order to fulfill its duty for corporate worship

¹⁹ See the parallel teaching of the *Larger Catechism*, questions 108-109. For a clearer idea of what the Westminster divines mean by "special occasions" and the extraordinary parts of worship, see the "Appendix" to the *Directory for Public Worship*.

²⁰ This is the correct wording of this section of the *Confession*, as published in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* by S. W. Carruthers (Manchester: R. Aikman, 1937). Cf. *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), vol. 3, pp. 291-95).

²¹ See John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Columbia, 1888), chapter 4, especially p.135ff.

(Heb. 10:25), must establish an hour and location for its services. Scripture does not mandate a specific time or place; this is clearly a “circumstance,” to be governed by the general rules of Scripture. Therefore, the elders, as the biblical officers of the church, will establish a time and place conducive to the edification of the congregation.

Summary of Reformed Doctrine

The collective testimony of the Reformed creeds and writers proclaims the following principle: Each part of worship must be enjoined by scripture, if it is to be admitted as valid form of service to God. (Regardless of the terms used to designate the *parts* of worship—terms such as *modes, elements, means, forms, ways*—the Reformed creeds and authors were speaking of the same basic concept.)

We are now prepared to examine Mr. Frame’s paradigm for worship and the regulative principle. We shall see that he departs from Reformed doctrine of worship; and he specifically repudiates the teaching of the *Westminster Confession*.

Rewriting the Regulative Principle

John Frame claims to believe in the regulative principle and the Westminster Confession. In chapter 4 of his book, he opens a discussion of the regulative principle, rightly noting the deficiencies of Rome, Canterbury, and Lutheranism. He quotes WCF 21:1, noting that the operative word is “prescribed” (p. 39). So far, so good.

He then moves to a section of applications, asking, “Is there, then, no role for human thought, planning, or decisions, in the worship of God?” (p. 40). He provides a negative assessment of some (unnamed) Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians who supposedly drew a sharp distinction between secular and sacred matters. Yet, the Puritans or Scots did not claim that decisions on circumstances were purely secular; rather, circumstances may be considered indifferent matters considered abstractly, but they obtain a sacred significance when implemented in some way for the service of God.

Because circumstances are restricted to actions “common to human actions and societies,” Frame concludes that matters such as specific words in prayer are not covered by the confessional doctrine of circumstances; and thus, the church is endowed with wide latitude in applications pertaining to prayer. Here he is setting up the reader for later deviations from the confessional paradigm.

Frame claims that his formulation “does not contradict the confession, but goes beyond it” (p. 43). But is this so?

Moreover, Frame caricatures the Puritan position, by accusing it of drawing a sharp distinction between formal services and other meetings at which worship takes place (such as family worship). Certainly some modern churches have drawn that distinction, but we challenge Frame to find this as a general teaching of either Puritans or Scottish Presbyterians. To Puritans and Scots alike, the elements of worship used in corporate worship were the same elements employed in the home, except for the public ordinances (the sacraments). (See the Westminster Directory for Family Worship.)²²

²² I dare say that Frame’s own church is more likely to draw a false dichotomy between “formal” worship and other Christian meetings. For example, his book is designed to be used for Sunday schools. When those Sunday schools convene, and instruction is undertaken in the setting of a church meeting, Frame encourages open discussion (p.

Frame now carries his “application” further, treating the *content* of singing in church on the level with minor discretionary matters. “Different churches legitimately apply God’s commands in different ways. God commands us to sing; some churches may apply that command by singing three hymns during their services, others four. Some may sing primarily traditional hymns, others contemporary songs” (p. 45). Notice how Frame encompasses in his view of application, not only the *number* of songs used, but the *content* of the singing as well. With the wave of his hand he has just dismissed one of the most serious controversies in Presbyterian history, by putting the *content* of song in worship on a level with the decision to sing a particular *number* of songs. Incredible!

In chapter 5, Frame sets the focus on public worship. He opens by disclaiming a paradigm composed of “elements” of worship:

The Puritans developed the doctrine of “elements” or “parts” of worship. Worship, they believed, is made up of certain clearly distinguishable elements: prayer, the reading of scripture, preaching, and so on. The regulative principle, they held, requires us to find biblical warrant for each of these elements.

But there are serious problems with this approach. The most serious problem is that there is no scriptural warrant for it! Scripture nowhere divides worship into a series of independent “elements,” each requiring independent scriptural justification” (pp. 52-53).

Now this is a very crafty description. Frame speaks of the “Puritan” view, and then goes on to describe a paradigm which parallels the *Westminster Confession*. Strictly speaking, this is not wholly inaccurate, since the *Westminster Confession* was written by Puritans. Yet, it might have been more shocking to his Presbyterian readers if Mr. Frame simply had come out and said directly, “I oppose the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* in its description of the parts of worship.”

It is important to realize that, in rejecting the idea of elements (or parts) of worship, Frame has undermined sections 3-6 of chapter 21 of the *Westminster Confession*. The *Confession* specifically uses the term “part” or “parts” three times within these sections, in its description of worship. Therefore, to reject the concept of parts to worship, is to reject the teaching of the *Confession*.

Moreover, as we have seen, the concept of *parts* of worship is much older than the Puritans. It is interwoven within numerous Reformed creeds and advocated by writers from the outset of the Reformation. Thus, Mr. Frame has not only dismissed the Puritans, and the *Confession*; in his self-proclaimed wisdom, he has also cast off the teachings of the Reformers.

Further still, Frame resorts to exaggeration when he characterizes the Puritans as holding to rigidly “independent” elements, since Reformed writers do not deny the interrelationship and

xiv). Need we ask: Are the women present for these discussions to be regulated by the apostolic injunction which governs the “public worship” services? “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (1 Cor. 14:34-35).

The usual answer given is that since a Sunday school is not a “worship” service, then women may freely participate with comments and inquiry, an outlook which Frame seems to share (cf. p. 75, note 6). The division between “formal” worship services and other “informal” public meetings for instruction is not a Puritan, Scottish, or confessional distinction at all. It is a modern accommodation to feminism in churches which are soft on biblical authority. So we ask Mr. Frame not to blame the Puritans for the errors of our times; for they are not the origin of such sophistries.

overlapping nature of various parts of worship. The key to the Reformed view is its demand for all means of worship to have clear scriptural warrant, not whether each part is rigidly independent of others.

Frame speaks against the “technical sense of Puritan theology,” and “the elaborate Puritan methodology” (p. 54) which he decries as insufficient. He has now moved from damning the Puritans with faint praise, to unveiled opposition. And let it be remembered that, by opposing the Puritans, he is in some respects heaping more scorn upon the confessional standards, since they were written by the Puritans.

If Mr. Frame clearly demonstrated where the Puritans were wrong, with firm exegesis from Scripture, we would take his arguments more seriously. But the professor is given to general assertions which he does not prove, either from scripture or history. Are we supposed to accept matters as Mr. Frame characterizes (and caricatures them), simply because he says so?

Mr. Frame cannot wholly escape a dilemma created by his own denial of the confessional description of elements of worship. He still has to find some nomenclature in the English language to describe the various “parts” of worship. Thus, Frame speaks of “aspects” of worship. He then formulates his own list of the parts—okay—“aspects”—of worship. These fit under a heading entitled, “My List,” which in itself reveals the direction of his reasoning. Since Frame has rejected the Reformed/confessional/Puritan idea of biblically-mandated parts of worship, he does not provide us with a divine pattern for worship. Instead, we discover Frame’s tidy list of “things to do in worship” (p. 55). (Perhaps with the acumen of the medieval schoolmen, Mr. Frame can explain to us the subtle differences between “things,” “aspects,” and “parts” in worship.)

Frame uses the assumptions he has introduced (against the parts of worship) to raise controverted issues in which he has an interest. Obviously if he can dispense with the confessional paradigm on worship, it leaves him with greater latitude to inject numerous “aspects” which do not fit within the confessional paradigm of worship.

Throughout the course of the book, Frame makes allowance for uninspired hymnody, instrumental music, ecclesiastical festival days, choral anthems, drama, and sacred dance in worship. He defends the idea of children’s church and, in a footnote, he leaves the door open for paedocommunion. Is it any wonder Frame is uncomfortable with the confessional paradigm for worship, since it would exclude such extravagant claims?

In arguing his case, Frame adopts a dubious method of hermeneutics. For example, consider his section on drama in worship (pp. 92-94). Frame does not produce a scriptural command to employ drama in worship. Instead, the symbolic actions of prophets, the typological character of OT feasts, and Christ’s use of parables within scriptural narratives, are produced as sufficient grounds to justify drama in worship. Frame has now stretched his construction of the regulative principle beyond any form which would be recognized in historic reformed paradigms of worship. Make no mistake about it: we can adhere to reformed and confessional views, or we can adopt Frame’s position; but there is no way to have them both. The disparity is too great.

Now this fact raises a troubling issue about the author’s integrity. In the Preface to the book, Frame claims, “In my view, the Westminster Confession is entirely right in its regulative principle—that true worship is limited to what God commands” (p. xiii). (Including drama, right?) Turning the page, we are assured, “My own theological commitment is Presbyterian; I subscribe enthusiastically to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and I trust that that commitment will be quite evident in this book” (pp. xiv-xv). Unfortunately, Frame’s commitment to confessional Presbyterianism is precisely what is *not* apparent in the book.

Indeed, what Frame professes to give with one hand, he takes away with the other. In the Preface, he shows his true colors:

Presbyterian worship—based on the biblical “regulative principle,” which I describe in these pages—was in its early days very restrictive, austere, and “minimalist.”²³ It excluded organs, choirs, hymn texts other than the Psalms, symbolism in the worship area, and religious holidays except for the Sabbath.²⁴ Presbyterians in the “Covenanter” tradition, such as those in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and a few other denominations, still worship this way, but they are in that respect a small minority of conservative Presbyterians today.

Nevertheless, the Puritan theology of worship that produced this minimalism is still taught in theologically conservative Presbyterian churches and seminaries as the authentic Presbyterian and Reformed view of worship. This is partly because that theology is reflected in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Catechisms, to which these churches subscribe. But the Westminster standards actually contain very little of the Puritan theology of worship. The Puritan and Scottish divines who wrote the Westminster standards were wise enough not to include in them all of their ideas on worship.

The result has been that although few conservative Presbyterian churches actually worship in the Puritan way, the Puritan theology of worship remains the standard of orthodoxy among them. This discrepancy sometimes leads to guilty consciences. I have talked to pastors, for instance, who are unwilling to go back to exclusive use of the Psalms in congregational singing, yet feel awkward about singing hymns. They almost seem to think that they ought to worship as the Puritans did, even though they have no intention of doing so. They worry that this wavering amounts to an inconsistency in their commitment to the Reformed faith and to Presbyterian orthodoxy.

These remarks contain a startling admission. Frame rightly notes a discrepancy between what Presbyterians *profess* in their doctrine and what they *practice* in worship. Rather than demand conformity in practice to confessional doctrine, Frame is encouraging Presbyterians to abandon the doctrine. In doing so, Frame speaks out of both sides of his mouth. As noted, he wants to assure readers of his commitment to the Westminster Standards. Yet, in the same breath, he acknowledges that he is constructing a new paradigm for worship:

The result of our rethinking, I hope, will be a somewhat revised paradigm for Presbyterian worship: one thoroughly Reformed in its assumptions, affirming the regulative principle and the statements of the *Westminster Confession* and Catechisms, but allowing greater flexibility than the Puritans did in applying God’s commands for worship.

²³ Frame is here adopting the language used by James Jordan, another heterodox writer. Mr. Jordan has a history of publishing speculative views on worship. For a brief appraisal of Jordan’s views, see *The Canterbury Tales: An Extended Review and Commentary based upon the Geneva Papers* by Kevin Reed (reprinted article; Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1984, 1996).

²⁴ It should be noted that Reformers and Puritans opposed some of these practices upon additional considerations beyond a bare statement of the regulative principle. They often invoked scriptural prohibitions which directly condemn superstitions and imitations of pagan worship (such as Deut. 12:1-4, 29-32). The application of biblical injunctions against superstitions and imitations are not a focal point of this review, and Frame does not deal with such prohibitions in any significant manner. Nevertheless, readers should realize that the Reformed doctrine of worship is broader in scope than might be apparent from the present discussion about the regulative principle.

Here again, Frame has tried to cast the Puritans in a negative role, and get readers to accept his distorted portrayal of the Westminster Standards. It's a bold play on Frame's part—similar to a straight-faced press conference given by a political spin doctor.

Can he really expect readers to believe that, “the Westminster standards actually contain very little of the Puritan theology of worship”? Has he seriously studied the *Confession* (chapters 1, 20-22, 27-29), the *Larger Catechism* (#104-121), and the *Shorter Catechism* (#45-62)? Further, we have not even considered the Westminster Directory for Public Worship, as well as the *Directory for Family Worship*. Now, we know that Frame does not adhere to these documents, because they do not have constitutional status in his denomination (cf. Frame, p. 17, note 2). Nevertheless, it is certain that the Westminster Assembly would not divorce these documents from the rest of the Standards; and thus the divines would not accept Frame's characterization that “the Westminster Standards actually contain very little of the Puritan theology of worship.” And how would they react to Frame's patronizing nonsense that they “were wise enough not to include in them all of their ideas on worship”? Certainly the Westminster Standards contain enough Puritan theology to refute Mr. Frame's ideas about worship.²⁵

We applaud Mr. Frame's pastoral desire to help his fellow Presbyterians who are suffering from “guilty consciences.” Might we suggest that the true remedy for their “wavering” and “inconsistency” is repentance, and a return to the biblical teaching and practices of the Reformed faith and Presbyterian orthodoxy?

The larger tragedy is that Mr. Frame's book is in itself a testimony to the low spiritual condition of “conservative” Presbyterian churches in America. Frame has openly admitted the discrepancy between confessional doctrine and ordinary practice within Presbyterian denominations. Consider further, that Mr. Frame teaches at a Presbyterian seminary; he is also a Presbyterian pastor (PCA); his book is published by a Presbyterian publisher; the blurb printed on the back cover of his book includes endorsements by four other seminary instructors who teach at institutions which profess to be Presbyterian and Reformed.

These facts raise distressing implications regarding the disingenuous nature of confessional subscription within both the churches and the seminaries. There are also troubling ramifications concerning the doctrine of Scripture, since the regulative principle rests upon the foundation of the sufficiency of Scripture, with respect to worship. Frame's book furnishes patent evidence that ecclesiastical discipline is lacking in the churches, and that seminary professors can teach heterodox views with impunity. If Presbyterians took their creed seriously, Mr. Frame would be removed from both the seminary and the pastorate, and not allowed to teach. But in the current situation, the majority of pastors, seminarians, and the people are partners in the crimes of corrupt worship and confessional laxity. “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so” (Jer. 5:30-31).

Copyright 1999, 2003 Second Edition © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)

²⁵ We encourage serious readers to make an experiment. Compare Mr. Frame's doctrine with any standard Puritan (or Reformed) exposition of the second commandment, or old-line Presbyterian explanation of the Westminster Standards. Ask yourself: “Which discussion takes scripture more seriously? Which one is really attending to the details of the biblical text?” Compare the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* with Mr. Frame's description of his own worship services in chapter 13. Which service tends most to the honor and glory of God?

