

The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas, Chapter 1

Sola Scriptura

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Introduction

What is the most popular holy day of the year? Is it Christmas, Easter, Kwanzaa, or the Christian Sabbath? In America, by far the most popular, honored day is not the Lord's day but Christmas. Why is Christmas so sacred to so many people? Do we find it commanded by God in the Bible? Was it celebrated and honored by the apostles and the early church? Is there biblical justification for such a holy day anywhere in Scripture? The answer to all these questions is *no*. Christmas did not even become a holy day in the church until the fourth century. Further, its adoption was not based on God's word, but was a pragmatic move to induce more pagans to join the church.

Interestingly, the Calvinistic wing of the Protestant Reformation (the Puritans and Presbyterians) rejected Christmas and the papal liturgical calendar as holy days not authorized by God.¹ This rejection did not mean that the early Puritans and Presbyterians had anything against the birth of Christ, for they honored the whole work of redemption every Lord's day. Neither does it mean that they did not care about their children, for no people within Christendom did more to catechize and educate their own children than did the Puritans and Presbyterians. These Reformed believers swept away all the unauthorized remnants of Romanism because they made the Scriptures the only infallible standard and authority in determining worship ordinances. Any ordinance solely based on church tradition or man's authority was discarded. By consistently applying *sola Scriptura* (i.e., the Scripture alone) to the worship and government of the church, the Puritans and Presbyterians accomplished purity in worship not seen since the apostolic church.

¹ D. M. Murray writes, "*The Reformation*. The 'keeping of holy dayes..., all those that the papists have invented, as the feasts...of Chrismasse...: which things because in God's Scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realme' (*The First Book of Discipline*, 88-89). Thus the Scottish Reformers abolished the observances of the Christian Year. In their view the Lord's Day alone had scriptural authority. Their attitude is further seen in the conditional acceptance by the General Assembly in 1566 of the Second Helvetic Confession of Faith: exception was taken to its support for the observances of the Christian Year" ("Christian Year" in Nigel M. De S. Cameron, ed., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993], 170). After Laud's liturgy (which Charles I attempted to impose by force upon Scotland) was defeated by godly Presbyterians, "the Christian Year was again 'utterly abolished' by the 1638 Glasgow Assembly 'because they are neither commanded nor warranted by Scripture' (Act session 17)" (*Ibid*, 171). The victory of Presbyterianism over the popish, prelatical religion of Laud and Charles I led to a great covenanted reformation. This reformation produced the Westminster Standards. Note the Assembly's teaching on holy days: "There is no day commanded in Scripture to keep holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days vulgarly called *Holy-Days*, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued" (The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, 1645). With the overthrow of the evil, corrupt, prelatical House of Stuart (1688) and "the re-establishment of Presbyterianism after the Revolution [1689] the Christian Year ceased to be observed in the Church of Scotland for nearly 200 years" (*ibid.*). Interestingly, the re-establishment of papal holy days and all sorts of other human innovations within Presbyterianism occurred virtually at the same time in Scotland and North America (see Appendix B).

Sadly, this purity attained by our spiritual forefathers has, with the passage of time, been cast aside. Pragmatism, tradition and human opinion are exalted in determining how God's people are to worship Him. The attitude among many in church leadership positions is to give the people what they want, rather than to submit to God's divine revelation. One sad symptom of this trend is the widespread acceptance of extra-biblical holy days such as Christmas in conservative Presbyterian churches. Thus, a study is needed to call Presbyterians and all professing Reformed Christians back to the biblical attainments of our spiritual forefathers.

The purpose of this book is to show that God does not give sinful man the authority to invent his own rules regarding worship. The Bible rejects human autonomy in the sphere of worship just as it does in the area of ethics. This study of Reformed worship will be limited to two areas. First, there will be an examination of the regulative principle of worship. This principle was one of the two pillars of the Calvinist wing of the Reformation.² The scriptural law of worship forces man to find biblical warrant for all the ordinances of worship. Man is not to add to or detract from God's word. The second part of this book examines the unlawfulness of the keeping of the Christmas holy day. Christmas is a prime example of how professing Christians violate two important biblical principles. (1) Christmas is a violation of the regulative principle. It is an invention of man that came into the church long after the death of the apostles and the close of the canon. (2) Christmas is a monument of pagan idolatry and cannot be made pleasing to God. With regard to the monuments of idolatry, the biblical imperative is annihilation not incorporation (syncretism). It is our hope and prayer that this book will be used by God to bring many brethren (whether Reformed or non-Reformed) back to the purity of worship attained by the Calvinist wing of the Reformation. History has shown that the acceptance of Christmas by Protestant churches has been a corrupting force leading directly to further declension (e.g., the adoption of the liturgical calendar as a whole, Episcopal-Lutheran liturgies, etc.).

Sola Scriptura

One of the greatest achievements of the Protestant Reformation was a rediscovery of the biblical doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. That is, the Bible is the sole standard and authority for faith and life (read Deut. 4:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Prov. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18-19; Josh. 1:7-8). The authority, completeness, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture place the word of God above everyone. The church and all men are required to submit to the authority of Scripture without any quibbling or reservations, for it is the voice of Almighty God Himself. The Bible is the only absolute, objective standard by which ethics, doctrine, church government and worship are to be determined and judged. The Westminster Confession says, "The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures" (1:10).

² The Reformer John Calvin in "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" writes, "If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standard 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" (Henry Beveridge, ed., *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 (1844)], 11:126). Today the term Reformed has been largely reduced to the sphere of soteriology (i.e., merely the acceptance of the five points of Calvinism). At one time however, it referred primarily to the acceptance and practice of the regulative principle of worship.

The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was the greatest weapon of the Protestant reformers against the corruptions of Romanism, for it forces men to prove everything from the sacred Scriptures *alone*. Human doctrines, commandments, rituals and ordinances cannot stand when placed under God's light and wisdom.

The Roman Catholic Church for many long centuries had openly denied the final definitive authority of Scripture. The clergy could formulate autonomous doctrines and worship as long as the new teaching had the blessing of the Pope and/or consensus of the church hierarchy. The result of this autonomous authority was a progressive corruption of worship and doctrine. The doctrine of justification was replaced by human merit, sacerdotalism and works righteousness. The doctrine of worship descended into the gross, blasphemous idolatry of the mass, Mariolatry, saint worship, prayers for the dead and so on. The common people suffered under the false doctrine, arbitrary laws and idolatrous worship of the papal church.

Standing on the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, Martin Luther was very successful at eliminating many of the perverse teachings of Romanism (e.g., the Roman Catholic mass, auricular confession, pilgrimages, the saints as mediators, the sacerdotal priesthood, etc.). Unfortunately, however, perhaps as a result of his conservative personality, or his comfort with medieval style worship, or even a simple error in logic, he never made the connection between Scripture alone and the need of divine warrant for worship ordinances, the way Calvin did. Luther held that human traditions in worship are valuable and should be respected as long as they do not contradict the Bible. In other words, only rites and ceremonies that are expressly forbidden by Scripture should be disallowed. A reading of the early Lutheran symbols does reveal, however, that early Lutheran theologians had at least a vague understanding of the tension (i.e., contradiction) between their position and *sola Scriptura*, for they declare that human additions are within the sphere of *adiaphora* and are non-compulsory.³

As a result of the inconsistent application of *sola Scriptura* to only some matters relating to worship, the Lutherans retained many ceremonies, rites and practices that were not derived from the Bible. "With such a view of the discretionary power of the church in matters of worship practice, it is not at all surprising that the Lutheran church retained a large portion of the ceremonial, ritualistic and governmental structures of the Catholic church, the root causes of the corruption in the church against which Luther had rebelled in the first place."⁴ The Anglican or Episcopal church also gave the church the power to determine (i.e., invent) ecclesiastical rites and ceremonies not derived from Scripture.⁵ Thus, Lutheran and Anglican churches have denied the absolute authority of Scripture in the area of worship. Therefore, although in many ways these churches were a vast improvement over Rome (e.g., regarding justification by faith alone), in the area of worship and church government they were still fundamentally Romish with minor window-dressing reforms.

The Calvinist wing of the Reformation (Puritans, Presbyterians, Huguenots, Dutch Reformed, etc.) was fully consistent with *sola Scriptura* and, in obedience to the Scriptures,

³ See the Augsburg Confession, Art. 7, "Of the Church"; the Formula of Concord, Art. 10, "Of Ecclesiastical Ceremonies"; Martin Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church" in John Dillenber, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writing Edited with an Introduction* (New York: 1961), 343-44; Philip Melancthon's *Apology*; Willard Dow Allbeck, *Studies in Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1952), 283; J. L. Neve, *Introduction to the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1926), 260-61.

⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant, 1993 [1980]), 110.

⁵ See the Thirty Nine Articles: Art. 20, "Of the Authority of the Church"; Article 34, "Of the Traditions of the Church."

argued that whatever is not commanded by Scripture in the worship of God is forbidden. That is, anything that the church does in worship must be proven from the Bible. This proof can be attained by an explicit command of God (e.g., “Do this in remembrance of Me,” Lk. 22:19); or by logical inference from Scripture (i.e., there may not be an explicit command but when several passages are compared they teach or infer a scriptural practice). “There is a course of careful distinction to be made between the Word of God and inferences drawn from the Word of God. We may challenge the validity of inferences drawn from Scripture and attempt to determine whether they are indeed scriptural, but we may never in the same way challenge the validity of the explicit statements of Scripture. The words and statements of Scripture are absolutely authoritative. Their authority is underived and indisputable. The authority of valid inferences from Scripture on the other hand, is derivative in nature, but one cannot argue that such inferences are therefore less authoritative than the express declarations of Scripture. They simply make explicit what is already expressed implicitly in Scripture.”⁶ Some of the most important and foundational doctrines of Christianity are drawn from inferences of Scripture, such as the hypostatic union of the two natures in Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. That the use of “good and necessary consequences” or logical inference from Scripture to formulate doctrine is biblical can be seen in the following passages: Luke 20:37ff, Matt. 22:31ff, Mark 12:26, Matt. 19:4-6, 1 Cor. 11:8-10; or by biblical historical example (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate public worship).⁷ The scriptural law of worship is very simple: “The Holy Scripture prescribes the whole content of worship. By this is meant that all elements or parts of worship are prescribed by God Himself in His Word. This principle has universal reference to worship performed by men since the fall. In other words, it has equal application to the Old and the New Testaments. It is also universal in that it is regulative of all types of worship, whether public, family, or private.”⁸

God says regarding the worship of Himself: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32). The worship of God is such a serious matter that God *alone* makes the rules. No man is permitted to add anything to or detract anything from what God has prescribed. The church’s job is *not* to innovate and create new worship styles, forms, or ordinances but simply to see what God has declared in His Word and obey it. “The power of the church is purely ministerial and declarative. She is only to hold forth the doctrine, enforce the laws, and execute the government which Christ has given to her. She is to add nothing of her own to, and to subtract nothing from, what her Lord has established. Discretionary power she does not possess.”⁹

⁶ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 124.

⁷ An instance of historical example is Lord’s day public worship. There is no explicit command or divine imperative changing public worship from the seventh day (Saturday) to the first day (Sunday) of the week, recorded in Scripture. Yet in the New Testament, the change from the seventh day to the first day is recorded as an accomplished fact (Ac. 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2, Rev. 1:10). Not every divine command or prophetic word has been inscripturated (i.e. included in the Bible). The universal practice of the apostolic church, such as Lord’s day public worship, is binding because of the unique authority given to the apostles, i.e., direct revelation. When the apostles died, direct revelation ceased and the canon was closed; now our doctrine, worship, and all historical examples are limited to the Bible, the Word of God. Those who appeal to church traditions, invented after the closing of the canon, for authority in establishing worship ordinances are, in principle, no better than Jeroboam, the son of Nebat (1 Kgs. 12:26-33).

⁸ William Young, “The Second Commandment” in Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), 75.

⁹ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1872), 2:163. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* says that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by Himself,

Most professing Christians would be outraged if someone added his own poetry or writings to the Bible. Isn't that what cults do? Most evangelicals would think a person a dangerous heretic who decided to make up new doctrines based solely on his own imagination. Isn't that what the Papal church has done? Yet, when it comes to that very important activity of worshiping God, many professing Christians think virtually anything goes. What would most believers think of a church that decided to eliminate the Lord's supper, or baptism, or the preaching of God's Word? They would probably classify such a church as a cult. Yet, the same command that forbids us from *eliminating* any of the worship ordinances commanded in God's Word also forbids us from *adding* to what God has commanded. "We say that the command to add nothing is an organic part of the whole law, as law, and therefore, that every human addition to the worship of God, even if it be not contrary to any particular command, is yet contrary to the general command that nothing be added."¹⁰

The vast majority of "Bible believing" churches today are totally ignorant of God's scriptural law of worship (i.e., the regulative principle). Many Christians, when confronted with this doctrine, argue that such a doctrine is an Old Testament teaching. They say that God in the New Testament economy has liberated us from such strictness. But an examination of the New Testament teaching on worship reveals that God's regulative principle of worship has not been abrogated but remains in full force. Furthermore, the regulative principle of worship gives man true liberty, for it frees man from the arbitrary opinions, imaginations, and gimmicks of other men.¹¹

The regulative principle of worship is taught throughout the Bible. What follows is an examination of the many passages in Scripture that *prove* that "whatever is not commanded in Scripture in the worship of God is forbidden." Worship ordinances must be based specifically on what God says and not on human opinion or tradition.

The Regulative Principle in the Old Testament

1. *The Unacceptable Offering*

And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell (Gen. 4:3-5).

What was it regarding Cain's offering that made it unacceptable before God? The preference for Abel's offering and the rejection of Cain's was not arbitrary, but based upon past revelation given to Adam and his family. Evidently God revealed this information to Adam when He killed animals to make coverings for Adam and his wife (cf. Gen. 2:21). Generations later,

and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men...or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture" (Chap. XXI, sec. 1).

¹⁰ Thomas E. Peck, *Miscellanies* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1895), 1:82.

¹¹ "The Christian is free from the commandments of men in matters of worship because God is the only lawgiver and His will is the perfect rule of all righteousness and holiness. Consequently, human constitutions [or ordinances] are contrary to the word of the Lord, if they are devised as part of the worship of God and their observance is bound upon the conscience as of necessary obligation. Calvin points out that in Colossians, Paul 'maintains that the doctrine of true worship is not to be sought from men, because the Lord has faithfully and fully taught as in what way He is to be worshiped' (*Inst.* IV, X, 8)" (William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship*, 7).

Noah knew that God would only accept clean animals and birds as burnt offerings to the Lord (cf. Gen. 8:20). Cain, unlike his brother Abel, decided, apart from God's word, that an offering of the fruit of the ground would be acceptable before the Lord. But God rejected Cain's offering because it was a creation of his mind. God did not command it. Therefore, even if Cain had been sincere in his desire to please God, God still would have rejected his offering.

A common objection to the interpretation given above is that there are no previously recorded divine imperatives regarding blood sacrifice in the book of Genesis. Therefore, it is often asserted that the idea that Cain violated the regulative principle is a case of assuming what one is setting out to prove. This argument is refuted by the inspired comments of the author of Hebrews who wrote, "by faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain" (Heb. 11:4). Biblical faith presupposes a trust in divine revelation. Throughout Hebrews 11 true faith is spoken of as a belief in God's word that results in obedience to God's revealed will. Obviously then, Abel's offering was not based on human reason or an educated guess. It was rooted in Jehovah's command. John Brown concurs,

Though we have no particular account of the institution of sacrifice, the theory of its originating in express divine appointment is the only tenable one. The idea of expressing religious feelings, or of expiating sin, by shedding the blood of animals, could never have entered into the mind of man. We read that God clothed our first parents with the skin of animals, and by far the most probable account of this matter is, that these were the skins of animals which He had commanded them to offer in sacrifice. We have already seen, in our illustrations of the ninth chapter, ver. 16, that all divine covenants, all merciful arrangements in reference to fallen man, have been ratified by sacrifice. The declaration of mercy contained in the first promise seems to have been accompanied with the institution of expiatory sacrifice. And expiatory sacrifice, when offered from a faith in the divine revelation in reference to it, was acceptable to God, both as the appointed expression of conscious guilt and ill desert, and of the hope of mercy, and as an act of obedience to the divine will. It would appear that this revelation was not believed by Cain, that he did not see and feel the need for expiatory sacrifice, and that his religion consisted merely in an acknowledgment of the Deity as the author of the benefits which he enjoyed. Abel, on the other hand, did believe the revelation. He readily acknowledges himself a sinner, and expresses his penitence and his hope of forgiveness in the way of God's appointment. Believing what God has said, he did what God had enjoined.¹²

The Hebrews 11:4 passage offers indisputable biblical proof that acceptable worship cannot be based on a human tradition which involves, not a faith in God and his infallible word, but a faith in man's wisdom and imagination. Acceptable worship can only be based on faith in divine revelation. John Knox writes, "It is not enough that man invent ceremony, and then give it a signification, according to his pleasure.... But if that anything proceed from faith, it must have the word of God for the assurance; for ye are not ignorant, 'That faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' Now, if ye will prove that your ceremonies proceed from faith, and do please God, ye must prove God in expressed words has commanded them: Or else shall ye never prove, that they proceed from faith, nor yet that they please God; but that they are sin, and do displease him, according to the words of the apostle, 'Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.'"¹³

God expects faith and obedience to His Word. If God's people can worship the Lord according to their own will, as long as the man-made ordinances are not expressly forbidden,

¹² John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1862]), 493-494.

¹³ William Croft Dickenson, ed., *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 1:87.

then could not Cain, Noah, or the Levites offer God a fruit salad or a bucket of turnips? And if God wanted a strict regulation of His worship apart from the regulative principle, would it not require hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of volumes telling us what is forbidden? But God, in His infinite wisdom, says, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:32).

2. *The Second Commandment*

You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them (Ex. 20:4-5).

The Puritans and Presbyterians recognized that the Ten Commandments were a summary of all God’s moral precepts. Thus, the second commandment summarized how God is to be worshiped. While the command expressly forbids the making and worshiping of any representation of false gods and the making and worshiping of any representation of God Himself, it also forbids the use of all man-made devices and ordinances in the worship of God. It condemns “all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever.”¹⁴ Thomas Ridgely writes, “We further break this commandment, when we invent ordinances which God has nowhere in His Word commanded; or think to recommend ourselves to him by gestures, or modes of worship, which we have no precedent or example for in the New Testament. This is what is generally called superstition and will-worship.”¹⁵ When discussing the second commandment Michael Bushell writes, “It [image worship] is the archetype of all of man’s attempts to worship God through the work of his own hands. Idolatry and the introduction of

¹⁴ The *Westminster Larger Catechism*, from the answer to question 109. Puritan pastor Thomas Boston writes, “The matter of this command is the worship of God and his ordinances; and it says to every man, Thou shalt not make any thing whereby thou wilt worship God. And as the seventh command meets him that defiles his neighbour’s wife, saying, Thou shalt not commit adultery; so this meets the church of Rome, and says, Thou shalt not make any graven image &c. But as the seventh says also to the fornicator, Thou shalt not commit uncleanness; so this says also to the church of England [i.e., the Anglican or Episcopal Church], thou shalt not make crossing in baptism, kneeling, bowing to the altar, festival days, &c. And to every sort of people, and to every particular person, it says, thou shalt not meddle to make anything of divine worship and ordinances out of thy own head. All holy ordinances and parts of worship God has reserved to himself the making of them for us, saying, with respect to these, Thou shalt not make them to thyself. Men are said, in Scripture, to make a thing to themselves, when they make it out of their own head, without the word of God for it. But when they make anything according to God’s Word, God is said to do it, Matt. xix.6. If there be not then a divine law for what is brought into the worship and ordinance of God, it is an idol of men’s making, a device of their own. And so Popery, Prelacy, ceremonies and whatsoever is without the word, brought in God’s matters, is overturned at once by his word. Thou shalt not make, be thou Pope, King, Parliament, minister, private person, synod, or council” (*Commentary on the Shorter Catechism* [Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 (1853)], 2:138-139).

¹⁵ Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1855]), 2:331. “Will-worship” is an excellent phrase to remember, for that is what it is—worship of one’s own will. Man tries to become God and decides what is worship. It is a form of idolatry, whether in the restricted area of worship, or the broader area, as is prevalent today under the name of humanism, i.e., man as the measure of all things. In such cases, man worships the creature rather than the Creator; and God condemns it. God commands how He will be worshiped. We are not to add to or take away” (Carl W. Bogue, *The Scriptural Law of Worship* [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988], 10).

unwarranted practices into services of worship are the illegitimate children of the same father. The latter is but a more ‘sophisticated’ version of the former. They both proceed on the assumption that the means of worship that God has seen fit to institute are inadequate.”¹⁶ James Durham adds: “It is a sin not only to worship false gods, but to worship the true God in a false way.”¹⁷ Zachary Ursinus concurs, “*The other species of idolatry* is more subtle and refined, as when the true God is supposed to be worshiped, whilst the kind of worship which is paid unto him is false, which is the case when any one imagines that he is worshiping or honoring God by the performance of any work not prescribed by the divine law. This species of idolatry is more properly condemned in the second commandment, and is termed superstition, because it adds to the commandments of God the inventions of men.”¹⁸ Those who think that the Puritans were making too much of the second commandment must keep in mind that Christ argued that the sixth commandment applied to name calling and hatred; the seventh commandment applied even to inward lust. If the seventh commandment forbids even impure thoughts, then surely the second commandment forbids devising our own forms of worship from our own minds.

3. *Strange Fire*

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which *he commanded them not*. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord (Lev. 10:1-2).

“*What was their sin?* Their sin was offering of strange fire, so the text saith that they offered *strange fire*, which God commanded them not. . . . But had God even forbidden it? Where do we find that ever God had forbidden them to offer strange fire, or appointed that they should offer only one kind of fire? There is no text of Scripture that you can find from the beginning of Genesis to this place, where God hath said in terminis, in so many words expressly, *You shall offer no fire but one kind of fire*. And yet here they are consumed by fire from God, for offering ‘strange fire.’”¹⁹

The Hebrew word translated “strange” (*zar*), as in “*strange fire*,” could also be translated “unauthorized.” Nadab and Abihu offered “unauthorized fire.” Leviticus 16:12 says that when a priest is to burn incense he must do so using coals taken directly from the altar. Nadab and Abihu used coals from an unauthorized source. The important thing to note is that what they did *was not commanded*. “The whole narrative from 8:1 has led us to expect God’s ministers to obey the law promptly and exactly. Suddenly we meet Aaron’s sons doing something that had not been commanded.”²⁰

Those who reject God’s regulative principle of worship have a real problem explaining this text. Some argue that Nadab and Abihu were condemned because they offered strange incense, for offering strange incense is expressly condemned in Exodus 30:9. But the text does

¹⁶ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 145.

¹⁷ James Durham, *The Law Unsealed: Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1802, 1675]), 65.

¹⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [from the 1852 ed.]), 518.

¹⁹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel-Worship* (London: Peter Cole, 1650), 2-3.

²⁰ G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 155.

not say strange incense, it says *strange fire*. Others argue that they must have been insincere or drunk. But what does the Holy Spirit give us as the reason for their judgment? They offered *strange fire*, “which he commanded them not.” Carl W. Bogue writes, “You see the point emerging: the *regulative principle*! It was not that God had specifically forbidden other fires to be used. The issue is his appointment of a particular fire, and the conclusion is that whatever is not commanded is therefore forbidden. Many professing Christians would no doubt be offended at such a restriction. After all, all they did was worship God in a way not commanded, not in a way He had explicitly forbidden. Why should it matter where the fire came from? So they used fire of their own making! It would probably burn as brightly and consume the incense just as well. No doubt many would say, ‘It is just as good.’”²¹ But, although from a human standpoint the worship of Nadab and Abihu appears to be sincere and pious, it was sinful and was an act of rebellion because it was not commanded. It was a form of idolatry. They placed their human autonomy over God’s expressed will. Therefore, God consumed them by fire for intruding human ideas into the worship of the Lord.

4. Avoiding False Worship

A passage of Scripture that tells Israel how to avoid the corruption of biblical worship and syncretism with pagan worship practices is Deuteronomy 12:28-32: “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

Verse 32 is an explicit statement of God’s regulative principle of worship.²² It is interesting to note that whenever Israel and the church have ignored God’s scriptural law of worship, they in fact did adopt pagan worship—corrupting the pure worship of God. The Roman Catholic Church as a conscious practice mixed paganism into their rites and ceremonies to attract the heathen. Likewise, modern evangelical churches are mixing American pop-culture into their worship practices to attract new people. Because of our sinful natures and the allure of the surrounding pagan cultures in which we live, God has given us His regulative principle of

²¹ Carl W. Bogue, *The Scriptural Law of Worship*, 16-17.

²² The regulative principle of worship is seen in practice in the construction of the tabernacle and the temple. Moses was told by God: “And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain” (Ex. 25:40). God prescribed the building of the tabernacle and temple down to smallest detail. Man was not permitted to improvise at all in the construction of either dwelling. This fact should teach God’s people that whatever is not commanded is forbidden. God’s people are not to turn aside to the right hand nor to the left. This point is further illustrated in God’s command to make altars of unhewn stone: “And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it” (Ex. 20:25). Before the establishment of the ceremonial law which appointed fashioned altars, God required that only unhewn stones were to be used. The use of man’s tools is said to profane the altar; the likely reason is that man contributes nothing of his own to salvation and thus should add nothing of his own to the appointed means of worship.

worship to protect us from ourselves, from sinful human autonomy in worship. To ignore God's explicit command is to invite declension, heathenism and disaster into the church.

5. *David and His Men's Error*

So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill, accompanying the ark of God; and Ahio went before the ark.... And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God (2 Sam. 6:3-4, 6-7).

David and the men involved in moving the ark were, without question, sincere in their desire to please God by moving the ark to Jerusalem. Yet, the result of this *sincere effort* was the judgment of God. Uzzah put out his hand to protect the ark from falling, because he loved God and cared about God's ark. Yet, despite all the sincerity and good intentions, God's anger was aroused and He killed Uzzah. Why? Because the whole affair was highly offensive to God! Uzzah's touching the ark was the capstone of the day's offenses. Those who object to the regulative principle make much of the fact that Uzzah was killed for something clearly forbidden in God's law (i.e., touching the ark). Yes, it is true that Uzzah died violating an explicit prohibition of the law (cf. Num. 4:15). But, King David's analysis of what went wrong that day includes everyone involved, not just Uzzah. "For because you did not do it the first time, the Lord our God broke out against us, *because we did not consult Him about the proper order.*' So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the Lord God of Israel. And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, *as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord*" (1 Chron. 15:13-15).

When God gives a command that the Levites are to carry the ark with poles (cf. Num. 4), it is not necessary for God to forbid men of Judah from using an ox cart. King David and his men should have consulted the law of Moses and obeyed it. Instead, they acted pragmatically. They imitated the Philistines, who used a new cart when they sent the ark back to Bethshemesh. When it comes to the worship of God, we are not permitted to improvise, even if our intentions are good. Sincerity is important, but sincerity must be in accord with divine revelation. Even in religious matters that may seem small or trivial to us, God commands that we act in accordance with His revealed will and not innovate according to our will. "The great lesson for all time is to beware of following our own devices in the worship of God when we have clear instructions in His Word how we are to worship Him."²³ "Moreover we must gather from it that none of our devotions will be accepted by God unless they conform 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."²⁴

²³ William G. Blaikie, *Commentary on Second Samuel* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1893), 88.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 246.

6. *Autonomous Worship Condemned*

And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, *which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart* (Jer. 7:31; cf. Jer. 19:5).

“How clearly does this passage show that God does not view sin as does man! Man would revolt at the unnatural and inhuman cruelty of the burning of the fruit of one’s own body before an idol. But in God’s mind this is but secondary, the essential evil being that it is worship which He does not command, neither came it into His heart.”²⁵ Idolatry, murder, and child sacrifice are explicitly condemned in the Law and the Prophets. Yet, Jeremiah cuts to the essence of idolatrous worship. Judah was worshiping in a manner that did not originate from God’s heart. Judah’s worship was not founded upon God’s command. Rather than worshiping God according to His command, they “walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward” (Jer. 7:24). If the people of Judah had consulted the Word of God and obeyed it, they would have been spared God’s fury. “We have to do with a God who is very jealous; who will be worshiped as He wills, or not at all. Nor can we complain. If God be such a Being as we are taught in the Holy Scriptures, it must be His inalienable right to determine and prescribe how He will be served.”²⁶

John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, writes, “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 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.... 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.”²⁷ Likewise, if modern Reformed, evangelical, and fundamentalist churches adopted and observed God’s regulative principle, the syncretism with our pagan culture (e.g., Hollywood), the entertainment (e.g., music soloists, drama, rock groups) and other gimmicks would cease.

7. *The Sinful Pragmatism of King Saul*

The biblical account of King Saul’s autonomy in worship and subsequent downfall reveals God’s attitude toward a man-centered, pragmatic view of worship.²⁸ In 1 Samuel 10:8,

²⁵ William Young, “The Second Commandment,” in Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God*, 85.

²⁶ Samuel H. Kellogg, *The Book of Leviticus* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), 240.

²⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 1:413-414.

²⁸ Another king who ignored God’s regulative principle of worship to his own peril was king Uzziah. Carl W. Bogue writes, “King Uzziah entered the temple to burn incense before the Lord. That he was king was now irrelevant. The priests were horrified, and eighty of them rushed in after him and opposed him, saying, ‘It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the

the prophet Samuel instructs King Saul (according to the word of the Lord) to go to Gilgal, and to wait seven days. Then Samuel (who also was a priest) would return “to offer burnt offerings and make sacrifices of peace offerings.” King Saul went to Gilgal and waited for seven days for Samuel to arrive. On the seventh day many hours had gone by and Samuel still had not arrived. Saul’s troops were starting to disperse. The situation was tense, with the Philistines ready to attack. Therefore, Saul took matters in his own hands and offered a sacrifice before Samuel arrived. When confronted by Samuel (who arrived soon after Saul’s sacrifice) Saul offered the following excuses: “When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and the Philistines gathered at Michmash, then I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the Lord. Therefore, I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering’” (1 Sam. 11-12).

Saul did not base his decision on Scripture or direct revelation from a prophet but upon the perceived need of the moment. From a human standpoint Saul’s pragmatic argument makes sense, for “Samuel had not yet come. The people were scattered from him. The Philistines were concentrating at Michmash, and might have come down and fallen upon him at Gilgal.”²⁹ Saul even argues that his act was pious: “He would be thought very devout, and in great care not to engage the Philistines till he had by prayer and sacrifice engaged God on his side.... What! Go to war before I said my prayers!”³⁰ If anyone had a legitimate excuse to do something in worship not prescribed by God it was King Saul. But Samuel said to Saul: “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you” (1 Sam. 13:13). Saul was instructed to wait for Samuel. Samuel was supposed to make the offering at God’s appointed time. Saul’s pragmatism in which he improvised to meet the perceived need of the moment showed a lack of trust in God. When it comes to worshipping God we are to do what He asks, no more and no less. Everything else is rebellion.

The story of Saul’s improvising in worship and God’s displeasure at such an act is important because almost all the innovations that are occurring in our day in worship, evangelism, church government, etc., are based solely upon pragmatic considerations. When people say, “But look at the number of people that are being saved; look at how marriages are being helped; look at the wonderful church growth we’re achieving,” we must respond by asking for scriptural warrant. In biblical Christianity the end *never* justifies using unauthorized means to that end.³¹

sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honor from the Lord God’ (2 Chronicles 26:18). The king was offended to think his worship was not acceptable to God. Enraged, he persisted, and sacred Scripture tells how that God caused a leprosy to appear on his forehead. ‘They thrust him out that place. Indeed he also hurried to get out, because the Lord had struck him’ (verse 20). The king was a leper to the day of his death. For anyone, even the king, to intrude into the temple, and thus add to God’s command, was an offense to God; and God showed His displeasure” (*The Scriptural Law of Worship*, 10).

²⁹ W. G. Blaikie, “The First Book of Samuel,” in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositors’ Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), 2:57.

³⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 2:347.

³¹ “Saul’s foolishness did not end with this first incident. A short time later, he led the Israelites in battle to destroy the Amalekites, and their livestock as well, taking no booty. Instead, ‘Saul and the people spared Agag,’ King of the Amalekites, ‘and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs.’ His subsequent explanation was that these choice animals would make an excellent sacrifice unto the Lord. From a human perspective this decision might sound reasonable. After all, when they considered the best of the livestock, it probably seemed like a terrible waste simply to destroy them. Wouldn’t it be better to retain them as an offering unto God? If the motive was sincere, how could such a generous act of worship be tainted? Samuel’s response was blunt: ‘Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey

8. The Apostasy of King Jeroboam

In 937 B.C., God divided the people of Israel into two separate nations and placed Jeroboam upon the throne over the northern tribes. Earlier, God had promised Jeroboam that if he walked according to His statutes and commandments He would give Jeroboam an enduring house as He had for David (1 Kings 11:38). But Jeroboam did not trust in the Lord and His promise. He believed that the path to power and prosperity was only to be found in pragmatic political and religious maneuvering. He believed that the only way his kingdom would endure was to construct an alternative religious system to the one that God had set up in Jerusalem. He believed that because he was the king he had the power to set up new ordinances in ecclesiastical matters.

King Jeroboam was guilty of adding four major innovations to the religious system that Jehovah had instituted:

First, he erected two new worship centers to replace God's chosen city, Jerusalem. Jeroboam chose the cities of Dan and Bethel for their strategic location at both ends of his kingdom and because these sites had a special religious significance to the Israelites: "In the extreme south was Beth-el—'the house of God and the gate of heaven'—consecrated by the twofold appearance of God to Jacob; set apart by the patriarch himself (Gen. xxviii. 11-19; xxxv. 1, 7, 9-15); and where Samuel had held solemn assemblies (1 Sam. vii. 16). Similarly, in the extreme north Dan was 'a consecrated' place, where 'strange worship' may have lingered from the days of Micah (Judges xviii. 30, 31)."³²

Second, King Jeroboam instituted a new method of worship. At Dan and Bethel he set up golden calves. Were the people of the north already so corrupt that they immediately would be attracted to the rank idolatry of worshipping cows? Probably not. The evidence shows that although Jeroboam was a power-hungry pragmatist, he considered himself to be a worshiper of Jehovah. He even named his son and destined successor Abijah, which means "Jehovah is my father." Therefore, Jeroboam and the people viewed the calves as representatives of the true God or as signs of Jehovah's presence. They may have viewed the calves as similar to the cherubim in the tabernacle and temple from which Jehovah spoke (Num. 7:8-9) and where the special Shekinah presence dwelt. One of the most prominent features in the courts of the temple was the molten sea on the back of the twelve bulls. Perhaps Jeroboam and his advisors took their cue from the brazen bulls or they reinterpreted Aaron's golden calf in a positive light. "[H]is contention would probably be, that he had not abolished the ancient religion of the people, only given it a form better suited to present circumstances—one, moreover, derived from primitive national use, and sanctioned by no less an authority than that of Aaron, the first High Priest."³³ Jeroboam not only violated the second commandment by using images in the worship of Jehovah but he also had shrines built for offerings on the high places. These high places were ancient sacred sites to the heathen. Therefore, Jeroboam's adding his own elements to the worship of

is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.' The lesson of this incident is simple. No motive or action in worship is acceptable, if it runs contrary to God's revealed word. At no point had Saul professed the worship of another god; yet the king's actions toward the Lord were unacceptable, because they deviated from God's revealed word. Therefore, Saul's deeds are likened to the very opposite of true worship—to *witchcraft* and *idolatry*" (Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* [Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995], 14-15).

³² Alfred Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 [1890]), 2:138.

³³ *Ibid*, 2:137.

God led immediately to syncretism with paganism. Adding to God's worship ordinances does not occur in a vacuum. When people add, they add what pleases man. In the north the people were already becoming attached to the local 'sacred' sites. Jeroboam merely accommodated their corrupt religious desires.

Jeroboam's third innovation was to make "priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi" (1 Kings 12:31). "This opening up of the office to all was calculated to please the people and to destroy the Levitical priestly office. Furthermore, Jeroboam could enrich 'himself' by taking the cities that belonged to the priests and Levites, which they were obliged to leave, and from whence he drove them."³⁴ "For the Levites left their common lands and their possessions and came to Judah and Jerusalem, for Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them from serving as priests to the Lord. Then he appointed for himself priests for the high places, for the demons, and for the calf idols which he had made" (2 Chron. 11:14-15).

Jeroboam's fourth innovation was to set *his own time* for one of God's holy days, "on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, in the month which he had devised in his own heart" (1 Kings 12:33). Jeroboam apparently took a feast of God's appointing (the Feast of Tabernacles) and merely changed the keeping of it from the fifteenth day of the *seventh* month to the fifteenth day of the *eighth* month. God does not tell us why Jeroboam changed the month. But, the fact that the change originated in Jeroboam's heart and not from God's Word is emphasized by the Holy Spirit and shows God's disapprobation of any human autonomy in worship.

What Jeroboam did through his innovations in worship led the whole northern kingdom into rank idolatry. Jeroboam's perversion of true worship is set forth throughout the book of Kings as the paradigm of idolatry. Whenever an idolater king is described in the northern kingdom, the Bible says, "he walked in all the ways of Jeroboam the son of Nebat" (cf. 1 Kings 15:26, 34; 16:19, 26, 31; 22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29; 13:2, 11; 14:24; 15:9, 18, 24, 29; 17:21-22).

Although God in His Word has continually warned His people of the need to follow strictly only what He has commanded in worship (not to *add* to it or *deduct* from it), and has repeatedly set forth Jeroboam the son of Nebat as an example of God's hatred of human innovations in worship and their disastrous effect upon God's people, most professing Christians in our day act as though God has been silent in this area. For example, Jeroboam was condemned for using images (the golden calves) as aids in the worship of Jehovah. Yet today, "pictures" of Jesus Christ are common in evangelical and Reformed circles. Although it is claimed that these pictures of Christ are merely educational and not worshiped, the Bible says that Jesus is fully God and fully man in *one* person. Therefore, pictures of Christ are automatically religious and devotional in nature. Therefore, their use needs divine warrant (there is none), and they violate the second commandment by depicting the second person of the Trinity. Pictures of Christ are made from the imagination of man.³⁵ This practice is will-worship.

³⁴ John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1810]), 2: 731.

³⁵ "And although the Son was, and is man, having taken on him that nature, and united it to his Godhead, yet he is not a mere man; therefore, that image, which only holds forth one nature, and looks like any man in the world, cannot be the representation of that person which is God and Man. And, if it be said, man's soul cannot be painted, but his body may, and yet that picture represents a man: I answer, it does so because he has but one nature; and what represents that, represents the person: But it is not so with Christ; his Godhead is not a distinct part of the human nature, as the soul of man is (which is necessarily supposed in every living man) but a distinct nature, only united with the manhood in that one person, Christ, who has no fellow: Therefore what represents him, must not represent a man only, but must represent Christ, *Immanuel, God-man*, otherwise it is not his image. Besides, there is no warrant for representing him in his Manhood; nor any colourable possibility of it, but as men fancy: and, shall that be called Christ's portraiture? Would that be called any other man's portraiture, which were drawn at men's pleasure, without

Jeroboam was condemned for devising the *time* of a holy day without warrant from God's Word. Yet professing Christians today devise many holy days and their times without scriptural warrant. There is the almost universally celebrated holy day of Christmas—a holy day not commanded, the *time* of which was taken from rank heathen sun worship. One can search the whole Bible very carefully and one will not find a shred of biblical warrant for Christmas, Easter, Whitsunday, All Hallow's Eve, etc.³⁶ If God regarded the setting of even the time of an authorized holy day by a king (appointed by Himself) as sinful, then surely all the holy days set up by popes, bishops, or anyone are likewise sinful. It can be said that many professing Christians today are following in the ways of Jeroboam, the son of Nebat.

Jeroboam was condemned for setting up a priesthood not authorized by God's Word. Yet most professing Christians today regard the method of governing Christ's church as something primarily devised by man. But the New Testament sets forth a Presbyterian system of government (e.g., government by a plurality of elders). Furthermore, parachurch organizations that function independently of the church's authority are unscriptural, for they are not authorized by God's Word. If God condemned the innovations in worship, holy days and church government made by a king, then He condemns these same innovations today. Be forewarned "that the first step on the path of idolatry is taken when men presume to worship the Lord through means and measures not ordained in the word of God."³⁷

The Regulative Principle in the New Testament

For those in love with their human traditions (that they have *added* to God's ordained worship), an obvious way to circumvent the clear meaning of the Old Testament passages discussed would be to assert that the regulative principle was meant *only* for an immature old covenant church. It is asserted that because the old covenant people of God did not have the Spirit of God in the same manner or fullness as new covenant believers, God had to prescribe all their worship ordinances in minute detail. But with the outpouring of God's Spirit at Pentecost: "The Church, it may be said, has passed from childhood to years of maturity where it can exercise discretion and liberty in determining its own worship."³⁸ This argument (although common) is fallacious, for the New Testament teaches the same principle of worship as does the Old Testament. Christ held strictly to the regulative principle before and after His resurrection and the Apostle Paul adhered strictly to the regulative principle many years after Pentecost.

regard to the pattern? Again, there is no use of it: for, either that image behooved to have but common estimation with other images, and that would wrong Christ; or a peculiar respect and reverence, and so sins against this commandment [the second] that forbids all religious reverence to images: But he being God, and so the Object of worship, we must either divide his natures, or say that image or picture does not represent Christ" (James Durham, in *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments* [Thomas Lumisden and John Robertson Printing House, 1735], 54).

³⁶ The idea of dividing up Christ's life into events and pieces and then attaching festival days or distinct holy days to each event was brought into church practice in imitation of Roman emperor-worship. The New Testament teaches that the church of Christ is to celebrate the *whole* work of redemption every Lord's day. Thus, God has ordained 52 days each year as special days for restful, concentrated worship. "There is no day commanded in the Scripture to be kept under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly [commonly] called holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued" (*An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship*, as annexed to the Westminster Directory for the Public Worship of God [1645]).

³⁷ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship*, 21.

³⁸ William Young, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 86.

1. Jesus and the Regulative Principle

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.’ He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition” (Matt. 15:1-3)?

The Pharisees were the respected religious leaders of the Jewish people. They believed that they had the liberty to add to the commandments of God. The law of God did contain various ceremonial washings to signify the unclean becoming clean. The Pharisees simply added other washings to emphasize and “perfect” the law of Moses. There is no express commandment forbidding these ceremonial additions except the regulative principle (e.g., Deut. 4:2; 12:31). These additions, however, have no warrant from the Word of God.

Our Lord strongly rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for adding to God’s law. What happens when sinful men add rules and regulations to God’s law? Eventually man-made tradition replaces or sets aside God’s law. “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). The ancient Christian church added its own rules and ceremonies to the worship of God and degenerated into the pagan and idolatrous Roman Catholic Church. If we do not draw the line regarding worship where God draws the line, then, as history proves, the church will eventually degenerate into little better than a bizarre pagan cult. Christ’s rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees applies today to virtually every (so called) branch of the Christian church. “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. *And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (Matt. 15:8-9).

It is not an accident that the Holy Spirit chose a very “innocuous” looking addition. Obviously, God does not view human additions as a light thing, as something that people should ignore. After all, if human additions are permissible in the religious sphere, what could be any more innocent, pragmatic or practical than a simple hand washing? Yet our Lord not only refused to submit to this man-made religious rite but also strongly rebuked the Pharisees for adding a human rule to God’s word. “Washing of the hands is a thing proper enough; one could wish it were oftener practiced; but to exalt it into a religious rite is a folly and a sin.”³⁹ The disciples of Christ were well trained, for they knew that any human tradition, no matter how good and innocent, must not be complied with when it is given a religious significance and status by man without divine warrant. “Note, illegal impositions will be laid to the charge of those who support and maintain them [human traditions in worship], and keep them up, as well as those who first invented and enjoined them.”⁴⁰ “Antiquity and Fathers without Scripture is the old charter of superstitious formalists.... Hence learn: That God in wisdom brings men’s ceremonies to a dispute and so to be refuted and condemned....”⁴¹

Jesus is a champion of the regulative principle. He rejects the most innocuous of religious traditions and also shows us how human traditions and laws drive out and thus set aside what God has condemned. Rutherford writes,

³⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 201.

⁴⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 5:210-211.

⁴¹ David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987 [1647]), 207.

And when the Pharisees saw some of the disciples eat bread with unwashed hands, they found fault. The challenge was for an external omission of an outward observance which may be seen with the eyes. Ergo, these traditions are not condemned by Christ because they were contrary to God's word, or impious, but in this, that they were contrary because not commanded. For in the external religious act of washing hands, there was no impiety of a wicked opinion objected to Christ's disciples, about the piety of these traditions, nor about any inward opinion. Nor is there any question between the Pharisees and the Lord's disciples, whether the traditions of the elders should be esteemed the marrow and sum of all religions, as Vasquez saith; but only anent external conformity with walking in the traditions of the elders, or not walking, as is most clear in the text. It is true, Christ objected they accounted more of the traditions of men, nor of God's commandments, as papists and formalists do; but that was not the state of the question between the disciples of Christ and the Pharisees. 2. Christ rejecteth these traditions, by an argument taken from the want of lawful Author, while he calls them precepts of men, opposed to the commandments of God.⁴²

People who oppose the regulative principle often attempt to circumvent the obvious import of these passages by appealing to the context. They argue that the example set forth by Christ in verses 4 and 5 (of the person who follows a human tradition in order not to provide for his parents in old age) informs us that Christ only had negative traditions in mind, that is, traditions which nullified, set apart or contradicted God's word. The problem with this interpretation is that it completely ignores verse 2 or the original confrontation that elicited Jesus' response in verses 3 to 9. Jesus gives an example of why adding human requirements to God's word is wrong. Human requirements eventually displace God's word. (Anyone with knowledge of Judaism or the history of the Christian church knows that our Lord's teaching is true.) The fact that Christ gives such an example does not detract at all from verse 2 where the most innocent and apparently harmless of human traditions (hand washing) is regarded as totally inappropriate. How does washing one's hands contradict, violate or set apart God's word? Jesus condemns the Pharisees for assuming (contrary to Scripture) that religious leaders have legislative authority in the church. When church leaders give themselves authority to invent out of their own imaginations doctrines or commandments, the eventual result is declension and even apostasy. Note once again, that in verse 9 Jesus unequivocally condemns all human doctrines and commandments in religion. "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9; cf. Isa. 29:13).

Further, the parallel passage in Mark 7 settles the matter once and for all, because in the Markian account Jesus *explicitly* identifies the traditions that he condemns as including religious washings.⁴³ "He answered and said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is

⁴² Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London: John Field, 1647), 138.

⁴³ The second half of verse 8 beginning with "the washing of" is not included in modern critical editions of the Greek New Testament (e.g., United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament [third edition]; the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament [26th edition]). Most modern translations (ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, JB, NIV) reflect modern textual criticism by leaving out the second half of verse 8. The expanded reading of verse 8 is found in the *Textus Receptus* (or the Received Text) and the Majority Text (or the Byzantine/Traditional Text). The KJV and NKJV are based on the *Textus Receptus*. In short, the critical editions of the Greek New Testament (that virtually all modern translations are based upon) depend primarily on a few older manuscripts that were discovered chiefly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., *Codex Vaticanus* and *Codex Sinaiticus*). The majority texts are not as old as those used in the critical editions; however, they are far greater in number and were used by Christ's church since at least as early as the fifth century. Modern scholarship regarding the majority texts (i.e., archeology, verification of various readings by older papyri, ancient versions and quotations from the early church fathers [e.g.,

written: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.’ He said to them, ‘All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition’” (vs. 6-9). “It is just as easy to destroy the authority of God’s Word by addition as by subtraction, by burying it under human inventions as by denying its truth. The whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, must be our rule of faith—nothing added and nothing taken away.”⁴⁴ Our Lord does not just condemn negative, bad or contradictory human traditions but all human traditions without exception. Spurgeon writes, “Religion based on human authority is worthless; we must *worship* the true God in the way of his own appointing, or we do not worship him at all. Doctrines and ordinances are only to be accepted when the divine Word supports them, and they are to be accepted for that reason only. The most punctilious form of devotion is *vain worship*, if it is regulated by man’s ordinance apart from the Lord’s own command.”⁴⁵ After briefly examining Christ’s teaching in context one can only conclude that the argument that our Lord is only condemning certain bad religious traditions rather than any and all human traditions is eisegesis of the worst sort.

Attempts at circumventing passages such as Matthew 15:2-9 which prove the regulative principle are not new but are (in general matters) restatements of old popish and prelatical arguments long ago rejected by the Reformed churches. Note the words of Zacharias Ursinus (written in the 1570s and first published in the 1580s):

There are some who object to what we have here said, and affirm in support of will-worship, that those passages which we have cited as condemning it, speak only in reference to the ceremonies instituted by Moses, and of the unlawful commandments of men, such as constitute no part of the worship of God; and not of those precepts which have been sanctioned by the church and bishops, and which command nothing contrary to the Word of God. But that this argument is false, may be proven by certain declarations connected with those passages of Scripture to which we have referred, which likewise reject those human laws, which, upon their own authority, prescribe anything in reference to divine worship which God has not commanded, although the thing itself is neither sinful nor forbidden by God. So Christ rejects the tradition which the Jews had in regard to washing their hands, because they associated with it the idea of divine worship, although it was not sinful in itself, saying, “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” “Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye make clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within ye are full of extortion and excess.” (Matthew 15:11, 23, 25). The same thing may be said of celibacy and of the distinction of meats and days, of which he calls “doctrines of devils,” although in themselves they are lawful to the godly, as he in other places teaches. Wherefore, those things are also which are in themselves indifferent, that is neither commanded

the disputed ending of Mark was accepted as canonical by the second century A.D.]), serious problems with the presuppositions and methodology of the early critical scholars such as Wescott and Hort, and great variations between the Vaticanus and Sinaiticus manuscripts have pointed many Christians back to the Majority Text as superior to the modern critical text. This author accepts the KJV or NKJV reading of Mark 7:8 as reflecting the actual words of Jesus Christ. Accepting the regulative principle, however, is not dependant upon accepting the Majority Text reading of Mark 7:8.

⁴⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Mark* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 101-102. Ryle (1816-1900) was an Anglican minister and bishop (of Liverpool) and therefore did not adhere to the regulative principle. Nevertheless, his remarks on Mark cited above are true.

⁴⁵ Spurgeon, *Matthew*, 203.

nor prohibited by God, if they are prescribed and done as the worship of God, or if it is supposed that God is honored by our performing them, and dishonored by neglecting them, it is plainly manifest that the Scriptures in these and similar places condemn them.⁴⁶

Calvin says, “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* (*ethelothreskeia*, 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 worshiping him, the heavier is the condemnation which they draw down upon themselves; for by such inventions religion is dishonored.”⁴⁷

2. *The Great Commission*

After Jesus’ resurrection, and immediately before His ascension, Christ gave orders to His church to disciple all nations: “Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Note that Jesus Christ gives the church a very limited authority. Only those things taught in the Word of God are to be taught to the nations. Therefore, whatever the church teaches by way of doctrine, church government, and worship must come from the Bible alone. The church does not have the authority to invent its own doctrine, or worship, or government. William Young writes, “The charter of the New Testament Church at this point is expressed in identical terms as those of the Mosaic economy which we have seen so expressly to exclude the inventions of men from the worship of God. No addition to or subtraction from Christ’s commands may be allowed in the New Testament any more than with respect to the commands given on Mount Sinai in the Old.” We have no more right to alter that divinely instituted pattern of ordinances for the New Testament Church than Nadab and Abihu, Saul, Jeroboam, or any others in the Old.... The will of God, not the will of man, is the rule of the worship of the New Testament Church.”⁴⁸

“The apostles obeyed Christ and taught the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). One can search carefully in the Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation for divine authorization for many of today’s church practices (e.g., holy days such as Christmas, the liturgical calendar, the use of musical instruments in worship, the use of uninspired human songs in worship, music soloists, choirs, etc.), but there is no biblical warrant at all. Most pastors and teachers are not just teaching what Christ commanded but are also teaching many human traditions. Christians who want to honor Christ as the only King and head of the church must *refuse* to observe these man-made additions to what our Lord commanded.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [1852]), 518-19.

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on A Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 2:253-54.

⁴⁸ William Young, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 87-88.

⁴⁹ G. I. Williamson, *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (Havertown, ND: New Covenant Publication Society), 9-10.

3. Worship in Spirit and in Truth

One of our Lord's most profound comments regarding worship is found in His interaction with a Samaritan woman. "The woman said to Him, 'Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth'" (Jn. 4:19-24). Although evangelicals commonly interpret the phrase "worship in spirit" as worship that takes place in man's spirit, the term "spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is the source of true worship. This point is proved by the following considerations.

(1) The context of the passage favors such an interpretation. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that her religion and worship are ignorant and false. The true knowledge of God and true worship (i.e., worship authorized by Scripture) reside with the Jewish people. Christ's comments are directed at the Samaritan religion which was guilty of rejecting *sola Scriptura* (i.e., they detracted from Scripture by accepting *only* the five books of Moses and they added to the word by instituting worship in an unauthorized place with an unauthorized priesthood and temple, etc.). Note also, that earlier in the same discourse our Lord contrasted true water and false water. The Savior gives the true water (the Holy Spirit) which is the source of eternal life. This same Spirit is the source of true worship. True worship must have as its source the Holy Scriptures which are breathed out by the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of truth (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16; Jn. 16:13; 17:17).

(2) This interpretation is supported by John's repeated pattern of conjoining the terms Spirit (or Holy Spirit) with truth in his gospel and epistles (e.g., Jn. 14:17; 15:16; 16:13; 1 Jn. 4:6; 5:7). "One preposition joins the two nouns and thus makes of the two one idea."⁵⁰ While the joining of the Holy Spirit with truth makes perfect sense exegetically and theologically, the joining of the human spirit with truth does not comport nearly as well with the context. The Samaritans' greatest problem was not that they were insincere, or, that their worship was merely external. Their central problem was that they did not follow the Holy Spirit's revealed will in Scripture. They had perverted the Torah⁵¹ and set aside most of the Old Testament to prop up their non-authorized, man-made system of worship.

(3) The Holy Spirit view comports much better with the reason given for "spirit and truth" worship in verse 24: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and

⁵⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Introduction of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961 [1946]), 322.

⁵¹ The false worship of the Samaritans had a direct effect on their theology, corrupting it in a number of ways. All worship practices rest upon some source of authority whether human, divine or a combination of the two. The Samaritans' love of human innovations forced them to abandon the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. They did this by corrupting the text of Scripture to support their choice of Gerizim as the sacred site—the site of the central sanctuary. The crucial text of this matter is found in Deuteronomy 12:56. In this passage the Israelites are instructed to seek out the place that God would choose among the tribes to place His name. This site would be the place of sacrifice for the nation (Deut. 12:6, 13-14). This section of Scripture does not specify this location, but rather assumes that the details will be taken care of by further revelation. The Jews who accepted the full canon of Scripture knew that Jerusalem was the one and only place (e.g., see 2 Chron. 6:6; 7:12; Ps. 78:68, etc.). The Samaritans corrupted the text of Scripture to make it appear that God's choice was already made (Mount Gerizim). Thus, according to the Samaritans, further revelation was no longer needed. Their corrupt worship shifted their authority of worship from the Bible to their religious leaders.

truth.” The Samaritans had abandoned divine revelation in order to support their human traditions. Their rejection of *sola Scriptura* and their corrupt worship are connected by our Lord to a complete ignorance of the true God. Thus, when Jesus speaks against false worship, He connects the true character of God with the true manner of worshiping Him. Since God’s nature is essentially spirit, the worship brought to Him must be determined and initiated by the Spirit of God. Worship must conform itself to the divine nature. Biblical worship is totally dependent upon the truth that God has revealed unto us. Christ is emphatic regarding this important matter. “Notice the ‘must.’ Jesus is not speaking merely of a desirable element in worship. He is speaking of something that is absolutely necessary.”⁵²

Calvin’s comments on the nature of God and worship are instructive. He writes, “*God is Spirit*. This is a confirmation drawn from the very nature of God. Since men are flesh, we ought not to wonder, if they take delight in those things which correspond to their own disposition. Hence it arises, that they contrive many things in the worship of God which are full of display, but have no solidity. But they ought first of all to consider that they have to do with God, who can no more agree with the flesh than fire with water. This single consideration, when the inquiry relates to the worship of God, ought to be sufficient for restraining the wantonness of our mind, that God is so far from being like us, that those things which please us most are the objects of his loathing and abhorrence. And if hypocrites are so blinded by their own pride, that they are not afraid to subject God their opinion, or rather to their unlawful desires, let us know that this modesty does not hold the lowest place in the true worship of God, to regard with suspicion whatever is gratifying according to the flesh. Besides, as we cannot ascend to the height of God, let us remember that we ought to seek from His word the rule by which we are governed.”⁵³

(4) The Holy Spirit view is supported in the epistles. Paul identifies true worshipers as “the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). The apostle contrasts worship in the Spirit with confidence in the flesh. Confidence in the flesh refers to a reliance on human rules, regulations and achievements. Worship in the Spirit is the very opposite of will worship. One is guided solely by faith in the Spirit’s revelation, while the other is guided by faith in man’s wisdom. One boasts in Christ Jesus and the loving direction He has provided, while the other boasts in human attainments (cf. Rom. 8:1, 4-5, 13; 1 Cor. 14:2. In the Corinthian passage “Spirit” [in the Greek text] without the article refers explicitly to the Holy Spirit). Hutcheson writes, “It is the Lord’s will and appointment alone that can give a being to true worship, and to this must all our reasons about this matter be subject.”⁵⁴

If believers are to offer worship that is agreeable to God’s nature, then they must submit themselves to the teaching of the Holy Spirit found only in the Bible. That is, everything in the worship of God (except the circumstances of worship) must have divine warrant in order to please the Father. Jehovah earnestly seeks such worshipers (cf. Jn. 4:23).

4. *Paul Condemns Will Worship*

Paul, in his epistle to the Colossians, concurs with both the Old Testament’s and Christ’s teaching on worship. Paul condemns those who seek to impose Judaical food laws and holy days upon the church (Col. 2:16). (Because the ceremonial laws were *shadows* that pointed to the

⁵² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 272.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 164.

⁵⁴ George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1657]), 65.

substance, Jesus Christ, they are done away with.) They are no longer authorized and therefore forbidden. Paul's warning regarding human philosophy is the backdrop of his condemnation of false worship and man-made laws (legalism) in the same chapter. "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, *according to the tradition of men*, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

Paul condemns man-made doctrines and commandments. "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why as though living in the world do you subject yourself to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using *according to the commandments and doctrines of men*? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in *self-imposed religion, false humility*, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23).

Paul says that any addition to what God has commanded is self-imposed religion, or as the King James Version says, "will worship." The Greek word used by Paul (*ethelothreskeia*) signifies worship that originates from man's own will. "This is worship not enjoined by God, but springing out of man's own ingenuity—unauthorized devotion.... The worship referred to is unsolicited and unaccepted. It is superstition...."⁵⁵ "The gist is that these ordinances are forms of worship or religious service chosen by man (according to the will of man), not means chosen by God. This is the essence of corrupt worship, when men seek to establish their own forms of religious service. We might call it *free-will worship*, since the advocates of man-made worship are claiming that men possess the right (or freedom) to institute acceptable means to worship God."⁵⁶

Paul says that adding to God's Word is a show of false humility. Can man improve upon the worship and service that God has instituted? It is the height of arrogance and stupidity to think that sinful man can improve upon God's ordinances. "It is provoking God, because it reflects much upon His honor, as if He were not wise enough to appoint the manner of His own worship. He hates all strange fire to be offered in His temple. Lev. x 11. A ceremony may in time lead to a crucifix. Those who contend for the cross in baptism, why not have the oil, salt and cream as well?"⁵⁷ As Paul says, man-made rules and regulations are "of no value" to the believer (Col. 2:23).

Opponents of the regulative principle attempt to circumvent the teaching of Colossians in a similar fashion to the way they treat the Matthew 15:2ff. passage. They argue that Paul is not condemning all human traditions but is merely concerned with suppressing certain types of asceticism. In other words, it is wrong to make rules that forbid the eating of meats and other foods, but it is entirely acceptable to invent worship practices, holy days and rites.

There are a number of reasons why Paul's condemnation of human requirements cannot be limited to certain ascetic eating practices. First, the broad context of the passage indicates that Paul emphatically rejects all human traditions in the religious sphere and not merely ascetic dietary laws. The likely problem at the Colossian church was the influence of an early form of ascetic Gnosticism. Paul does condemn Gnostic legalism in chapter 2. However, in his condemnation of this particular philosophy and the false ethical system that flows from it, Paul condemns all forms of non-Christian philosophy and all worship and ethics that are founded upon human philosophy and the tradition of men. In this epistle Paul first points the Colossians

⁵⁵ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979 [1884]), 4:199-200.

⁵⁶ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship*, 56.

⁵⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986 [1692]), 63.

to Jesus Christ. The Colossian believers need to be reminded that Christ is pre-eminent (1:18); that in Christ, who is the head of all, they are complete (2:10); that some have not been holding fast the Head (2:19); that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). Christ alone is the king and head of the church. He alone is our sanctification. Through Christ alone and his law-word come right doctrine, meaning and ethics. Thus Paul writes, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). Calvin writes,

According to the tradition of men. He points out more precisely what kind of *philosophy* he reproves, and at the same time convicts it of vanity on a twofold account—because it is not *according to Christ*, but according to the inclinations of men; and because it consists in the *elements of the world*. Observe, however, that he places Christ in opposition to the *elements of the world*, equally as to the *tradition of men*, by which he intimates, that whatever is hatched in man’s brain is not in accordance with Christ, who has been appointed us by the Father as our sole Teacher; that he might retain us in the simplicity of his gospel. Now, that is corrupted by even a small portion of the leaven of *human traditions*. He intimates also, that all doctrines are foreign to Christ that make the worship of God, which we know to be spiritual, according to Christ’s rule, to consist in the *elements of the world*, and also such as fetter the minds of men by such trifles and frivolities, while Christ calls us directly to himself.⁵⁸

Paul’s condemnation of philosophy that is according to the tradition of men is universal. One cannot argue that Paul in this passage condemns only ascetic Gnosticism yet does not also condemn the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, Schliermacher, Marx and Dewey. For Paul there is no such thing as philosophical or ethical neutrality. A doctrine or practice is either according to Christ or it is not. And if it is not, then it comes from man’s autonomous devising and is (according to Paul) a tradition of men. Therefore, when Paul condemns human regulations in 2:20-23, he uses the same universal language. In verse 20 Paul asks those in error at Colossae the question (to paraphrase): “Why do you act like unsaved people who are still living in accordance with a pagan worldview and thus subject yourself to human regulations?” Then in verse 21 Paul gives specific examples. Are the man-made regulations mentioned in verse 21 the only human traditions that Paul forbids? No. Given the universal condemnation of human philosophy and tradition that both precedes and follows verse 21, the human requirements of verse 21 must be viewed as a few examples taken from the universal category of human philosophy and traditions. There is no way that Paul’s statement in verse 22, “according to the commandments and doctrines of men” can be restricted to the regulations of ascetic Gnosticism anymore than the condemnation of human philosophy in verse 8 can be restricted to one Greek sect. Further, the statement in verse 22, “according to the commandments and doctrines of men,” mirrors the condemnation of Jewish traditions in doctrine and ethics found in Isaiah 19:13 and Matthew 15:2-9. The Bible condemns human additions and requirements, whether these man-made traditions in doctrine, ethics or worship are Jewish, Greek, Persian, Roman, German, English or American.

Second, the interpretation that says that Paul forbids the addition of some human philosophies and traditions into the doctrine, ethics and worship of the church, yet permits other human traditions, violates standard orthodox Protestant methods of interpretation. A study of both the Old and New Testaments proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God forbids additions

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 181.

or subtractions to the doctrine, ethics and worship set forth in divine revelation (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Gen. 4:3-5; Lev. 10:1-2; 2 Sam. 6:3-7; 1 Chr. 15:13-15; Jer. 7:24, 31, 19:5; Isa. 29:13; Num. 15:39-40; Mt. 15:2-9; Jn. 4:24; Rev. 2:18, 19; etc.). This assertion is simply the Reformed confessional understanding of the regulative principle which has been discussed in earlier portions of this study. The attempt to make Paul a good Episcopalian, Lutheran or Romanist on the issue of human tradition involves a willful ignorance of the overall teaching of Scripture. The human heart is so incredibly deceitful that, through self-deception and the subtleties of human reason, it develops loopholes for human autonomy where none exist. Therefore, our only hope for maintaining purity in doctrine, ethics and worship is to strictly adhere to and obey God's commands without departing to the right or to the left.

5. *The Circumstances of Worship*

Another common objection to the regulative principle of worship that is based on a misunderstanding of the principle is as follows: "Where in the Bible are we commanded to sit in chairs in church?" or, "Where are we commanded to use a building and lights?" or, "Where are we commanded to meet at 11:00 a.m.?" These objections are easily answered, once we understand the biblical difference between worship ordinances and the circumstances, or incidentals, of worship.⁵⁹

Worship ordinances are those things and activities received from divine revelation. Every worship ordinance is appointed by God. Anything connected to worship that has a religious and moral significance has to be based on divine command (explicit or implicit) or historical example. The Church receives all worship ordinances from God as revealed in the Bible. The Church must obey all of God's ordinances. The Church does not have the authority to add to or detract from those things which God has appointed.

The circumstances of worship refer not to worship content and ceremony, but to those things "common to human actions and societies." The *only* way someone can learn a *worship*

⁵⁹ Most attacks against what is called the strict view of the regulative principle are accomplished by misrepresenting the regulative principle (either knowingly or by ignorance) in order to make it look absurd. For example, theonomist pastor and author Steven Schlissel argued (cf. *Chalcedon Report*) that Jesus Christ certainly did not believe in the regulative principle for He attended and even preached in the Jewish synagogue even though there is no explicit command in the Old Testament requiring synagogue attendance. Schlissel's argument is a gross perversion of the scriptural law of worship for he restricts it only to explicit divine imperatives when it also includes approved historical example (from Scripture) and deduction by good and necessary consequence. Schlissel argues against a position that was *never* held by the Puritans or early Presbyterians. There is no explicit command in the Bible to baptize infants. The Calvinist divines of the 16th and 17th centuries who held to the strict view of the regulative principle argued that the practice was based on "good and necessary consequence." Likewise, there is no explicit command changing the Sabbath to the first day of the week. Presbyterian and Puritan Lord's day sabbatarianism is based on the historical example of the apostolic church and good and necessary consequence. It is true that there is no explicit command to attend synagogue worship in the Old Testament. But the simple fact that the Bible recognizes it as an acceptable practice is warrant enough. The original command (like that of Lord's day worship) was never inscripturated, but approved historical example is sufficient. Why do men who normally are careful scholars resort to straw man misrepresentations and mocking attacks against God's scriptural law of worship? Perhaps they are in love with their traditions and are accustomed to the corruptions of their backsliding predecessors. Arguments against the regulative principle are nothing but "a pretense for escaping from the supremacy of God's Word without formally denying its authority" (William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1:49). This author's personal experience with people who are vehemently opposed to the regulative principle of worship and its application is that these people are *emotionally attached* to unauthorized holy days (Christmas, etc.), uninspired hymns, musical instrumentation, etc. It is sentimentalism that dictates their exegesis.

ordinance is to study the Bible and see what God commands. But the circumstances of worship are *not* dependent on the explicit instructions of the Bible; they depend only upon general revelation and common sense (“Christian prudence”). Believers and unbelievers alike know that a building and heater are necessary to conduct a meeting in January in Minnesota. Both understand the need for chairs, lighting, clothing, and so on. Everyone understands that a time must be chosen in advance in order to conduct a meeting. There are many things common to both religious and civil (or secular) meetings that are not dependent on specific biblical instructions. These things are the circumstances, or incidentals, of worship.

Worship Ordinances⁶⁰ vs. Worship Circumstances

Ordinances		Circumstances	
Preaching from the Bible	Matt. 26:13; Mk. 16:15; Acts 9:20; 2 Tim. 4:2; Acts 20:8, 17:10; 1 Cor. 14:28	Structure in which the church meets	Acts 20:8, 17:10; 1 Cor. 14:28
Reading the Word of God	Mark 4:16-20; Acts 13:15; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:13; Acts 1:13, 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20	Location at which the church meets	Acts 1:13, 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20
Meeting on the Lord’s day	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Rev. 1:10; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:18	Time at which the church meets	Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:18
Administration of sacraments	Matt. 28:19; Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:24-25	Clothing worn to worship	1 Cor. 11:13-15; Deut. 22:5
Hearing the Word of God	Luke 2:46; Acts 8:31; Rom. 10:41; Jas. 1:22; Luke 4:20; Acts 20:9	Type of seating provided	Luke 4:20; Acts 20:9

⁶⁰ “The first idea contained in them, is that they are religious duties, prescribed by God, as an instituted method in which he will be worshiped by his creatures.... Now the ordinances as thus described must be engaged in according to a divine appointment. No creature has a warrant to enjoin any modes of worship, pretending that these will be acceptable or well-pleasing to God; since God alone, who is the object of worship, has a right to prescribe the way in which he will be worshiped. For a creature to institute modes of worship would be an instance of profaneness and bold presumption; and the worship performed would be ‘in vain’; as our Saviour says concerning that which has no higher sanction than ‘the commandments of men’” (Thomas Ridgely, *A Body of Divinity* [New York, 1855], 2:433).

Prayer to God	Matt. 6:9; 1 Thess. 5:17; Heb. 13:18; Phil. 4:6; Jas. 1:5; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; Deut. 22:5		
The singing of Psalms	1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16		

Note that everything in the left column must be learned from the Word of God. Everything in the right column is a function common to everyone who lives in God’s universe. Worship ordinances are limited in number by divine revelation. Worship circumstances are virtually infinite in number being based on the common agreement of men guided by “Christian prudence.”⁶¹ Because man is created in the image of God, and because man must live and function in God’s created reality (the universe), he must live and function in accordance with that reality. People do not need explicit instruction from the Bible to know to put on a jacket when it is -5°F outside. But men do need clear instructions from the Bible on how to approach the infinitely holy God.

Some men in Reformed denominations have attempted to blur the distinction between the circumstances of worship and worship ordinances in order to add their own human innovations to what God has commanded. But such clever subterfuges are easily discovered when one considers that God has given worship ordinances in His word and also delineated their proper use. For example, Christians are told to pray. Yet believers are permitted to invent the content of prayer as long as they carefully follow the pattern or example set forth by Christ in the Lord’s prayer. Christians also are told to praise God in song in public worship. Yet, in the singing of praise they are only to sing from God’s inspired hymn book, the Psalter. In one ordinance (prayer) God says, “Follow this pattern.” In another ordinance (singing praise) God requires the singing of God-written songs (the Psalter) alone. We must be careful to examine God’s Word to determine what the worship ordinances are, as well as their proper use.

6. *Why the Regulative Principle is Necessary*

Church history has shown that God’s covenant people have often been drawn away from the simplicity of pure gospel worship into all manner of man-made innovations. Because of man’s fallen nature and proneness to sin it was inevitable that human autonomy in worship

⁶¹ The authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) clearly make a distinction between those things taken directly from Scripture and circumstances “common to human actions and societies.” “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, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men...and that 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” (chap. 1, sec. 6).

would pervert and then force out true worship. “And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and *that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined*, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God” (Num. 15:39-40).

Many argue that God’s regulative principle is too strict. They argue that it confines the human spirit and that it stifles human creativity. They teach that it is an overreaction to the abuses of Roman Catholicism. But let us look at the logical implications of allowing anything into God’s worship as long as it is not forbidden in the Word of God.

The first is that the simplicity and trans-cultural nature of pure gospel worship are replaced by a virtually infinite variety of man-made innovations. *Since God no longer draws the line for worship content and ceremony, man will draw and redraw the line as he pleases.* A church that does not obey God’s regulative principle finds it impossible to stop newfangled ideas and innovations in worship. The Presbyterian and Reformed denominations that abandoned the “regulative principle” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries prove this point. The pattern of perversion goes something like this: First, man-made hymns (not commanded) are sung alongside of God’s inspired psalms (commanded). Then, within a generation or two, the psalms are completely replaced by hymns and grossly paraphrased psalms. The old-fashioned hymns after a while are replaced by ‘charismatic,’ slap-happy, campfire songs. Previously, the Reformed churches would sing the psalms without musical accompaniment because musical instruments were used only in association with God’s temple, and therefore, ceased as aspects of the ceremonial law. Many Reformed churches abandoned *a cappella* psalm singing and brought in organs. Then, within a generation or two, churches were using folk guitars, orchestras, and even rock groups. The innovations just described are only the tip of the iceberg. Now one can find the following in so-called “Presbyterian and Reformed” churches: celebration of holy days (Christmas, Easter, etc.), choirs, intricate liturgies, liturgical dance, rock groups, drama groups, rock videos, the church calendar, pictures of Christ, and crosses. Michael Bushell writes, “Each generation, it seems, inherits the liturgical mutations of those who went before and without much reflection adds a few of its own. Considered individually, each generation’s changes may not seem all that significant, but the cumulative effect is one of substantial, if not drastic, change. The end product of such a process is a church whose worship practice has drifted far from its Biblical moorings but whose people are largely unaware of the changes that have taken place. The ignorance and apathy that feed this process are two of the Church’s greatest weaknesses, just as they are without doubt two of Satan’s most potent weapons, and they must be confronted head-on if present trends are to be affected materially.... A church that is unconsciously in sin is still in sin. One can only hope that apathy towards the truth is not as widespread as the ignorance of it.”⁶²

If you give sinful man the autonomy of choosing how he will worship, the historical pattern is clear. Man will choose man-centered worship. Sinful man is drawn to entertainment (thus the popularity of the clap-your-hands, stamp-your-feet, “charismatic-style” worship, rock groups, drama groups, choirs, music soloists, pop and country singers, etc.) and to ritual and pompousness (cathedrals, incense, candles, bells, holy days, popish vestments, liturgy, etc.). And when will man-made innovations stop? They won’t until the church obeys God’s regulative principle of worship. God has given a command which man is not to ignore. “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 in any

⁶² Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 4-5.

way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”⁶³ False worship originates in the mind of man according to his imagination. True worship originates in the mind of God and is revealed in the Bible. “But this is what I commanded them, saying ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you.’ Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in the counsels and the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward” (Jer. 7:23-24).

True Worship vs. False Worship

True Worship	False Worship
Only what God commands in His Word is allowed.	Whatever is not expressly condemned in the Bible is allowable.
God-centered worship.	Leads to man-centered worship.
Worship content determined by the objective Word of God.	Worship becomes more and more subjective or mystical.
Worship remains pure, simple, and unadulterated.	Worship changes and evolves and becomes adulterated with man-made traditions.
Worship based on God’s Word has limited parameters.	Public worship forms and content theoretically are infinite.
Thoroughly biblical.	Basically pragmatic: whatever seems to work, and whatever pleases man, will be used.
Pure Gospel worship is trans-cultural. Besides language barriers, people from churches that are faithful to the regulative principle could visit a like-minded church anywhere in the world and immediately fit in and feel at home. In the 17th century, an English or American Puritan, a Scottish or Irish Presbyterian, and a Reformed Dutchman each had very similar worship services. This was not the result of some act of conformity but because all believed and obeyed the regulative principle. In the future, as pure doctrine and pure worship are revived and as whole nations are	False worship caters to man’s sinful autonomy. Therefore false worship is a mixture of paganism and Christianity. Because false worship has a theoretically infinite number of worship options, a person would have to adapt, learn, and adjust to each cultural and denominational worship option. The high-church liturgical Episcopalian would probably feel uncomfortable at a black gospel jam-fest. There are thousands of different hymnals, hundreds of different liturgies. There are rock groups, drama groups, orchestras, poetry readings, videos, Bo-Bo the clown, comedians, entertainers, Johnny Carson-style interviews, liturgical dance, organ recitals;

⁶³ Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), 21:1.

converted and covenant with God, the trans-cultural nature of pure gospel worship will be very useful and important to travelers and business people.	there are several different holy days and church calendars, etc. False worship fragments the church.
Historically has kept the Reformed and Presbyterian churches' worship pure, until abandoned or redefined so as to be rendered meaningless.	Historically has led the church into declension, heresy and idolatry. The apostolic church eventually degenerated into papalism.
Biblical worship focuses on God and His Word.	Man-centered worship focuses on man and his senses. Therefore it either degenerates into entertainment or pompous ritual and ceremony (smells, bells, gator hats, cathedrals, intricate liturgies, etc.). ⁶⁴
Men have liberty under God's Word.	Men lose their liberty under man's changing and arbitrary standard.
Pure gospel worship fosters biblical ecumenicity and community.	False worship divides the church into a thousand splinters. As worship content and style "evolve" and change, the old are even divided from the young.

Conclusion

The regulative principle of worship is clearly set forth in Scripture. There are many plain statements of it in all parts of the Bible (e.g., the law, the writings, the prophets, the gospels, and epistles), and there are a number of historical examples given in the Bible of God's indignation against those who violate it. There is nothing complicated or esoteric regarding God's scriptural law of worship. Its genius and practicality lies in its simplicity: "that a divine warrant is required for everything in the faith and practice of the Church, that whatsoever is not in the Scriptures commanded, either explicitly or by good and necessary consequence, is forbidden."⁶⁵ The testimony of Scripture and history is very clear that human innovations in worship are a fountain of heresy and idolatry. God regards adding or subtracting from what He has commanded as sinful will-worship.

⁶⁴ The word "liturgy" comes from the Greek *leiturgia*, meaning "the work or service of the people." Therefore, in a sense, all Christian worship is liturgical. When I speak of liturgy in a negative sense I am referring to liturgies based on human and church tradition, for example: mandatory use of prayer books, the church calendar, priestly robes and vestments, candles, incense, man-made holy days, kneeling at communion, cathedrals, pictures of Christ and the saints, church music, choirs, and so on.

⁶⁵ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA.: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983 [1888]), 22.

That so many churches ignore and even ridicule such an important and clear teaching of God's Word shows the widespread declension and apostasy in our day. The worshiping of God is a serious matter. The contrast between modern evangelicalism's comedy, skits, and entertainment with what God has commanded should make Christians tremble with fear. Girardeau writes,

God is seen manifesting a most vehement jealousy in protecting the purity of his worship. Any attempt to assert the judgment, the will, the taste of man apart from the express warrant of his Word, and to introduce in his worship human inventions, devices, and methods was overtaken by immediate retribution and rebuked by the thunderbolts of his wrath. Nor need we wonder at this; for the service which the creature professes to render to God reaches its highest and most formal expression in the worship which is offered him. In this act the majesty of the Most High is directly confronted. The worshiper presents himself face to face with the infinite Sovereign of heaven and earth, and assumes to lay at his feet the sincerest homage of the heart. In the performance of such an act to violate divine appointments or transcend divine prescription, to affirm the reason of a sinful creature against the authority of God, is deliberately to flaunt an insult in his face, and to hurl an indignity against his throne. What else could follow but the flash of divine indignation? It is true that in the New Testament dispensation the same swift and visible arrest of this sin is not the ordinary rule. But the patience and forbearance of God can constitute no justification of its commission. Its punishment, if it be not repented of, is only deferred.⁶⁶

Let us return to the liberty of Christ's law; to the purity of the inspired apostolic doctrine and the simplicity of pure gospel worship. A true reformation and revival will only occur when churches return to the doctrines of sovereign grace *and* to the scriptural law of worship.

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⁶⁶ Ibid, 22-23.