

Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense, Chapter 1

The Scriptural Law of Worship

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There are a number of important doctrines in the Bible which are deduced from many parts of Scripture and cannot be conclusively proven from one or two verses. Exclusive Psalm singing is one such doctrine. Exclusive Psalmody flows directly from the overall teaching of Scripture regarding the worship of Jehovah. The Bible teaches that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or *any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture.*”¹ When it comes to the elements of worship and the content of praise, we must have a warrant from God’s word. God sets the parameters on what is permissible in worship, not man. In other words, anything that the church does in worship must be proved 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); or by biblical historical example (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate public worship).

The Reformed doctrine of worship called “the scriptural law of worship”; “the puritan principle of worship”; or, “the regulative principle of worship” is clearly taught in both the Old and New Testaments.² In Genesis 4:3-5 we read that God rejected Cain’s offering of the fruit of the ground, but accepted Abel’s offering of animal sacrifices. Why? Because even though offering fruit is not prohibited, it also was not commanded. Leviticus 10:1-2 records that God killed Nadab and Abihu because they offered strange fire, which God “commanded them not.” The offering of strange fire is not prohibited in Scripture, but it also is not commanded. In Deuteronomy 12:32, in the specific context of avoiding false heathen worship practices, God said, “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (cf. Dt. 4:2; Jer. 7:24,31; 19:5; 1 Kgs. 12:32-33; Num. 15:39-40). In 2 Samuel 6:3-7 we read of God’s judgment on David’s men who were moving the ark. Why were they judged? God

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap XXI:1. “It was the application of this principle which enabled the Protestant Reformers to accomplish their great work of reformation. They denied for example the validity of five of the seven sacraments of the corrupt Church, and retained only Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Likewise the application of this principle enabled them to purify the worship of God by ordering it in accordance with God’s will as set forth in His Word. Thus the work of the Reformation had its positive and negative aspects. It involved the rejection of the use of altars, crosses, crucifixes, candles, incense, and a host of other unscriptural practices, as well as the reinstatement of free prayer as distinct from set forms of prayer, the reading and exposition of God’s word, and the congregational singing of the Psalms. Where this principle that what is not prescribed is forbidden is rejected or ignored, purity of worship is imperiled” (M.C. Ramsey, *Psalms Only*, pp. 24-25).

² For more on the Regulative Principle of worship see: B. Schwertley’s *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, Chapter One; also, *Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship*, chapters 4 and 5.

was angry because they did not follow “the due order...as Moses commanded according to the word of the Lord” (1 Chr. 15:13-15). Jesus chided the Pharisees for adding to God’s law: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (Mt. 15:3). Jesus told the women at the well that “they that worship Him [God] must worship Him in spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24). When Jesus Christ gave orders to the apostles before His ascension into heaven, did He give the church the authority to make up their own doctrine, government, worship, and holy days? Absolutely not! He said to teach “them [the nations] to observe all things that *I have commanded you*” (Mt. 28:20). Jesus told the Pharisees who made up their own rules regarding worship, “In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:9). Paul says that adding the commandments and doctrines of men to Christianity is “*self imposed religion, false humility*” and is of “*no value against the indulgence of the flesh*” (Col. 2:20-23).

The biblical teaching regarding worship is crystal clear. The church’s job is *not* to innovate and create new worship 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.”³ John W. Keddie writes, “The great Church historian William Cunningham pointed out that the implication of this [principle] ‘if it were fully carried out, would just be to leave the Church in the condition in which it was left by the Apostles, in so far as we have any means of information—a result, surely, which need not be very alarming, except to those who think that they themselves have very superior powers for improving and adorning the Church by their inventions [*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 32].’ It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the consequences of the adoption of the laxer view—a basically *permissive* one, and unquestionably the predominant one today even in evangelical churches—has been the tendency for biblical materials in worship to be displaced and countless innovations of one sort or another, having no warrant in God’s word, to be introduced.”⁴

³ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1872) 2:163.

⁴ J.W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?* (Cambridge, England: Scottish Reformed Fellowship, 1978), p. 8. People of Reformed and Presbyterian persuasion should note that all the Calvinistic Reformers and Churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries held to a very strict interpretation of the regulative principle. Calvin’s view can be found in his *Institutes* I, XI, 4; I, XII, 1 and 3; II, VIII, 5 and 17; IV, X, 1 and 8-17; cf. commentary on Jeremiah 7:31; sermon on 2 Samuel 6:6-12; tract on “the necessity of Reforming the Church”; and, the confession drafted by Calvin for the Reformed churches of France (1562). John Knox’s view is clearly set forth in *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* (1550). The Reformed Creeds also teach the regulative principle of worship; cf. the Belgic Confession (1561) Art. VII, XXIX, XXXII; the Heidelberg Catechism Question 96; The Westminster Standards, Confession 1:6,7; 20:2; 21:1; Shorter Catechism 51; Larger Catechism 108, 109. A strict interpretation of the regulative principle can be found in the writings of: George Gillespie, William Ames, Samuel Rutherford, Jeremiah Burroughs, Thomas Watson, Thomas Ridgeley, Thomas Boston, William Romaine, John Cotton, Thomas Manton, Matthew Henry, John Owen, R.L. Dabney, James H. Thornwell, John L. Girardeau and many others. The regulative principle is still officially recognized by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the Presbyterian Reformed Church, the American Presbyterian Church, the Free Church of Scotland, and many other Reformed denominations.

The regulative principle of worship is crucial in understanding exclusive Psalmody, for while there is abundant biblical evidence that Psalms were used for praise in both the Old and New Testament eras, there is no evidence in the Bible that God's people ever used uninspired human compositions in public worship. Churches which use uninspired hymns in public worship must prove that such a practice has biblical warrant from either a command, historical example or by deduction. In a moment we will examine the standard arguments used by Reformed authors to justify the use of uninspired songs in public worship. It will be shown that these arguments are based on either a faulty exegesis of Scripture, a misunderstanding or perversion of the regulative principle (e.g. praise as a circumstance of worship), or on unsubstantiated speculation (e.g., the hymn fragment argument). We will see that the Calvinistic Reformers, Scottish Presbyterians, French Huguenots, Dutch Reformed and English and American Puritans were biblically correct in maintaining exclusive Psalmody.

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