

# Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, Chapter 5 Some Contemporary Objections to *Sola Scriptura* in the Sphere of Worship Considered and Refuted

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Today, the most vocal critics of *sola scriptura* applied to the sphere of worship (i.e., the regulative principle) are men who consider themselves “truly Reformed.”<sup>1</sup> These apologists for declension and the status quo have come up with some interesting arguments that they think justify a wholesale abandonment of the regulative principle of worship in favor of a Lutheran/Episcopalian conception of worship. In order to sharpen our understanding of *sola scriptura*’s relationship to biblical worship, we will examine and refute such arguments.

## 1. The “False Understanding of Ethics and *Adiaphora*” Argument

The first argument used against the regulative principle of worship is based on a false understanding of the meaning and relationship of *sola scriptura*, the regulative principle and Christian liberty or *adiaphora*. Schlissel writes,

Some regulativists will attempt to broaden their appeal to the “principle” found in 12:32 by saying that it is found also in Deuteronomy 4:2. But this passage reads. “Now

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<sup>1</sup> One of the great problems that Reformed denominations have today is the existence of corrupt and dishonest ministers and elders. There are a number of ordained men today who, after having professed their allegiance to the Westminster Standards, work to undermine them in their writing and teaching. There are men who consider themselves Reformed who openly attack the regulative principle which is one of the pillars of the Calvinistic reformation. There are sessions that are introducing many innovations in public worship. The long-term goal of some ministers and elders is a Presbyterian church with Episcopal worship built upon prelatical principles. To such men the words of James Begg are appropriate. He writes, “If it be true, it ought to be firmly maintained, and all worship for which a divine warrant cannot be pleaded, ought to be opposed and discarded. Till it is abandoned, every Presbyterian minister can only be an honest man by maintaining it. It is utterly vain, and worse, to dispose of our solemn obligations by vague and pointless declamation. The position taken up by the Presbyterian Church is either sound or unsound. ‘To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word it is because there is no light in them.’ And the only class of men more inconsistent and criminal than those who leave such a matter in doubt, are those who, in accepting office, profess to hold the doctrine of the Presbyterian Church, and promise to maintain it, but who afterwards treat their solemn professions and vows with faithlessness and disregard.... Now we are not proving this [the regulative principle of worship] for the sake of the office-bearers of the Presbyterian Church. They have all solemnly vowed that, according to their convictions, these are the principles of Scripture which they will defend to the utmost of their power. To do anything else therefore, to make any other profession, without abandoning the office which they received in connection with their previous avowal, is simply an act of perjury, fitted to bring disgrace on the Christian Church, and to give the enemies of the truth cause to blaspheme. Every Presbyterian office-bearer is as much bound as we are to maintain and vindicate these principles, and neither directly nor indirectly to connive at their subversion. We live, however, unfortunately, in a day when ‘truce breaking’ is not uncommon; and when many, instead of following ‘no divisive courses,’ according to their solemn vows, seem to make the promotion of innovations in the worship of God one of their favourite employments. Religion is wounded in the house of her professed friends. We can imagine nothing more fitted to eat like a canker into the faith and morals of the community” (*Anarchy in Worship* [Edinburgh: Lyon and Gemmell, 1875], 10, 12-13).

therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.” If the Regulist would bring this passage to bear on the question of worship, he has gone even further from the path leading to the light. *For this passage refers to all the Law of God, not simply to laws governing worship.* Very few regulativists would seriously argue that God’s intent here is to forbid Israel from doing *anything whatsoever* in *any* area of life that is not specifically commanded in the Law. I suppose those Amish who eschew buttons for want of finding them mentioned in Scripture might look somewhat favorable on this interpretation, but they’d be mighty lonely in so doing. Yet that is precisely the conclusion which cannot be evaded if 4:2 is cited as supportive of the Regulist’s reading of 12:32. Deuteronomy 4:2 is a *general rule*, requiring a life that conforms to God’s disclosed will *in its entirety*. The NIV Study Bible note is to the point: “The revelation of the Lord is sufficient. All of it must be obeyed and anything that adulterates or contradicts it cannot be tolerated.” God did not intend that the recipients of this verse (4:2) would *literally* do nothing not mentioned therein (e.g., no skateboarding, using electricity, driving automobiles, or eating lemon ices). Thus, 4:2 *as a parallel demonstrates that 12:32 is not to be taken in an absolute sense*. If you find a similar phrase used by the same author in the same book, you need to justify applying a radically different sense to each. If it is agreed that 4:2, referring to the whole Law, was not to be taken absolutely when it forbids additions and subtractions, neither is 12:32 to be taken as an abstract and absolute rule. Both are to be interpreted in terms of *the whole Word of God*, a Word that simply does not teach: if it is not commanded, it is forbidden.<sup>2</sup>

Schlissel’s statement is perhaps the most popular modern argument against the regulative principle. He argues that Deuteronomy 4:2 refers to the whole law which regulates all of life. Since all of life contains many activities that are not strictly regulated, that are left to the free choice of man (e.g., “Should I wear blue pants or grey pants?”). Therefore, the virtually identical regulative principle proof text passages such as Deuteronomy 12:32 must also be interpreted in such a manner that leaves man a great deal of liberty in the sphere of worship.

Schlissel’s argument against the regulative principle is founded upon a complete misunderstanding of Deuteronomy 4:2 and therefore should be rejected as unscriptural. His false understanding of this passage and its application to the area of worship is based on a glaring failure to distinguish between God-given ethics and areas of *adiaphora*. Schlissel’s assertion that Deuteronomy 4:2 “was not to be taken absolutely when it forbids additions and subtractions” is totally false. Deuteronomy 4:2 teaches that men are not permitted to add or detract from God’s commandments. In other words, God is the *sole* source of ethics for personal, family, institutional and civil life. Men do not have ethical autonomy. They do not have any authority to make up ethical absolutes, nor are they permitted to ignore or detract from God’s law in any way. R. J. Rushdoony has a clear understanding of the implications of passages such as Deuteronomy 4:2. He writes,

It must be recognized that in any culture *the source of law is the god of that society*. If law has its source in man’s reason, then reason is the god of that society. If the source is

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle” (Part IV), *Messiah’s Mandate*.

an oligarchy, or in a court, senate, or ruler, then that source is the god of that system.... Modern humanism, the religion of the state, locates law in the state and thus makes the state or the people as they find expression in the state, the god of the system.... Nothing is more deadly or more derelict than the notion that the Christian is at liberty with respect to the kind of law he can have.... Neither positive law nor natural law can reflect more than the sin and apostasy of man: *revealed law* is the need and privilege of Christian society.<sup>3</sup>

Men do not have the authority to declare a thought, word or deed evil or sinful apart from proving such by a biblical commandment or deduction from the Bible.

Does the fact that there are many matters in life that are *adiaphora* or indifferent<sup>4</sup> (e.g., skateboarding, planting tomatoes, riding a bike, etc.) mean that Deuteronomy 4:2 was not meant to be taken strictly? Does it mean that men are permitted to add or detract from God's law? No, absolutely not! Likewise in the sphere of commanded or authorized worship men do not have liberty to add or detract one iota from the worship that God has instituted. However, men do have a great deal of liberty in areas that are circumstantial or incidental to worship itself. Schlissel's arguments fail to recognize the distinction between ethics and *adiaphora*, worship ordinances and the circumstances of worship.

If opponents of the regulative principle of worship want to use Deuteronomy 4:2 as a proof text against the Reformed understanding of a strictly regulated worship, they need to demonstrate that worship ordinances belong to the sphere of life that is *adiaphora*. Are the parts or elements of worship that are delineated in Scripture in the same category as riding a bike, or wearing blue pants instead of grey pants, or planting beefsteak tomatoes instead of early girl tomatoes? The answer is: obviously not. *Adiaphora* refers to matters that are indifferent to ethics (e.g., Should I boil my eggs or scramble them for breakfast?). That is, they involve activities that are neither commanded nor forbidden, and therefore the decision whether or not to commit the act or not commit the act does not involve sin or a violation of God's word. As long as men act in accordance with the general rules of Scripture (i.e., Is it done to God's glory [1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 4:7-9]? Does it cause a weak brother to sin [Rom. 14:21]? Can it be done in faith with a clear conscience [Rom. 14:14, 23]? Can I engage in this activity without coming under its power [1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; e.g., tobacco addiction?]), men have liberty to commit or refrain from the act.

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<sup>3</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 [1973]), 4-5, 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding areas of life that are ethically indifferent or *adiaphora*, there are at least four biblical principles that must be followed. First, everything that we do, no matter how mundane, must be done to God's glory. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:7-8). Second, a matter that normally would be indifferent ceases to be indifferent if it would cause a weak brother to sin. "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak" (Rom. 14:21). Third, an activity that in itself is indifferent ceases to be indifferent if it cannot be done in faith with a clean conscience. "To him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean....he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:14, 23). Fourth, an act that normally is *adiaphora* ceases to be *adiaphora* if a person becomes enslaved to or comes under the power or control of that activity. "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12). "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify" (1 Cor 10:23). There are many things that are lawful, such as Twinkies, Big Macs, candy bars, Coca-Cola and fine cigars, that can be abused and thus do not edify. Even organic brown rice can be abused and used in a sinful manner.

Worship ordinances do not involve the liberty to do as one desires and therefore cannot be placed in the category of *adiaphora*. Are Christians free to omit or add to the elements of religious worship as they please? Can a church lawfully eliminate the Lord's supper and replace it with a new sacrament? Would the elders of a church be obedient to Christ if they replaced trinitarian baptism with a man-made ritual? Is it permissible to eliminate the Scripture reading and replace it with Shakespeare or a rock video? Would it be sinful to eliminate the preaching of God's word and replace it with a "Christian" movie or a "Christian" comedy hour or variety show? The answer to these questions is obvious (no, no, no and no). If one places worship ordinances in the category of *adiaphora*, then everything involved in public worship and even public worship itself is optional. Furthermore, one could have two, zero or 20 sacraments.

Because worship ordinances are required by Scripture, they should never be treated as *adiaphora*. Rather, they should receive the same treatment as God's moral law. *Areas of life that are adiaphora correspond not to worship ordinances but to the circumstances of worship* (e.g., Should we start the service at 10:30 a.m. or 11:00 a.m.? Should the meeting house have blue carpeting or maroon carpeting? Should we use wooden pews or folding chairs? etc.). Ironically, Deuteronomy 4:2, when properly understood, is one of the strongest proof texts for the regulative principle of worship, for the regulative principle logically follows *sola scriptura*. Protestant reformer John Knox concurs,

And that is principal idolatry when our own inventions we defend to be righteous in the sight of God, because we think them good, laudable, and pleasant. We may not think us so free nor so wise, that we may do unto God, and unto his honor, what we think expedient. No! The contrary is commanded by God, saying, "Unto my Word shall ye add nothing; nothing shall ye diminish therefrom, that ye might observe the precepts of your Lord God" (Deut. 4:2). Which words are not to be understood of the Decalogue and Law Moral only, but of statutes, rites, and ceremonies; for equal obedience of all his Laws requireth God.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The "All of Life Is Worship" Argument

An argument that is closely related to the argument from Deuteronomy 4:2 is one which claims that all of life is worship, and since life contains many activities that are not strictly regulated by Scripture, therefore worship is not strictly regulated either. Although, as Christians, everything we do is to be done to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and thus we are to live to the Lord (Rom. 14:7-8) and present our bodies as living sacrifices to God (Rom. 12:1), the idea that all of life is worship and therefore no distinction exists between public worship and activities like mowing the lawn is absurd. There are several reasons why we must regard "the all of life is worship" argument as unscriptural.

First, there are several passages from both the Old and New Testaments which teach and/or assume that public worship is special and set apart from everyday life.

*Psalms* 22:22, 25. "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise You.... My praise shall be of You in the great assembly; I will pay My vows before those who fear Him."

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<sup>5</sup> John Knox, "A Vindication of the Doctrine That the Sacrifice of the Mass Is Idolatry" in *Works*, David Laing, ed. (Edinburgh: The Bannatyne Club, 1854), 3:37-38.

*Psalm 27:4.* “One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple.”

David Dickson writes,

A third ground of confidence, is the conscience of his purpose to study to have constant communion with God, in the use of the means, and the conscience of his very earnest desire to have the benefit of all the public ordinances, in the fellowship of the church. Whence learn, 1. Hearty resolution to subject ourselves to all God’s ordinances, and to follow the appointed means of communion-keeping with God, is a sound mark of solid faith; and the conscience of this resolution, serveth much to confirm our confidence in God, if we can say with the prophet, *this one thing have I desired, &c.* 2. In the using of the means and ordinances of God’s house, the glory of the Lord may be seen, counsel and direction in all things may be had, with comfort and spiritual delight to our souls; for in the ordinances David was to *behold the beauty of the Lord, with delight, and to enquire in his holy temple.* 3. The desire of communion with God, and love to his ordinances, where it is sincere, should have the chief place in the heart, above all earthly desires and delights whatsoever: *one thing have I desired.* 4. A sincere desire must not be suffered to go away, but should be pursued resolutely, and recommended to God daily; *this I will still seek after,* saith he: and the means of communion with God in the public fellowship of the church must be constantly continued in, *even all the days of our life.*<sup>6</sup>

In his application of this passage to believers in the new covenant era Calvin writes, “The Word, sacraments, public prayers, and other helps of the same kind, cannot be neglected, without a wicked contempt of God, who manifests himself to us in these ordinances, as in a mirror or image.”<sup>7</sup>

*Psalm 84:1-2.* “How lovely is Your tabernacle, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”

Calvin writes,

David complains of his being deprived of liberty of access to the Church of God, there to make a profession of his faith, to improve in godliness, and to engage in the divine worship.... He knew that God had not in vain appointed the holy assemblies, and that the godly have need of such helps so long as they are sojourners in this world.<sup>8</sup>

Plummer writes, “The appointed worship of the true God has in all ages possessed great attractions for the regenerate.”<sup>9</sup>

*Psalm 87:2.* “The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.”

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<sup>6</sup> David Dickson, *Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1959 [1653-55]), 1:141-142.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 1:455.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 3:353-354.

<sup>9</sup> William S. Plummer, *Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975 [1867]), 794.

David Clarkson writes,

But it may be replied, the Lord had worship, not only in the gates of Zion, in the temple, but also in the dwellings of Jacob. We cannot suppose that all the posterity of Jacob would neglect the worship of God in their families; no doubt the faithful among them resolved with Joshua, "I and my house will serve the Lord." Since, therefore, the worship of God was to be found in both, how can this worship be the reason why one should be preferred before the other? Sure upon no other account but this, the worship of God in the gates of Zion was public, his worship in the dwellings of Jacob was private. So that, in fine, the Lord may be said to love the gates of Zion before all the dwellings of Jacob, because he prefers public worship before private. He loved all the dwellings of Jacob, wherein he was worshiped privately; but the gates of Zion he loved more than all the dwellings of Jacob, for there he was publicly worshiped. Hence we have clear ground for this: *Observation*. Public worship is to be preferred before private. So it is by the Lord, so it should be by his people. So it was under the law, so it must be under the gospel. Indeed, there is difference between the public worship under the law and gospel in respect of a circumstance, *viz.*, the place of public worship. Under the law, the place of public worship was holy, but we have no reason so to account any place of public worship under the gospel; and this will be manifest, if both we inquire what were the grounds of that legal holiness in the tabernacle or temple, and withal observe that none of them can be applied to any place of worship under the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-2*. "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few" (KJV).

This passage alone proves that public worship is unique and special. There is to be a solemn recognition of the special presence of God in public worship and thus great care must be taken to be sincere, reverent, composed, deliberate and attentive. Matthew Henry writes,

Address thyself to the worship of God with a solemn pause, and take time to compose thyself for it, not going about it with precipitation, which is called *hasting with the feet*, Prov. xix. 2. Keep thy thought from roving and wandering from the work; keep thy affections from running out towards wrong objects, for in the business of God's house there is work enough for the whole man, and all too little to be employed.... When we are in the house of God, we are in a special manner before God and in his presence, there where he has promised to meet his people, where his eye is upon us and ours ought to be unto him.<sup>11</sup>

John Gill writes,

All which may denote the purity and cleanness of the conversation of the true worshipers of God; for, as the feet are the instruments of the action of walking, they may intend the conduct and behaviour of the saints in the house of God, where they should take care to

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<sup>10</sup> David Clarkson, "Public Worship to Be Preferred Before Private" in *The Blue Banner* (Dallas, TX: First Presbyterian Church Rowlett, July/August, 1999), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 6:1006.

do all things according to his word, which is a lamp to the feet, and a light unto the path.<sup>12</sup>

It is obvious from this and many other passages that public worship is to be treated by God's people far differently than attending a sporting event or going to a barbecue. Frank Smith writes,

One of the privileges of a worship service is that of coming into the special presence of God and communing with Him. Anything which detracts from this clearly should not be allowed. If we were to be in the royal presence of the Queen of England, it would not be proper protocol to interrupt that audience with the monarch in order to talk with one another. How much more important it is that we do not interrupt our audience with the King of kings by trivial items which center on ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

*Leviticus 23:3.* "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work in it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings."

After Israel was settled in the land, this requirement of weekly public worship could only be put into practice if there were many congregations meeting throughout the land of Israel. These decentralized congregational worship services would of course not contain the ceremonial elements of tabernacle or temple worship (such as animal sacrifices). Matthew Henry writes,

It is a holy convocation; that is, "If it lie within your reach, you shall sanctify it in a religious assembly: let as many as can come to the door of the tabernacle, and let others meet elsewhere for prayer, praise, and the reading of the law," as in the schools of the prophets, while prophecy continued, and afterwards in the synagogues. Christ appointed the New Testament Sabbath to be a holy convocation, by meeting his disciples once and again (and perhaps oftener) on the first day of the week.... Note, God's Sabbaths are to be religiously observed in every private house, by every family apart, as well as by many families together in holy convocations.<sup>14</sup>

*Acts 15:21.* "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (cf. Ps. 74:8).

*Hebrews 10:24-25.* "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

Unlike everyday activities such as skateboarding, gardening and driving a car, public worship is not an area that believers can treat with indifference, for it is not an optional activity. Those who regard "all of life as worship" (like those who misinterpret Deuteronomy 4:2) completely misunderstand the difference between public worship, the commanded elements of that worship and matters indifferent or common to human actions and societies. Once an activity is commanded and set apart by God, we cannot treat that activity as optional or *adiaphora*. Singing

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<sup>12</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1810]), 4:579.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Smith, "An Introduction to the Elements of Worship" in *Worship in the Presence of God*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 1:536.

praise to God in public worship is in an entirely different category than planting tomatoes, even though both are done to God's glory.

Second, Christ the king and head of the church has appointed public officers with special public functions that require a special public use. "Therefore He says: 'When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.... And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ'" (Eph. 4:8, 11, 12). The Bible has certain requirements for preaching, reading the Scriptures and administering the sacraments in public worship. These worship elements are *only* to be conducted by an ordained teacher or preacher and must not be treated as indifferent activities of everyday life. If there is no distinction between all of life and public worship, then why are public ordinances restricted to ordained officers in the church? If all of life is worship, then such rules and distinctions would be unnecessary.

Third, when the apostle Paul discusses the conduct of believers during public worship, he sets forth regulations that presuppose a sharp distinction between public worship and all of life. For example, women may speak at a barbecue and may teach their children during home school, yet they are strictly forbidden to speak or teach during the public worship service (cf. 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12-14). Regarding the Lord's supper, Paul tells believers that they must conduct themselves in a proper manner when coming to the Lord's table. They are to examine themselves and are to make sure that they have a special regard for their brethren (1 Cor 11:17-34). The regulations regarding this sacrament obviously do not apply to the local picnic or volleyball game. There is also a special decorum for public worship that is commanded by Paul. Men are not to wear head coverings in church while women are (1 Cor. 11:2-16). However, men may wear baseball caps at the ball park. If all of life is worship (as some assert), and thus worship is not to be strictly regulated by Scripture, then the apostle Paul's inspired instructions regarding public worship would be superfluous.

Fourth, the term for church (*ekklesia*) often denotes a society of professing Christians who constitute a local church that meets together for public worship in a particular location (Ac. 5:11; 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18; 16:19; Rom. 16:23; Gal. 1:2; 1 Th. 2:14; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2; Rev. 1:11; 20, etc.). Hodge writes,

God has commanded ecclesiastical communities with constitutions, laws and officers, badges, ordinances and discipline, for the great purpose of giving visibility to his kingdom, of making known the gospel of that kingdom, and of gathering in all its elect subjects.<sup>15</sup>

The New Testament church met together for public worship on the Lord's day (Ac. 2:1; 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:23, 26, 34, 35; 16:1, 2). Lord's day public worship was commanded by God (Lev. 23:3; Heb. 10:24-45). It is a period of time that is set apart from everyday life. Public worship consists of certain elements that are authorized by Scripture such as: reading the Scriptures (Dt. 31:9-13; Neh. 8:7-8; 13:1; 1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13); prayer (Ac. 4:31; 1 Cor. 11:13-15); preaching from the Bible (Ac. 17:13; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2); the administration of the sacraments (Mt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:18-34) and the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). It clearly would be inappropriate to

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<sup>15</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1869], 312).



treat public worship conducted by the church in the same manner as areas of life that are indifferent or *adiaphora*.

Fifth, the Bible teaches that there is a special presence of God in public worship. In a special sense Christ is speaking to his covenant people through the preached word. The people as a covenant body respond to God's word with prayer and praise. The confession of sins to God includes both individual and corporate sins. When the one body partakes of the Lord's supper (the bread and wine), there is a special blessing that is received from our Lord. Yet an unworthy partaking of the supper (e.g. when the corporate assembled body is disregarded, etc.) involves covenant sanctions and even death (1 Cor. 11:27-34). Cases of serious public sin and excommunication are to be announced during public worship where Christ is present in his court (Mt. 18:20), where the excommunicate is delivered to Satan by Christ's power (1 Cor. 5:4). Not only does the congregation receive a special blessing from the public means of grace and God's unique presence, but God is more glorified when he is praised by the corporate body of Christ. Clarkson writes,

The Lord has engaged to be with every particular saint, but when the particular are joined in public worship, there are all the engagements united together. The Lord engages himself to let forth as it were, a stream of his comfortable, quickening presence to every particular person that fears him, but when many of these particulars join together to worship God, then these several streams are united and meet in one. So that the presence of God, which, enjoyed in private, is but a stream, in public becomes a river, a river that makes glad the city of God. The Lord has a dish for every particular soul that truly serves him; but when many particulars meet together, there is a variety, a confluence, a multitude of dishes. The presence of the Lord in public worship makes it a spiritual feast, and so it is expressed, Isa. xxv. 6. There is, you see, more of God's presence in public worship, *ergo* public worship is to be preferred before private.<sup>16</sup>

One should not be surprised that God is present in public worship in a special manner, for nothing on earth more resembles the throne room of God in heaven than public worship. Heaven is described in Scripture as a place of continued public worship where an innumerable host of angels and saints behold the face of God and the Lamb (Rev. 1:9-12). "The innumerable company of angels, and the church of the first born, make up one general assembly in the heavenly Jerusalem, Heb. xii. 22, 23. They make one glorious congregation, and so jointly together sing the praises of him that sits on the throne, and the praises of the Lamb, and continue in this public worship to eternity."<sup>17</sup>

To argue that all of life is worship and thus public worship is not strictly regulated by God's word is akin to comparing the Lord's supper to that which is common or profane.

The public assembly is a covenantal gathering, a time and place for God to meet directly with His people. He lays down the law, and they are to bless Him in return.... Worship is special and it is dialogical in nature. It is also prescribed. The fact of being in God's presence means that not only are general principles to be observed, but the very elements of service have been written out beforehand.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David Clarkson, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Smith, "What is Worship?" in *Worship in the Presence of God*, 14-15. David C. Lachman, in refuting the "spiritual gift" argument, makes an important observation that is germane to our discussion: "Much ingenuity has

### 3. “The Regulative Principle of Worship Only Applies to the Temple” Argument

Another popular argument against the regulative principle of worship is based on the idea that the regulative principle only applied to tabernacle and temple worship. This idea is based on the *context* of the classic regulative principle text, Deuteronomy 12:32, and the notion that God was very strict with the tabernacle/temple worship solely because the temple service typified the person and work of Jesus Christ. If one accepts this argument then one can conclude that: (1) The decentralized worship in Israel that occurred in the synagogue was not strictly regulated. In other words, the Israelites could do whatever they desired in worship as long as it did not violate the express teaching of Scripture (this is essentially the Episcopal-Lutheran conception of acceptable worship). (2) The regulative principle was abrogated with the death of Christ when his perfect sacrifice rendered the temple cultus unnecessary. (3) Therefore, the new covenant church has nothing to do with the regulative principle and has liberty to devise rites, ceremonies and holy days as it desires, as long as the human inventions do not violate or contradict God’s word.

The idea that the regulative principle only applied to the service of the central sanctuary must be rejected for a number of reasons. First, the notion that since Deuteronomy 12:32 is given in a section that deals primarily with the tabernacle, and thus *only* applies to the tabernacle is simply assumed without exegetical proof. Are we told anywhere in chapter 12 or anywhere in the whole Old or New Testament that the principle of no addition or subtraction is limited to the tabernacle or temple? No, we are not. But can we not *infer* from the context that this ultra-strict principle applied only to the tabernacle/temple? No. In fact the context proves the exact opposite. While it is true that chapter 12 contains a lengthy discussion of the central sanctuary (in particular the need to offer sacrifices and offerings at the central sanctuary) the context of Deuteronomy 12:32 also speaks to the matters of the repression of idolatry and syncretism with pagan worship that can occur not only at the tabernacle but throughout the whole land of Israel. Note the immediate context of the passage:

“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” (Dt. 12:29-32).

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been exercised in attempting to justify various worship practices. Some have even argued that music is a spiritual gift, claiming that the lists of spiritual gifts given in Scripture are not exhaustive, but rather illustrative. But such arguments generally contend only for a few other supposed gifts, usually including such artistic accomplishments as dance, drama and even magic. Beyond these and similar forms of entertainment, no one ever suggests that a surgeon perform some particularly difficult operation or a plumber clear a clogged drain as a part of worship, however talented they may be. Although all these may be legitimate parts of our lives, Scripture nowhere suggest that God is pleased by any of them when they are included as part of our worship. What we may well do to the glory of God in our lives in general is not thereby given any warrant to be intruded into our worship of Him” (“Christian Liberty and Worship” in *Ibid.* 99).

The passage applies not just to behavior at the tabernacle but to worship practices throughout the whole land of Israel. If Deuteronomy 12:32 only applied to the central sanctuary, why would it be used as a foundational verse to suppress pagan idolatry throughout the land? Pagan Canaanite worship was decentralized with house idols, local pagan sacred sites, local high places and sacred groves. Are we supposed to believe that Deuteronomy 12:32 is only concerned with syncretism within the tabernacle proper? Is verse 31 only concerned with suppressing child sacrifice within the tabernacle? Of course not! The context of Deuteronomy 12:32 proves that it *cannot* be restricted to the tabernacle/temple.

Second, Deuteronomy 12:32 cannot be interpreted in isolation from the virtually identical *sola scriptura* passages that apply not only to the tabernacle/temple but to all of life. The *sola scriptura* passages teach that the church does not have autonomy or legislative authority with respect to doctrine, ethics or worship ordinances. Note the follow passages. Deuteronomy 4:2. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." Proverbs 30:5-6. "Every word of God is pure.... Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar."

We have already noted in our discussion of Deuteronomy 4:2 that it is sinful for men to make up their own ethical rules. Church members would be justly angry and outraged if their pastor or session issued a decree that eating meat on Fridays, or wearing blue jeans, or riding a bike was now sinful and merited church censure. Deuteronomy 4:2 also forbids church authorities from detracting or adding to the worship prescribed in Scripture. The only way that Deuteronomy 4:2 can be circumvented by opponents of the regulative principle is to argue that the worship of God is not a prescribed matter of law but rather belongs to the sphere of things indifferent (*adiaphora*).

The idea that the worship of Jehovah (the most sacred and important duty of the church) is *adiaphora* is impossible for two reasons.

First, *adiaphora* refers only to indifferent matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden, that are not directly regulated by Scripture. Worship, however, is commanded by God.

Second, areas of *adiaphora* are optional. Worship is not optional. Deuteronomy 12:32, which is virtually identical to 4:2, is given in the context of worship to emphasize: (1) Scripture's sole authority over worship, (2) the covenant people's lack of legislative authority to determine or make up their own worship and (3) the necessity of sticking strictly to what God's word says to avoid human additions which because of man's inherent depravity lead to syncretism and sin. The regulative principle is simply *sola scriptura* applied to the sphere of worship. Those who apply Deuteronomy 12:32 solely to the temple do so only because they do not understand Deuteronomy 4:2 and the full implication of *sola scriptura*.

Third, the idea that the regulative principle only applied to the temple ignores the fact that tabernacle/temple worship contained ceremonial and non-ceremonial ordinances. The sacrificing of animals, the burning of incense and the priestly and Levitical use of instruments during the sacrifice were ceremonial. But the reading of Scripture, prayer and the singing of praise were not ceremonial. This assertion is proved from the fact that Scripture reading (1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13), prayer (Mt. 6:9; 1 Th. 5:17; Ac. 4:31; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; Phil. 4:6; Jas. 1:5) and the singing of praise (Mt. 26:30; Ac. 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 13:15; Jas. 5:13) are all integral aspects of Christian worship *after* the dissolution of the temple and the abrogation of ceremonial ordinances. Therefore, it is overly simplistic and exegetically unsound to argue that the regulative principle was annulled with the ceremonial order. If the regulative

principle applied to the temple worship, then it also regulated the non-ceremonial worship that occurred there.

Those who use the argument that the regulative principle applied solely to the temple and thus was abrogated with the ceremonial law are guilty of making a *total* antithesis between temple worship and synagogue/Christian public worship. One cannot deny that the temple cultus typified Christ and His work. However, one must not overlook the fact that the temple was also a place of worship (Jn. 4:21) and prayer (Mt. 21:13). A number of the crucial elements of Christian public worship were first practiced in the temple. Bushell writes,

To the Old Testament Jew, the Temple ritual was the very epitome of worship, and all exercises of piety were in one way or another related back to that source. Liturgical practices in the synagogue in many instances corresponded directly to those of the Temple. Prayer, for example, was offered in the synagogue at the time of the Temple offerings. Outside, the Temple prayer was always offered facing the Temple or Jerusalem. The synagogues were considered sanctuaries in miniature, even to the point that the furniture in the synagogue (such as the Ark and the seven-branched candelabra) was patterned after that of the Temple. Considering, therefore, the importance of the Temple even for worship outside of Jerusalem, it would seem reasonable to postulate a greater degree of continuity between Christian worship practice and certain aspects of the Temple liturgy than most authorities are willing to admit. The paucity of references in the literature to the influence of the Temple liturgy on Christian worship is an unbalanced situation that needs very much to be corrected. It is our opinion that the Temple rather than the synagogue is the ultimate source of a number of the most important aspects of Christian worship. That many of these aspects may have been mediated by the synagogue is beside the point, at least in so far as our concern with the subject goes.<sup>19</sup>

While the attempts to limit the regulative principle to the temple are clever, they have absolutely no foundation in Scripture. The worship of the temple itself proves that the regulative principle cannot be restricted to ceremonial ordinances.

Fourth, there are a number of passages that apply the regulative principle outside the sphere of tabernacle/temple worship. If there is even one passage of Scripture that applies the regulative principle outside of tabernacle temple worship, then the assertion that the regulative principle applied only to the temple falls to the ground. We will examine three passages.

(1) In Matthew 15:1-3 Jesus condemned the Pharisees for adding ritualistic washing *that occurred in the home and not in the temple* to the law. “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?’” This passage poses a serious problem for those who teach that the regulative principle applied only to the temple, and thus man-made traditions are permissible as long as they do not violate the express teaching of Scripture. Where is the washing of hands condemned in God’s word? 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

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 71-72.

exalt it into a religious rite is a folly and a sin.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> “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....”<sup>22</sup>

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,

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 201.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 5:210-211.

<sup>22</sup> David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1987 [1647]), 207.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London: John Field, 1647), 138.

Note also 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.<sup>24</sup> “He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is 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.”<sup>25</sup> Our Lord does not just condemn negative, bad or contradictory human traditions but all of them 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.<sup>26</sup>

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

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<sup>24</sup> 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., 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.

<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> Spurgeon, *Matthew*, 203.

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 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.<sup>27</sup>

(2) Another passage of Scripture which disproves the “temple only” theory is Colossians 2:20-23, “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves 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.” The apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit several years after the regulative principle was supposedly abolished, rigorously enforced the regulative principle.

Paul says that any addition to what God has commanded or authorized 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....”<sup>28</sup>

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

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<sup>27</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [from the 1852 edition]), 518-519.

<sup>28</sup> John Eadie, *Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1884]), 199-200.

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.<sup>29</sup>

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?"<sup>30</sup> 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 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 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

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<sup>29</sup> Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1995), 56.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986 [1692]), 63.



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.<sup>31</sup>

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 doctrines 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 doctrines, 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 doctrines, 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 or subtractions to the doctrine, ethics and worship set forth in divine revelation (Dt. 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 *sola scriptura* 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.

(3) Another passage which disproves the "temple only" theory is John 4:21-24: "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.'" When Jesus

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<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 181.

discussed worship with the Samaritan woman and contrasted old covenant worship with new covenant worship, he taught that worship in both dispensations was to be conducted upon the same principles. Note the phrase, “the hour is coming and now is” (v. 23). Although the death of Christ eliminated all the typical and ceremonial aspects of old covenant worship, the need to worship God “in spirit and truth” was not a new principle, for it was already in effect when Jesus spoke these words. According to Jesus, God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth, *not because the temple represents Christ and the gospel, but because of God’s nature and character*. Bushell writes,

The Spirit that is the source of eternal life must also be the source of true worship. If we assume that the Spirit works only in and through His word, it is a fair inference from this principle that all true worship must be founded upon the Holy Scriptures.... Acceptable worship must be consonant with the character of God as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures, and must be in conformity with that sufficient rule at every point. Only that worship that proceeds ultimately from the Spirit through His word is pleasing to God.<sup>32</sup>

This passage of Scripture by itself refutes that idea that the regulative principle applied only to the temple, for when Jesus begins this discussion, it is clear that he was speaking of the temple worship in Jerusalem (v. 21). Therefore, when he says that the same worship principle of “spirit and truth” that is now operative in the old covenant era will also be operative in the new covenant era, he is connecting the strict worship principle that regulated the temple to the new covenant church. If believers of both old and new covenant eras want to worship God properly, they must do so only in accordance with his nature and character. And the only way to approach God in a manner that pleases him is to approach him on his own terms in accordance with his own rules. This means that worship must be prescribed by Scripture and not by sinful men. God who is truth itself must be worshiped according to truth and not man’s imagination. The Westminster Larger Catechism says: “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are: all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving any religious worship not instituted by God Himself...” (Larger Catechism #109). The idea that the regulative principle only applied to the tabernacle/temple worship has no biblical support, contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture and therefore must be rejected.

#### 4. The “Circumstances of Worship” Argument

A common method of avoiding the full implication of *sola scriptura* in the sphere of worship is to confuse and blur the distinction between worship ordinances and the circumstances of worship. The statement of the Westminster Confession regarding circumstances of worship (1.6) is often used as a justification to introduce human traditions and innovations into the public worship of God. An opponent to the regulative principle writes,

We are here simply insisting that the Westminster Confession’s admission concerning “circumstances” of worship “*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*”—is, in truth, a far more

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 149, 151-152.

comprehensive statement of God's will for New Order worship than is recognized in some quarters.<sup>33</sup>

It is common for opponents of the regulative principle (and for men who claim adherence to the regulative principle yet who refuse to apply it to certain areas of worship because of a love of human traditions) to add human innovations and traditions to the worship of God and then arbitrarily declare the additions to be circumstances of worship. This tactic, which leads to the corruption of worship, is simply a more sophisticated, up to date version of the Lutheran notion that their additions all belong to the sphere of *adiaphora*. This method of circumventing the regulative principle is not a direct frontal attack upon *sola scriptura* over worship but rather is clever side-stepping or back-door evasion of the regulative principle. In denominations that adhere to Reformed confessions (thus officially adhering to the regulative principle) yet have backslid and departed from biblical worship, apologists for declension and the status quo have developed some clever unbiblical arguments. Some popular examples of such argumentation are as follows.

(1) Some argue that singing is not a separate element of worship but is merely a circumstance of worship. Bahnsen writes, "Is singing a separate 'element' of worship or a 'circumstance' of worship? If the latter, it does not require biblical warrant according to the regulative principle. I have argued that singing is simply a means to (one circumstance through which to) pray, praise, exhort, or teach—rather than an element of worship itself."<sup>34</sup> What Bahnsen is saying is that the general command to praise God is an element of worship, but how this command to praise is carried out is a mere circumstance of worship. Thus, a person could praise God through singing, or silent meditation, or speaking, or even through drama or dance, for the circumstances of worship are not strictly regulated by God's word.

(2) Many argue that musical accompaniment to the singing of praise in public worship is a circumstance of worship. Theologian John Frame gives a typical example of this argument. He writes,

Churches in the Covenanter tradition, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, often justify the use of pitch pipes as 'circumstance,' while rejecting the use of organs and pianos as unauthorized 'elements.' The logic of this distinction escapes

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<sup>33</sup> Steven Schlissel, "All I Really Need to Know about Worship I Don't Learn from the Regulative Principle" (Part IV) in *Messiah's Mandate*.

<sup>34</sup> Greg Bahnsen, "Exclusive Psalmody" in *Antithesis* 1:2 (March-April, 1990), 51. The argument that singing is not a separate element of worship was popularized by Vern S. Poythress, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and a PCA minister. In 1974 he wrote, "We regard teaching-by-singing and teaching-in-the-narrow-sense as simply two forms of teaching, each particularly effective in meeting certain needs and expressing certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Each has its advantages and limitations, due to the nature of the medium of expression. We challenge the exclusive psalmist position to prove from Scripture, rather than assume, that teaching-by-singing and proclaiming are 'two separate elements of worship.' To us they appear little more 'separate' than preaching to a visible audience versus preaching over the radio" ("Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 [1974-75], 225-226). The latest expression of this argument comes from the pen of John M. Frame: "Even if we accept the division of worship into elements, it is not plausible to argue that song is an element of worship, independent of all others. As we saw in the preceding chapter, song is not an independent element, but rather a way of doing other things. It is a way of praying, of teaching, of confessing, etc. Therefore, when we apply the regulative principle to matters of song, we should not ask specifically what words Scripture commands us to sing, but rather, what words Scripture commands us to use in teaching, prayer, confession, etc." (*Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principle and Practice of Biblical Worship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996], 124).

me. If it is legitimate to use a pitch pipe to give the congregation the first note of a song, why shouldn't we also give the congregation help with the second note, the third, and the rhythm?<sup>35</sup>

Others point out that the use of musical instruments in worship is “common to human actions and societies.” Therefore (they argue) it must be a circumstance of worship.

(3) Many pastors and sessions in Reformed or Presbyterian denominations who have special Christmas and Easter services yet who understand that such services have no warrant in God's word argue that choosing a text for a sermon is a circumstance of worship. Therefore, it is entirely permissible (as a circumstance of worship) for the pastor to preach on the incarnation on or near December 25. Thus, one can find many a Presbyterian church following a Romanist or Anglican church calendar with the excuse that doing so is only a circumstance of worship.<sup>36</sup>

In order to refute arguments intended to circumvent Scripture's sole authority in authorizing worship elements, it is necessary to briefly consider the difference between the circumstances of worship and worship ordinances.

The first difference is that *worship ordinances are prescribed or determined from Scripture*. Every part or element of worship must be based on either an explicit command from the Bible (e.g., “Do this in remembrance of Me” [Lk. 22:19]); or an approved historical example from Scripture (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate worship);<sup>37</sup> or by logical inference from the Bible (i.e., there may not be an explicit command but when several passages are compared they teach or infer a scriptural practice).<sup>38</sup> Because the

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<sup>35</sup> John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 62, fn. 1.

<sup>36</sup> If a pastor is preaching through a book of the Bible and in the natural course of his exposition he comes to a passage on the birth or incarnation of Christ on or near December 25th, then choosing that text is a circumstance of worship. But, if a pastor is preaching through a book and purposely changes the subject to the incarnation or birth of Christ on or near December 25th then he has deliberately regarded an extra-biblical holy day, and is using the choosing of a text as a circumstance, as an excuse. Some of the reasons that Reformed believers give for not celebrating Christmas are: (1) The Bible has only authorized the Lord's day or the Christian sabbath as a special religious holy day. In it believers are to celebrate the *whole work of redemption*. (2) Jesus Christ was not born on December 25th and thus Christmas is a lie. Our Lord was born in the fall of the year. (3) It is immoral for Christians to syncretize biblical worship with paganism and popery. Believers should have nothing to do with remnants of paganism or the trinkets of Antichrist. (4) The Bible tells God's people to “love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15). Christmas was the invention of rank pagans and apostate Romanists. It is loved and admired by pagans (sodomites, murderers, child molesters, Hollywood, etc.) all over the world as a special “holy day.” Therefore, it is unchristian and should be shunned by all believers.

<sup>37</sup> 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).

<sup>38</sup> “There is of course 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

elements of worship must be proved from Scripture, they are finite in number; and, because the canon of Scripture is closed, the elements are fixed and unchanging. The circumstances of worship are not determinable from the Bible. Although public worship is required on the Lord's day (the Christian sabbath), the time to meet is not prescribed. Other circumstances of worship are: the type of building to meet in; the type of seating; the location of the meeting house; the particular psalm selections; the choice of what text to preach on; the choice of Scripture reading, etc. The circumstances of worship are determined by Christian prudence (i.e., sanctified common sense) according to the general rules of Scripture (e.g.: What time to meet would be the most convenient and edifying for the congregation? What Psalm selections are most appropriate for the sermon text? What type of building design will help the congregation focus on the preached word? etc.).

Some circumstances are determined by the pastor (e.g., the sermon text); others by the session (e.g., the time to meet) and others by heads of households and individuals (e.g., Should I wear a blue, black grey or brown suit to church? etc.). Unlike worship elements, the circumstances of worship are virtually infinite in number and frequently change. Remember, if something in public worship is determinable by Scripture, then it cannot be a circumstance of worship. Furthermore, note that only God has the authority to take something that is a circumstance of worship and make it a worship ordinance. For example, there is nothing intrinsically special regarding any particular day of the week. Yet God has the authority to set aside a particular day and make it religiously significant. There is nothing religiously significant or special regarding any particular piece of land on the earth. Yet, in the old covenant era, God made Jerusalem and the temple a special religious place. Therefore, when men add their own holy day, or make up a holy place or object, or bring musical instruments or non-inspired hymns into the worship of Jehovah, they are usurping God's authority.

Once one understands that worship ordinances are commanded or prescribed by Scripture then he will not be misguided by those who attempt to blur the distinction between the elements or parts of worship and the circumstances of worship. For example (as noted above), many pastors today argue that the use of musical instruments in public worship is a circumstance of worship. To someone who is not familiar with the Bible this argument sounds plausible. After all, are not musical instruments used in all cultures and nations? Are they not also commonly used in religious ceremonies? The problem with this argument is that the use of musical instruments was commanded by God and only priests and Levites were authorized to play them in association with the temple cultus (Num. 10:18, 10; 1 Chr. 15:14-24, 23:5, 28:11-13, 19; 2 Chr. 5:11-14, 29:26; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:27, etc.). If musical instruments were only a circumstance of worship, and if any Israelite could play musical instruments in worship, then such commands would be totally unnecessary and out of place. Something incidental to worship *by nature* is incidental or discretionary in all circumstances.

Second, anything in worship which holds a religious or moral significance is an element or part of worship and therefore must have divine warrant. The circumstances of worship are "common to human actions and societies." Note the following illustrations for clarification. If a church in first-century Palestine had a bucket of water inside the door that believers used to rinse

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simply make explicit what is already expressed implicitly in Scripture" (Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 124). 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 consequence" or logical inference from Scripture to formulate doctrine is biblical can be seen in the following passages: Lk. 20:37ff., Mt. 22:31ff., Mk. 12:26, Mt. 19:4-6, 1 Cor. 11:8-10.

the dust off their feet before they sat down, then this rinsing of the feet would not be religiously significant. But if the elders of that church instructed church members to dip their hand in the water and make the sign of the cross or take some water and toss it in the air while saying a certain prayer, then they would be guilty of adding a human tradition to the worship of God. Many pastors have a glass of water on or near the pulpit to drink during the sermon. There is nothing religiously significant regarding a glass of water. However, if the pastor blesses the glass of water and then dips a baby rattle in it and starts sprinkling church members while mumbling in Latin, then he has added a human tradition to worship. Today there are many human additions to worship that clearly have crossed the line and are regarded as holding a special, sacred or religious significance (e.g., the sign of the cross, holy water, priestly garments, prayer candles, kneeling at communion, the altar call, religious drama, liturgical dance, the “Christian” calendar, saints’ days, holy days [apart from the Sabbath], etc.).

Third, worship ordinances are practices that are required by Scripture and therefore are not voluntary or optional. That is, they are biblically necessary. Church members do not have the option of eliminating the sermon, the Scripture reading or the sacraments, etc. (in fact, evangelicals often consider sects that omit such things as cults). Circumstances are not required or biblically necessary. Worship services are not dependent upon buildings, seating and pulpits. The circumstances of worship are matters that can be changed, eliminated or added without any consequence to public worship. No Christian would argue that the Lord’s supper was optional. Yet would anyone be taken seriously who argued that a music soloist, or a drama skit, or a puppet show, or a rock band, or an altar call, or an incense procession, or a whirling dervish were necessary aspects of worship? When churches take non-required and unnecessary human traditions and add them to the worship of God, they detract from what God has prescribed; mix that which is profane with that which is truly religiously significant; and offend God who has not appointed such things.

The attempt to broaden the definition of the circumstances of worship, or to blur the distinction between worship elements and circumstances, or to merge distinct elements into broad categories, is unscriptural and anti-Confessional.<sup>39</sup> One must never treat the elements of

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<sup>39</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith does not just set forth broad categories but rather gives well defined, distinct worship elements that all serve as the ordinary parts of religious worship. The Confession names “prayer with thanksgiving” (21:3); also “the reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence: singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due admiration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgiving upon several occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner” (21:5). The authors of the Confession clearly believed that scriptural authorization or proof was required for each separate part of worship. That is why each distinct element of worship is proof-texted by the Confession. The confessional view of the circumstances and elements of worship is supported and reflected in the writings of the greatest theologians of that time. George Gillespie (1613-1648) wrote: “Beside all this, there is nothing which any way pertaineth to the worship of God left to determination of human laws, besides the mere circumstances, which neither have any holiness in them, forasmuch as they have no other use and praise in sacred than they have in civil things, nor yet were part-determinable in Scripture, because they are infinite; but sacred significant ceremonies, such as cross, kneeling, surplice, holidays, bishopping, etc., which have no use and praise except in religion only, and which, also, were most easily determinable (yet not determined) within those bounds which the wisdom of God did set to his written word, are such things as God never left to the determination of any human laws” (*A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded upon the Church of England*, Christopher Coldwell, ed. [Dallas, TX: Naphtali, 1993 (1637, 60)], xli). Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600-1661) wrote: “In actions or religious means of worship, or circumstances physical, not moral, not religious, as whether the pulpit be of stone or of timber, the bell of this or this metal, the house of worship stand thus or thus in situation” (*The Divine Right of Church-Government*

worship as abstractions that can be molded to fit one's own preconceptions of what is permissible in worship. The proper biblical interpretive procedure lets the Bible tell us what the distinct elements of worship are and lets Scripture delineate the rules for each element. Although it is true that the elements of singing praise, preaching or teaching and prayer can have certain aspects in common (e.g., many psalms contains prayer, prayer can contain praise and sermons can contain praise and supplication, etc.), the idea that these distinct elements can be collapsed into one category (e.g., teaching) or that the specific rules given by Scripture for one element can be applied to the other parts of worship completely breaks down when one examines the specific rules and context that the Bible gives to each separate ordinance. Note the follow examples.

(1) One element is preaching from the Bible (Mt. 26:13; Mk 16:15; Ac. 9:20; 17:10; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 2 Tim. 4:2). Preaching involves reasoning from the Scriptures (cf. Ac. 17:2-3; 18:4, 19; 24:25) and explaining or expounding God's word (cf. Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). New covenant teachers did not speak by divine interpretation but interpreted divinely inspired Scripture. In the same manner the Old Testament Levitical teachers explained and interpreted the inscripturated law to the covenant people (cf. Neh. 8:7-8; Lev. 10:8-11; Dt. 17:8-13; 24:8; 31:9-13; 33:8; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:7-9; 19:8-10; 30:22; 35:3; Ezr. 7:1-11; Ezek. 44:15, 23-24; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:1, 5-8). There are specific biblical rules that apply to preaching that distinguish it from other elements such as praise and prayer. While both men and women can pray (Ac. 1:13-14, 1 Cor. 11:5) and sing praise (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 1:5) only men (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14) who are called by God and set apart to the gospel ministry can preach (Mt. 28:18-20; Ac. 9:15; 13:1-5; Rom. 10:14-15; Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 4:2, etc.). Therefore, the idea that singing praise is not an element of worship but only one way to teach or a circumstance of teaching is clearly unscriptural. If singing praise was simply one given method of teaching, then women would be forbidden to sing praise in church, for they are

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*and Excommunication* [London: John Field for Christopher Meredith, 1646], 109). William Ames (1576-1633) wrote: "The outward circumstances are those which pertain to order and decency. 1 Corinthians 14:40. Let all things be done decently and in order. But the general rule of these is that they be ordered in that manner which maketh most for edification. 1 Corinthians 14:26. Of this nature are the circumstances of place, time, and the like, which are common adjuncts to religious and civil acts. Therefore although such like circumstances are wont to be called of some rites, and religious or ecclesiastical ceremonies, yet they have nothing in their nature which is proper to religion, and therefore religious worship doth not properly consist in them" (*The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* [London: Edward Griffen for Henry Overton, 1642], 318). John Owen (1616-1683) wrote: "It is said men may add nothing to the substance of the worship of God, but they may order, dispose, and appoint the things that belong to the manner and circumstances of it, this is all that is done in the prescription of liturgies. Of circumstances in and about the worship of God we have spoken before, and removed that pretense. Nor is it safe distinguishing in the things of God where himself hath not distinguished. Indeed, there is nothing in its whole nature, as it belongs to the general being of things, so circumstantial, but that if it be appointed by God in his worship, it becomes a part of the substance of it; nor can anything that is so appointed ever by any be made a circumstance of his worship" ("A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition" in *Works* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965 (1850-53)], 15:40). Thomas Ridgely (1667-1734) wrote: "The first idea contained in them [worship ordinances], 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 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" (*A Body of Divinity* [New York: 1855], 2:433).

forbidden to teach in the public assemblies. Furthermore, if singing were a circumstance of worship, then it would be optional and could be excluded from public worship altogether.

(2) Another part of worship is the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Unlike preaching, where the minister uses his own uninspired words to exposit Scripture, singing praise involves only the use of Spirit-inspired songs. In the Bible prophetic inspiration was a requirement for writing worship songs for the church (cf. Ex. 15:20-21; Jdg. 5; Isa. 5:1; 26:1ff; 2 Sam 23:1, 2; 1 Chr. 25:5; 2 Chr. 29:30; 35:15; Mt. 22:43-44; Mk. 12:36; Ac. 1:16-17; 2:29-31; 4:24-25). The writing of worship songs in the Old Testament was so intimately connected with prophetic inspiration that 2 Kings 23:2 and 2 Chronicles 34:30 use the term “Levite” and “prophet” interchangeably.

(3) Reading the Bible is also a part of public worship (Mk. 4:16-20; Ac. 1:13; 13:15; 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:13). Obviously, Scripture reading requires reading from the Bible alone. Reading from the Apocrypha or Shakespeare or uninspired Christian poetry or theology books cannot be substituted for this element. Scripture reading, like preaching but unlike singing praise, is restricted to ministers of the gospel (Ex. 24:7; Josh 8:34-35; Dt. 31:9-13; Neh. 8:7-8; 13:1; 1 Th. 5:27; Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:3).

(4) Another element of worship is prayer to God (Dt. 22:5; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Th. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5). Unlike the elements of singing praise and reading the Scriptures, the Bible authorizes the use of our own words in prayer, as long as we follow the pattern or model given to us by Christ (cf. Mt. 6:9). God promises his people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

A brief consideration of the elements of worship noted above proves that the rules that apply to one element (e.g., prayer) cannot be applied to another element (e.g., singing praise or reading the Bible) without violating Scripture. Our consideration has also proved that collapsing various elements into broad categories violates God’s word. The only reason people artificially construct such broad categories is to avoid the specific rules that God has instituted for each particular element of worship. Feminists do so to accommodate women reading the Scriptures and preaching in church. Others do so to allow a drama group to substitute for the sermon. There are also many who do so in order to substitute the uninspired songs of men for the inspired Psalms of God.

## 5. The “Jesus Accepted and Participated in Human Traditions” Argument

A popular argument against the regulative principle is that Jesus himself did not believe in it, for he accepted and even participated in man-made religious traditions. It is argued that Jesus celebrated the Passover according to the non-authorized Rabbinical tradition; that is, the Jewish Seder with all its human additions. Regarding the Jewish Seder (Hebrew for “order”) there is no question but that the Pharisees added their own rituals to the meal. Wilson writes,

The meal included various symbolic elements, each consumed at specified points throughout the evening. These included roasted lamb, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, [*haroset*] (pastry mixture of nuts, fruit, and wine), and a raw vegetable dipped into a tart liquid. At various intervals four cups of wine, a symbol of joy, were consumed. The wine



was probably mixed with water and heated (cf. *Pesahim* vii.13). Ritual hand-washings, prayers, and portions of the Hallel (Pss. 113-119) also punctuated the observance.<sup>40</sup>

What is the textual evidence that is offered as proof that Jesus participated in the various Rabbinical additions? The only “evidence” that is offered is the fact that Jesus drank wine. It is *assumed* that since Christ and the apostles had wine with their meal, that they must also have participated in a Seder with its additional rituals. Note: *Not one* of the Jewish additions—the rituals of the Seder—is mentioned in any of the various accounts of the Last Supper. When the virtually universal practice of the Jews in Jesus’ day was to drink wine with their meals, is the Jewish Seder theory a necessary inference from the text or pure speculation? Is it theologically and pastorally responsible to develop a theology of worship on pure speculation and guesswork?

But what about the use of wine? Some argue that since the use of wine is not commanded in the original institution of the Passover it therefore is a human innovation in a religious ritual. Is the use of wine a violation of the regulative principle? No, for the Passover was a meal, and the drinking of a beverage is an ordinary, necessary circumstance of eating (especially if one is eating roasted lamb, unyeasted bread and bitter herbs). During the feast of unleavened bread the Israelites were commanded to eat unleavened bread for seven days (Ex. 12:15ff.) Yet nothing is mentioned whatsoever of any beverages to be drunk. Obviously God was not requiring the Jews to die of thirst in the hot Egyptian climate. The fact that Christ and the disciples drank wine with (or after) their meal was not significant at all until Jesus made it a gospel ordinance in the Lord’s supper. An argument from an historical account must be based on the written account itself, not on assumptions about what happened.

Not only is the “Jewish Seder” theory totally speculative, but it also violates standard Protestant methods of interpretation (i.e., the analogy of Scripture). Whenever an interpreter encounters a difficult or unclear passage, he must use the clearer portions of Scripture to interpret the less clear. Does it make sense to interpret Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper in a manner that contradicts the clear teaching of both the Old and New Testaments? Are the *sola scriptura* or *regulative principle* passages unclear or difficult to understand? Should one choose an interpretation that makes Jesus look incompetent and hypocritical? Jesus frequently condemned the Pharisees for adding human traditions to God’s word, including religious hand washings (Mt. 15:2ff.). Would our Lord participate in the Jewish Seder *which included ritual hand washings*<sup>41</sup> after he condemned the Pharisees in the strongest of terms for the exact same behavior?

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<sup>40</sup> M. R. Wilson, “Passover” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:677.

<sup>41</sup> Alfred Edersheim writes, “the ‘cup of blessing,’ which was the third, and formed part of the new institution of the Lord’s Supper, being mentioned in verse 20. In washing their hands this customary prayer was repeated: ‘Blessed art Thou, Jehovah our God, who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments, and hast enjoined us concerning the washing of our hands.’ Two different kinds of ‘washing’ were prescribed by tradition—‘dipping’ and ‘pouring.’ At the Paschal Supper the hands were to be ‘dipped’ in water” (*The Temple: Its Ministry and Services as They Were at the Time of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], p. 239. Note Edersheim’s footnote to the quote above: “The distinction [between two types of ritual hand washings] is also interesting as explaining Mark vii 3. For when water was poured on the hands, they had to be lifted, yet so that the water should neither run up above the wrist, nor back again upon the hand; best, therefore, by doubling the fingers into a fist. Hence (as Lightfoot rightly remarks) Mark vii 3, which should be translated: ‘For the Pharisees...except they wash their hands with the fist, eat not, holding the traditions of the elders’” (*Ibid.* fn. 4). Note, Mark 7:2ff. is a parallel account with Matthew 15:2ff. What all this means is that if Jesus and the disciples celebrated the Seder as it is set forth in the Mishnah (as many assert), then Christ was guilty of participating in the exact same ritual that earlier in the gospel accounts he and his disciples refused to do and which elicited a scathing condemnation of the Pharisees by our Lord. We regard such a scenario as

Note also the foundation of the “Seder theory” is not the inspired Scriptures but the Jewish Mishnah. The Mishnah is a compilation of rabbinical oral traditions that date from around 200 B.C. until about A.D. 200. The Mishnah was compiled primarily by Rabbi Judah (“Ha Nasi” or the “Prince”) along with other Jewish scholars around A.D. 189. Because most of what was written down at that time came by way of oral tradition, no one is sure how much the Mishnah accurately reflects Jewish traditions. Edersheim writes, “It has already been hinted more than once that the law laid down in the Mishnah frequently represents the theories and speculations of the Jewish doctors of the second century A.D., and not the actual practice of any given period. Several of their regulations deal accordingly with obsolete customs, and have little regard to the actual circumstances of the time.”<sup>42</sup> While it is understandable that a Christian scholar would examine the Mishnah in an attempt to shed light upon the social milieu of first century Palestine, it is incredible that pastors and scholars of “Reformed” persuasion would look to such an untrustworthy and blasphemous document<sup>43</sup> to undermine *sola scriptura*.

Another popular argument is that Jesus celebrated Chanukah because he was present at its celebration according to John 10:22-23. “Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon’s porch.” Does this passage of Scripture prove or even imply that Jesus accepted and participated in human traditions in worship? No. There are many reasons why such a view must be rejected.

First, one cannot ascertain from the text if Jesus even celebrated the Feast of Dedication. The passage does not say that Christ went to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of dedication, but merely that he was in Jerusalem at that time. Many excellent commentators (e.g., Hengstenburg, Meyer, Weiss and others) argue that Jesus had been staying in Jerusalem since the feast of tabernacles.

Second, there is nothing significant regarding our Lord’s presence in Jerusalem at the time of this feast, for it was not a feast that occurred only in Jerusalem. Chanukah was celebrated throughout the whole nation. John is not making a statement regarding Jesus’ attitude toward Chanukah, but is merely giving an historical setting to the addresses that follow.

Third, even if Christ went to Jerusalem to be there during the feast, the chapter as a whole indicates that he went there to teach. Gillespie writes,

[W]e must remember, that the circumstances only of time and place are noted by the evangelist, for evidence to the story, and not for any mystery. Christ had come up to the feast of tabernacles (John 7), and tarried still all that while, because then there was a

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exegetically and theologically impossible. There are other problems with the idea that Jesus followed the Seder according to Mishnah. For instance, the gospel accounts do not speak of four cups but merely one which was shared by all the disciples.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1856]), 381.

<sup>43</sup> Note how the Mishnah perverts the meaning of Leviticus 18:21 and endorses idolatry. “MISHNAH. HE WHO GIVES OF HIS SEED TO MOLECH INCURS NO PUNISHMENT UNLESS HE DELIVERS IT TO MOLECH AND CAUSES IT TO PASS THROUGH THE FIRE. IF HE GAVE IT TO MOLECH BUT DID NOT CAUSE IT TO PASS THROUGH FIRE, OR, THE REVERSE, HE INCURS NO PENALTY, UNLESS HE DOES BOTH. GEMARA. R. Abin said: Our Mishnah is in accordance with the view that Molech worship is not idolatry.... R. Simeon said: if to Molech, he is liable; if to another idol, he is not [Sanhedrin 64a]. R. Aha the son of Raba said: If one caused all his seed to pass through [the fire] to Molech, he is exempt from punishment, because it is written, of thy seed implying, but not all thy seed [Sanhedrin 64b]” (*The Babylonian Talmud* quoted in Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990], 1019). (In the Talmud, the Mishnah is always written in all capitals.)

great confluence of people in Jerusalem. Whereupon he took occasion to spread the net of the gospel for catching of many souls. And whilst John says, 'It was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication,' he gives a reason only of the confluence of many people at Jerusalem, and shows how it came to pass that Christ had occasions to preach to such a multitude; and whilst he adds, 'and it was winter,' he gives reason of Christ's walking in Solomon's porch, whither the Jews resort was. It was not thought be seeming to walk in the temple itself, but in the porch men used to convene either for talking or walking, because in the summer the porch shadowed them from the heat. Others think, that whilst he says, it was winter, imports that therefore Christ was the more frequently in the temple, knowing that his time was short which he had then for his preaching; for in the entry of the next spring he was to suffer.<sup>44</sup>

There is not one shred of evidence that our Lord participated in any man-made rituals. (Note: Paul preached at the Areopagus [Ac. 17:22ff.], not because he had a favorable attitude toward Greek philosophy, but because it provided an excellent evangelistic opportunity.)

Fourth, Jesus' presence does not prove that he celebrated the Feast of Dedication, for the celebration of Chanukah did not involve any holy convocations. Further, it was not a religious sabbath in which people were required to cease from their labors.

Fifth, most commentators who speculate regarding the apostle's mention of the feast argue that here Jesus dedicates himself to death (cf. Pink, Lightfoot, Stachen, etc.). In other words, the mention of the feast points to Christ, not human tradition.

Sixth (as noted above), one should never choose an interpretation that violates the analogy of Scripture. It is exegetically irresponsible to read into a text what is not there (eisegesis) and then use that speculative interpretation to overthrow the many clear passages of Scripture which unequivocally condemn human traditions in the religious sphere. Such a procedure is nothing more than self-deception, excuse making and a grasping after straw.

Another argument (that Jesus countenanced human traditions in worship) is based on the idea that our Lord gave his blessing to two Jewish ceremonies that were likely added after the close of the Old Testament canon. These rituals were associated with the feast of Tabernacles. It is argued that Jesus' strategically placed statements (that played off these ceremonies) prove that he did not condemn such human traditions. A brief examination of these passages will prove that such a conclusion is unwarranted.

This first passage is John 7:37-39. "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." F. F. Bruce give an explanation of the festival as it would have been celebrated in Jesus' day.

The festival lasted eight days, and on the eighth day was 'a holy convocation...a solemn assembly' (Lev. 23:36; cf. Num. 29:35ff.; Neh. 8:18). When the people thanked God at the celebration of Tabernacles for all the fruits of the past year—vine and olive as well as barley and wheat—they did not forget his gift of rain, apart from which none of those crops would have grown. An association of this festival with adequate rainfall is implied in Zech. 14:16f., and although the ceremony of water-pouring, well attested in connexion with Tabernacles for the two centuries preceding AD 70, is not mentioned in

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<sup>44</sup> George Gillespie, *English Popish Ceremonies*, 269-270.

the OT (with the doubtful exception of 1 Sam. 7:6), it was probably of very considerable antiquity. This ceremony, which was intended to acknowledge God's goodness in sending rain and to ensure a plentiful supply for the following season, was enacted at dawn on the first seven days of the festival. A procession led by a priest went down to the pool of Siloam, where a golden pitcher was filled with water, and returned to the temple as the morning sacrifice was being offered. The water was then poured into a funnel at the west side of the altar, and the temple choir began to sing the Great Hallel (Pss. 113-118).<sup>45</sup>

Jesus made his statement on the eighth day when no water was poured by the priests. Many commentators believe our Lord purposely timed his statement to dramatize and emphasize the need for true spiritual life-giving water.

The second passage is John 8:12. "Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, 'I am the light of the world, He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.'" Some commentators believe that Jesus' statement regarding "the light of the world" was a purposeful comparison of himself to the large brilliant golden lamps that were placed in the Court of Women and were lit at the beginning of the Feast of Tabernacles.

There are a number of reasons why the idea that these passages prove that Jesus accepted and approved of human traditions in worship must be rejected.

First, neither of the passages in question say that our Lord approved of man-made traditions. The idea that Christ approved of human additions is simply assumed with no textual evidence. Is it not wise to follow what the Bible says instead of rejecting what it says in favor of what it does not say?

Second, a theory, hypothesis or speculative interpretation should never be used to overturn the clear teaching of Scripture. The whole idea that Jesus was setting forth his approbation of human traditions is an argument from silence. It is not founded upon the text but on the uninspired Mishnah which was composed by unbelieving Jews in A.D. 189. (Commentators are not in agreement regarding these passages. In fact, most commentators do not believe that our Lord was comparing himself to certain rituals but rather was comparing himself to events in the book of Exodus (the water from the rock [Ex. 17:6; Nu. 20:7-11] and the pillar of fire [Ex. 13:21-22]).<sup>46</sup> Perhaps we should heed Hengstenberg's comment. He writes, "It is needless to spend time in forming hypotheses, externally accounting for the saying of our

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<sup>45</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 181.

<sup>46</sup> Leon Morris writes, "Yet, just as the reference to the water in ch.7 seems to point us back to the rock in the wilderness rather than to the pouring of water from the golden pitcher, so the light may refer us to the pillar of fire in the wilderness. We have noted the reference to the manna in ch. 6, so that in three successive chapters the wilderness imagery seems consistently used to illustrate aspects of Jesus' Person and work. It must always be borne in mind that light is a common theme in both Old and New Testaments, so that it is not necessary for us to find the source of Jesus' great saying in any non-biblical places' (*The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], 437). R. C. H. Lenski writes, "Maimonides states that this ceremony took place every evening during the feast, others are sure that it occurred only on the first evening. The main difficulty in connecting the word of Jesus with this ceremony is that it leaves out an essential part of the figure. Those candelabra were stationary, and men danced in the courts, while Jesus speaks of a movable light: 'he that follows me.' We may say more. In 7:37, when Jesus calls those that 'thirst' and bids them come to him and 'drink,' he does not stop with the ceremony of drawing water from Siloah and pouring it out at the altar, in which no quenching of thirst by drinking is pictured; he reaches back to the original blessing received at Meribah where the thirsty actually received water to drink. He does the same here. One of the great blessings during the desert sojourn of Israel was the pillar of cloud and of fire, evidence of the presence of Jehovah with his people" (*St. John's Gospel* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], pp. 593-594).

Lord, by the rising of the sun, the kindling of the lamps in the temple, etc. If anything significant of this kind had taken place, the Apostle would not have left us to guess about it.”<sup>47</sup>

Third, even if Jesus did make his statements to coincide with certain Jewish rituals, it does not mean that he approved of man-made additions. If a pastor (who happens to be anti-Christmas) passes out gospel tracts at the shopping mall in December, or preaches in the mall and refers to Christ’s work of redemption as a gift from God, it does not mean that he approves of Christmas. One should be careful not to read something into a passage that is not there. Fourth, a more logical and scriptural inference from these passages is not that he was approving of their additions but rather that he was teaching that the law and the prophets did not point to silly rituals but to himself.<sup>48</sup> Contrary to modern popular opinion, Jesus was neither a Pharisee or a papist.

But what about the argument that says, “If Jesus was a strict regulativist, would he not have physically attacked the priests and Levites of the temple who were adding to God’s word as he had earlier done with the money changers?” The argument that Christ would have attacked the priests and Levites if he believed in the regulative principle is based on an ignorance of Scripture. Jesus did not come to earth as a civil judge (cf. Luke 12:13-14; John 8:1-11). His opinion of Pharisaical additions to God’s law was well known through his teaching (e.g., Mt 5:17-6:8; 15:2-9; 23:1-36; etc.). If Jesus became angry and resorted to whips every time he encountered sin, he would have had little time to preach the gospel, which was his primary didactic mission. Further, the priests and Levites were not common merchants or money changers; they held positions of authority. If our Lord had attacked them, he would have: (1) been committing an act of revolution; (2) precipitated a riot at the temple; (3) prematurely endangered his own life and the lives of his disciples; and (4) possibly even been arrested by the Roman authorities. Jesus dealt with apostate priests and Levites in A.D. 70; however, while on earth he respected lawful governing authorities (cf. Mt. 23:2-3; Ac. 23:1-5). The opponents of the regulative principle are once again grasping after straw.

## 6. The “Feast of Purim” Argument

Perhaps the most popular argument in support of human traditions in worship is based on the Feast of Purim. It is argued that the Jews without any command or special revelation from God made up their own holy day; therefore, the church can make up its own holy days such as Christmas and Easter. There are a number of problems with this argument.

First, this argument assumes without evidence that Purim was a special holy day like Christmas. The biblical text makes it abundantly clear that Purim was not a special religious holy day but rather was a time of thanksgiving. The events of Purim are: “Joy and gladness, a feast

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<sup>47</sup> E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1980 [1865]), 1:429.

<sup>48</sup> Hengstenberg writes, “The feast was not only one of thanksgiving, it was also one of hope; and of this latter aspect of it, Isa. xii. 3 was the appropriate text. Jesus declares Himself to be the water of salvation, announced by the prophet Isaiah; and Isaiah himself gave the warrant for doing so. The connection of the springs of salvation with the person of the Messiah is plain from the relation of ch. xii. to ch. xi., where all the salvation of the future is bond up with the person of the Messiah. And what Isaiah said in ch. xii. concerning the waters of salvation, receives its consummation also in ch. iv. 1, to which the words ‘*ean tis dipsa poeto*’ definitely allude: comp. on ch. vi. 45, iv. 14” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1:405). Brooke Foss Westcott writes, Nothing can prove more clearly the intimate relation between the teaching recorded by St. John and the Old Testament than the manner in which Christ is shown to transfer to Himself the figures of the Exodus (the brazen serpent, the manna, the water, the fiery pillar)” (*The Gospel According to St. John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 277).

and good day...and of sending portions to one another, and gifts to the poor” (Est. 8:17; 9:22 kjv). “There is no mention of any religious observance connected with the day.”<sup>49</sup> There were no special worship services, there were no ceremonies, there were no Levitical or priestly activities. Also, Purim—unlike Christmas and Easter—was not an admixture of pagan and popish monuments and paraphernalia with the religion of Jehovah. Purim should not be compared to popish holy days, such as Christmas, but to special days of rejoicing such as Thanksgiving day. The Westminster divines (who were champions of the regulative principle) used Purim as a proof text (Est. 9:22) authorizing occasional days of thanksgiving (cf. Confession of Faith 21.5, proof text a).

Second, Purim did not come about because the people or church officials got together and decided to make up a holy day. It came about because of a unique historical event in Israel’s salvation history. The festival was decreed by the civil magistrate (the prime minister, Mordecai, and the queen, Esther). Religious leaders had nothing to do with it. After the civil decree, it was agreed to unanimously by the people. Thomas M’Crie writes,

Did Mordecai, in proposing it, act from the private notion of his own mind; and, in confirming it, did he proceed entirely upon the consent of the people? Or was he guided in both by divine and extraordinary counsel, imparted to him immediately, or by some prophetic person living at that time? That the vision and the prophecy were still enjoyed by the Jews dwelling in Persia, cannot be denied by those who believe the canonical authority of this book, and what is contained in that of Ezra. We have already seen reasons for thinking Mordecai acted under the influence of the faith of Moses’ parents, from the time that he proposed his cousin Esther as a candidate to succeed Vashti the queen. There can be no doubt that he was raised up in an extraordinary manner as a saviour to Israel; and in the course of this Lecture we have seen grounds for believing that, in addition to his other honours, he was employed as the penman of this portion of inspired scripture. From all these considerations, it is reasonable to conclude that the feast of Purim was not instituted without divine counsel and approbation. Add to this, that the decree of Esther confirming it, it is expressly said, in the close of this chapter, to have been engrossed in this book, by whomsoever it was written.<sup>50</sup>

Note, the occasion and authorization of Purim are inscripturated in the word of God and approved by the Holy Spirit. Thus, Purim itself satisfied the requirement of the regulative principle as biblically defined.

Third, the notion that Purim proves that men are permitted to make up holy days whenever they desire cannot be true, for if it were, Scripture would contain a blatant contradiction. Not only would it contradict the passages which teach that we are not permitted to add to what God has authorized (e.g. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5; etc.); it also would contradict the book of Kings where God condemned King Jeroboam for setting up a feast day “in the month which he had devised in his own heart” (1 Kgs. 12:33). Not even kings have authority to make up their own holy days. M’Crie writes,

To seek a warrant for days of religious commemoration under the gospel from the Jewish festivals, is not only to overlook the distinction between the old and new

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<sup>49</sup> J. P. Lewis, “Feasts” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 2:525.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas M’Crie, *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (New York: Robert Carter, 1838), 287-288.

dispensations, but to forget that the Jews were never allowed to institute such memorial for themselves, but simply to keep those which infinite Wisdom had expressly and by name set apart and sanctified. The prohibitory sanction is equally strict under both Testaments: ‘What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.’

There are times when God calls, on the one hand, to religious fasting, or, on the other, to thanksgiving and religious joy; and it is our duty to comply with these calls, and to set apart time for the respective exercises. But this is quite a different thing from recurrent or anniversary holidays. In the former case the day is chosen for the duty, in the latter the duty is performed for the day; in the former case there is no holiness on the day but what arises from the service which is performed on it, and when the same day afterwards recurs, it is as common as any other day; in the latter case the day is set apart on all following times, and may not be employed for common or secular purposes. Stated and recurring festivals countenance the false principle, that some days have a peculiar sanctity, either inherent or impressed by the works which occurred on them; they proceed on an undue assumption of human authority; interfere with the free use of that time which the Creator hath granted to man; detract from the honour due to the day of sacred rest which he hath appointed; lead to impositions over conscience; have been the fruitful source of superstition and idolatry; and have been productive of the worst effects upon morals, in every age, and among every people, barbarous and civilized, pagan and Christian, popish and protestant, among whom they have been observed. On these grounds they were rejected from the beginning, among other corruptions of antichrist, by the Reformed Church of Scotland, which allowed no stated religious days but the Christian Sabbath.<sup>51</sup>

## 7. The “Misrepresentation of the Regulative Principle” Argument

A rather common method of circumventing the regulative principle today is to give it a false definition that is scripturally and rationally indefensible. After defining the regulative principle in this manner, the opponents of *sola scriptura* over worship then proceed to make their false straw-man version of the regulative principle look totally absurd. The false version of the regulative principle that is used is: “If it is not commanded, it is forbidden.” In other words, there must be an explicit divine imperative for every worship ordinance in the church. Fundamentalist Baptists argue in this manner when they say, “Where are we commanded in the Bible to baptize infants?” Seventh-day Adventists follow this tactic when they say, “Show us where God commanded the apostolic church to rest and worship on Sunday instead of Saturday!” Anti-regulativists use arguments such as: (a) the worship of the synagogue was never commanded by God; (b) Christ and the apostles attended and approved of synagogue worship; therefore, Christ and the apostles rejected the regulative principle.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 298-300.

<sup>52</sup> Let us briefly examine the writings of an independent Calvinistic minister who opposes Reformed worship. He writes, “The very existence of the synagogue, however, undoes the regulativist’s position! For he knows that the synagogues existed. And he knows that Christ and the Apostles *regularly* worshiped at synagogues without so much as a breath of suggestion that they were institutionally or liturgically illegitimate. And he knows that he cannot find so much as a sliver of a Divine commandment concerning what ought to be done in the synagogue. And, according to his principle, if God commanded naught concerning what ought to be done, then all was forbidden. And if all was forbidden, then the whole of it—institution and liturgy—was a sinful abomination. But that brings him back to Christ attending upon the service of God there and Christ following its liturgy: did *He* sin by participating in an entire order of worship that was without express divine warrant? The thought is blasphemy!” (Steve Schlissel, “All I

Once a person understands the true definition of the regulative principle, he will immediately recognize that the objections to Reformed worship offered by Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and anti-regulativists are not based on Scripture, but on an ignorance of the regulative principle itself. Although it is not uncommon to see a regulativist give a statement such as “if it is not commanded, it is forbidden” as a brief statement or summary of the principle, the Westminster Confession and virtually all Reformed authors define the regulative principle in a much broader fashion. The regulative principle refers *not just* to explicit commands of Scripture, but also to approved historical examples within the Bible and to good and necessary consequence, i.e., a particular worship practice or ordinance is inferred from many passages of Scripture.

The Confession and various Reformed authors will prove that the genuine, historic and confessional understanding of the regulative principle is broad and easily defended by Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1.6) says,

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. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: 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.

For the Westminster divines, *sola scriptura* is the natural starting point for the regulative principle as a spring is to a stream. There can be no question whatsoever but that the phrase “good and necessary consequence” applies to the worship and government of the church. To argue otherwise would render the section on the “circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church” totally out of place.

John Owen, in his essay, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship,” deals with an opponent of Puritanism, Samuel Parker. Owen says that Parker considers the “foundation of all Puritanism” to be this principle: “That nothing ought to be established in the worship of God but what is authorized by some precept or example in the Word of God, which is the complete and adequate rule of worship.”<sup>53</sup> This accurate definition was formulated by Parker by reading the available Puritan literature of his day (the seventeenth century).

Robert Shaw writes,

In maintaining the perfection of the Scriptures, we do not insist that every article of religion is contained in Scriptures in so many words; but we hold that conclusions fairly deduced from the declarations of the Word of God are as truly parts of divine revelation as if they were expressly taught in the Sacred Volume. That good and necessary consequences deduced from Scripture are to be received as part of the rule of

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Really Need to Know About Worship I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle,” Part 1, in *Messiah’s Mandate*, 7).

<sup>53</sup> Samuel Parker quoted in John Owen, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship” in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:462.



our faith and practice, is evident from the example of our Saviour in proving the doctrine of the resurrection against the Sadducees,—Matt. xxii. 31,32; and from the example of Paul, who proved that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, by reasoning with the Jews out of the Old Testament Scriptures.—Acts xvii. 2, 3. “All Scripture” is declared to be “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness;” but all these ends cannot be obtained, unless by the deduction of consequences. Legitimate consequences, indeed, only bring out the full meaning of the words of Scripture; and as we are endued with the faculty of reason, and commanded to search the Scriptures, it was manifestly intended that we should draw conclusions from what is therein set down in express words.<sup>54</sup>

Hetherington writes, “They [the Scottish Reformers] dared, therefore, to conclude that Divine authority might be rightfully claimed, not only for the direct statements contained in the Scriptures, but also for whatsoever could be deduced from Scripture by just and necessary inference.”<sup>55</sup>

Francis Petticrew writes,

A practice about a mere matter of detail, a mere circumstance, a thing held by the Church to be indifferent, immaterial, and on purpose left open, does not constitute common law. But a practice founded on a principle does to all intents and purposes constitute common law. And this is the character of the practice of this Church in excluding the use of instrumental music in the worship of God. That principle was substantially this, that for all the constituents of worship, you require the positive sanction of divine authority, either in the shape of direct command, or good and necessary consequence, or approved example; and that you are not at liberty to introduce anything else in connection with the worship of God, unless it comes legitimately under the apostolic heading of “decency and order.”<sup>56</sup>

James H. Thornwell writes, “We have not been able to lay our hands upon a single Puritan Confession of Faith which does not explicitly teach that necessary inferences from Scripture are of equal authority with its express statements: nor have we found a single Puritan writer, having occasion to allude to the subject, who has not explicitly taught the same things. The *principle of inference* they have unanimously affirmed. Our own Confession of Faith—and surely that is a Puritan document—does it, in a passage already cited.”<sup>57</sup>

John L. Girardeau writes, “A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1845]), 16.

<sup>55</sup> W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1848), 1:15.

<sup>56</sup> Francis Petticrew, “Speech of the mover of the report to the General Assembly, 1873” in James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorized* (Belfast: C. Aitchison; J. Cleeland, n.d.), 4-5. Glasgow adds the following footnote: “Not religious circumstances entering into and blending with worship, but men’s mere social circumstances, as of times, places, persons, &c” (Ibid, 5).

<sup>57</sup> James H. Thornwell, “Boards and Presbyterianism” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1875]), 4:255.

the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, *is forbidden.*”<sup>58</sup>

A. A. Hodge writes,

That, while the Scriptures are a complete rule of faith and practice, and while nothing is to be regarded as an article of faith to be believed, or a religious duty obligatory upon the conscience, which is not explicitly or implicitly taught in Scripture, nevertheless they do not descend in practical matters into details, but, laying down general principles, leave men to apply them in the exercise of their natural judgment, in the light of experience, and in adaptation to changing circumstances, as they are guided by the sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit.

This liberty, of course, is allowed only within the limits of the strict interpretation of the principles taught in the Word, and in the legitimate application of those principles, and applies to the regulation of the practical life of the individual and of the Church, in detailed adjustments to changing circumstances.<sup>59</sup>

B. B. Warfield writes,

It must be observed, however, that the teachings and prescriptions of Scripture are not confined by the Confession to what is “expressly set down in Scripture.” Men are required to believe and to obey not only what is “expressly set down in Scripture,” but also what “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” This is the strenuous and universal contention of the Reformed theology against Socinians and Arminians, who desired to confine the authority of Scripture to its literal assertions; and it involves a characteristic honoring of reason as the instrument for the ascertainment of truth. We must depend upon our human faculties to ascertain what Scripture *says*; we cannot suddenly abnegate them and refuse their guidance in determining what Scripture *means*. This is not, of course, to make reason the ground of the authority of inferred doctrines and duties. Reason is the instrument of discovery of all doctrines and duties, whether “expressly set down in Scripture” or “by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture”: but their authority, when once discovered, is derived from God, who reveals and prescribes them in Scripture, either by literal assertion or by necessary implication. The Confession is only zealous, as it declares that only Scripture is the authoritative rule of faith and practice, so to declare that the whole of Scripture is authoritative in the whole stretch of its involved meaning. It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications. The reemergence in recent controversies of the plea that the authority of Scripture is to be confined to its expressed declarations, and that human logic is not to be trusted in divine things, is, therefore, a direct denial of a fundamental position of Reformed theology, explicitly affirmed in the Confession, as well as an abnegation of fundamental reason, which would not only render thinking in a system impossible, but would discredit at a stroke many of the fundamentals of the faith, such e.g. as the doctrine of the Trinity, and would logically involve the denial of the authority of all doctrine whatsoever, since no single doctrine of whatever simplicity can be ascertained from Scripture except by the use of the processes of the understanding. It

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<sup>58</sup> John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1980 [1888]), 9.

<sup>59</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961 [1869]), 39.

is, therefore, an unimportant incident that the recent plea against the use of human logic in determining doctrine has been most sharply put forward in order to reject a doctrine which is explicitly taught, and that repeatedly, in the very letter of Scripture; if the plea is valid at all, it destroys at once our confidence in all doctrines, no one of which is ascertained or formulated without the aid of human logic.<sup>60</sup>

William S. McClure writes, “God’s commands are either explicit, clearly stated, or they are implicit, implied as a logical, necessary inference from authoritative example, such as that of Christ or His Apostles.”<sup>61</sup>

William Young writes, “The mode of prescription need not be that of explicit command in single text of Scripture. Approved example warrants an element of worship as surely as does an express precept. Moreover, good and necessary consequence may warrant acceptable worship. Without entering upon disputed questions as to the proper subjects of baptism, all would agree that Scripture warrants the admission of women to the Lord’s table, although no express command or approved example can be adduced.”<sup>62</sup>

Michael Bushell writes,

When we say that each element of worship requires a divine warrant, we do not mean that an explicit command in a single text is required in every instance. Commandment in the narrow sense of the term is not necessary to establish divine prescription. Approved example or inference from relevant scriptural data is sufficient to determine the proper manner of worship. The *Confession of Faith* clearly operates on the assumption that principles derived from the Word by “good and necessary consequence” are every bit as binding upon us as those “expressly set down in Scripture.” It is remarkable that there is so much confusion in Reformed circles concerning the validity of this essential principle.... The assumed validity and binding character of argument by inference from Scripture is an essential part of the life of every Christian and lies at the base of every statement of doctrine or belief that goes beyond the express words of Scripture. Certainly we may want from time to time to question the validity of inferences which some people draw, but that is a different question altogether from that of whether or not the church *may* bind the conscience of a believer on the basis of an inference from Scripture.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [1931]), 6:226-227 (originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* iv [1893], 582-655).

<sup>61</sup> William S. McClure, “The Scriptural Law of Worship” in John McNaugher, ed., *The Psalms in Worship* (Edmonton, AB: Canada; Still Waters Revival Books, 1992 [1907]), 33.

<sup>62</sup> William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, Va.: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, 1993 [1980]), 122-123. Note also Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas*: “Whatever is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden. Anything that the church does in worship must have warrant from an explicit command of God, be deduced by good and necessary consequence, or be derived from approved historical example (e.g., the change of day from seventh to first for Lord’s Day corporate worship)” (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1996), 4.

It is important that one understand the proper, broad interpretation of the regulative principle, for anti-regulativists often point to historical examples in the Bible as proof texts against *sola scriptura* over worship. When an anti-regulativist comes to a worship practice in the Bible that does not have a prior *inscripturated* divine imperative behind it, it is *assumed* that such practices must have originated from human tradition. When a Puritan or Reformed regulativist encounters a worship practice that is approved by God, yet is not accompanied by an explicit command, it is assumed (based on the analogy of Scripture) that such a practice is based on some prior revelation that did not make it into the canon. For example, John Owen writes,

For a long time God was pleased to guide his church in many concerns of his worship by fresh occasional revelations, even from the giving of the first promise unto Adam unto the solemn giving of the law of Moses; for although men had, in process of time, many *stated revelations*, that were preserved by tradition among them, as the first promise, the institution of sacrifices, and the like, yet as to sundry emergencies of his worship, and parts of it, God guided them by new occasional revelations. Now, those revelations not being recorded in Scriptures, as being only for present or emergent use, we have no way to know them but by what those to whom God was pleased to reveal himself did practice, and which, on good testimony, found acceptance with him. Whatever they so did, they had especial warrant from God for; which is the case of the great institution of sacrifices itself. It is a sufficient argument that they were divinely instituted, because they were graciously accepted.<sup>64</sup>

Opponents of the regulative principle argue that the Puritan or Reformed understanding of “approved historical examples” is an argument of begging the question (i.e., assuming that which one sets out to prove); or, that it is an argument from silence; or, that regulativists are guilty of forcing the evidence to fit their own faulty starting point. All these objections, however, are easily refuted if one understands necessary inference from Scripture and follows standard Protestant procedures of interpretation.

One of the most fundamental principles of biblical interpretation is that Scripture cannot contradict itself. Another important principle is that when two or more passages seem to contradict each other, the clearer portions of Scripture should be used to interpret the less clear. If one follows these interpretive rules, determining which understanding of an approved historical example is biblical will be simple.

Note the many reasons why the regulativist approach must be accepted. (1) There are several passages in the Bible which unequivocally condemn adding to God’s law-word (e.g., Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5). (2) Man is not permitted autonomously to determine his own ethics, theology or worship. (3) There are also passages where both Christ (e.g., Mt. 15:2-9; Mk. 7:1-13) and Paul (e.g., Col. 2:20-23) condemn human traditions in worship. These passages are not hard to understand. Indeed, they are crystal clear, if one is willing to accept what they say. Given the clear teaching of Scripture regarding adding human traditions to ethics or worship, what interpretation should one choose when one encounters Jesus or the apostles engaging in worship that is not specifically discussed in the Old Testament Scriptures?

If one argues that Jesus by his attendance at synagogue was endorsing human traditions in worship, then one has chosen an interpretation which contradicts clear portions of Scripture. If one argues that the *sola scriptura* and regulative principle passages must be reinterpreted in light

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<sup>64</sup> John Owen, “The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship” in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:467.

of passages such as Jesus attending synagogue worship or the change of public worship to Sunday, then one is guilty of using passages which do not even speak directly to the issue of human tradition in worship (and thus are not clear passages) to overthrow the clear passages that do speak directly to the issue of human additions. When regulativists approach passages where God accepts the worship offered, yet there are no accompanying divine imperatives, they do not simply argue from silence or impose an arbitrary starting point or assumption on the text. Instead, they stand upon the overall clear teaching regarding worship and therefore legitimately infer that what God accepts cannot be “the doctrines and commandments of men.”

The regulativist position is not only supported by standard biblical hermeneutical procedures but is also supported by an inspired New Testament interpretation of an Old Testament worship practice that was not accompanied by any inscripturated divine commands. Genesis 4:3-5 says, “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.” In this passage Abel’s blood sacrifice is accepted, while Cain’s bloodless plant offering is not. Note, there are no previously recorded divine imperatives regarding blood sacrifice in the book of Genesis. If one applies the same anti-regulativist interpretation to this passage that has been used of Jesus and the synagogue service, then one would have to conclude that God preferred Abel’s human tradition over Cain’s. The author of Hebrews implicitly rejects the anti-regulativist’s interpretation when he says that “by faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain” (Heb. 11:4). Biblical faith presupposes 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. Any idea that Abel’s offering was based on reason alone, or that God’s acceptance of the blood sacrifice was arbitrary or based on the subjective state of Abel’s heart alone, must be rejected as unscriptural. 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.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> John Brown, *Hebrews* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1963 [1862]), 493-494.

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. Therefore, when one notes that Noah offered *clean* animals, or that the apostles observed a first-day Sabbath, or that Jesus and Paul read and expounded the Scriptures in the synagogue (all without accompanying explicit divine imperatives), one should never assume that these accepted worship practices were based on human tradition. They were based on faith in the spoken word of God.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> One objection to the Puritan and Reformed concept of approved historical examples from Scripture is that it is pharisaical and Romish. It is argued that when Reformed theologians assume that historical examples are based on prior revelation that was not inscripturated, they are advocating a form of binding and normative oral tradition. This comparison with Pharisees and Romanists is a clever yet unwarranted *ad hominem* attack. The Pharisees and Roman Catholics were and are guilty of adding their own doctrines and commandments to what the Bible teaches. They justify their additions to the Scripture by advocating a source of divine revelation which is *independent* of the Bible. The Jews have their Talmud (which in English translation runs to 34 large volumes) and the Roman Catholics have the church fathers, councils, decrees and papal declarations. Puritan and Reformed pastors and theologians add nothing of their own to the doctrine or commandment of Scripture. They do not believe in any *independent* sources of revelation outside of the Bible. They simply infer from the Bible itself that in the few cases where God is described as accepting worship practices that are not accompanied with explicit instructions, the people involved (such as Abel [Gen. 4:4] or Noah [Gen. 8:20]) had based their practice on a previous communication by God. As noted above, the Reformed interpretation is a necessary inference from Scripture. Approved historical examples come only from the text of Scripture, and not from any Pharisaical or Romish type of independent oral tradition. It is one thing to infer a communication based on a particular text of Scripture, and quite another to posit with absolutely no biblical evidence that God spoke the whole Talmud to Moses on Mount Sinai. Opponents of the regulative principle are comparing apples to oranges, and they know it. Who has more in common with a Pharisee or Romanist? Someone who adds his own human traditions to what God has authorized? Or someone who refuses to add to God's word?