

The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 1: Sola Scriptura

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

² The Reformer John Calvin in "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" writes, "If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standard existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshiped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain" (Henry Beveridge, ed., *Selected Works: Tracts and Letters* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 (1844)], 11:126). Today the term Reformed has been largely reduced to the sphere of soteriology (i.e., merely the acceptance of the five points of Calvinism). At one time however, it referred primarily to the acceptance and practice of the regulative principle of worship.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Regulative Principle in the Old Testament

1. *The Unacceptable Offering*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. *The Second Commandment*

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

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

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

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

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

3. *Strange Fire*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Avoiding False Worship

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

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

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

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

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

5. *David and His Men's Error*

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

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

When God gives a command that the Levites are to carry the ark with poles (cf. Num. 4), it is not necessary for God to forbid men of Judah from using an ox cart. King David and his men should have consulted the law of Moses and obeyed it. Instead, they acted pragmatically. They imitated the Philistines, who used a new cart when they sent the ark back to Bethshemesh. When it comes to the worship of God, we are not permitted to improvise, even if our intentions are good. Sincerity is important, but sincerity must be in accord with divine revelation. Even in religious matters that may seem small or trivial to us, God commands that we act in accordance with His revealed will and not innovate according to our will. "The great lesson for all time is to beware of following our own devices in the worship of God when we have clear instructions in His Word how we are to worship Him."²³ "Moreover we must gather from it that none of our devotions will be accepted by God unless they conform to His will. This rule ruins all the man-made inventions in the papacy's so-called worship of God, which has so much pomp and foolishness. All of that is nothing but sheer trash before God, and is in fact an abomination to Him. Hence, let us hold this unmistakable rule, that if we want to worship God in accordance with our own ideas, it will simply be abuse and corruption. And so, on the contrary, we must have the testimony of His will in order to follow what He commands us, and to submit to it. Now that is how the worship which we render to God will be approved."²⁴

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

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

6. *Autonomous Worship Condemned*

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

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

John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, writes, “God here cuts off from men every occasion for making evasions, since he condemns by this one phrase, ‘I have not commanded them,’ whatever the Jews devised. There is then no other argument needed to condemn superstitions, than that they are not commanded by God: for when men allow themselves to worship God according to their own fancies, and attend not to His commands, they pervert true religion. And if this principle was adopted by the Papists, all those fictitious modes of worship, in which they absurdly exercise themselves, would fall to the ground.... Were they to admit this principle, that we cannot rightly worship God except by obeying His Word, they would be delivered from their deep abyss of error. The Prophet’s words then are very important when he says that God had *commanded* no such thing and that it never came to His mind; as though He had said, that men assume too much wisdom, when they devise what He never required, nay, what He never knew.”²⁷ Likewise, if modern Reformed, evangelical, and fundamentalist churches adopted and observed God’s regulative principle, the syncretism with our pagan culture (e.g., Hollywood), the entertainment (e.g., music soloists, drama, rock groups) and other gimmicks would cease.

7. *The Sinful Pragmatism of King Saul*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. *The Apostasy of King Jeroboam*

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

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

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

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

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

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

³³ *Ibid*, 2:137.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Regulative Principle in the New Testament

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

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

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

³⁷ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship*, 21.

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

1. Jesus and the Regulative Principle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁵ Spurgeon, *Matthew*, 203.

supposed that God is honored by our performing them, and dishonored by neglecting them, it is plainly manifest that the Scriptures in these and similar places condemn them.⁴⁶

Calvin says, “Christ has faithfully and accurately given the meaning, that *in vain is God worshiped*, when the will of men is substituted in the room of doctrine. By these words, all kinds of *will-worship* (*ethelothreskeia*, as Paul calls it, Col. 2:23), are plainly condemned. For, as we have said, since God chooses to be worshiped in no other way than according to his own appointment, he cannot endure new modes of worship to be devised. As soon as men allow themselves to wander beyond the limits of the Word of God, the more labour and anxiety they display in worshiping him, the heavier is the condemnation which they draw down upon themselves; for by such inventions religion is dishonored.”⁴⁷

2. The Great Commission

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*

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

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

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

(3) The Holy Spirit view comports much better with the reason given for "spirit and truth" worship in verse 24: "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The Samaritans had abandoned divine revelation in order to support their human

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Paul Condemns Will Worship

Paul, in his epistle to the Colossians, concurs with both the Old Testament's and Christ's teaching on worship. Paul condemns those who seek to impose Judaical food laws and holy days upon the church (Col. 2:16). (Because the ceremonial laws were *shadows* that pointed to the *substance*, Jesus Christ, they are done away with.) They are no longer authorized and therefore

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

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

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

forbidden. Paul's warning regarding human philosophy is the backdrop of his condemnation of false worship and man-made laws (legalism) in the same chapter. "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, *according to the tradition of men*, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

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

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

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

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

There are a number of reasons why Paul's condemnation of human requirements cannot be limited to certain ascetic eating practices. First, the broad context of the passage indicates that Paul emphatically rejects all human traditions in the religious sphere and not merely ascetic dietary laws. The likely problem at the Colossian church was the influence of an early form of ascetic Gnosticism. Paul does condemn Gnostic legalism in chapter 2. However, in his condemnation of this particular philosophy and the false ethical system that flows from it, Paul condemns all forms of non-Christian philosophy and all worship and ethics that are founded upon human philosophy and the tradition of men. In this epistle Paul first points the Colossians to Jesus Christ. The Colossian believers need to be reminded that Christ is pre-eminent (1:18);

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

⁵⁶ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship*, 56.

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

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

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

Second, the interpretation that says that Paul forbids the addition of some human philosophies and traditions into the doctrine, ethics and worship of the church, yet permits other human traditions, violates standard orthodox Protestant methods of interpretation. A study of both the Old and New Testaments proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that God forbids additions or subtractions to the doctrine, ethics and worship set forth in divine revelation (Deut. 4:2; 12:32;

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

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

5. *The Circumstances of Worship*

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

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

The circumstances of worship refer not to worship content and ceremony, but to those things "common to human actions and societies." The *only* way someone can learn a *worship ordinance* is to study the Bible and see what God commands. But the circumstances of worship

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

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

Worship Ordinances⁶⁰ vs. Worship Circumstances

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

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

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

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

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

6. *Why the Regulative Principle is Necessary*

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

⁶¹ The authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) clearly make a distinction between those things taken directly from Scripture and circumstances “common to human actions and societies.” “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men...and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (chap. 1, sec. 6).

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

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

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

If you give sinful man the autonomy of choosing how he will worship, the historical pattern is clear. Man will choose man-centered worship. Sinful man is drawn to entertainment (thus the popularity of the clap-your-hands, stamp-your-feet, “charismatic-style” worship, rock groups, drama groups, choirs, music soloists, pop and country singers, etc.) and to ritual and pompousness (cathedrals, incense, candles, bells, holy days, popish vestments, liturgy, etc.). And when will man-made innovations stop? They won’t until the church obeys God’s regulative principle of worship. God has given a command which man is not to ignore. “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is *instituted* by himself, and so *limited* by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men: or in any

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

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

True Worship vs. False Worship

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2: Christmas

The regulative principle of worship has clear implications for those who want to promote the celebration of Christmas. It forces those who celebrate Christmas *to prove from Scripture* that God has authorized the celebrating of such a day. This, in fact, is impossible. Additionally, celebrating Christmas violates other scriptural principles.

1. Christmas Is a Monument to Past and Present Idolatry

The day on which Christmas is celebrated (December 25) and nearly all the customs associated with Christmas had their origins in pagan idol worship. "Many of the earth's inhabitants were sun worshippers because the course of their lives depended on its yearly round in the heavens, and feasts were held to aid its return from distant wanderings. In the south of Europe, in Egypt and Persia, the sun gods were worshipped with elaborate ceremonies at the season of the winter solstice, as a fitting time to pay tribute to the benign god of plenty, while in Rome the Saturnalia reigned for a week. In northern lands mid-December was a critical time, for the days became shorter and shorter and the sun was weak and far away. Thus these ancient peoples held feast at the same period that Christmas is now observed."⁶⁷ During the winter

⁶⁶ Ibid, 22-23.

⁶⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1961), 5:643.

solstice period the Babylonians worshiped Tammuz;⁶⁸ the Greeks and Romans worshipped Jupiter, Mithra, Saturn, Hercules, Bacchus, and Adonis; the Egyptians worshiped Osiris and Horus; the Scandinavians worshiped Odin (or Woden). “Among the German and Celtic tribes the winter solstice was considered an important point of the year, and they held their chief festival of Yul to commemorate the return of the burning wheel. The holly, the mistletoe, the Yul log, and the wassail bowl are relics of pre-Christian times.”⁶⁹ The church historian Philip Schaff writes,

The Christmas festival was probably the Christian transformation or regeneration of a series of kindred heathen festivals—Saturnalia, Sigillaria, Juvenalia, and Brumalia—which were kept in Rome in the month of December, in commemoration of the golden age of universal freedom and equality, and in honor of the unconquered sun, and which were great holidays, especially for slaves and children. This connection accounts for many customs of the Christmas season, like the giving of presents to the children and to the poor, the lighting of wax tapers, perhaps also the erection of Christmas trees, and gives them a Christian import; while it also betrays the origin of the many excesses in which the unbelieving world indulges at this season, in wanton perversion of the true Christmas mirth, but which, of course, no more forbid right use, than the abuses of the Bible or of any other gift of God. Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidity of opposition between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen.⁷⁰

Christmas was not celebrated by the apostolic church. It was not celebrated during the first few centuries of the church. As late as A.D. 245, Origen (Hom. 8 on Leviticus) repudiated the idea of keeping the birthday of Christ, “as if he were a king Pharaoh.”⁷¹ By the middle of the 4th century, many churches in the Latin west were celebrating Christmas. Schaff adds:

Notwithstanding this deep significance and wide popularity, the festival of the birth of the Lord is of comparatively late institution.... The feast of Epiphany had spread from the East to the West. The feast of Christmas took the opposite course. We find it first in Rome, in the time of the bishop Liberius, who on the twenty-fifth of December, 360, consecrated Marcella, the sister of St. Ambrose, nun or bride of Christ, and addressed her with the words: “Thou seest what multitudes are come to the birth-festival of thy bridegroom.” [Ambrose, *De virgin ii*. 1.] This passage implies that the festival was already existing and familiar. Christmas was introduced in Antioch about the year 380; in Alexandria, where the feast of the Epiphany was celebrated as the nativity of Christ, not till about 430. Chrysostom, who delivered the Christmas homily in Antioch on the 25th of December, 386, already calls it, notwithstanding its recent introduction (some ten years before), the fundamental feast, or the root, from which all other Christian festivals grow forth.⁷²

⁶⁸ “Long before the fourth century, and long before the Christian era itself, a festival was celebrated among the heathen, at that precise time of the year, in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian queen of heaven; and it may be fairly presumed that, in order to conciliate the heathen, and to swell the numbers of the nominal adherents of Christianity, the same festival was adopted by the Roman Church, giving it only the name of Christ” (Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylonians* [Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, (1916) 1943], 93).

⁶⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1961), 6:623.

⁷⁰ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [1910]), 3:398.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 5:642.

⁷² *Ibid*, 3:395-396.

During the 5th century, Christmas became an official Roman Catholic holy day. In A.D. 534, Christmas was recognized as an official holy day by the Roman state. An expert in ancient church worship concurs. Herman Wegman writes,

The oldest mention of Christmas (December 25) as a Christian feast is found in the west at Rome in the *Chronography* of 354, based on a calendar that goes back to about 336. Thus, Christmas may have been known in Rome by 330 or earlier. There may have been some connection with the building of St. Peter's on the Vatican hill where in one of the tombs, a mosaic of Christ as the *sol iustitiae* (sun of righteousness) has been discovered. The texts of Christmas often refer to Christ the light of the world and the sun of righteousness. In any case, it is practically certain that Christmas in Rome originated as a Christian appendage to (or perhaps replacement of) the pagan *Natalis Invicti*, the festival of the unconquered sun at the winter solstice. The syncretistic ideas of the emperor Constantine may also have been related to this development.... It appears that the festival of Christmas was adopted in the east from Rome, probably in the last quarter of the fourth century in Constantinople and in the middle of the fifth century in Egypt.⁷³

The reason that Christmas became a church holy day has nothing to do with the Bible. The Bible does not give the date of Christ's birth. "[T]he day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be certainly determined."⁷⁴ According to the writers of the Talmud "the flocks in Palestine were brought in at the beginning of November, and not driven to pasture again till toward March."⁷⁵ Therefore, the date of December 25 is in direct conflict with Luke 2:8. Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to celebrate Christmas. Christmas (as well as many other pagan practices) was adopted by the Roman church as a missionary strategy.

The syncretism with paganism as a missionary strategy is clearly revealed in Pope Gregory I's instructions to missionaries, given in A.D. 601: "Because they [the pagans] were wont to sacrifice oxen to devils, some celebration should be given in exchange for this...they should celebrate a religious feast and worship God by their feasting, so that still keeping outward pleasures, they may more readily receive spiritual joys."⁷⁶

This syncretism with paganism explains why Christmas customs are pagan to the core. The Christmas tree came into use because sacred trees were an important aspect of pagan worship during the winter solstice season. In Babylon, the evergreen tree represented Nimrod coming to life again in Tammuz, the queen of Babylon. Tammuz was supposedly born of a virgin, Semiramus. In Rome, they decorated fir trees with red berries to celebrate Saturnalia.⁷⁷ The Scandinavians brought a sacred fir tree into their homes in honor of their god Odin. "When the pagans of Northern Europe became Christians, they made their sacred evergreen trees part of

⁷³ Herman Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 103.

⁷⁴ Schaff, 3:395.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 3:397, fn. 2.

⁷⁶ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (quoted in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [1961], 5:643).

⁷⁷ "The Saturnalia, like Christmas, was a time for giving presents. Small dolls were a popular gift—though for an unpleasant reason. They commemorated a myth that Saturn ate all his male children at birth, to fulfill a pledge that he would die without heirs" (The United Church Observer, *Santa's Family Tree*, Dec. 1976, 14).

the Christian festival, and decorated the trees with gilded nuts, candles (a carryover from sun worship), and apples to stand for the stars, moon, and sun.”⁷⁸

The lighting of special fires and candles on December 24 and 25 are practices that originated in sun worship. The use of the Yule log probably originated with Druid sun worship. The log would not be allowed to burn up and would be used to start next year’s fire (possibly a symbol of the sun’s rebirth). “The Romans ornamented their temples and homes with green boughs and flowers for the Saturnalia, their season of merry making and the giving of presents; the Druids gathered mistletoe with great ceremony and hung it in their homes; the Saxons used holly, ivy and bay.”⁷⁹

The fact that Christmas is full of pagan practices is universally recognized. “Yet many Christians contend that such practices no longer bear pagan connotations, and believe that the observance of Christmas provides an opportunity for worship and witness bearing.”⁸⁰ Many Christians argue that they do not worship the Christmas tree, and that the pagan origins are so far in the past as to be harmless. But such a view, while common in our day, shows a total disregard of the biblical teaching regarding idols, the paraphernalia associated with idolatry, and the monuments to idolatry.

God has such a strong hatred of idolatry that Israel was not just commanded to avoid the worship of idols. Israel was also specifically ordered to *destroy everything* associated with idolatry. “You shall utterly destroy all the places, where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains, and on the hills, and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods, and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things.... [A]nd 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...” (Deut. 12:2-4, 30-31).

When Jacob set out to purify the camp (i.e., his household and attendants) the earrings were removed as well as their foreign gods (Gen. 35:1-4), because their earrings were associated with their false gods. They were signs of superstition. When Elijah went to offer his sacrifice, in his contest with the prophets of Baal, he did not use the pagan altar. He did not take something made for idols (e.g., Saturnalia) and attempt to sanctify it for holy use (e.g., Christmas), but instead he rebuilt the Lord’s altar. Christians should not take the pagan festival of Yule or Saturnalia and dress it with Christian clothing, but rather sanctify the Lord’s day, as did the apostles (1 Kgs. 18:32). When Jehu went up against the worshipers of Baal and their temple, did he save the temple and set it apart for holy use? No! He slaughtered the worshipers of Baal and then “broke down the sacred pillar of Baal, and tore down the temple of Baal, and made it a refuse dump to this day” (2 Kgs. 10:27). “Moreover, we have the example of good Josiah (2 Kgs. 23), for he did not only destroy the houses, and the high places of Baal, but his vessels also, and his grove, and his altars; yea, the horses and chariots which had been given to the sun. The[re is the] example also of penitent Manasseh, who not only overthrew the strange gods, but their altars too (2 Chron. 23:15). And of Moses, the man of God, who was not content to execute vengeance on the idolatrous Israelites, except he should also utterly destroy the monument of their idolatry.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ *World Book Encyclopedia* (1955), 3:1425.

⁷⁹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5:643.

⁸⁰ G. Lambert, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 1:805.

⁸¹ George Gillespie, *English Popish Ceremonies*, (1637), 3:19.

God does not want His church to take pagan days, and those pagan and popish rites and paraphernalia that go with them, and adapt them to Christian use. He simply commands us to abolish them altogether from the face of the earth forever. You may not be offended by the Yule log, the Christmas tree, the mistletoe, the holly berries and the selection of a pagan day to celebrate Christ's birth, but God is offended. God commands us to get rid of the monuments and paraphernalia of paganism.

If your wife was promiscuous before you married her would you be offended if she had pictures of her old boyfriends on her dresser? Would it bother you if she celebrated the various anniversaries relating to her past relationships? Would you be offended if she kept and cherished the various rings, jewelry and mementos given to her by her old boyfriends? Of course you would be offended! The Lord God is infinitely more zealous of His honor than you are; He is a jealous God. Could Israel take festival days to Baal, Ashteroth, Dagon and Molech and alter them to make them pleasing to God? Of course not! The Bible makes very clear which kings of Judah pleased God the most. God is pleased when idols, their temples, their religious dress, earrings, sacred houses, sacred trees, poles, ornaments, rites, names and days are utterly cut off from the earth, never again to be restored. God wants His bride to eliminate forever the monuments, the days, the paraphernalia and the mementos of idolatry. "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile..." (Jer. 10:2-3). "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..." (Deut. 12:31).

Christians must not only put away the monuments of past idolatry but also everything associated with present idolatry. Christmas is the most important holy day in Roman Catholicism. The name Christmas comes from Romanism: Christ-mass, or the mass of Christ. The name Christmas unites the name or title of our glorious God and Savior with the idolatrous, blasphemous mass of popedom. Christ-mass is a mixture of pagan idolatry and Popish invention.

The Roman Catholic Church hates the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Roman church uses human inventions, such as Christmas, to keep millions of people in darkness. The fact that millions of Bible-believing Protestants are observing a Roman Catholic holy day which has not been commanded anywhere in God's Word reveals the sad state of modern Evangelicalism. "We cannot conform, communicate, and symbolize with the idolatrous Papists, in the use of the same, without making ourselves idolaters by participation."⁸² Our attitude should be that of the Protestant Reformer Bucer who said, "I would to God that every holy day whatsoever besides the Lord's day were abolished. That zeal which brought them first in, was without all warrant of the Word, and merely followed corrupt reason, forsooth to drive out the holy days of the pagans, as one nail drives out another. Those holy days have been so tainted with superstitions that I wonder we tremble not at their very names."⁸³

The common objection against the argument that pagan monuments must be abolished is that these things occurred so long ago as to be harmless to us. But this is totally untrue. Not only do we have the present idolatry of Romanism, but there is a revival going on at this very moment in Europe and North America of the old pagan European religions. The radical feminist movement is presently reviving the fertility goddesses and gods of the ancient Near East. God's

⁸² Ibid, 3:35.

⁸³ Martin Bucer, quoted in William Ames, *A Fresh Suit Against Human Ceremonies in God's Worship*, (n.p., 1633), 360.

law-Word says to get rid of the monuments to idolatry. God's law is not rendered null and void with the passage of time.

2. *Christmas Dishonors Christ's Day*

The day that God has set apart for His church corporately to celebrate the person and work of Christ is that day commonly called the Lord's day or the Christian Sabbath. The first day of the week is the day that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. It is the day of Christ's victory over sin, Satan and death. Jesus' humiliation and sacrificial death are complete. Christ rose and is forever the exalted Lord of heaven and earth. "Therefore, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." (2 Cor. 5:16). "The Lord's day is given in memory of *the whole work of redemption*."⁸⁴ The idea of honoring someone's life piecemeal (this event, that event) comes not from the Bible but from pagan emperor worship. In fact, the only birthday celebrations recorded in the whole Bible are those of Pharaoh (Gen. 40:20) and King Herod (Matt. 14:6; Mk. 6:21). Both birthday parties ended in murder, Herod's in the murder of John the Baptist.

God has been very generous to His people in giving them 52 holy days a year. When men add their own days (e.g., Christmas, Easter, etc.) they detract from, denigrate and even set aside the Lord's day. People love and give more attention to Christmas than they do the Lord's day. Many Christians spend nearly the whole month of December preparing for Christmas: decorating their homes, offices and churches, buying gifts, baking pies and cookies, practicing and memorizing Christmas carols, performing nativity plays, holding carol recitals, etc. Many Americans rarely attend church but would never miss the Christmas service. The typical American winks at Sabbath breaking, fornication, adultery and drunkenness; but considers Christians who do not celebrate Christmas to be deluded fanatics:

What Jesus desires of us is not the observance of things He did not command, but the things He did command. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, 20). This is what the Apostles did. They taught the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). It did not include Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter, because they were not part of the things commanded by Christ. So, the one who understands "the true meaning of Christmas" (or Good Friday, or Easter) is precisely the one who realizes that they are human inventions. And in order to honor Christ as the only king and head of the church, *such a person will not observe* these man-made additions to what our Lord commanded. A person such as this may be out of step with a very popular custom. The important thing is that he will be in step with Christ and the apostles.⁸⁵

Christmas (and all other extra-biblical holy days) destroys society's obedience toward the Christian Sabbath by blurring the distinction or the boundary line between Jehovah's appointed day of rest and worship and the other six days of the week in which man is commanded by God to work. The Larger Catechism says, "The fourth commandment requireth of all men the sanctifying or keeping holy to God such set times as he hath appointed in his word, expressly one whole day in seven; which was the seventh from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, and the first day of the week ever since, and so to continue to the end of the world; which

⁸⁴ Gillespie, 146.

⁸⁵ G. I. Williamson, *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (Havertown: New Covenant Publication Society, n.d.), 9-10.

is the Christian Sabbath, and in the New Testament called The Lord's Day" (Ans. 116). Tragically in American society the Lord's day is openly profaned with unnecessary labor and the pursuit of personal pleasures while Christmas day which usually falls upon a work day is used as a day of rest. The command to labor six days is not incidental to the fourth commandment but a crucial aspect of it ("shalt thou labor" [*tha abod*] is an imperfect with imperatival meaning). Therefore, Christmas leads directly to the violation of the positive aspect of the fourth commandment. In fact Christmas is one of the very few days of the year in which virtually every business in the land is closed. This lack of human activity is not practiced on the Lord's day. This sad fact demonstrates the apostasy of American culture. Christmas (which is not authorized) is honored, while the Lord's day (which is commanded) is not honored (except by a tiny remnant of professing Christians). Loving God and His day go hand in hand. When the love and fear of God no longer exist, His day is not honored.

Further, the religious observance of a *man-made* holy day is an implicit usurpation of the authority of Christ who is the only King and head of the church, family and state. Bannerman writes,

In keeping the last day of the week as a day of religious observance, the Jews, by the very act, expressed their religious acknowledgment of God, who had appointed it, and did an act of worship to Him as its author, in the character of the one Creator who made the heavens and the earth. In keeping the first day of the week, Christians, by the very act, recognize Christ as the author of it, and do an act of religious homage to Him as the one Redeemer, who on that day rose from the dead, and secured the salvation of His people.... And who does not see, that upon the very same principle the observance of holidays appointed by the Church, as ordinary and stated parts of Divine worship, is an expression of religious homage to man, who is the author of the appointment,—an unlawful acknowledgment of human or ecclesiastical authority in an act of worship. In keeping, after a religious sort, a day that has no authority but man's, we are paying a religious homage to that authority; we are bowing down, in the very act of our observance of the day as part of worship, not to Christ, who has not appointed it, but to the Church, which has. We are keeping the season holy, not to God, but to man.⁸⁶

The *only* day that God has authorized as a holy day is the Lord's day.⁸⁷ If the church wants to please Jesus Christ and honor Him, then it should do so by keeping His day and by setting an example to the outside world. When Christians make Christmas more special than the Lord's day, they disobey the teachings of Christ and dishonor His day.

3. *Christmas Is a Lie*

Christianity is the religion of truth. God cannot lie. All truth and knowledge ultimately come from God. Jesus Christ is "the way, *the truth*, and the life" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13). The Gospel is called "the word of truth" (Eph. 1:13). God commands: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Ex. 20:16). Paul tells us to be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), to put away lying and speak the truth to our neighbor in order not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:25, 30). Jesus Christ tells us that "God is a

⁸⁶ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1869]), 1:416.

⁸⁷ "There is no day commanded in the scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called *Holy-days*, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued" (The Westminster Assembly, *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, 1645).

Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in *truth*” (John 4:24). Christians are to be light and salt to the world (Matt. 5:13, 16). They are to be a witness before the world by speaking the truth and living the truth. Is celebrating Christmas compatible with our responsibility to speak and live the truth before the world? No, because Christmas is a lie.

The date used to celebrate the birth of Christ, December 25, is a lie. According to the Bible, Jesus was not born on December 25. “And there were in the same country shepherds *abiding in the field*, keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8). It is common knowledge that shepherds in Palestine came in from the fields before winter. The rainy season in Judea began in late October or early November. The shepherds would bring their field flocks into the villages before the beginning of the rainy season. Therefore, Christ was born *before* the first week of November. “It is quite evident that Christ was not actually born in the middle of the winter season. But, on the other hand, do the Scriptures tell us what season of the year he was born? Yes, the scriptures indicated that he was born in the *fall* of the year. For example, our Lord’s public ministry lasted for three and a half years (Dan. 9:27, etc.). His ministry came to an end at the time of the Passover (John 18:39), which was in the spring of the year. And so three and a half years before this would mark the beginning of His ministry in the *fall* of the year. Now when Jesus began his ministry, he was about thirty years of age (Lk. 3:23). This was the recognized age for a priest before he could become an official minister under the Old Testament (Num. 4:3). Therefore, since Christ began his ministry at the age of about 30 since this was in the fall season of the year then thirty years before this would mark his birth as being in the early FALL, not December 25.”⁸⁸

If Christians are willing to celebrate a lie and fill Christ’s sham birthday with papist and pagan mythology (e.g., Santa Claus, the Christmas tree, mistletoe, the Yule log, evergreens, etc.), then why should the world believe the church when it really speaks the truth? If you lie about the birth of Christ and gladly indulge in pagan mythology, then when you tell your neighbor about the resurrection of Christ, why should he believe you? By celebrating Christmas you are putting a stumbling block in front of your unbelieving neighbor. Your neighbor could reason that since you speak and live a lie regarding the birth of Christ, you cannot be trusted when you speak about the resurrection of Christ. I’ve actually had intellectuals say to me, after I spoke to them of Christ’s death and resurrection, that they are myths foisted on simple people by the church just like Santa Claus and the Easter bunny (of course, the Christmas lie has gone on for so long that most people accept it as fact). The church must stop denigrating God’s inspired, infallible Word by setting up human fantasies alongside divine revelation. Christmas is a contradiction of the biblical account of Christ’s birth.

4. *The World Loves Christmas*⁸⁹

Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4). “Do not love the world, or the things in the world (1 Jn. 2:15).

Who leads whom? Is not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ supposed to be an example to the world? Is it not to be salt and light to the nations? Is it proper for the church to follow the

⁸⁸ Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* (Riverside: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1961), 160-61.

⁸⁹ Of course, the world loves puppy dogs, apple pie and baseball as well, but these hold no religious significance. They are not associated with Christ and are not religious ordinances.

pagan world-system? Christmas did not originate in the Bible or the apostolic church; it is pagan to its very core. The day, the tree, the exchanging of gifts, the mistletoe, the holly berries all originated in the idolatrous pagan festivities surrounding the winter solstice. The compromised, apostatizing Roman church took what was pagan and attempted to Christianize it. Covenant-breaking, Christ-hating, idol-worshipping, pagan unbelievers love Christmas. Why? Because Christmas is not biblical! Christmas is not of God. It is a lie, and Satan, their master, is the father of lies. Atheists, homosexuals, feminists, wicked politicians, murderers, child molesters and idolaters all love Christmas. If Christmas were biblical, and if Christmas were commanded to be observed in the Bible, would the world love it so? Absolutely not! The world would hate Christmas. “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). Does the world love the Lord’s day, the Christian Sabbath? Of course not! The world hates it. Does the world love and obey the resurrected King of kings and Lord of lords? No! The world hates Christ. The world does love a plastic or clay baby in a manger. A plastic baby is not very threatening. Christ is no longer a baby. He is the glorified King who sits at the right hand of the Father. “Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know we Him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16).

The Bible teaches that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 3:19). “Thus says the LORD: Do not learn the way of the Gentiles...for the customs of the peoples are futile” (Jer. 10: 2-3). The apostle Paul has in mind a much broader application than just marriage when he says, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? *Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?* And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?... Therefore come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:14-17). When the church has something relating to worship and religion in common with the unbelieving pagan world, the church, in that area, is bound together with unbelievers. The church has no business celebrating a pagan holiday with the pagan world. What hypocrisy! What wickedness!

5. Christmas Is Destructive of Christian Liberty

Jesus Christ is the only king and sole lawgiver to the church. Whenever men add human laws, ordinance, rites, ceremonies or holy days to what Christ has authorized in His word, they deny believers the liberty they have in Christ. While it is a duty for Christians to walk according to our Lord’s precepts, ordinance and admonitions, it is sinful for believers to submit to religious ordinances based on human authority. When we draw near to God by doing things deemed sacred or holy it is especially important that such things are based upon faith. Paul says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23) and believers must “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5) with regard to the lawfulness of holy days.

What does the apostle mean when he says that things done apart from faith are sinful? Does he mean that we must have faith in ourselves, our goodness, or our creativity? No. Paul says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Faith must have as its object that which is taught or authorized by Scripture. Obviously biblical faith cannot be connected to that which is an invention of man in matters of worship. Thus, God rejected Abel’s offering because it did not proceed from Jehovah’s command but from Abel’s imagination (cf. Gen. 4:3-5; Heb. 11:4). Likewise then, the appointment and celebration of religious holy days (that have no divine warrant) is sinful and will without question offend the

consciences of all good Puritan and truly confessional Presbyterian believers. Thus, the imposition of Christmas religious services apart from faith, resting solely on human invention and authority, is a gross violation of Christian liberty and charity. Is a love of human traditions so important that the liberty of Christ's sheep should be disregarded and trampled underfoot? Is it an act of Christian love to tempt believers to sin by doing that which is *not* rooted in biblical faith, but rather pagan and popish tradition? For the sake of all Christians who want to be faithful to Scripture, Christmas services must be abolished.

6. The Church Calendar Is an Imitation of the Old Covenant Ceremonial Holy Days Coupled with Heathen Customs

The "Christian" church year came into being as a human combination of three elements:

(1) There was Jewish calendar which had sacred seasons and ceremonial sabbaths which comported quite well with the natural succession of seasons. These seasons and ceremonial sabbaths were done away by the work of Christ. The imitation of the old covenant holy days may be rooted in the fact that the early church had many Jewish believers and Gentile proselytes who were accustomed to keeping such days. Thus, ceremonial days were retained and "Christianized." An even more probable explanation is that the Christian year originated in the soil of sacerdotalism. As the church hierarchy embraced human merit and the idea that the clergy were priests, the old covenant priesthood, temple (sacred places), priestly garments, incense and special holy days became the pattern of Roman Catholic worship. The church year was founded upon "the precedent of the Old Testament cultus, with no positive direction from Christ or the apostles. The New Testament contains no certain traces of annual festivals."⁹⁰

(2) There was the combination of pagan customs that originated with the heathen traditions from ancient times that predated the arrival of Christianity in Europe. Indeed, Christmas is one day on the church calendar which is not rooted in a specific Jewish day but is based (as far as the timing of it goes) solely on a pagan feast day.⁹¹ "In the Christmas festival,

⁹⁰ Schaff, 1:388.

⁹¹ The almost universal practice of some sort of pagan sun worship throughout the ancient world (from Babylon to Egypt, Greece, Rome and even Northern Europe) with often very similar heathen customs, has led some scholars to believe that the winter solstice festival had a very early heathen origin in Babylon that eventually spread throughout much of the old world. Woodrow writes, "In pagan days, this birth of the sun-god was especially popular among that branch of the 'Mysteries' known as Mithraism. Concerning this we read: 'The largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds was the pagan sun worship—Mithraism.... This winter festival was called 'the Nativity'—the 'nativity of the SUN'." (James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 471.) And not only was Mithra, the sun-god of Mithraism, said to be born at this time of the year, but Osiris, Horus, Hercules, Bacchus, Adonis, Jupiter, Tammuz, and other sun-gods were supposedly born at what is today called the "Christmas" season—the winter solstice! (T. W. Doane, *Bible Myths*, 474).

Says a noted writer, "The winter solstice (was) the time at which all the sun-gods from Osiris to Jupiter and Mithra had celebrated their (birthdays), the celebration being adorned with the pine tree of Adonis, the Holly of Saturn, and the mistletoe...tapers represented the kindling of the newborn sun-god's fire..." (Homer W. Smith, *Man and His Gods*, 201).

Now the fact that the various sun-gods that were worshiped in different countries were all believed to have been born at the same season (in the old fables), would seem to indicate that they were but different forms (under different names) of the original son of the sun-god, Tammuz, of Babylon, the land from which sun-worship originally spread.

In Babylon, the birthday of Tammuz was celebrated at the time of the winter solstice with great feasts, revelry, and drunkenness—the same way many celebrate it today! The ancient celebration spread and became so much an established custom that "in pagan Rome and Greece, in the days of Teutonic barbarians, in the remote times of an-

which from the fourth century spread from Rome over the entire church, the holy commemoration of the birth of the Redeemer is associated—to this day, even in Protestant lands—with the wanton merriments of the pagan Saturnalia.”⁹² For example, Easter contains many heathen elements from pagan fertility cults such as the painting or dyeing of eggs, sunrise services, rabbits and hot cross buns. The name “*Easter*” is derived from Astarte or Ishtar (pronounced *easter*) a pagan fertility goddess.⁹³ The pagan Greeks in Ephesus worshiped the Hellenized version of Astarte called Diana (Ac. 19:24-27). Diana was a very large statue of a woman whose whole mid-section (front, sides and back) was surrounded by several rows of eggs.

(3) There was the division of various important events of our Lord’s life (e.g., birth, circumcision, crucifixion, resurrection, sending of the Holy Spirit) into separate holy days with peculiar themes and rituals. The commemoration of particular events of a person’s life was patterned after heathen emperor and hero worship.

Having already noted that the Bible strongly condemns adding human traditions to what God has commanded and expresses Jehovah’s hatred of syncretism (i.e., mixing pagan customs with the true religion), a few comments regarding the Judaizing aspect of the church year are in order. First, if Christ and the apostles wanted the church to follow a church year or Christian calendar, then they would have either commanded such a thing or left us an inscripturated example to follow. Yet there is not a shred of evidence for the church calendar within the New Testament. The church calendar is based on the false, unbiblical assumption that church authorities have the right to invent their own holy days. The Roman Catholic and Episcopal concept of church authority (as autonomous or independent of divine warrant) is an implicit rejection of the crown rights of Jesus Christ. When popes or prelates place man-made holy days or rites alongside of what God has authorized, they assign to themselves an authority that belongs solely to God.

cient Egyptian civilization, in the infancy of the race East and West and North and South, the period of the winter solstice was ever a period of rejoicing and festivity” (William S. Walsh, *Curiosities of Popular Customs*, 242).

When this mid-winter festival came to Rome, it was known as the Saturnalia—Saturn being but another name of Nimrod or Tammuz as ‘the hidden god’” (Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* [Riverside, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, Inc., 1966], 163-164).

⁹² Ibid, 1:376.

⁹³ The pagan elements of Easter (like Christmas) are found throughout much of the ancient world. One scholar writes, “Although Easter is a Christian festival, it embodies traditions of an ancient time antedating the rise of Christianity. The origin of its name is lost in the dim past; some scholars believe it probably is derived from *Ēastre*, Anglo-Saxon name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility, to whom was dedicated *Ēastre mōnath*, corresponding to April. Her festival was celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, and traditions associated with the festival survive in the familiar Easter bunny, symbol of the fertile rabbit, and in the equally familiar colored Easter eggs originally painted with gay hues to represent sunlight of spring. Such festivals, and the myths and legends which explain their origin, abounded in ancient religions. The Greek myth of the return of the earth-goddess Demeter from the underworld to the light of day, symbolizing the resurrection of life in the spring after the long hibernation of winter, had its counterpart, among others, in the Latin legend of Ceres and Persephone. The Phrygians believed that their all-powerful deity went to sleep at the time of the winter solstice, and they performed ceremonies at the spring equinox to awaken him with music and dancing. The universality of such festivals and myths among ancient peoples has led some [unbelieving modernist] scholars to interpret the resurrection of Christ as a mystical and exalted variant of fertility myths” (*Funk and Wagnall’s New Standard Encyclopedia* [New York: Unicorn, 1950], 2:4045).

Given the sinful nature of our human hearts and our sinful tendency to incorporate pagan elements into the unadorned worship of Christ, we must heed the words of the prophet Jeremiah who declared: “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile [lit. vain]” (Jer. 10:2-3).

Second, Paul condemned such days when he rebuked believers who wanted to retain the old covenant shadows. “But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Gal. 4:9-11). James Bannerman writes,

And in the context it is not difficult to gather the twofold ground on which the apostle condemned such observances. First of all, he grounded condemnation of ecclesiastical days on the fact that, in attaching importance to them, and regarding them as ordinary parts of the service due to God, the Galatians, like “children, were in bondage under the elements (*stoicheia*) of the world;” in other words, he stigmatizes these appointments of days and seasons as rudimentary observances suited to the infancy of the Church, but only fetters to it now, when it ought to have arrived at spiritual manhood. And again he characterizes them as “the weak and beggarly elements (or rudiments) whereunto the Galatians desired again to be in bondage.” They were the empty and outward appointments of a carnal and worn-out dispensation.⁹⁴

The imitation of the holy days and seasons of the old covenant Jewish calendar is a rejection of the simple unadorned gospel worship instituted by our Lord through His inspired apostles.

Third (as noted), the church year or religious calendar detracts from the permanent, moral, weekly Sabbath (the Lord’s day) that God instituted before the fall, that is included in the Decalogue—the moral law. Since it was God’s sovereign plan to set aside the ceremonial sabbaths and festivals with the completion of His Son’s redemptive work, while retaining the weekly moral Sabbath (yet changing the day from the seventh to the first day of the week in honor of Christ’s resurrection); obviously Jehovah wants us to keep and cherish the Lord’s day as a special day, sanctified from all other days. Thus, while men seek to honor Jesus by adding to Scripture, they actually dishonor Him by detracting from and de-emphasizing the Lord’s day.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Bannerman, 1:414. Calvin writes, “When certain days are represented as holy in themselves, when one day is distinguished from another on religious grounds, when holy days are reckoned as a part of divine worship, then days are improperly observed” (*Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 124).

⁹⁵ An example of the rejection of the regulative principle and the acceptance of man-made holy days can be found among the first table-antinomian Christian Reconstruction writers. Note the following comments by James Jordan. He writes, “The festival calendar of the Old Testament is no more and no less binding on the Church today than is the sabbath day. Just as the Lord’s day has come in place of the sabbath day, so the Church has devised voluntary festivals in place of those of the Old Covenant. Just as the Old Covenant feasts followed the rhythmic pace of the natural year, giving typological meaning to it, so the Christian calendar also moves from the dark winter of the Nativity, through the rising of the sun, and the Resurrection of the world in the spring” (*The Law and the Covenant: An Exposition of Exodus 21-23* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984], 184-86. Why should Jordan’s comments be rejected as unscriptural and Romanizing? First, he *presupposes* that the regulative principle doesn’t exist and that men have the right to make up holy days without biblical warrant. This presupposition is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture (see Deut. 12:32; Gen. 4:3-5; Ex. 20:4-5; Lev. 10:1-2; 1 Chron. 15:13-15; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 1 Kgs. 12:33; Mt. 15:1-3, 8-9; 18:20; Jn. 4: 19-24; Col. 2:8, 16, 20-23). Second, he *ignores* the fact that the Old Testament festivals were *not* made up by the church but were *commanded by God*. These old covenant holy days were not instituted to teach us about “the rhythmic pace of the natural year” but were designed to instruct the church in its immaturity about the person and work of Christ. Once these types, shadows and “weak and beggarly elements” (Gal. 4:9) served their purpose, and Jesus completed His redemptive work, all the festival days were completely abrogated. Third, the inspired apostles and prophets who were sent by God to interpret the person and work of Jesus as well as set in order the new covenant church’s worship and government did not institute a church calendar. If God wanted us to set up new covenant imitations of the Old Testament festivals days or to follow the rhythmic pace of the seasons, He did not instruct the New Testament apostles or prophets to do so. Therefore, the

7. Don't Be Fooled

Paul warns that “Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). That is why pagan festivals throughout the world are fun days. They are days of fine food, parties, parades, family reunions and gift giving. Satan’s goal is not merely to enslave individuals but also to control institutions, cultures and nations. The heathen calendar of “holy days,” where pagan festivals are celebrated each year at certain times, is a Satan-inspired tool to habituate whole cultures in covenant rebellion. Satan wants individuals and nations to be enslaved in pagan ritual and darkness. A culture is habituated to paganism when pagan festivals, rites and ceremonies are second nature and unquestioned in that society.

How have Christians been fooled into celebrating a pagan festival day? The day has been transformed from a day of darkness to a day of light. How is this done? It’s very simple! The first thing you do is lie. You teach that this day is Christ’s birthday. The fact that this is not really the day Christ was born is inconsequential. Very few people will check the facts. And the ones who do will be regarded as fanatics, Scrooges and out of touch with modernity. Second, you make it a day when family members are required to be together. What a wonderful thing it is, a day for family dinner and family values. Third, you make it a day of gift giving and charity, a day of caring and sharing. Who could be against that? Fourth, you dedicate the day to children all over the world. You make it fun and give them lots of hugs and presents. Therefore, when these children grow up, the day will be filled with fond memories. It is a day of intense sentimentality. (Does it not bring a little tear to your eye when you think of your parents and brothers and sisters gathered around the tree?) Fifth, you make sure every city and town is properly decorated. And you get the whole entertainment industry into high gear with articles, specials, movies, plays and recitals. Sixth, you put community, workplace, church and family pressure on those who do not celebrate the day to conform or else be viewed as perverting the truth or out of touch with reality.

Has this strategy been effective? Yes, very effective. There was a time when Presbyterians and Congregationalists would have been disciplined for celebrating Christmas. For Protestants from the Calvinist wing of the Reformation, celebrating such days was unthinkable for nearly three hundred years. Now, if you are a Presbyterian and do not celebrate Christmas, other Presbyterians think you are a fanatic. Protestants have been fooled, bamboozled, hoodwinked and duped because they have forgotten God’s regulative principle. “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Prov. 30:5-6). There would be only one acceptable reason for a Christian to celebrate Christmas, and that would be an instruction from the Word of

church calendar is Romish, man-made nonsense. Fourth, Jordan erroneously asserts that the man-made festival days (i.e., holy days) are voluntary. The man-made church calendars are not voluntary; they are explicitly mandatory in many communions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox) and implicitly mandatory in others (e.g., Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, etc). Once a denomination adopts such popish trash a person can only avoid such corruptions by finding a different church. Even in many “conservative” Presbyterian bodies the pressure to conform to papal days such as Christmas is immense. For young men seeking a pastorate not to favor celebrating such days is a job killer. Fifth, Jordan offers not a shred of biblical evidence for the celebration of non-authorized holy days. This author did read one of Jordan’s newsletters that offered justification for the celebration of holy days. The gist of the article was the fact that there are four seasons proves the necessity of the church calendar. Of course, if such an argument constitutes divine warrant for the worship of Christ’s church, one could prove anything one dreamed up (e.g., the existence of rocks proves that God wants rock and roll bands in public worship). The bottom line is that Mr. Jordan likes the liturgical calendar.

God to do so. Since there is no implicit or explicit instruction from the Bible to do so, it is forbidden.

Common Reasons Given by Christians for Celebrating Christmas

1. Doesn't Romans 14:5-6 allow Christians to celebrate Christmas?

One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it (Rom. 14:5-6).

(1) Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, was addressing a situation unique to the early church. There were Jewish believers who “regarded the holy days of the ceremonial economy as having abiding sanctity.”⁹⁶ The “days” spoken of in Romans were days *commanded by God in the old economy*. Paul is “referring to the ceremonial holy days of the Levitical institution.”⁹⁷ Virtually all commentators concur with this interpretation.⁹⁸ Paul allows for diversity in the church *over the issue of Jewish holy days* because of the unique historical circumstances. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, the ceremonial aspects of the law (e.g., animal sacrifices, Jewish holy days, circumcision, etc.) were done away with. Yet prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70, the apostles allowed certain practices by Jewish Christians, as long as no works-righteousness was attributed to these practices. In Acts 21:26 we even encounter the apostle Paul going to the temple “to announce the expiration of the days of purification.” Jewish believers who were already accustomed to keeping certain holy days of the Mosaic economy were allowed to continue doing so for a time. But once the Temple was destroyed, the canon of Scripture was completed, and the church had existed for a whole generation, these unique historical circumstances ceased. Further, even if this passage were still applicable to our present situation, it could not be used to justify Christmas, because these days were not “Christianized” pagan holy days nor arbitrary holy days set up by man. Therefore, if this passage were still applicable to our situation, it could only be used to justify the private celebration of Jewish holy days by weak Jewish believers. It cannot be used as a justification for man-made days or pagan days which God has not commanded.

(2) Not only does this passage not allow Christians to celebrate Christmas, it most certainly forbids holding Christmas services of any kind and having Christmas fellowships or parties. Paul allows for diversity in the church over this issue (i.e., Jewish holy days). Both parties are to accept each other for the sake of peace and unity in the church. Both parties believe that they are obeying the Word of God. “Compelled conformity or pressure exerted to the end of securing conformity defeats the aims to which all the exhortations and reproofs are directed.”⁹⁹ Therefore, it would be wrong for the weak Jewish believers to force the church to have a worship service in honor of a ceremonial holy day, because the strong Gentile believers would feel compelled to attend the public worship of God. Therefore, those who did celebrate Jewish holy days had to do it privately unto the Lord. Those who use this passage to justify celebrating

⁹⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 177-78.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 257.

⁹⁸ Out of 24 commentaries consulted, only one (a modernist) entertained the possibility that these days were non-Judaical.

⁹⁹ Murray, 178.

Christmas would likewise be forced by Paul's injunction to keep the day a private affair. Thus, Christmas services and church Christmas parties would cease, for they violate the freedom of Christians not to celebrate such a day. Of course, Christmas, not being commanded by God and being a monument to idolatry, is forbidden, anyway.¹⁰⁰

Pastors and elders who do authorize a Christmas service abuse their office. The pastors and governors of a church receive their authority from God. They are responsible to rule the church according to the Word of God. When pastors and elders authorize a special Christmas service, they do so on their own authority, because there is no warrant from the Word of God to do so. Therefore, in this one point they act no differently than the pope or a bishop. They intrude a human invention into the church. Those in the church who refuse to take part in a pagan-popish festival day, who refuse to worship God according to man's imagination, who refuse to worship God without divine authorization, are forced by the church leadership to remain at home instead of attending the public worship of God. Thus, in this point, many presbyters act like popes, prelates and tyrants over God's flock, because they take away the freedom we have in Christ to worship God as one body publicly "in Spirit and in truth" on the Lord's day.

2. Didn't the Jews in the days of Queen Esther set up a holy day not authorized in the law of Moses? Doesn't that example allow the church to set up a holy day (e.g., Christmas) not authorized in the Bible?

There are a number of problems with this argument.

(1) 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 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."¹⁰¹ There were no special worship services, no ceremonies, 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).

(2) Purim did not come about because the people or church officials got together and decided to invent 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 (i.e., the priests) 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,

¹⁰⁰ In Gal. 4:10-11 and Col. 2:16-17 the observance of days is condemned by Paul because in these instances the celebration of days was connected with heresy. The situation at Rome was different. The days were kept because of a genuine misunderstanding. Heresy and ideas of works-righteousness were not involved.

¹⁰¹ J. P. Lewis, "Feasts" in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 2:525.

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.¹⁰²

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.

(3) The notion that Purim proves that men are permitted to invent 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 invent 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 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*

¹⁰² Thomas M'Crie, *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (New York: Robert Carter, 1838), 287-88.

beginning, among other corruptions of antichrist, by the Reformed Church of Scotland, which allowed no stated religious days but the Christian Sabbath.¹⁰³

3. *There is no question that Christmas has no place in the public worship of God, but isn't it okay to celebrate it privately in the home?*

The problem with this view is that it presupposes that the regulative principle only applies to public worship. There is no biblical evidence to support the idea that the regulative principle was meant only for public worship. In fact, the biblical evidence supports the opposite view. Cain was condemned for an innovation in private worship (Gen. 4:2-8). Noah, in family worship, offered clean animals to God (Gen. 8:20-21). God was pleased and accepted Noah's offering on behalf of himself and his family. Abraham, Jacob and Job offered sacrifices to God in private or family worship, according to God's Word. God accepted these lawful offerings. The idea that innovations in worship are permitted in family and private worship is unbiblical. It is totally arbitrary because it is not based on divine revelation. If an innovation in public worship displeases God, then how does it please Him in private worship? Would it not be permissible, under such premises, to have little shrines in our homes where we burn incense, wear surplices, miters and such, as long as we keep such things out of public meetings?

There are some differences between public and private worship (e.g., private worship should occur two to three times a day, whereas public worship should occur at *least* once every Lord's day.) People in Reformed denominations who brought in unbiblical innovations such as Christmas, women teaching the Bible and theology to men in Bible studies and Sunday school, hymns and Christmas carols, etc., did not seek to justify these new innovations by appealing to Scripture. Instead, they *arbitrarily* set these activities outside of the regulative principle by pronouncing them all as under the sphere of private worship. Pastors and their flocks are so in love with their innovations that they resort to mystification. They act as if their pastor is a pope or bishop and has the authority to turn private worship (where they assume human autonomy is permitted) into public worship (where the Word reigns supreme) by saying "thus begins the public worship of God." Where in the Bible is public worship relegated to a few hours on the Lord's day?¹⁰⁴ Jesus Christ said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). How is a woman teaching several men on the Sabbath *private*? How are fifty people singing Christmas carols engaging in *private* worship? Do not presuppose that God permits innovation and human autonomy in private worship. Try to prove it from the Word of God. You cannot. Do not arbitrarily declare what is obviously public worship as private. The rabbis of old justified all sorts of nonsense with such reasoning.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 298-300 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁴ God's people are the church whether they meet in a church building, barn, park or house. When Christians gather together to hear the Word and worship God, it is the church meeting. It is public worship whether they meet at 7:00 a.m. or 11:00 p.m. Public worship *must* occur on the Lord's day, but that does not mean that public worship is limited to that day alone. The idea that teaching and worship at 10:00 a.m. is not public, but at 11:00 a.m. it is public is totally irrational and arbitrary. It is based on human tradition. If this imaginary line really existed between 10:59 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., then could not Reformed churches have two worship and teaching services each Lord's day? One could be run by women. The women could teach and lead. They could sing uninspired hymns and charismatic campfire songs. They could burn incense and wear popish dress. They could have intricate popish liturgies, candles, bells, dance and so on. Then at 11:00 a.m. they could have "public worship" in which they have Psalm singing, preaching by men, etc. Those who arbitrarily set up a sphere of private worship in which human innovations are permitted have no recourse, on their own presuppositions, in which to avoid such bizarre dualities.

The Bible says, “a little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9). When Presbyterian pastors and elders stopped disciplining church members for celebrating Christmas in the home in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they virtually guaranteed that the pagan-popish leaven of Christmas would spread. In fact, it has. One must search far and wide to find a Presbyterian home or church where this popish invention is not celebrated.¹⁰⁵

4. We do not celebrate Christmas. For us the day is just a secular family day. What could be wrong with that?

There are 365 days in a year. How is it that every year your secular family day just happens to fall on December 25? Could it be that you are just imitating your pagan neighbors and their heathen culture? Could it be that you celebrate the day just as everyone else does and merely declare it secular as a justification or an excuse? If you are just having a good family day, then why do you fill your living room with the monuments and mementos of present and past idolatry? You say the day is a secular family day, but you have a tree, evergreens, mistletoe, gifts, candles and carols. It is obvious that you celebrate Christmas much as a papist does. The truth is that if you eliminated all the pagan paraphernalia of Christmas, then you probably would not bother to celebrate it. The pagan day would lose its glitter, charm and emotional allure. As Christians we should be family oriented. We should get together with our relatives and enjoy each other’s company. But we do not need a pagan festival day to do so.

5. As Reformed believers who are dedicated to the Christianization of pagan culture, are we not taking dominion over paganism by making a pagan day a holy day dedicated to Christ?

This argument is very popular with many followers of Christian Reconstruction. They take the biblical concept of corporate sanctification (i.e., the idea that whole families, churches and societies can grow in holiness over time as people submit themselves to the word of God) and apply it to pagan-popish days such as Christmas and Easter. (One popular Reformed pastor and author even wrote that believers take dominion over evergreen trees by cutting them down, placing them in their living rooms and decorating them.) Although such an argument is clever we must emphatically reject it as contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture.

This argument confuses corporate sanctification with syncretism. When it comes to the monuments of idolatry (i.e., statues, mementos [e.g., earrings dedicated to idols], customs that are directly associated with idolatry [e.g., Saturnalia, the Yule log, the Christmas tree, etc.]) God never instructed His people to take dominion over such things by giving them different, more biblical names or by arbitrarily assigning new “Christian” meanings to such things. Instead, He always explicitly commanded their total destruction (cf. Gen. 35:4; Ex. 32:20; Deut. 12:2-4, 30-31; 2 Kgs. 10:27; 23; 2 Chron. 23:15; Jer. 10: 2-3; etc.). Christians can no more make things associated with idolatry pleasing to God, than can they somehow make fornication or adultery acceptable. One must not confuse an innocent custom such as wearing wooden shoes with heathen idolatrous practices. Jehovah has made it crystal clear that with regard to idolatry and its monuments the path to corporate sanctification involves annihilation not incorporation. When it comes to the idolatrous holy days of Halloween or Saturnalia, God’s method of corporate or societal sanctification involves putting off that which is pagan and offensive to God; and, putting

¹⁰⁵ As noted earlier, Christmas is a monument to past and present idolatry; therefore, even apart from the regulative principle it is still wrong to celebrate it in the home, office, church, country club, and so on.

on that which is pleasing to Him—a cheerful weekly observance of the Lord’s day, the Christian Sabbath.¹⁰⁶

6. Since Christmas is a national holiday recognized by the civil magistrate and almost universally celebrated by the populace, is it not perfectly acceptable to celebrate the day as a national holiday like the Fourth of July?

This excuse is very similar to the assertion that the day is simply a secular day. The basic argument is that Christmas is something that the United States as a whole participates in, therefore as good citizens we should also participate in the festivities. Christmas is part of our American culture like apple pie and baseball. Why should we not allow our children to participate in this wonderful national-cultural activity?

There are a number of reasons why the national holiday argument should be rejected. (1) The fact that the civil magistrate and the majority of the populace accept and practice the Christmas holiday does not somehow make the celebration of such a day acceptable before God. If the state authorized a day to celebrate a pagan deity or the life of an anti-Christian homosexual, Christians (i.e., conservative evangelicals) would not celebrate such a day. Why? Because such a day is obviously contrary to the teaching of Scripture! Therefore, when considering the national holiday argument the issue still boils down to: (a) Is Christmas authorized by Scripture; and, (b) Can pagan monuments to idolatry be made acceptable to God? (2) The state (and the whole nation as a corporate unity; cf. Mt. 28:18) is under God’s law-word and Christ’s authority in the same way that the church and individuals are. Therefore, the state (like the church and individuals) does not have the authority to recognize or sanction a holy day without warrant from God’s word. Keep in mind Christmas is not like the fourth of July which is a secular commemoration of America’s independence. It is a religious day associated directly with the birth of Christ. As such it falls directly under the jurisdiction of the regulative principle. Further, the acceptance of the national holiday argument is an implicit acceptance of the idea that religious holy days can stand solely upon a human source of authority. All such thinking is foundational to humanism, popery and prelacy.

It is tragic that many of the very people who are the direct spiritual descendants of the original Presbyterians of Scotland (the Covenanters) have become great defenders of Christmas and the liturgical calendar. Why is this fact so distressing? Because the faithful Presbyterians of both the first and second reformations in Scotland were willing to be persecuted rather than corrupt themselves with the romanizing practices of Episcopalianism! The early Presbyterians recognized that the episcopal Church of England had retained many superstitions that were part of Roman Catholic worship. From 1660 to 1688 thousands of Presbyterians died because they refused to acknowledge Episcopal church government and worship practices. If the leaders of the modern “conservative” Presbyterian denominations had been in charge in 1638 when Laud’s prayer book was to be imposed upon Scotland there would have been no second reformation or National Covenant. (3) Christians are not to blindly follow the heathen culture in which we live (“You shall not follow a crowd to do evil” [Ex. 23:2]). Rather, they are to do the exact opposite. They are to be as salt and light to pagan culture, causing it to move in a distinctly Christian

¹⁰⁶ Sadly, the “father” of the modern “Christian Reconstruction” movement himself (R. J. Rushdoony) was an example of the dangers of syncretism. While he boldly proclaimed the blessedness of Christmas (and mocked those who refuse to participate in this non-authorized practice), he also denigrated the day Jehovah commanded—the Lord’s day. The corporate sanctification argument is syncretistic and antinomian.

direction. If believers are concerned that people are not regarding Jesus as they should, then they should encourage all people and nations to submit to what Christ has commanded. A good start would be a return to biblical sabbatarianism and the observance of the sabbath day in which people celebrate the whole work of redemption. Putting a lot of time and energy into something that is not authorized, that is offensive to God, is not the way to be salt and light to culture. Christians should lead in cultural affairs, not follow.

7. Didn't the angels of God celebrate the birth of Christ? If such holy creatures of heaven celebrated the birth of our Savior should not we do likewise?

In the gospel of Luke we read that, when the angel of the Lord announced the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds, suddenly a multitude of heavenly hosts began praising God (Lk. 2:13-14). Does this glorious response to the announcement of the birth of the Savior justify the recurring annual holy day of Christmas? No, it most certainly does not. Note the following reasons.

(1) Although the angels did many things during our Lord's life, there is no indication in either the narrow or broad context of Scripture that God was using their activities as guides for perpetual worship ordinances. If the Lord was somehow instructing the church to celebrate Christmas by the angelic outburst of praise, then the apostles and the post-apostolic church missed this lesson, for it is an established fact of history that Christmas was not widely practiced in the churches until the latter half of the fourth century. Further, the obvious application of Luke 2:13 is *not* an annual Christmas holiday but the need to praise God for the incarnation of Christ.

(2) The angelic praise does not support Christmas because there is absolutely no evidence that the angels bought Christmas trees, Yule logs, mistletoe or any other paraphernalia associated with that holy day. The text says they praised God and that is it. The heavenly hosts certainly did not incorporate heathen monuments and practices into their worship of Jehovah.

(3) The text gives no indication at all that the angels established a yearly perpetual Christmas service in heaven. They praised God during the actual incarnation itself; a one time, non-repeatable historical event in salvation history.

(4) The biblical evidence noted above regarding the birth of Christ indicates that our Lord was born in the fall of the year and not on December 25. Therefore, the angelic praise in Luke 2:13 did not occur on December 25. If God was making some kind of statement regarding an annual, perpetual holy day by the heavenly praise of the angels, then He would have revealed the date that Jesus was born. Note, however, that the Bible is totally silent regarding this matter. Jehovah did not regard the actual date to be of such importance as to include it in the inspired record of the Savior's life. Thus, the importance attached to the particular date of December 25 is man-made. It did not originate in the mind of God, but in the imagination of man.

8. Do we have a Christmas celebration in Matthew 2:11 where the Magi present gifts to the baby Jesus?

This argument is an example of a commonly accepted false notion regarding the birth of the Savior that Christmas perpetuates. One often sees nativity scenes in churches, front lawns and even government buildings with the wise men kneeling or standing in the stable with the shepherds from Bethlehem. There are many reasons why such nativity scenes are unbiblical.

The biblical accounts of the visitation of the shepherds and the wise men make it abundantly clear that the appearance of the Magi occurred *long after* the birth of the Messiah. The account of the King's birth in Luke's gospel says that the shepherds were *local*, that is "from the same country" (Lk. 2:8). If the shepherds were from the vicinity of Bethlehem (which is likely), then according to various scholars they would have only been two miles outside of Bethlehem.¹⁰⁷ When the angel of God told the shepherds that their Messiah had been born that *very day* (Lk. 2:11), they *immediately* went to Bethlehem (i.e., "they came with haste" [Lk. 2:16]). There they found the newborn "lying in a manger" (Lk. 2:16) just as the angel had promised. This all occurred *before* Jesus was circumcised at the age of eight days old (Lk. 2:21).

The wise men (unlike the shepherds) had to travel a great distance to visit the Messiah-King. They came from the East (Mt. 2:1), probably from Persia or Babylon. They made a stop in Jerusalem to inquire where the king of the Jews would be born (Mt. 2:1-2). When they finally arrived, Joseph, Mary and Jesus were not in a manger, but were now living in a *house* (*oikia*). Further, our Lord is not identified as a "babe" (Lk. 2:12; Greek: *brephos*, which refers to a newborn baby), but as a "young child" (Mt. 2:11; Greek: *paidion*). Note also that the wise men did not arrive within the forty day period of Mary's purification for her offering ("a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," Lk. 2:24, was the offering of a poor person). Obviously Joseph and Mary did not yet have access to the valuable gifts of the wise men, the "gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Mt. 2:11). When the wise men were warned by God not to return to Herod and he decided to kill all the male children in Bethlehem, the account implies that Jesus may have been as old as two years when He was visited by the Magi ("from two years old and under, according to the time which he [Herod] had determined from the wise men" [Mt. 2:16]).

What this analysis teaches us is that the presentation of the gifts by the wise men had nothing to do with the particular day that Jesus was born. They did not come to celebrate Christmas day, but to honor the King. If we want to honor Christ the King, then we must do those things He has commanded. We must not follow human traditions (such as Christmas) which our Lord unequivocally condemned (read Mt. 15:1-9).

9. Isn't having a special Christmas service merely a circumstance of worship, since the birth of Jesus is recorded in the Bible and pastors have a certain liberty to preach on different texts at different times?

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 an unrelated section of Scripture 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. It is disingenuous and dishonest to celebrate Christmas when it is obvious to everyone that a deliberate change in the preaching schedule was made to honor the papal, Episcopal, and Lutheran church calendar. Presbyterian pastors who do such a thing (which is a violation of Scripture, the Westminster Standards and the covenanted reformation) ought to resign and join an Episcopal church.

¹⁰⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 213.

10. Aren't you making a mountain out of a mole hill? When we look at the major social ills, which plague our nation (e.g., abortion on demand, the homosexual rights movement, feminism, pornography, socialism, etc.), is not such rigor with respect to Christmas misplaced and absurd?

This objection (which is common) says a lot about the current state of evangelicalism and modern "conservative" Presbyterianism. Tragically, it treats the Christian Sabbath and the proper worship of God as a childish trifle. It makes the central principle of biblical worship (which flows directly from the second commandment) out to be a light thing. Where in Scripture do we find the principle that some commandments are unimportant (and therefore can be ignored), while we pursue what we regard as weightier matters of the law? Did not our Lord say that He came to uphold every jot and tittle of the law (Mt. 5:17 ff.). "[I]t is a pernicious fantasy to imagine that it is a tolerable and pardonable offence to transgress any commandment of God at all, because we must show to every point of his law, from the first to the last, the same fear and reverence which we have for his majesty. And indeed, once we begin to abase the word of God at any point, it is an open door for us to reject it in general afterwards. Thus, whatever is done contrary to the will of God, in whatever way, must indifferently be reprov'd and actively corrected. If we do not omit a single detail of all that he had commanded us, in so doing we shall show that we fear him and desire to be subject to him."¹⁰⁸

There is a tendency among many professing Christians today to regard the first table of the law as much less important than the second table of the law and less germane to the problems of modern culture. This tendency is likely the result of the wide-spread acceptance of pluralism in America. It also is related to the idea that believers must first seek social reforms in areas in which all conservative denominations agree. The problem with this approach is two-fold.

(1) The second table of the law rests upon the first table and cannot be divorced from it without dire consequences. In the Bible not one genuine revival ever occurred apart from a restoration of biblical worship. In fact, a reading of Old Testament history makes it very clear that true and lasting social reforms can never occur apart from a deep repentance concerning violations with regard to the first table of the law. Does anyone really think that there can be a Christian reconstruction of society while people habitually break the Sabbath and worship idols?¹⁰⁹ "God not only regards a fruitless but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to his worship, it at variance with his command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, 'Obedience is better than sacrifice.' 'In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men' (1 Sam. 15:22; Mt. 15:9)."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ John Calvin, *Come out from among Them: Anti-Nicodemite Writings of John Calvin*, translated by Seth Skolnisky (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001), 82-83.

¹⁰⁹ The modern Christian Reconstruction movement *generally-speaking* is schizophrenic and antinomian. On the one hand the movement advocates the continuing validity of God's law as a rule for individuals, families and the state. The goal of this movement is the Christianization of all earthly institutions. But on the other hand, many of the leaders and their followers reject the abiding validity of the Sabbath and want churches to have autonomous legislative authority with regard to rites, holy days and ceremonies. While the original Puritan and Presbyterian concept of the civil magistrate as one who is under the direct authority of Jesus Christ and His law Word is advocated, the Episcopal concept of the church is set forth. This flagrant inconsistency and hypocrisy can be summed up by the phrase "theonomy for the state, autonomy for the church." A number of the leading advocates of the Christian reconstruction movement mock the Puritan concept of worship and church authority while pointing people to Eastern Orthodox writers and Episcopalian liturgy and discipline. Presbyterians need to advocate a distinctly Reformed and confessional theonomy (e.g., the teachings of George Gillespie, not James Jordan, David Chilton or Ray Sutton, etc.).

¹¹⁰ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, eds., *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 [1844]), 1:128-29.

Ezekiel Hopkins writes, “Does it not argue great contempt of God, when you will not obey Him in a matter, that you yourselves count small and inconsiderable? When we sin, we flatter ourselves straight with this: ‘Is it not a little one?’ *Truly if it be but a little one to commit, it is but a little one to refrain from.* It is an aggravation of sin, rather than an excuse, to say, our sins are but little ones. It shows a heart hardened against God, and a desperate contempt of all that He can say to us or do against us, when we shall choose rather to thwart and break His commands, to venture on or rather to despise His power, wrath, and justice, than to forego our Little Sins.”¹¹¹

(2) The church must reform itself and live in accordance with *sola Scriptura* (i.e., the Bible alone is the *sole* standard for faith and life) before she can be effective as a salt and light to culture. The great revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which placed biblical worship and purity of doctrine on the “back burner” (in order to have the greatest cooperation among denominations and thus reach out to the most people), led to compromise, corruption and apostasy among Independents and Presbyterians. The idea that worship and doctrine should be de-emphasized for cooperation and social reform led directly to the spread of Arminianism, cult groups and modernism. When churches neglect their own continuing reform or sanctification in order to reach out to society, they fertilize the fields with *poison*. They (in the name of love and compassion) sow seeds of societal decay and corruption. While autonomous pragmatism may have temporary benefits or lead to large numbers in the pews, it invariably destroys the culture that it sets out to save. When the church imitates the world in order to “redeem” it, it loses its saltiness and becomes worthless (cf. Mt. 5:13).

11. Didn't the Continental Reformed churches accept Christmas and the church calendar? Since the Reformed churches on the continent celebrated Christmas, can we not remain faithful to the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation and still celebrate Christmas?

It is true that the celebration of extra-biblical holy days became the accepted practice among Reformed churches on the continent. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566) authored by Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) reads: “Moreover, if the Churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord’s Nativity, Circumcision, Passion, Resurrection, and of his ascension into Heaven, and sending the Holy Ghost upon his disciples, according to Christian liberty, we do very well approve of it. But as for Festival days, ordained to men, or saints departed, we cannot allow of them” (Chapter 24, “Of Holy Days, Fasts, and Choice of Meats”).¹¹² The Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), famous for its excellent refutation of Arminianism, concurs. “Article 53. Days of Commemoration” reads: “Each year the churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹³ Many people appeal to the practice of German and Dutch Reformed churches as a justification for the celebration of extra-biblical holy days.

¹¹¹ Ezekiel Hopkins, *Works*, as quoted in Buddy Hanson, *God's Ten Words: A Commentary on the Ten Commandments* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Hanson Group, 2002), 263.

¹¹² Peter Hall, ed., *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions: Exhibiting the Faith of the Churches of Christ, Reformed After the Pure and Holy Doctrine of the Gospel* (Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1992 [1842]), 382.

¹¹³ *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, rev. ed. (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Printing Ltd., 1984, 1995), 670.

Before one examines why this continental tradition must be rejected it needs to be pointed out that: (1) The Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans never accepted these statements as scriptural because they were not based on the Bible but upon human tradition. (2) Many of the Dutch ministers themselves recognized that extra-biblical holy days are unscriptural and attempted to have them abolished. Maurice G. Hanson writes, “The [Dutch] Reformed churches had been in the habit of keeping Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide [Pentecost] as days of religious worship. The Synod [Provincial Synod of Dordrecht, 1574] enjoined the churches to do this no longer, but to be satisfied with Sundays for divine service.”¹¹⁴ (3) John Calvin’s own Presbytery, the pastors in Geneva, explicitly condemned extra biblical holy days over a decade before they were outlawed in Scotland (e.g., see the Scottish First Book of Discipline, 1560). In 1546 the Company of Pastors in Geneva ruled: “Those who observe the Romish festivals or fasts shall only be reprimanded, unless [i.e., if] they remain obstinately rebellious.” Four years later they strengthened their previous ruling. “*Abrogation of Festivals*. On Sunday, 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Counsel, an edict was also announced respecting the abrogation of all the festivals, with the exception of Sundays, which God had ordained” (*Register of the Company of Pastors*, Geneva 1550). These statements prove that the rejection of extra-biblical holy days or religious festival days was not peculiar to the Scottish Presbyterians or English Puritans. Further, it helps to demonstrate that the later official policy in Geneva and on the Continent that accepted man-made holy days was an indication of declension based on following human tradition and not Scripture.

Regardless of what occurred in church history, the all-important question regarding the statements from the Second Helvetic Confession and the Canons of Dordt is: are they consistent with the teaching of Scripture? Is there divine warrant for these special festival or holy days? Did God instruct the New Covenant church by command or historical example to set up a church calendar with special holy days? No. He most certainly did not. (This point has already been discussed at length in this book.)

How then do the Dutch and German Reformed churches justify the celebration of these non-authorized days? Do they make a direct appeal to Scripture as the regulative principle requires? No. They argue that the commemoration (i.e., the celebration) of these festival days is a matter of *adiaphora*. That is, they are matters indifferent to worship and thus fall outside the scope of the regulative principle. Therefore, the church can lawfully set up such days for the edification of the body of Christ. This argument raises the following question. Are man-made religious holy days a matter of *adiaphora*?

There are a number of reasons why the *adiaphora* argument is unscriptural. First, the idea that these holy days, festival days or special days of commemoration fall within the category of things indifferent or are mere circumstances of worship is totally wrong. The only activities that one can consider *adiaphora* are matters that are truly circumstantial or incidental to worship such as setting up chairs, turning on the lights, the time the congregation meets on the Lord’s day, the shape or size of the church building, the type of chairs people sit in, and so forth.

Those who argue that Christmas and Easter are matters of *adiaphora* use a false analogy to prove their assertion. They point out (correctly) that men are at liberty to gather for worship on other days besides the Christian Sabbath. Then they argue that since men have the freedom to gather for worship when they please, they also have the liberty to set up voluntary holy days besides the Sabbath. The problem with this argument is that getting together to worship God during the week at a voluntary time is very different than setting up a recurring annual religious

¹¹⁴ Maurice G. Hansen, *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands*.

holy day. People who do the latter take a day chosen by men, set that day up above other days and give that day special religious signification. Once a certain day is given a yearly, perpetual religious significance it no longer is circumstantial, voluntary or indifferent.

This point is proven by the fact that in Dutch Reformed churches the church calendar is mandatory. These so-called holy days are enforced by ecclesiastical coercion and social pressure. Remember, that genuine areas of *adiaphora* are never matters of coercion, force or discipline. For example, the consistory of a church would never be disciplined for purchasing maroon carpeting for the church building. However, they would be forced out of the denomination if they refused to follow the church calendar. Therefore, it is obvious to any unbiased observer that the Dutch and German Reformed denominations are disingenuous regarding holy days. They pretend they are *adiaphora* when as an ecclesiastical policy and practice they most certainly are not. The Romanist and Episcopalian view is much more honest and consistent because they reject the regulative principle and give ecclesiastical authorities to right to decree new rites and ceremonies.

But what if the man-made religious holy days were truly voluntary? Would they then be *adiaphora* and permissible? No. They most certainly would not because: (1) Everything within the sphere of religious worship requires divine warrant and these man-made festivals cannot be proven by Scripture. (2) The moment that human traditions are introduced into the Christian Sabbath (Easter and Pentecost always fall on a Sunday) or the church service, people are forced either to depart from that church at that particular time to avoid the human addition to worship or they are forced to violate liberty of conscience. That is, they are forced to participate in activities that do not have biblical authorization. “Any doctrine or commandment contrary to or besides His will in matters religious the Christian not only may but must disobey. Liberty of conscience means the liberty of the individual to obey God rather than men.”¹¹⁵ “Whatever is not done in faith, nor accompanied with a personal persuasion of the obligation or lawfulness of it in the sight of God is pronounced to be sin—Rom. xiv. 23.”¹¹⁶ “It is a great sin, involving at the same time sacrilege, and treason to the human race, for any man or set of men to arrogate consciences of their fellow men by any obligation not certainly imposed by God and revealed in his Word.”¹¹⁷ Given the fact we are dealing with public worship, these human additions cannot ever be truly voluntary. Being forced to stay home during public worship because of the addition of human traditions should never take place within Reformed churches. Sadly, today it is common.

Second, the Holy Spirit condemns King Jeroboam for devising *his own time* for a holy day (1 Kgs. 2:33). If the civil magistrate of a nation in covenant with God is not permitted to autonomously determine a religious festival day, then certainly ecclesiastical authorities do not have such an authority. In *this matter*, those who follow the error of the Continental Reformed churches are guilty of the same sin as Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

Third, even apart from the regulative principle, the celebration of Christmas and Easter involve the mixing of pagan and popish elements with biblical Christianity. Syncretism and the retaining of monuments to idolatry are expressly condemned in Scripture (Deut. 4:2ff.; 7:2-6; 12:2-4; 28-32; Josh. 23: 6-13; Gen. 35:1-4; 1 Kgs. 18:32; 2 Kgs. 10:27; 23; 2 Chron. 23:15; Jer. 10:2-3).

Fourth, Christmas promotes the lie that Jesus was born on December 25. As noted earlier, according to Scripture our Lord was likely born in the fall, not the winter (Lk. 2:8, see Section

¹¹⁵ James Benjamin Green, *Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards* (Collins World, 1976), 155.

¹¹⁶ Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1845]), 206.

¹¹⁷ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958 [1869]), 267.

3). Further, Christmas and other holy days detract from the uniqueness of the Lord's day, are loved by Christ-hating heathens, destroy Christian liberty, promote the imitation of the ceremonial shadows and stimulate legalism in the church.

Therefore, although confessional Presbyterians respect the Reformed symbols from the Continent (as long as they agree with God's word) and love our Dutch and German Reformed brethren, we cannot submit to, nor sanction their acceptance of extra-biblical holy days. We call upon them to repent of this human corruption, revise their standards and unite with us under the banner of our covenanted and more thorough Reformation.

Conclusion

If the church of Jesus Christ is to be salt and light to our degenerate culture, she must first clean her own house. More and more Christians are trying to have a positive impact on our pagan culture. They are trying to stem the tide of secular humanism and statism. This new involvement is needed, but it will not succeed until the church returns to the doctrinal purity and purity of worship attained by the Calvinist wing of the Reformation. The pagan Roman state with all of its power could not destroy the Christian church. The church prospered in spite of the Roman Empire's tyranny and oppression. What caused severe damage to the church was internal decay. The corruption of doctrine and worship within the church made the church a fountain of heresy, superstition, idolatry and tyranny.

Evangelicalism in our day is in a state of serious decline. Church growth, ecumenical fellowship, pragmatism and keeping the peace have taken precedence over doctrinal integrity and pure worship. As a result, modern Evangelicalism is flabby, compromising, impotent and lukewarm. It is not a coincidence that the church had the most positive impact upon society and culture when its doctrine and worship were most pure (e.g., the second Reformation period in Scotland, 1638). Only when we return to biblical worship and reject human autonomy will we be prepared to recapture our society for Christ.

Appendix A: An Historical Examination of the Church's Opposition to Christmas

The Holy Spirit upbraids the Jew with their holy-days. "Your Sabbaths, and new moons, and ceremonies," says He, "My soul hateth." By us, to whom Sabbaths [i.e., the Jewish sabbaths] are strange, and the new moons and festivals formerly beloved by God, the Saturnalia [i.e., Yule] and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented—presents come and go—New-year's gifts—games join their noise—banquets join their din! Oh, better fidelity of the nations to their own sect, which claims no solemnity of the Christians for itself! Not the Lord's day, not Pentecost, even if they had known them, would they have shared with us; for they would fear lest they should seem to be Christians. We are not apprehensive lest we seem to be heathens! If any indulgence is to be granted to the flesh, you have it. I will not say your own days, but more too; for to the heathens each festive day occurs but once annually: you have a festive day every eighth day [i.e., the Lord's day].—**Tertullian, *De Idololatria* (2nd century).**

We have always accounted as an unspeakable abomination before God, all those inventions of men, viz. the feasts and the vigils of saints, the water they call holy, the abstaining

from flesh upon certain days, and similar things; but especially the mass.—**Waldenses, *First Confession* (1120).**

One should abolish all festivals, retaining only the Lord's day.... My reason is this: with our present abuses of drinking, gambling, idling, and all manner of sin, we vex God more on holy days than on others. And the matter is just reversed; we have made holy days unholy, and working days holy, and do no service, but great dishonour, to God and His saints **with** all our holy days.—**Martin Luther (German Reformer), *Address to the German Nobility* (1520).**

We ought to cease from all work on the Lord's day, as persons zealous for God's glory, and be kind to our servants; and on that day we ought to devote ourselves to the worship of God.... There is no certain determination of time for any Christian fast, and it cannot be found in Scripture that God has either commanded or appointed any particular days.—**Waldenses, *Second Confession* (1532).**

Those who observe the Romish festivals or fasts shall only be reprimanded, unless [i.e., if] they remain obstinately rebellious.—***Register of the Company of Pastors* (Geneva, 1546).**

Abrogation of Festivals. On Sunday 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Council, an edict was also announced respecting the abrogation of all the festivals, with the exception of Sundays, which God had ordained.—***Register of the Company of Pastors* (Geneva, 1550).**

By the contrary doctrine, we understand whatsoever men, by laws, councils, or constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's Word; such as the vows of chastity, forswearing of marriage, binding of men and women to several disguised apparels, to the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat [food] for conscience' sake, prayer for the dead; and keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of Apostles, Martyrs, Virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our Lady. Which things, because in God's Scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from the realm; affirming farther, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil magistrate.—**Church of Scotland, *(First) Book of Discipline* (1560).**

This one thing, however, we can scarcely refrain from mentioning, with regard to what is written in the 24th chapter of the aforesaid Confession [Second Helvetic] concerning the "festival of our Lord's nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, ascension, and sending the Holy Ghost upon his disciples," that these festivals at the present time obtain no place among us; for we dare not religiously celebrate any other feast-day than what the divine oracles have prescribed.—**The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland** [subscribed by John Knox, John Craig, James Melville, and a host of others], ***Letter to the Very Eminent Servant of Christ, Master Theodore Beza, the Most Learned and Vigilant Pastor of the Genevan Church* (1566).**

That all days that heretofore have been kept holy, besides the Sabbath days, such as Yule [Christ-mass] day, Saint's days, and such others, may be abolished, and a civil penalty against the keepers thereof by ceremonies, banqueting, fasting, and such other vanities.—**General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, *Articles to be Presented to my Lord Regent's Grace* (1575).**

[W]e abhor and detest all contrary religion and doctrine; but chiefly all kind of Papistry in general and particular heads, even as they are now damned and confuted by the Word of God and Kirk of Scotland. But, in special, we detest and refuse the usurped authority of that Roman Antichrist upon the Scriptures of God, upon the Kirk, the civil magistrate, and consciences of men;... [his] dedicating of kirks, altars, days;...—**John Craig** [subscribed by the king and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1580; renewed in 1581, 1590 and 1638], *The National Covenant: or, the Confession of Faith* (1580).

The Kirk of Geneva, keeps Pasche and Yule, what have they for them? They have no institution [from Scripture].—**King James VI** (James I, of King James Bible fame), *Address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (1590).

If Paul condemns the Galatians for observing the feasts which God himself instituted, and that for his own honour only, and not for the honour of any creature: the Papists are much more laid open to condemnation, which press observations of feasts of men's devising, and to the honour of men.—**Thomas Cartwright** (Nonconformist minister, England), *The Confutation of the Rhemists' Translation, Glosses and Annotations* (1618).

On the day called Christmas Day, the Governor called them out to work as was used. But the most of this new company excused themselves and said it went against their consciences to work on that day. So the Governor told them that if they made it a matter of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed; so he led away the rest and left them. But when they came home at noon from their work, he found them in the street at play, openly; some pitching the bar, and some at stool-ball and such like sports. So he went to them and took away their implements and told them that was against his conscience, that they should play and others work. If they made the keeping of it a matter of devotion, let them keep their houses; but there should be no gaming or reveling in the streets. Since which time nothing hath been attempted that way, at least openly.—**William Bradford** (governor, Plymouth colony), *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1621).

Opposed to the ordinance of the Lord's Day are all feast days ordained by men when they are considered holy days like the Lord's Day.—**William Ames** (Nonconformist minister, exiled to the Netherlands; professor of theology at Franeker), *The Marrow of Theology* (1623).

The PASTOR thinketh it no Judaism nor superstition, but a moral duty to observe the Sabbath.... Beside the Sabbath he can admit no ordinary holidays appointed by man, whether in respect of any mystery, or of difference of one day from another, as being warranted by mere tradition, against the doctrine of Christ and his apostles, but accounteth the solemn fasts and humiliations unto which the Lord calleth, to be extraordinary sabbaths, warranted by God himself. The PRELATE, by his doctrine, practice, example, and neglect of discipline, declareth

that he hath no such reverend estimation of the Sabbath. He doteth so upon the observation of Pasche, Yule, and festival days appointed by men, that he preferreth them to the Sabbath, and hath turned to nothing our solemn fasts and blessed humiliations.—**David Calderwood** (minister and theologian, Church of Scotland), *The Pastor and the Prelate* (1628).

Concerning ceremonial festivals, of man's making, our practice cannot be objected: because we observe none. We take occasion of hearing, and praying, upon any day, when occasion is offered. We say (with Hospinian, *de Orig. Fest. Christ*, cap. 2.), *Not the day, but the Word of God, &c. puts us in mind of the nativity, resurrection, and ascension of Christ....* For we do not fear...lest *all the Churches of God will condemn us herein*. Those that consent with Geneva, nor those of Scotland;... no nor any that follow Bucer's judgment (in Matt. 12), *I would to God that every Holy-day whatsoever beside the Lord's Day, were abolished. That zeal which brought them first in, was without all warrant of the Word, and merely followed corrupt reason, forsooth to drive out the Holy days of the Pagans, as one nail drives out another. Those Holy-days, have been so tainted with superstition that I wonder we tremble not at their very names.* See the place, Oecolampadius (in Isa. 1:4), thinketh that no wise Christian will condemn us. *I never heard wise man yet, who did not judge that a great part at least of other feasts besides the Lord's Day should be abolished.*—**William Ames** (Nonconformist minister, exiled to the Netherlands; professor of theology at Franeker), *A Fresh Suit Against Human Ceremonies in God's Worship* (1633).

By communicating with idolaters in their rites and ceremonies, we ourselves become guilty of idolatry. Even as Ahaz (2 Kgs. 16:10) was an idolater...that he took the pattern of an altar from idolaters. Forasmuch then, as kneeling before the consecrated bread, the sign of the cross, surplice, festival days, bishopping, bowing to the altar, administration of the sacraments in private places, &c. are the wares of Rome, the baggage of Babylon, the trinkets of the Whore, the badges of Popery, the ensigns of Christ's enemies, and the very trophies of Antichrist: we cannot conform, communicate, and symbolize with the idolatrous Papists, in the use of the same, without making ourselves idolaters by participation. Shall the chaste Spouse of Christ take upon her the ornaments of the Whore?—**George Gillespie** (Westminster divine), *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* (1637).

[H]ow can it be denied, that many corruptions, contrary to the purity and liberty of the Gospel, were they never so innocent in themselves, have accompanied these *Novations*, such as the superstitious observing of *Days*, feriation and cessation from work, on those days, *Feasting-guising*, &c.—**Alexander Henderson** (Westminster divine) and **David Dickson** (professor of theology, Church of Scotland), *The Answers of Some Brethren of the Ministrie, to the Replies of the Ministers and Professours of Divinitie in Aberdeene: Concerning the Late Covenant* (1638).

Festival days are an entrenching upon God's prerogative: for *none can appoint an holy day, but he who hath made the days*, and hath all power in his own hand, which is clear; first, from the denomination of them in both Testaments; in the old they are called the solemn feasts of Jehovah [Lev. 23:1; Ex. 32:5], not only because they were to be kept to Jehovah, but also because they were of his appointing; and so in the New Testament, as we read but of one [holy-

day] for the self-same reasons, it is called *The Lord's Day* [Rev. 1:10].—**John Bernard** (Nonconformist minister, England), *The Anatomy of the Service Book* (1641).

This day is the day which is commonly called *The Feast of Christ's Nativity*, or *Christmas day*: A day that hath been heretofore much abused to *superstition* and *prophaneness*. It is not easy to reckon whether the superstition hath been greater, or the prophaneness. I have known some that have preferred *Christmas day* before the *Lord's Day*, and have cried down the *Lord's Day*, and cried up *Christmas day*. I have known those that would be sure to receive the sacrament upon Christmas day, though they did not receive it all the year after. This and much more was the superstition of the day. And the prophaneness was as great. Old Father *Latimer* saith in one of his sermons, That the Devil had more service in the twelve Christmas holy days (as they were called) than God had all the year after.... There are some that though they did not play at cards all the year long, yet they must play at Christmas; thereby, it seems, to keep in memory the birth of Christ. This and much more hath been the profanation of this feast. And truly I think that the superstition and profanation of this day is so rooted into it, as that there is no way to reform it but by dealing with it as *Hezekiah* did with the brazen serpent. This year God by a *Providence* hath buried this feast in a fast, and I hope it will never rise again. You have set out (Right Honourable [House of Lords]) a strict order for the keeping of it, and you are here this day to observe your own order, and I hope you will do it strictly. The necessity of the times are great. Never more need of prayer and fasting. The Lord give us grace to be humbled in this day of humiliation for all our own, and *England's* sins; and especially for the old superstition, and profanation of this feast: always remembering upon such days as these, Isa. 22:12-14.—**Edmund Calamy** (Westminster divine), *An Indictment Against England Because of her Selfe-Murdering Divisions* (1645).

Festival days, vulgarly called holy-days, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued.—**Westminster Assembly**, *Directory for Publick Worship* (1645).

The General Assembly taking to their consideration the manifold abuses, profanity, and superstitions, committed on Yule-day [Christ-mass] and some other superstitious days following, have unanimously concluded and hereby ordains, that whatsoever person or persons hereafter shall be found guilty in keeping of the foresaid superstitious days, shall be proceeded against by Kirk censures, and shall make their public repentance therefore in the face of the congregation where the offence is committed. And that the presbyteries and provincial synods take particular notice how ministers try and censure delinquents of this kind, within the several parishes.—**General Assembly, Church of Scotland**, *Act for Censuring Observers of Yule-day, and other Superstitious days* (1645).

Lascivious carousings, drunkenness, harlotry, come from observing of holy days.... [Y]our [i.e., the prelates'] ceremonies that break the sixth commandment, shall find no room in the fifth commandment. Cause the fifth commandment [to] speak thus, if you can: "Notwithstanding that crossing, kneeling, surplice, human holy days occasion the soul murder of him for whom Christ died, yet we the Prelates command the practice of the foresaid ceremonies as good and expedient for edification, for our commandment maketh the murdering of our brethren, to be obedience to the fifth commandment." But if Prelates may command that which would otherwise, without, or before the commandment, spiritual murdering and scandalizing our

brother, they may command also, that which would be otherwise without, or before their command, adultery against the seventh, and theft against the eighth, and perjury and lying against the ninth commandment, and concupiscence against the tenth; for the fifth commandment hath the precedency before the seventh, eighth, ninth and tenth commandments, no less than before the sixth, which forbiddeth the killing of our brother's soul.... What do our Doctors [the prelates] clatter and fable to us of a right of justice, that mortal rulers have to command in things indifferent, from which the destruction of souls doth arise? For these commandments of rulers: *kneel religiously before bread, the vicegerent image of Christ crucified; keep human holy days; cross the air with your thumb above a baptized infant's face*, at best, are but positive commandments, not warranted by God's word. But shall they be more obligatory by a supposed band of justice that Prelates have over us to command, such toys then this divine law of God and Nature, *Rom. 14. For indifferent days, meats, surplice, destroy not him for whom Christ died?*.... We see not how the ceremonies are left free to conscience, because they are alterable by the Church, for [because] the reason of kneeling to bread, of human [holy] days, of surplice, is moral, not national [i.e., they are ecclesiastical, and therefore moral, not civil, and therefore national].—**Samuel Rutherford** (Westminster divine), *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (1646).

[U]surping Prelacy under its shadow, did in the secret and holy judgment of God, change the Glory of God and of our Lord Jesus into the Similitude and Image of the Roman Beast, turning the Power of Godliness unto Formality, his faithful Ministers into corrupt Hirelings, the Power and Life of Preaching into Flattery and Vanity, the Substance of Religion into empty and ridiculous Ceremonies, the Beauty and Purity of the Ordinances into Superstitious Inventions of Kneeling, Crossing, Holy days and the like.—**James Stirling** (minister, Church of Scotland), *Naphtali, or the Wrestlings of the Church of Scotland for the Kingdom of Christ* (1667).

1. That there can be no solemn setting apart of any day to any creature; thus Saints' days are unlawful. For the Sabbath, or Day of *Rest*, is to the Lord, and to none other, it being a peculiar piece of worship to him who hath divided time betwixt his worship and our work....2. No man can institute any day, even to the true God, as a part of worship, so as to bind the consciences to it, or to equal it with this day [the Lord's day]. That is a part of God's royal prerogative, and a thing peculiar to him to sanctify and bless a day. 3. Even those days which are pretended to be set apart to and for God, and yet not as part of worship, cannot be imposed in a constant and ordinary way (as Anniversary days and feasts are) because by an ordinary rule God hath given to man six days for work, except in extraordinary cases he shall please to call for some part of them again.—**James Durham** (minister, Church of Scotland), *The Law Unsealed* (1675).

Dec. 25. Friday. Carts come to Town and Shops open as is usual. Some somehow observe the day [Christ-mass]; but are vexed I believe that the Body of the People profane it, and blessed be God no Authority yet to compell them to keep it.—**Samuel Sewall** (judge, chief magistrate of Boston), journal entry in *The Heart of the Puritan* (1685).

It is not a work but a word makes one day more holy than another. There is no day of the week, but some eminent work of God has been done therein; but it does not therefore follow that every day must be kept as a Sabbath. The Lord Christ has appointed the first day of the week to

be perpetually observed in remembrance of his resurrection and redemption. If more days than that had been needful, he would have appointed more. It is a deep reflection on the wisdom of Christ, to say, *He has not appointed days enough for his own honour, but he must be beholding to men for their additions.* The Old Waldenses witnessed against the observing of any holidays, besides that which God in his Word hath instituted. Calvin, Luther, Danaeus, Bucer, Farel, Viret, and other great Reformers, have wished that the observation of all holidays, except the Lord's Day, were abolished. A Popish writer complains that the Puritans in England were of the same mind. So was John Huss and Jerome of Prague long ago. And the Belgic Churches in their Synod, *Anno 1578.* The Apostle condemns the observation of Jewish festivals in these days of the New Testament, Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16. Much less may Christians state other days in their room. The Gospel has put an end to the difference of days as well as of meats. And neither the Pope nor the Church can make some days holy above others, no more than they can make the use of some meats to be lawful or unlawful, both of which are expressly contrary to the Scripture, Rom. 14:5,6. All stated holidays of man's inventing, are breaches of the Second and of the Fourth Commandment. A stated religious festival is a part of instituted worship. Therefore it is not in the power of men, but God only, to make a day holy.—**Increase Mather** (Nonconformist minister, New England), *Testimony Against Prophane Customs (1687).*

Q. Is there any other day holy besides this day [i.e., the Lord's day]?

A. No day but this is holy by institution of the Lord; yet days of humiliation and thanksgiving may be lawfully set apart by men on a call of providence; but popish holidays are not warrantable, nor to be observed; Gal. 4:10. Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.—**John Flavel** (Nonconformist minister, Dartmouth, England), *An Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism (1692).*

Q. 3. May not the Popish holy-days be observed?

A. The Popish holy-days ought not to be observed, because they are not appointed in the Word; and, by the same reason, no other holy-days may be kept, whatsoever pretence there be of devotion towards God, when there is no precept or example for such practice in the holy scripture.—**Thomas Vincent** (Nonconformist minister, London), *An Explicatory Catechism: or, An Explanation of the Assembly's Catechism (1708).*

Instead of Endeavours to *extirpate Superstition and Heresie*, as we are bound by the same Articles of the *Solemn League*, and by the "National Covenant to Detaste [*sic*] all Superstition and Heresie without or against the Word of God, and Doctrine of this Reformed Kirk; according to the Scripture...Gal. 4:10. Ye observe Days, and Months, and Times, and Years.... Col. 2:23, Which things have indeed a shew of Wisdom in Will-worship, and Humility, and neglecting of the Body, not in any Honour to the satisfying of the Flesh. Tit. 3:10. A Man that is an Heretick, after the first and second Admonition, reject. Yet in the darkness of the times of Persecution, many Dregs of Popish Superstition were observed, many *Omens* and *Freets* too much looked to; Popish Festival days, as Pasche, Yule, Fastings even, &c. have been kept by many...."—**John M'Millan, of Balmaghie, et al., The National Covenant, and Solemn League and Covenant, With the Acknowledgement of Sins and Engagement to Duties: As they were Renewed at Douglass, July 24th, 1712, With Accommodation to the Present Times (1712).**

I do reckon the civil imposition of the Yule vacance not only unreasonable, but an occasional inlet into the religious observation of the holy days, since this is certainly the *prima ratio legis*, but very burdensome and expensive to lieges. I hear endeavours will be used to alter the law.—**Robert Wodrow** (minister and Scottish church historian), *Letter to Mr. John Williamson* (1713).

The restoring of the Yule vacance, abolished at the Revolution, as it carries in it a studied reflection upon the Reformation then attained unto, so it is most senseless and superstitious in itself, an occasion of much debauchery, and a great prejudice to the lieges, by stopping the courts of justice; and it is most evident, that this and sundry other things were hatched and promoted by ill-affected persons or Jacobites, sent from among ourselves, for no other reason but merely out of wantonness, to kick at our constitution, at the Revolution, and at the glorious reign of King William our deliverer.—**Robert Wylie** (minister, Church of Scotland) et al., *Memorial of Grievances to be Presented to the King* (1714).

1. We think God has appointed one certain day in the week, for the thankful remembrance of those mercies, which he has in common bestowed upon us. Upon that therefore, as often as it returns, all Christians are bound to employ themselves in meditating upon God's works of creation and redemption, in praising God, and in other religious exercises. Hence we judge it needless for men, by their authority, to appoint other days of the same nature; and desire them, who usurp such a power, to produce the commission they have for it.

2. It seems probable to us, that God would not have us observe these yearly Holidays; because we meet with nothing in his word, whereby we can fix the times of the year, when those things happened, which our Adversaries pretend are the occasion of them.—**James Pierce** (Nonconformist minister, Exon, England), *A Vindication of the Dissenters* (1718).

Albeit there be an Act of Assembly 1645. Sess. ult. *Ordering all the Observers of superstitious Days, particularly Yule, &c.—to be proceeded against by Kirk-Censure—the Guilty to make publick Repentance for the same—before the Congregation where the Offence is committed—Presbyteries—and Synods, to take particular Notice how Ministers—censure Delinquents of this Kind, within the several Parishes, &c.* Yet this seems to be gone into Desuetude, seeing, not only *Masters of Schools* and *Colleges* are accessory to this *superstitious Prophanity*—by granting Liberty or Vacancy to their Scholars at such Times; for which, by Virtue of this *Act*, they ought to be summoned before the Assembly, and censured according to their Trespass. But even the *Elders of this Church* [the author means the Revolution Church—the Church of Scotland], in many Places, are guilty of *observing Yule*, and such as are ordinarily *Communicants*, with Numbers of others in class Communion with this Church, and yet never one of these censured, but connived at. And what if I should say, too *many Ministers* homologate this sinful Custom? Whereby, through Ministers Unfaithfulness, a young up-rising Generation are left in Ignorance about the Sinfulness of that, and other superstitious Days, &c. too, too much in Fashion in our declining Days.—**Andrew Clarkson** (acting as clerk and compiler for the United Societies, i.e., the Covenanters), *Plain Reasons for Presbyterians Dissenting from the Revolution-Church in Scotland* (1731).

Dissenters...reject the consecrating churches, chapels, cathedrals, priests, garments, altars, liturgies, singing service, litanies, bowings, crossings, cringings, holy days, fasts, feasts, vigils,

because not one word of any of them is contained in our only rule of faith.—**Thomas DeLaune** (English Nonconformist Baptist), *A Plea for the Non-Conformists* (1733).

[I]nstead of making progress in a work of reformation, we came in a short time to fall under the weight of some *new* and very heavy *grievances*: As for instance.... Countenance is also given to a superstitious observation of *holy-days*, by the *vacation* of our most considerable civil courts, in the *latter end* of *December*.—**Ebenezer Erskine, William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff, and James Fisher** (founding ministers of the Secession [Associate Presbyterian Church]), *A Testimony to the Doctrine, Worship, Government and Discipline of the Church of Scotland* (1734).

Q. Hath God appointed any other set times to be kept holy to the Lord, besides the sabbath?

A. None but the Jewish festivals or ceremonial sabbaths, which being only shadows of things to come, they expired with Christ's coming; but the command for the weekly sabbath being moral, it continues still in force, Col. 2:16,17; Gal. 4:9-11; 1 Cor. 16:1,2.

Q. Are we bound to keep the holy-days observed by others, such as days for Christ's birth, passion and ascension; days dedicated to angels, as Michaelmas; to the virgin Mary, as Candlemas; besides many others dedicated to the apostles and other saints?

A. Though it be pretended that these days serve to promote piety and devotion, yet we have no warrant from God to observe any of them; nay, it appears to be unlawful to do it: for 1st, God doth quarrel men for using any device of their own for promoting his service or worship, without having his command or warrant for it, as in Deut. 12:32; Isa. 1:12; Jer. 7:30. 2ndly, the apostle Paul doth expressly condemn the Galatians for observing such holy days, Gal. 4:10,11. 3dly, It is a disparaging of the Lord's day which God hath appointed, and a usurping of his legislative power, for men to set days of their appointing on a level with his day, as the institutors do, by hindering people to labor thereupon. 4thly, It is an idolatrous practice to consecrate days to the honor of saints and angels, for commemorating their acts, and publishing their praise; such honor and worship being due to God alone.

Q. Were not these days appointed by the ancient church, and authorized by great and holy men?

A. It was will-worship in them, seeing they had no power to institute holy-days: for, 1st, Under the law, when ceremonies and festivals were in use, the church appointed none of them, but God himself. 2dly, We read nothing of the apostles appointing or observing such holy-days; not a word of their consecrating a day for Christ's birth, his passion, or ascension; nor a day to Stephen the proto-martyr, nor to James, whom Herod killed with the sword. We read of the apostles observing the Lord's day, and keeping it holy, but not of any other. 3dly, These other days are left unrecorded, and uncertain, and so are concealed like the body of Moses, that men might not be tempted to abuse them to superstition. 4thly, These days have not the divine blessing upon them; for they are the occasions of much looseness and immorality. 5thly, Though the observing of these days had been indifferent or lawful at first, yet the defiling of them with superstition and intemperance should make all forbear them.—**John Willison** (minister, Church of Scotland), *An Example of Plain Catechising, Upon the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (1737).

Q. May the church appoint *holy days*, to remember Christ's birth, death, temptation, ascension, &c.?

A. No; as God hath abolished the Jewish holy days of his own appointment, so he hath given no warrant to the church to appoint any: but hath commanded us to labour six days, except when Providence calls us to humiliation or thanksgiving; and expressly forbids us to observe holy days of men's appointment, Col. 2:16; Gal. 4:10,11.

Q. What is the difference between a fast day and a holy day?

A. The day of a fast is changeable, and esteemed no better in itself than another day; but a holy day is fixed to a certain time of the week, year, or moon, and reckoned better in itself.—**John Brown, of Haddington** (minister and professor, Associate [Presbyterian] Burgher Synod), *An Essay Towards an Easy, Plain, Practical, and Extensive Explication of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (1758).

Not to insist further in enumerating particulars, the presbytery finally testify [*sic*] against church and state, for their negligence to suppress impiety, vice, and superstitious observance of holy days, &c. The civil powers herein acting directly contrary to the nature and perverting the very ends of the magistrate's office, which is to be *custos et vindex utriusque tabulae*; the minister of God, a revenger, to execute wrath on him that doeth evil. Transgressors of the first table of the law may now sin openly with impunity; and, while the religious observation of the sabbath is not regarded, the superstitious observation of holy days, even in *Scotland*, is so much authorized, that on some of them the most considerable courts of justice are discharged to sit.—**The Reformed Presbytery (Covenanters), Act, Declaration, and Testimony, for the Whole of our Covenanted Reformation, as Attained to, and Established in Britain and Ireland, Particularly Betwixt the Years 1638 and 1649, Inclusive. As, Also, Against all the Steps of Defection from Said Reformation, Whether in Former or Latter Times, Since the Overthrow of that Glorious Work, Down to this Present Day** (1761).

Q. Is there any warrant for anniversary, or stated holidays, now, under the New Testament?

A. No: these under the Old, being abrogated by the death and resurrection of Christ, there is neither precept nor example in scripture, for any of the yearly holidays observed by Papists, and others: on the contrary, all such days are condemned in bulk, Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16, 17.

Q. What crimes doth the observation of them import?

A. The observation of them imports no less than an impeachment of the institutions of God, concerning his worship, as if they were imperfect; and an encroachment upon the liberty wherewith Christ hath made his church and people free, Col. 3:20.—**James Fisher** (minister, Associate [Presbyterian] Burgher Synod), *Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism Explained* (1765).

The *public worship* of God is grievously corrupted, in *England* and *Ireland*,—by a multitude of superstitious inventions.... A great many devised holidays, saints days, fasts and festivals, are likewise observed; with peculiar offices for the same.—**Adam Gib** (minister, Associate [Presbyterian] Anti-Burgher), *The Present Truth: A Display of the Secession Testimony, Vol. 2* (1774).

Men cannot, without sin, appoint any *holy days*. (1.) God has marked the weekly sabbath with peculiar honour, in his command and word. But, if men appoint holy days, they detract from its honour; and wherever holy days of men's appointment are much observed, God's weekly sabbath is much profaned, Ex. 20:8; Ezek. 43:8. (2.) God never could have abolished his own ceremonial holy days, in order that men might appoint others of their own invention, in their room, Col. 2:16-23; Gal. 4:10,11. (3.) God alone can bless holy days, and render them effectual to promote holy purposes; and we have no hint in his word, that he will bless any appointed by men, Ex. 20:11. (4.) By permitting, if not requiring us, to labour *six days* of the week in our worldly employments, this commandment excludes all holy days of men's appointment; Ex. 20:8,9. If it *permit* six days for our worldly labour, we ought to stand fast in that liberty with which Christ hath made us free, Gal. 5:1; 1 Cor. 7:23; Matt. 15:9. If it *require* them, we ought to obey God rather than men, Acts 4:19; 5:29.—Days of occasional fasting and thanksgiving are generally marked out by the providence of God: and the observation of them does not suppose any holiness in the day itself, Joel 1:14; 2:15; Acts 13:2; 14:23; Matt. 9:15.—**John Brown, of Haddington** (minister and professor, Associate [Presbyterian] Burgher Synod), *A Compendious View of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1796).

We therefore condemn the following *errors*, and testify against all who maintain them: 1. “That any part of time is appointed in divine revelation, or may be appointed by the church, to be kept holy, in its weekly, monthly, or annual returns, except the first day of the week, which is the Christian Sabbath.”—**Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Covenanters)**, *Reformation Principles Exhibited* (1806).

That the Lord's day is the only day appointed by God to be kept holy, though he allows us to set days apart, on proper occasions, for fasting and thanksgiving. Those days which, by men now under the New Testament are called festival or holy days, have no warrant from the word, and are superstitious. Ex. 20:8; Matt. 9:14, 15; 28:20; Col. 2:20-23; Matt. 15:7-9.—**Reformed Dissenting Presbytery, An Act, Declaration and Testimony, of the Reformed Dissenting Presbyterian Church, in North America** (1808).

It is our duty to attend faithfully and industriously to that secular business which is incumbent on us, during the six last days of the week, and not to institute or observe sabbaths of human invention; that we may be prepared for the sanctification of the Lord's sabbath. “*Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work.*” Gal. 4:10, 11. “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed labour upon you in vain.”—**Ezra Stiles Ely** (pastor, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.), *A Synopsis of Didactic Theology* (1822).

[The Waldenses] contemn all approved ecclesiastical customs which they do not read of in the gospel, such as the observance of Candlemas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and the feast of Easter.—**William Sime**, *History of the Waldenses* (1827).

Under the old dispensation, there were a number of days appointed for ceremonial observances. The Jews kept thirty-five in the year, but of these some fell on the Sabbath. While the Mosaic economy lasted, and while they remained in Palestine, these were to be observed; but at the death of Christ they passed away. Hence the apostle says to the primitive Christians, “Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the

Sabbath day” (Col. 2:16), or the Jewish Sabbath, on the seventh day of the week, which was now merged in the first. This shews how little they understand the liberty of the gospel, who prescribe for the observance of Christians, a variety of holy days, which are unauthorized in Scripture, and are found in experience to be lost in idleness, or abused in folly. Such days, originating in secular policy, or superstitious excitement, may be marked by names and rites solemn and imposing; yet, wanting the sanction of Jehovah, and the animating breath of heaven, they are soon disregarded as empty forms, hated as encumbrances on public industry, and welcomed only by those whose situation makes them wish for a season and a pretext for amusement and dissipation.—**Henry Belfrage** (minister, Associate [Presbyterian] Burgher Synod), *A Practical Exposition of the Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (1834).

[M]en have no right to institute holidays, which return as regularly at certain intervals as the Sabbath does in the beginning of the week. This is an assumption of authority which God has not delegated to them. Holidays are an encroachment upon the time of which he has made a free gift to men for their worldly affairs....—**John Dick** (minister, United Associate Congregation; professor, United Secession Theological Seminary), *Lectures on Theology* (1835).

We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days [i.e., “holy” days], but that they positively discountenance it. Let any one impartially weigh Colossians 2:16, and also, Galatians 4:9-11; and then say whether these passages do not evidently indicate, that the inspired Apostle disapproved of the observance of such days.—**Samuel Miller** (professor, Princeton Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.), *Presbyterianism: The Truly Primitive and Apostolic Constitution of the Church of Christ* (1836).

[W]e testify against the celebration of Christmas, or other festivals of the Papal or Episcopal church.—**Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland**, *Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland: Historical and Doctrinal* (1837).

From what has been said, we may infer that this passage of Scripture gives no countenance to religious festivals, or holidays of human appointment, especially under the New Testament. Feasts appear to have been connected with sacrifices from the most ancient times; but the observance of them was not brought under any fixed rules until the establishment of the Mosaic law. Religious festivals formed a noted and splendid part of the ritual of that law; but they were only designed to be temporary; and having served their end in commemorating certain great events connected with the Jewish commonwealth, and in typifying certain mysteries now clearly revealed by the gospel, they ceased, and, along with other figures, vanished away. To retain these, or to return them after the promulgation of the Christian law, or to imitate them by instituting festivals of a similar kind, is to doat on shadows—to choose weak and beggarly elements—to bring ourselves under a yoke of bondage which the Jews were unable to bear, and interpretatively to fall from grace and the truth of the gospel. “Ye observe days and months, and times and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.” “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holiday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come.” Shall we suppose that Christ and his apostles, in abrogating those days which God himself had appointed to be observed, without instituting others in their room, intended that either churches or individuals should be allowed to

substitute whatever they pleased in their room? Yet the Christian church soon degenerated so far as to bring herself under a severer bondage than that from which Christ had redeemed her, and instituted a greater number of festivals than were observed under the Mosaic law, or even among pagans.

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 dispensations, but to forget that the Jews were never allowed to institute such memorials 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.—**Thomas M’Crie** (minister, Associate Anti-Burgher/Constitutional Associate Presbytery; author and church historian), *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (1838).

It is notorious, that wherever other days than the Sabbath are religiously observed, there that holy day is less strictly observed than its nature demands—less strictly than it is generally observed by those who regard it as the only *set* time which God has commanded to be kept holy. It is also notorious, that holy days, as they are called, are times at which every species of vice and disorder is more flagrantly and more generally indulged in, than at any other time; so that these days are really and highly injurious to civil society, as well as an encroachment on the prerogative of God.—**Ashbel Green** (minister, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.), *Lectures on the Shorter Catechism* (1841).

Stated festival-days, commonly called *holy-days*, have no warrant in the Word of God; but a day may be set apart, by competent authority, for fasting or thanksgiving when extraordinary dispensations of Providence administer cause for them. When judgments are threatened or inflicted, or when some special blessing is to be sought and obtained, fasting is eminently seasonable.—**Robert Shaw** (minister, Free Church of Scotland), *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (1845).

Is it innocent and allowable to observe the Passover, (or Easter), the Pentecost, or the Nativity of our Saviour, (Christmas)...? Ans. No; Not even when the observance is left optional with the people; because, (1.) The Passover and the Pentecost are, by the introduction of the new dispensation, laid aside, as typical observances. (2.) The observance of them was partly in accommodation to the early Jewish believers, partly to please pagans with outward parade of worship, in compensation for the loss of their heathen observances, and partly by a declining church, that wished to substitute outward worship for that which is spiritual. (3.) There is no need of them in order to promote religion. The observance of them is will-worship, and will tend to the decline of religion. (4.) Christmas, or the Nativity, is unauthorized. The time is utterly unknown, being left in impenetrable darkness by the Holy Spirit in the divine records; and no doubt this was done because the knowledge of it was unnecessary, and in order to repress will-worship. In a word, while fast-days are appointed on account of the duty to be performed, in set days, or periodical days, the duty is observed on account of the day; and therefore the day must be of divine appointment, or it is sinful.—**Abraham Anderson** (minister and professor, Associate Presbyterian Church), *Lectures on Theology* (1851).

Under the Jewish economy there were other set times and modes of worship, which were abolished when the Christian economy was introduced. Since then no *holidays* (holy days) but the Sabbath, are of divine authority or obligation....—**James R. Boyd** (minister, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.), *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1854).

To those who believe in this form of regimen [keeping the Sabbath as a holy day of rest] it forms “the golden hours” of time; and finding no command nor fair deduction from Scripture warranting them to keep any other day, whether (in honor of the Saxon goddess Eostre, that is, the Prelatic) “Easter,” “the Holy Innocents,” or of “St. Michael and all the angels,” they believe that “festival days, vulgarly called *holidays*, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be observed.”—**Alexander Blaikie** (minister, Associate Reformed Church), *The Philosophy of Sectarianism* (1854).

No human power can make it unlawful for men to pursue their industrial avocations during the six secular days. The New Testament plainly discourages the attempt to fill up the calendar with holidays, Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-23. Even days of fasting or thanksgiving are not holy days; but they are a part of secular time voluntarily devoted to God’s service. And if we are to perform these things at all, we must take some time for them. Yet none but God can sanctify a day so as to make it holy. The attempt to do this was one of the sins of Jeroboam, 1 Kings 12:33.—**William S. Plumer** (professor, Columbia Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.), *The Law of God, As Contained in the Ten Commandments* (1864).

In keeping the last day of the week as a day of religious observance, the Jews, by the very act, expressed their religious acknowledgment of God, who had appointed it, and did an act of worship to Him as its author, in the character of one Creator who made the heavens and the earth. In keeping the first day of the week now, Christians, by the very act, recognise Christ as the author of it, and do homage to Him as the one Redeemer, who on that day rose from the dead, and secured the salvation of His people.... And who does not see, that upon the very same principle the observance of holidays appointed by the Church, as ordinary and stated parts of Divine worship, is an expression of religious homage to man, who is the author of the

appointment,—an unlawful acknowledgment of human or ecclesiastical authority in an act of worship. In keeping, after a religious sort, a day that has no authority but man's, we are paying a religious homage to that authority; we are bowing down, in the very act of our observance of the days as part of worship, not to Christ, who has not appointed it, but to the Church, which has. We are keeping the season holy, not to God, but to man.—**James Bannerman** (professor, New College, Free Church of Scotland), *The Church of Christ* (1869).

Festival days, vulgarly called holy days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be observed.—**Synod of the Associate Reformed Church in North America**, *The Constitution and Standards of the Associate Reformed Church in North America* (1874).

The [Dutch] Reformed churches had been in the habit of keeping Christmas, Easter and Whitsuntide [Pentecost] as days of religious worship. The synod [Provincial Synod of Dordrecht, 1574] enjoined the churches to do this no longer, but to be satisfied with Sundays for divine service.—**Maurice G. Hansen** (historian, Reformed Church in America), *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands* (1884).

To take the ground that the church has a discretionary power to appoint other holy days and other symbolical rites is to concede to Rome the legitimacy of her five superfluous sacraments and all her self-devised paraphernalia of sacred festivals. There is no middle ground. Either we are bound by the Lord's appointments in his Word, or human discretion is logically entitled to the full-blown license of Rome.—**John L. Girardeau** (professor, Columbia Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Church in the U.S.), *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (1888).

The Protestant Church is fast returning to the heathen ceremonies of the Church of Rome, vieing with her in the observance of "Easter Sunday," etc. By means of Christmas trees, Santa Claus is becoming a greater reality and the object of more affection to children than the Saviour himself.—**Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanter)**, *Minutes of the General Meeting* (1889).

That Christians did observe sacred days in the apostle's time these writers [i.e., those who deny the divine sanction and authority of the Lord's day] admit, and also that the usage was approved. But they say it was not founded on any divine authority; the apostle had just repealed all that. Then on whose authority? That of the uninspired church. Their view, then, is that the apostle, sweeping away all Sabbaths and Lord's days, invites Christians to ascend to his lofty and devoted experience, which had no use for a set Sabbath because all his days were consecrated. But as it was found that this did not suit the actual Christian state of most Christians, human authority was allowed, and even encouraged, to appoint Sundays, Easters and Whitsuntides for them. The objections are: first, that this countenances 'will-worship,' or the intrusion of man's inventions into God's service; second, it is an implied insult to Paul's inspiration, assuming that he made a practical blunder, which the church synods, wiser than his inspiration, had to mend by a human expedient; and third, we have here a practical confession that, after all, the average New Testament Christian does need a stated holy day, and therefore the ground of the Sabbath command is perpetual and moral.—**Robert L. Dabney** (professor,

Union Theological Seminary, Virginia; Theological School at Austin, Texas; University of Texas; Presbyterian Church in the U.S.), “The Christian Sabbath,” in *Discussions*, Vol. 1 (1890).

[T]hose who quote those portions of Scripture in opposition to the idea of a divine obligation on Christians to observe the Sabbath are found for the most part, in one section of the Church, and as members or dignitaries therein they are very far from being consistent. Their reasoning on behalf of their theory and their practice are diametrically opposed. If the Apostle Paul were permitted to revisit earth, we might imagine him addressing them somewhat after the following manner:—‘Ye men of a half-reformed Church, ye observe days and times. Ye have a whole calendar of so-called saints’ days. Ye observe a Holy Thursday and a Good Friday. Ye have a time called Easter, and a season called Lent, about which some of you make no small stir. Ye have a day regarded especially holy, named Christmas, observed at a manifestly wrong season of the year, and notoriously grafted on an old Pagan festival. And all this while many of you refuse to acknowledge the continued obligation of the Fourth Commandment. I am afraid of you, lest the instruction contained in my epistle, as well as in other parts of Scripture, has been bestowed upon you in vain.’—**Robert Nevin** (minister, Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland and editor of the *Covenanter Magazine* in Ireland), *Misunderstood Scriptures* (1893).

Q. 49. What are some of the festival seasons of the Church of Rome?

A. They are very numerous; among them the following are the most prominent:—Christmas, Lady Day, Lent, Easter, and the Feast of the Assumption.

Q. 50. What is the meaning of Christmas?

A. It is a festival held on the 25th of December, in honour of the birth of Christ. On this day three Masses are performed: one at midnight, one at daybreak, and one in the morning.

Q. 51. When was this festival introduced?

A. The spurious decretals attributed its institution to Telesphorus, Bishop of Rome, in the first half of the second century; but the Fathers of the first three centuries make no mention of it.

Q. 52. What is its most probable origin?

A. That it was not Christian is manifest from the fact that the day on which the feast is observed could not have been the day of Christ’s birth, inasmuch as from December to February is the cold and rainy season in Palestine, when the shepherds could not have been “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” The festival is to be traced partly to the tendency in the fourth century to multiply such seasons, and, by introducing a festival for each period in Christ’s life, to complete “the Christian year,” and partly to the growing tendency in the church to conciliate the heathen by adopting their religious customs.

Q. 53. Are there any features in the Christmas festival that point to a Pagan origin?

A. There are several: the name, the time of its observance, and the ceremonies associated with it.

Q. 54. Explain these features in detail.

A. The name “Yule Day,” given to Christmas, is Pagan. According to some the word Yule is derived from huel, a wheel, and was meant to designate the Pagan sun feast in commemoration of the turn of the sun and the lengthening of the day. According to others it was the Chaldee name for “infant,” and was meant to designate the feast in honour of the birth of the son of the Babylonian Queen of Heaven. The time indicates a Pagan origin, for it was at the time of the winter solstice that the Pagan festival just referred to was celebrated. The ceremonies of

the “Drunken festival” of Babylon have their counterpart in the wassail bowl and the revels that in all Popish countries have been characteristic of Christmas.

Q. 55. Is this festival warranted in Scripture?

A. No. The Scriptures are silent regarding the day and month of Christ’s birth, and it is admitted by the best writers that the precise day cannot now be ascertained from any source. Christ commanded His disciples to commemorate His *death*, but He gave no command concerning His *birth*.—**John M’Donald** (minister, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland; member, Scottish Reformation Society), *Romanism Analysed in the Light of Scripture, Reason, and History* (1894).

There is a ritualism against which George Gillespie delivered a destructive blow by his work on “English-Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the (Reformed) Church of Scotland”—the ritualism of saints’ days and holy days—and in which he described these and other ceremonies as the “twigs and spriggs of Popish superstition.” These and other similar rites and ceremonies have been repudiated by the Presbyterianism of this northern kingdom without a dissentient voice for the last 300 years.... If a number of ministers in Presbyterian charges where no ritualism exists were to resolve to ritualise and Romanise their congregations, could they adopt better measures than those in operation by ritualists? Their plan of campaign would be marked by the following stages at considerable intervals:—adverse comments on the simplicity of the worship observed;... introduction of saints’ days and holy days, including Ash Wednesday, Maunday Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday;... Would they not be toying all this time with the trinkets of Babylon?—**Dr. James Kerr** (pastor, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland), “The Scriptural Doctrines Violated by Ritualism,” in *Romanism and Ritualism in Great Britain and Ireland* (1895).

[Things forbidden by the fourth commandment]: The erection and regular observance of other holy days. Had God seen their regular recurrence was desirable they would have been appointed. Their use has been spiritually damaging. They often become centers of ceremonialism and sensual worship.—**J. A. Grier**, (professor, Allegheny Theological Seminary, United Presbyterian Church), *Synoptical Lectures on Theological Subjects* (1896).

There is no warrant in Scripture for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holy days, rather the contrary (see Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed Faith, conducive to will worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.—**General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States** (Southern Presbyterians), *Deliverance on Christmas and Easter* (1899).

Q. 7. Is it not a daring intrusion upon the prerogative of God to appoint as a stated religious festival any other day or season, such as Christmas or Easter?

A. It is an impeachment of the wisdom of God and an assertion of our right and ability to improve on his plans.—**James Harper** (professor, Xenia Theological Seminary, United Presbyterian Church), *An Exposition in the Form of Question and Answer of the Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism* (1905).

The observance of Holy days had been rejected at the Reformation, and the people of Scotland desired no change [as mandated by the Perth Articles passed in 1618].... An Order in

June 1619 commanded universal obedience to the Articles.... So strong was the opposition that little impression was made by such proceedings.... The general result was that only a small minority, and these chiefly official persons, kneeled at Communion or observed Easter or Christmas; even this was due simply out of deference to the king's wishes.—**Sheriff Orr, Alexander Henderson: Churchman and Statesman (1919).**

Festival days, commonly called holy-days, having no warrant in the Word, are not to be observed.—**Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod, Constitution of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (1937).**

In former times the Reformed Presbyterian Church was solidly opposed to the religious observance of Christmas, Easter and other special days of the same kind.... [W]e should realize that we Covenanters, in opposing the observance of Easter and other “holy” days, are only holding to the original principle which was once held by *all* Presbyterians everywhere. It is not the Covenanters that have changed.... [T]he apostle Paul regards this observance of days as *a bad tendency*: “I am afraid of (for) you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain.”...Paul wondered what was wrong with their religious knowledge and experience, that they should have become so zealous for the observance of days.—**J. G. Vos** (minister, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America), “**The Observance of Days**” in *Blue Banner Faith and Life (1947)*.

Here I am alone in the library and apparently everyone has gone from Machen Hall until Friday morning. Now it is 9:30 p.m. on Wednesday. You may think this dismal. Well, I love it. It is a delightful change from the usual stir. I have had two good days in the Library. Monday was taken up with committee meetings, forenoon and afternoon. I hope to be here all day tomorrow. I have not even accepted a dinner engagement for what they call ‘Christmas.’ I hate the whole business.—**John Murray** (professor, Westminster Seminary, Orthodox Presbyterian Church), “Letter to Valerie Knowlton, Dec. 24, 1958,” in *Collected Writings, Vol. 3 (1958)*.

What was originally the conviction of the churches in regard to the holy days?

The Reformers such as Calvin, Farel, Viret, Bucer and John Knox were opposed to observing the holy days.

2. *What were their motives for this?*

- a. That they were not divine but human institutions.
- b. That they brushed aside the importance of Sunday.
- c. That they gave occasion to licentious and heathen festivities.

3. *What then did they prefer in regard to preaching the facts of Christ's birth, death, etc.?*

That it be done on regular Sundays. On the Sunday before Christmas the Christmas story was preached, etc.

4. *How is it then that the ecclesiastical synods still made provision for the observance of the holy days?*

a. They did so as a concession to the Authorities, which clung tenaciously to the holy days as vacation days for the people.

b. The churches permitted the ministers to preach on these holy days in order to change a useless and unprofitable idleness into a holy and profitable exercise.—**K. DeGier** (minister, Netherlands Reformed Church, the Hague; teacher, Theological School at Rotterdam), *Explanation of the Church Order of Dordt (1968)*.

It is just this attitude of indifference to the Constitution that has brought us to the state we are in in the P.C.U.S. Whereas, earlier, as is reflected in the 1899 deliverance about Christmas and Easter, there was meticulous concern for staying with the standards, and the strict interpretation of Scripture on even such a matter as these two days. Now there is a complete reversal to the point of adopting the liturgical calendar of past tradition, without any Biblical basis.—**Morton Smith** (professor, Greenville Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Church in America), *How Is the Gold Become Dim* (1973).

Holy days. The Free Presbyterian Church rejects the modern custom becoming so prevalent in the Church of Scotland, of observing Christmas and Easter. It regards the observance of these days as symptomatic of the trend in the Church of Scotland towards closer relations with Episcopacy. At the time of the Reformation in Scotland all these festivals were cast out of the Church as things that were not only unnecessary but unscriptural.—**Committee appointed by the Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church**, *History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. 1893-1970* (ca. 1974).

Recently denominations that never had calendars before were induced by the National Council of Churches to adopt the practice.... How can such non-biblical forms of worship be defended? The Puritan principle, that is, the Biblical command, is that in worship we should neither add to nor subtract from the divine requirements.... [Professor] James Benjamin Green, *Studies in the Holy Spirit* (Revell, 1936), has urged Christians to celebrate Pentecost: “There are three great days in the Christian year: Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday, and we are not true to our faith when we allow Whitsunday to fall into the background.... It has ranked with Christmas and Easter. The three together are the three throned days of the Christian year.”

It is amazing that a professor in a Presbyterian seminary should be so Romish and anti-Reformed. Scripture gives us our rules for worship, and, to repeat, from them we should not subtract, nor to them should we add. We should turn neither to the left nor to the right. Now, Scripture does not authorize us to celebrate Pentecost. The same is true of Christmas. It began as a drunken orgy and continues so today in office parties. The Puritans even made its celebration a civil offense. And yet an argument for celebrating Pentecost was, “Don’t all Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter?” No, they do not. My father’s family and church never celebrated Christmas, nor did the two Blanchard administrations in Wheaton College. But what about Easter? Surely we must celebrate Easter, shouldn’t we? Yes indeed, we should, as the Scripture commands, not just once a year in the spring, but fifty-two times a year.—**Gordon H. Clark** (professor, Covenant College, Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod), *The Holy Spirit* (1993).

Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are Romish sacred days. By this we mean that they have their source in Roman Catholic tradition, rather than in Scripture.... [T]here have been times in the history of the Reformed churches when the truth on the subject of sacred days received reverent attention. Already, before John Calvin arrived in Geneva at the time of the great Reformation, the observance of Romish sacred days had been discontinued there. This had been done under the leadership of Guillaume Farel and Peter Viret. But Calvin was in hearty agreement. It is well known that when these traditional days came along on the calendar, Calvin did not pay the slightest attention to them. He just went right on with his exposition of whatever

book of the Bible he happened to be expounding. The Reformers, Knox and Zwingli, agreed with Calvin. So did the entire Reformed church of Scotland and Holland. At the Synod of Dort in 1574 it was agreed that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed, and that the observance of all other days should be discouraged. This faithful Biblical practice was later compromised. But that does not change the fact that the Reformed churches originally stood for the biblical principle. The original stand of the Reformed churches was Scriptural. That is the important thing.—**G. I. Williamson** (minister, Orthodox Presbyterian Church), *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (n.d.).

Appendix B: Why Do Presbyterians Observe Holy Days?

By Andrew J. Webb

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Dr. Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Seminary, wrote confidently in 1835 “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days.”¹¹⁸ Yet some 164 years after the book in which Miller made that bold declaration was published, an informal survey of 30 churches in the Presbyterian Church in America, the largest of the theologically conservative Presbyterian bodies in the United States, indicated that 83% of the churches *do* regularly celebrate holy days.

What happened in those intervening 164 years? Did the practice of Presbyterians change significantly in that time or was Miller’s declaration inaccurate when he made it? What might have brought about such a radical change if it did in fact occur? This essay will seek to answer these questions. Because of space constraints, considerably more time will be spent examining the history of the development of Presbyterian practice in the United States regarding holy days than in examining the theological foundations for that practice. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to begin by discussing the theological reasoning behind Dr. Miller’s declaration.

Presbyterians, and indeed most Christians who describe their theology as distinctively Reformed, believe that the worship of the church is one of the most important aspects of the faith. Furthermore they believe that this worship must be guided by the theology of the Bible. What makes the worship of those whose theological roots are in the Puritan wing of the Reformation distinctive is their belief that the only worship that is acceptable before God is that worship which is expressly commanded in His word, the Bible. This Puritan belief is succinctly summed up in the most important of the Puritan creedal documents, the Westminster Confession of Faith, in the first section of the twenty-first chapter:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

¹¹⁸ Samuel Miller, *Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835), 73.

In accordance with their beliefs, the Puritans attempted to ensure that only those elements that were directly instituted by God were present in their worship. Such worship was distinctively different from that of other Protestants such as the Lutherans and Anglicans, who tended to believe that true worship consisted of that which was commanded by God *and* anything which was not specifically condemned. Accordingly, outside of the Puritan wing of the Reformation, many innovations in worship that had been adopted by the church since the closing of the Canon were retained. The fact that the Anglican church in particular retained many of these innovations is particularly important, because it was in the attempt to thoroughly reform the Church of England that the majority of the Puritan battles were waged, and it was out of these battles that the Presbyterian confessional standards came.

Amongst those innovations that continued to be practiced by the Anglican church after they broke with Rome was the observance of what had come to be called the church year. The church year consisted of a series of festivals or feast days on which the church traditionally held special worship services and employed particular liturgies. While feast days were most commonly held to celebrate the birth or martyrdom of a saint, the two most popular feast days in the Anglican Church were undoubtedly Christmas and Easter, which celebrated the birth and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Puritans did not observe Christmas and Easter not because they did not wish to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but because they believed that God had instituted a cycle not of two special feast days, but of fifty-two holy days on which to glorify Jesus Christ and to preach on the importance of his birth, death, and resurrection.

These fifty-two holy days were, of course, Sunday—the Lord’s day. The Puritans observed every Sunday as the New Testament continuation of the Old Testament Sabbath day of rest and worship:

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week, and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.¹¹⁹

For the Puritans, these Christian Sabbaths were the only days that were specifically set aside by the Lord for worship. There had indeed been specific feast days apart from the Sabbath in the Old Testament period, but the Puritans felt that these feast days were part of the ceremonial law, and as such had passed away when Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, appeared. The Sabbath, on the other hand, as both a creation ordinance (cf. Genesis 2:2-3) and part of the moral law (Exodus 20:8-11), was an occasion to be observed by all of the people of God throughout all the ages.

Part of the proof for the Puritans that new feast days were not to be created and observed was the fact that they had not been invented or observed by either the apostolic or the early church. The Scriptures contained no references whatsoever to the actual dates on which the events that were later celebrated were to be observed or had occurred. The church did not begin to seriously conjecture as to when these events had taken place until the third century A.D. and it was not until the fourth century A.D. that the church began to celebrate the feast of the nativity

¹¹⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 21:7.

(Christmas), for instance. The placement by the church of this event on December 25th had less to do with the date they felt was most likely for the birth of Christ than with the desire to undermine the celebration of the Saturnalia, a pagan festival beginning on the December 17th, with a rival Christian holiday. The choice of December 25th, the winter solstice, was made because the Roman Emperor Aurelian had decreed in 274 A.D. that December 25th was to be kept as a public festival in honor of the Invincible Sun.¹²⁰ The choice of the 25th was therefore both an attempt to challenge the pagan feast day and to maximize on the obvious metaphor between the “invincible sun” of Roman paganism and the “Invincible Son” (Jesus Christ) of Christianity.

But more important than the questionable circumstances of their institution for the Puritans was the simple fact that the celebration of these holy days had no warrant in the Word of God. On the contrary, the Puritans and their descendants were concerned that the Word of God forbade their celebration:

We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days, but that they positively discountenance it. Let any one impartially weigh Colossians ii. 16 and also, Galatians iv. 9, 10, 11; and then say whether these passages do not evidently indicate, that the inspired Apostle disapproved of the observance of such days.¹²¹

Another concern for the Puritans was the mode in which these feast days were commonly celebrated. In English society at the beginning of the 17th century the celebration of Christmas had become particularly scandalous. Far from being a season of dignified worship it had become a prolonged bacchanal that seemed to have more to do with the original feasting and festivity of the Roman Saturnalia than the celebration of Christ’s birth: “Celebrants devoted much of the season to pagan pleasures that were discouraged during the remainder of the year. The annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, card playing, and gambling escalated to magnificent proportions.”¹²²

Accordingly, Puritan condemnation of the festival of Christmas in particular often focused on the common abuses of the holiday. William Prynne’s *Histriomastix* (1633), for instance, commented: “Into what a stupendous height of more than pagan impiety...have we now degenerated!” Another common complaint was that well over half of the days on the calendar were holy days. This seriously cut into the amount of time that could be spent occupied in labor. It seemed to John Northbrooke, another English Reformer writing in 1577, that the Pope, “not God in his word,” had appointed Holy days “to traine up the people in ignorance and ydleness, wherby half of the year, and more, was overpassed (by their ydle holy-dayes) in loytering and vaine pastimes &c., in restrayning men from their handy labors and occupations.”¹²³

It should be stressed that the Puritans and Presbyterians were not the only descendants of the Reformation who held to this belief. Even the inheritors of the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptists, Baptists, and Quakers, loathed holy days as Papist abominations without scriptural warrant. This united support for the abandonment of feast days was to prove particularly

¹²⁰ Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

¹²¹ Miller, 72.

¹²² Restad, 6.

¹²³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 24.

important in the colonies of New England, where the celebration of feast days was to become virtually unheard of outside of the few Anglican enclaves that existed.¹²⁴

While the Reformers in the Anglican church corporately decided to retain these holy days in 1562 and endeavored unsuccessfully to gain control of them, the Puritans decided to strike them from their calendars entirely for the above stated reasons.

When the Puritans assembled at Westminster in the 1640s to draw up the standards that would define Presbyterian belief for centuries to follow, they did not mince words regarding holy days. The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, which was a part of the original Westminster Standards adopted by Parliament, was intended to guide and inform (but not liturgically constrain like the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*) the worship of the church. Included in the Directory was the bold theological declaration: “THERE is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord’s day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.”¹²⁵

The Puritans had declared holy days theologically unwarranted, and as they began to gain the upper hand in the English Parliament, they moved decisively against both the public and ecclesiastical celebration of holy days. In 1642 Parliament outlawed the seasonal plays and pageants that proliferated around holy days and purposely met on every Christmas from 1644 to 1652 to show their disdain for what they felt was an unwarranted innovation that produced nothing but moral abuses. Finally in 1652 after the triumph of the Puritan statesman Oliver Cromwell and the beheading of Charles I, the observance of holy days was “strongly prohibited” and ministers who preached on the birth of Christ on Christmas risked imprisonment. Shops were required to keep open and churches were heavily fined for attempting to put up decorations.¹²⁶

As was to be expected, many of the common English people and Anglican clergy were not at all happy with this Puritan suppression of “their holiday.” Consequently, after the death of Cromwell and the restoration of both the King and the primacy of the Anglican Church, the celebration of holy days was once again declared legal. Their celebration returned as a permanent part of both the English secular and ecclesiastical landscape.

In Scotland however, the Reformation was more thoroughgoing and the Presbyterian Church successfully purged holy days almost entirely from their landscape. All English attempts to reintroduce them failed miserably, and indeed Scotland was not to officially recognize Christmas as a holiday until the 1950s—by which time the influence of the Presbyterian church on Scotland had long since been waning.

Before the short-lived victory of the Puritan armies in England, many Puritans had despaired of reforming the Church of England. By the early 1600s the struggle to reform the Anglican church had been going on for over half a century with little or no success. Every English monarch since Henry VIII had resisted, suppressed, or martyred the Puritans. After years of suppression and ecclesiastical maneuvering by Elizabeth I, Puritan hopes for reform were rekindled with the accession of James I to the throne of England. King James was a Scot who had been trained by Presbyterian tutors, so it was hoped that he at last would be the monarch who would bring in a thoroughgoing reformation of the English Church. These hopes were cruelly dashed however, when it became painfully apparent that the new King despised the

¹²⁴ Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 89.

¹²⁵ Westminster divines, “The Directory for the Publick Worship of God” (1645).

¹²⁶ Restad, 8.

Puritans and was insistent on preserving or even strengthening the existing status quo in the English church.

For many Puritans this was the last straw, their hopes turned either to separating themselves entirely from the English church or establishing a purified church elsewhere to act as a shining example. Some immigrated to the Holland, where the Reformed faith was more firmly entrenched. Other Puritans looked to the new colonies in America. It was here in the New World that Puritanism was to reach its fullest expression outside of Scotland.

In the Puritan settlements of New England the celebration of holidays simply did not occur outside of the few Anglican enclaves. The pilgrims who immigrated to Plymouth spent their first Christmas in America working in the fields. By spending the days on which holy days were observed in a cycle of routine work these Puritan settlers showed their utter contempt for what were to them symbols of the corruption from which they had fled. Attempts by non-Puritans visiting the colony at Plymouth to observe Christmas were initially tolerated, but when it was discovered that they were actively engaged in games and revelry on this day they were angrily told by Governor William Bradford: “Your conscience may not let you work on Christmas but my conscience cannot let you play while everybody else is out working.”¹²⁷

After this, attempts to celebrate Christmas in the English way were punished, and Bradford noted years later that “no one had tried to celebrate Christmas since that second year.” Other American colonies, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, also outlawed the observance of Christmas, and after the laws abolishing holy days were passed in England, the colonies gladly followed with their own. Even after the Restoration monarchy forced the repeal of these laws in the colonies in the 1680s, the practice of not observing holy days remained. While it may no longer have been strictly illegal, socially and ecclesiastically holy days were anathema. The Puritan Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the other dissenters of New England were all unified in their belief that holy days were an abomination and no proper part of the worship of the people of God. This common belief was to remain in place well into the 1800s.

Samuel Miller appears to be largely correct then when he declared that “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days.” This was certainly the understanding of the first Presbyterians, it had been codified in their creedal documents, and it had been their practice both in Scotland and America for over 200 years. What then happened in the 19th and 20th centuries to change the practice of Presbyterians?

The answer to that question is complex, but surprisingly it does not lie in any substantial rethinking of the underlying theological presuppositions that have guided Presbyterian worship since the Reformation. Rather, as we shall see, the increasing willingness of Presbyterians to observe holy days was ultimately the result of pressure from the laity, the movement towards the adoption of a common liturgy, and the pervasive atmosphere of pluralism, ecumenicism, and liberalism in the American Protestantism of the 19th and 20th century.

America after the Revolution was a very different place than Europe, and even than the mother country she had painfully broken away from. Unlike most European countries which had one established state church, America was simply awash in different forms of Christianity. Immigrants seeking freedom from the religious persecution of Europe had flooded into the New World, and by the 1800s America was a nation unlike any other. A large town might have Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Presbyterian churches and whilst these churches were initially strongly associated with the immigrant populations they served (German Lutherans, French

¹²⁷ Schmidt, 89.

Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians), the strong American desire for novelty and experimentation gradually began to overcome the initial distaste for worshiping outside of one's own tradition.

Nowhere was this attraction more apparent than on holy days. By the 1800s the initial spiritual vigor that had marked the first Puritan settlers of New England had begun to dampen. Nominalism, legalism, revivalism, and heresy were all working to produce moribund and listless congregations in what had once been the fiery heart of Calvinism in America. Unitarian Universalism, which represented the triumph of rationalism and liberalism over the scriptural faith nurtured by the Reformation, was growing in popularity, and by 1805 even the old Puritan bastion of Harvard had been overcome by it. In the midst of this sea-change in the religious attitudes of New Englanders, both the laymen and clergy of Calvinistic denominations began to express a curiosity about the rites and practices of different denominations. After over 200 years of non-observance, many of the descendants of the Puritans were extremely curious about the colorful celebration of holy days in non-Reformed denominations. In many cases it was precisely because the Puritan victory over holy days had been so complete in the new world that the laity and, in some cases, the clergy were unaware of the theological arguments against their observance or of the battles that had been fought in Britain over them. Henry Ward Beecher, who was raised in a Presbyterian household, wrote in 1874: "To me Christmas was a foreign day. When I was a boy I wondered what Christmas was. I knew there was such a time, because we had an Episcopal church in our town and I saw them dressing it with evergreens, and wondered what they were taking the woods in church for; but I got no satisfactory explanation. A little later I understood it was a Romish institution, kept up by the Romish Church."¹²⁸

Initially, the reaction amongst Reformed clergy to clandestine visits of their parishioners to other churches on Christmas and Easter was often to oppose it directly: "Congregationalist ministers countered by ordering fasts on Christmas Day and tried in other ways to show their disregard for the festival. One spent the Sunday preceding Christmas outlining his proof that the celebration of Jesus' birth was 'Popery and prelatic tyranny, a destroyer of consciences.'¹²⁹ But gradually under the influence of social pressure Reformed churches began to change their practice. In 1772, for instance, the Baptist Church in Newport observed Christmas for the first time in its history. One observer of the service, Ezra Stiles who had studied at (the then-Calvinist) Yale, remarked "this looked more like keeping Christmas than any Thing that ever before appeared amongst the Baptists or Congregationalists in New England.... It is probable this will begin the Introduction of Christmas among the Baptist Churches, about one hundred and fifty years from the planting of New England and near one hundred and thirty years from the foundation of the first Baptist Church in New England."¹³⁰

Ezra Stiles was a clandestine attendee of Christmas services, attending his first in 1769. Initially Stiles seems to have been driven to attend Christmas services solely by curiosity, remarking in his diary that "Had it been the will of Christ that the Anniversary of his Nativity should have been celebrated, he would have at least let us have known the day." As has proven to be the case time and again however, practice can have a very strong influence on one's belief, and by 1782 Stiles appears to have fully acclimated himself to observing Christmas. That year he wrote that he did "cordially joyn with the greatest part of christendom this day in celebrating the

¹²⁸ Restad, 31-32.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 30.

nativity of a divine Savior; altho' I well know from Ecclesiastical History that this is not the true day of his Nativity."¹³¹

The attraction of the holy day celebrations of Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches for those raised in communities that did not observe them was very strong, and this attraction certainly exerted its influence on the clergy. Thomas Robbins, a Congregational minister, made a habit of slipping into an Episcopal Church on Christmas. In his diary he notes that on December 25th of 1804 he was invited to a quiet "Christmas entertainment" with a number of people who were also from denominations that did not technically observe the day. By 1808, however, Robbins was already venturing to "preach a little in reference to Christmas Day."¹³² One Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. James Waddel Alexander, was somewhat bolder than Rev. Robbins in appeasing his curiosity. He records that on Christmas of 1851 he attended no less than nine different churches in New York including several Roman Catholic ones.¹³³

But while the practice of observing holy days was growing informally amongst congregants and clergy in denominations that had formally eschewed them, there was as yet no formal acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the practice. In many cases the practice of attending a church that celebrated a holy day was a guilty thrill that the individual knew the guardians of doctrine in their own denominations would frown upon.

It was not until the liturgical movement that a means was created within Presbyterianism that might have real success in gaining official recognition for the observance of the church year at a denominational level.

Historically Presbyterians had rejected written liturgies, the Westminster divines had made a conscious decision not to create a formal liturgy that would restrict their freedom in worship and for which they saw no warrant in Scripture, but they decided instead to write a simple directory that would give guidance to ministers in preparing their worship. The colonial Presbyterians had inherited the same distrust of liturgies as their Puritan forbears, but their distrust went even further. In 1729 when the American Presbyterians decided to formally adopt the Westminster Standards, they did not officially adopt the *Directory for Publick Worship*, which had been considered an integral part of the Standards by the Puritans who framed it. This was because of the hostility of many American Presbyters to *any* document that smacked of usurping the role of Scripture in guiding and shaping their worship. As a result, the Adopting Act framed by the Synod of 1729 only "recommended" the directory to its members. In 1786 when the Presbyterian church of the newly formed United States again adopted the Westminster Standards as their creedal statement they opted to "receive" the Directory as "in substance agreeable to the institutions of the New Testament."¹³⁴ This was an important distinction, for of all the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly only the Directory contained an explicit repudiation of the practice of observing Holy days. As we have seen, holy days are clearly inconsistent with the idea of biblical worship as it is abundantly set forth in the Confession, but in later years the concept that biblical worship was only that which was explicitly authorized in Scripture (this concept is often referred to as the *regulative principle of worship*) was to come under attack within the Presbyterian church.

Until the mid-1800s, both the regulative principle and tradition were usually enough to ensure that the Church year had no place in the Presbyterian Church. In 1837 the Presbyterian

¹³¹ Ibid, 31.

¹³² Ibid, 32.

¹³³ Ibid, 31.

¹³⁴ Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 17.

Church in the United States had split into two separate camps, the “New” and “Old” school. The issues that had caused the split had to do with the feelings of ministers in either wing towards Calvinism and the traditional polity and practice of the Presbyterian church. The New School, which had been profoundly influenced by the sweeping revivals of the 18th and early 19th centuries, tended to believe that evangelistic considerations outweighed issues like strict adherence to confessional standards. Their worship tended to be less constrained by the regulative principle and more inclined to incorporate elements that were to be found in the Protestant traditions that did not descend from Puritanism, or which had moved further away from their roots. Despite this tendency towards adopting new methods, the New School does not seem to have initially been any more eager than their more conservative counterparts to incorporate the observation of the church year into their worship. Before that could happen there was to be a more thoroughgoing revolution in Presbyterian attitudes towards worship.

In 1855 a book that began to change the way Presbyterians of both the Old and New Schools thought about worship was published by a Presbyterian minister by the name of Charles Baird. Baird had been heavily influenced by the history of the continental Reformed churches, and in particular he began to discover that the Reformed tradition outside of England and Scotland had a rich tradition of using liturgies. His book *Eutaxia, or the Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches*, was the result of his discoveries. By examining the liturgies used by the likes of Calvin, Knox, and the Huguenots, Baird was able to construct an argument for the reintroduction of liturgical worship into the Presbyterian Church.

While Baird did not advocate a reintroduction of the Church year in *Eutaxia*, and his comments on the subject were limited to an observation that even Calvin had observed Christmas on a few occasions, his work paved the way for two important developments. The first was a reassessment of the use of liturgies in Presbyterianism and the second was the opening of a window in which the practices of Reformed churches that had pursued a less thoroughgoing reformation of worship than the Scots and English Puritans might be introduced. Both played on the growing distaste of some within the Presbyterian church for purely extempore worship.

Baird’s book was to create an opportunity for other Presbyterians who wanted to “improve” Presbyterian worship by making it more liturgical, and in many cases, directly tied in to the church year. One such individual was a Presbyterian elder and businessman by the name of Benjamin Bartis Comegys. Comegys had no sympathy whatsoever for the older Puritan view of worship. His views were highly colored by his romanticism and attachment to all things medieval. His sympathies lay so thoroughly in the Anglican camp that one friend commented: “A stranger visiting his library would probably conclude that its owner was a clergyman of the Church of England, as few clergymen in this country, even those of the Episcopal Church, possessed so complete a liturgical library.”¹³⁵

This combination of romanticism and sympathy for high-church Anglicanism led Comegys to an almost total rejection of the regulative principle of worship and in particular the Puritan rejection of holy days. Consequently, he endeavored to see holy days restored, and while he agreed that these holy days had no warrant in Scripture, he pointed out that the Presbyterian Church had been gradually introducing other innovations that did not square with the regulative principle and that “no bad effects have followed.” From this he concluded that the average layman (and presumably himself) could not “see why other changes may not be adopted.”¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ibid, 102.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 103.

Comegys even went so far as to say that preaching was not the primary element in Sunday worship: “The grand object of the church service was prayer and praise.” He hoped, therefore, to make Presbyterians into “a people who express their devotions in well-ordered prayer and praise.”¹³⁷ To this end Comegys published *An Order of Worship with Forms of Prayer for Divine Service* in 1885 and then *A Presbyterian Prayer Book for Public Worship*. His stated intention was to “create a public opinion which will not be startled” by the move away from traditional Presbyterian worship according to the regulative principle to a more expressly liturgical and Anglican model. Both books had an impact on American Presbyterian practice that was so deep that one need not hesitate in concluding Comegys achieved his stated intention. Needless to say, both of Comegys’s books included mention of the church year. But as yet, there was no *official* Book of Common Worship that would officially tie the Presbyterian Church to the observation of holy days.

The stage had been set for the creation of such a book by the publication of several smaller books of “forms” of worship by the denominational press—the Presbyterian Board of Publication. The advantage of creating a book of forms for worship over a set liturgy was that it seemed to tie in better with the Presbyterian practice of not forcibly determining exactly how worship should proceed. The first of these books was A. A. Hodge’s *Manual of Forms* published in 1877. Hodge’s manual was really quite conservative and certainly did not advocate the observance of the church year in any way. The second of these was *Forms for Special Occasions* by ex-moderator of the General assembly, Herrick Johnson. Johnson’s book, published in 1889, wasn’t that much more radical than Hodge’s work, but it did take another step closer to a set liturgy by including liturgical diction in prayer.

While Hodge and Johnson were cautiously moving towards a more expressly liturgical format in worship by producing books that were safe enough for the denomination to publish, private individuals like Comegys were producing other volumes that moved considerably more quickly. Eventually these two streams were to merge in the production of an official *Book of Common Worship*. An important agency that was to pave the way for this was the Church Service Society formed in 1897 by two influential American Pastors—Henry Van Dyke, pastor of the prestigious Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City, and Louis Benson, an influential Philadelphian and pastor of another prestigious church in the suburbs of that city. Both had worked extensively to privately produce liturgical materials that included the observation of the church year.

The effect of forming the Church Service Society was to create an organization that unified the various men fighting for the institution of a standardized Presbyterian liturgy. Most of these men were gentlemen of “pastoral, esthetic, and literary inclinations”¹³⁸ and *not* the foremost theologians of Presbyterianism. One author observed that this was because “most of Presbyterianism’s theologians were too busy fighting in the opening engagements of the fundamentalist-modernist war and defending scholastic Calvinism to take an active part in what became a significant movement.”¹³⁹ While the organization stated their commitment to the Presbyterian standards in their “Statement of Principles” it seems clear that with individuals such as Comegys on board, this commitment was to a very broad definition of these standards in regard to worship. The group did no more than survey the practices of churches and the way in which ministers were trained concerning worship, but the effects of the surveys themselves were

¹³⁷ Ibid, 104.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 121.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

far reaching. They stirred the church into concerted action on the issue of worship and led several Presbyteries, most notably that of New York, to comprehensively examine the issue themselves.

The fruits of this examination were to quickly become apparent. In 1903 both New York and Denver Presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to produce forms for public worship. With Henry Van Dyke acting as the chairman of the all-important Committee on Bills and Overtures, the committee quickly resolved to answer the two overtures favorably and appointed a committee to consider the preparation of a simple common book of worship for voluntary usage in Presbyterian churches. This measure too was approved and eventually resulted in the publication in 1906 of the *Book of Common Worship*. While the General Assembly stressed that the use of this book was strictly voluntary and not officially recommended (the title page simply stated “Prepared by the Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. for Voluntary Use”) it had far reaching effects—it was, after all, an official publication of the denomination. More importantly, as far as the question we are considering was concerned, it contained prayers for Good Friday, Easter, Advent, and Christmas. Barely 71 years since Samuel Miller had declared that “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days” the denomination had boldly proclaimed that this was no longer true.

The 1906 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* was eventually replaced twenty-two years later by the edition of 1932. The 1932 edition continued the advance towards a liturgical format and included even more emphasis on the church year, with prayers provided for Lent, Palm Sunday, Pentecost, and All Saints’ Day. The 1932 edition was also the first edition to be officially accepted by the Southern Presbyterian Church. This was even more startling in light of the fact that in 1899 the Southern General Assembly had declared: “There is no warrant in Scripture for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holy days, rather the contrary (see Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed Faith, conducive to will worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁰ Apparently the intervening 33 years and the obvious influence of the 1906 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* had made a world of difference in Southern Presbyterian attitudes. It is important to note, however, that the original declaration of the 1899 General Assembly was never repealed.

As the *Book of Common Worship* continued to be revised, subsequent editions indicated that Presbyterians continued to become more and more comfortable with the observance of holy days. The 1946 edition included prayers for Maundy Thursday, Ascension Day, Trinity Sunday, and thirteen Sundays after Trinity.

By 1955, when Northern Presbyterians were once again considering another revision of the *Book of Common Worship*, it had become painfully obvious that the *Directory of Worship* of 1788, which was still technically in force, had little or nothing to do with the actual worship of Presbyterians. Indeed it was questionable whether the Presbyterian practice could even claim to follow the regulative principle of worship outlined in chapter twenty-one of the Westminster Confession, especially now that the gap between Presbyterian and Anglican worship was rapidly closing. The solution, of course, was to revise the Directory for Worship of 1788 and to produce a modern edition that would finally put an end to the need to give lip service to the principles that had guided the worship of the Puritans. Accordingly, the new Directory, published in 1961, stated that worship should draw its order and content not only from Scripture *but also from the*

¹⁴⁰ General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterians), “Deliverance on Christmas and Easter” (1899).

historical experience and resources of Christianity. At last the Northern Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA) had altered its theological foundations to allow for what they had already been officially practicing for over 55 years.

This new directory was not accepted by the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS) however, and the directory they produced was far closer to the content and format of the *Directory of Worship* of 1788. It differed markedly from these documents however, in that it too gave a notable prominence to the Christian year, but without clearly admitting, as the Northern directory had, that the new worship model followed by the PCUS was not strictly scriptural.

In 1973 many conservative Southern Presbyterians faced with the prospect of the union of the body they belonged to (the PCUS) with the more liberal Northern UPCUSA opted instead to withdraw and form a new theologically conservative Presbyterian Church. This new church, the Presbyterian Church in America, opted not to adopt the liturgically oriented *Book of Common Worship* of the PCUS, its revised Directory of Worship, or any of the alterations that had been made to the Presbyterian standards since adoption in 1789. Instead the PCA adopted the 1789 revision of the Westminster Standards and set to work on creating their own Directory of Worship. The non-binding Directory they created—while it is far more liturgical than the original Directory for Publick Worship and includes sample forms for special occasions—does not contain a single reference to the church year. In fact at no point in the history of the Presbyterian Church in America has the practice of observing holy days been officially authorized by the General Assembly, nor does anything in the constitution of the church legitimize the practice. To the contrary, since the constitutional documents of the PCA uphold and endorse the original Puritan concept of the regulative principle of worship as it is set forth in chapter 21.1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the practice of observing holy days in worship is logically forbidden as no one has ever been able to prove that the practice of their observation was instituted by God in His Word. What is odd in light of this is that very few, if any, members of the PCA view the observance of holy days as an exception to the teaching of the Westminster Standards.

So while we can answer clearly why Presbyterians who belong to the PCUSA observe holy days, for they changed their doctrinal standards to allow for the practice, one cannot answer that question when it comes to members of other bodies that have not, such as the PCA. Their doctrinal standards clearly do not permit the practice, and yet it would seem that the majority of PCA churches observe holy days anyway. Why is that? One might be tempted to conclude that it is because the General Assembly has never tackled the subject, but the far more obvious answer is that *they observe them because the church they left observed them and the vast majority of modern evangelical churches around them observe them*. In most cases no one living can remember a time when holy days were not observed and most Presbyterian clergymen seem unaware that there was once a time when they were not observed. Even the oldest of PCA saints might be reasonably tempted to conclude that a notion that holy days should not be observed represents the thought of a crackpot.

Of course, while these conclusions address the specifics of how it was that the vast majority of American Presbyterians came to celebrate holy days when their forbears clearly did not, they do not tell us from whence the psychological impetus for these changes comes. Perhaps it was an unconscious desire to return to the comforting traditions and symbolism of medieval Roman Catholicism; this is, for instance, the supposition advanced by James Hastings Nichols in *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*. Nichols notes that Catholic conceptions and forms of worship “established themselves in a few Reformed centers in the day of cultural

romanticism and political reaction” and from thence “they have increasingly penetrated the main Reformed bodies.” Nichols goes on to point out that while the Catholicizing tendency has often been blunted by the “legacy of anti-Romanism” it has “established its right to exist in these churches and won official toleration.”¹⁴¹ It is more likely, however, that the answer ultimately lies somewhere in a statement made almost 200 years ago by French Statesman and observer of the new American society, Alexis de Toqueville: “All the clergy of America freely adopt the general views of their time and country and let themselves go unresistingly with the tide of feeling and opinion which carries everything around them along with it.”

Appendix C: A Brief Critique of Steven M. Schlissel’s Articles against the Regulative Principle of Worship¹⁴²

Recently, a series of articles was written by Pastor Steven M. Schlissel against the regulative principle of worship, entitled “All I Really Need to Know About Worship...I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle.” These articles were published in Schlissel’s newsletter, *Messiah’s Mandate*, and were reprinted in edited-abridged form in *Chalcedon Report*. They received a rather wide audience in Reformed circles and are being referred to by opponents of Reformed worship.

The purpose of this essay is to examine Schlissel’s main arguments and expose them as false, unscriptural, and based upon poor exegesis and faulty reasoning. After reading Schlissel’s articles we want to commend him for his openness and honesty regarding his position on the regulative principle. Many people in Reformed churches give lip service to the regulative principle while doing everything they possibly can to get around it. They confess it with their lips, but dread it with their hearts. They formally adhere to what they in practice continually deny. At least Schlissel, in his quest for human autonomy in worship, is consistent. He jettisons the foundation of Reformed worship altogether and in its place advocates what he calls the “informed principle of worship,” which we will see is, in principle and in reality, no different than the Lutheran or Episcopal conception of worship. Before we examine Schlissel’s false presentation of the regulative principle, his sloppy exegesis, and faulty reasoning, let us first examine his disapprobation of Reformed worship and the historical relativism that accompanies it.

Throughout his three articles against biblical worship Schlissel shows a strong disdain for the regulative principle and those who adhere to it. Schlissel calls regulativists “chauvinists” (3:1) and “sourpusses” (3:1).¹⁴³ He argues that regulativists are radicals and extremists who have succumbed to “the pendulum phenomenon” (1:2). Schlissel teaches that regulativists are no different than legalists such as teetotalers, people who advocate celibacy and people who forbid the use of makeup and jewelry for women (1:1-2). He compares regulativists to communist party officials who must maintain dictatorial control over their delegates to the United Nations (3:2). He says that “regulativists are totalitarian in what they exclude” (3:2), that “regulativists treat people like infants incapable of sound judgment” (3:2).

¹⁴¹ James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 153.

¹⁴² Originally published in *The Counsel of Chalcedon* magazine.

¹⁴³ As used in this appendix, “(3:1)” means article number 3, p. 1.

Schlissel says that the regulative principle is “not biblical” (1:3; 2:4), that is “an *invention of men* and therefore an imposition upon the consciences of those forced to accept it” (1:7). He says that it is an addition “to our legal obligations under God” (1:7) which is based on “a pattern of obfuscation” (2:1). He also teaches that “it cannot survive when measured against Scripture” (3:1). After realizing that he has insulted and impugned *all* the Calvinistic reformers, *all* the Reformed Confessions, and *all* the Reformed churches (Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, French Huguenots, the Puritans) Schlissel offers up some historical relativism.¹⁴⁴

Even though, according to Schlissel, the regulative principle is unbiblical, legalistic, an invention of men, based on obfuscation and false exegesis, dictatorial, totalitarian, contrary to our legal obligations to God and a human imposition upon the consciences of men, what the Reformers did was not unethical because of their unique historical situation. They were just coming out of Romanism. If the regulative principle is an unbiblical, dictatorial human tradition and a perversion of biblical worship (as our brother asserts), then what the Reformers did was positively sinful. Schlissel cannot have it both ways. He cannot repudiate modern advocates of the regulative principle without also repudiating the Reformed faith.¹⁴⁵ What separates the reformed confessions from Luther and Calvinistic Baptists¹⁴⁶ is not soteriology, but worship and

¹⁴⁴ Schlissel writes, “Though most excellent and welcome in its historic situation, the Regulative principle somehow loosed itself from its moorings and took on a life of its own in certain Reformed and Presbyterian circles. Many took it to be not merely a *good* word on worship but the last word, in fact, God’s last Word on the subject. And as men are wont to do, zealots—who saw in this principle the *only* way to acceptably approach God—began to extend and apply it more and more rigorously” (1:2). Tell us, Pastor Schlissel, how something that you say is unbiblical, legalistic, an invention of man, a human imposition, contrary to our legal obligations, totalitarian, etc., is also at the same time excellent, welcome, and a good word on worship. Please also point out where modern advocates of the regulative principle differ from the Puritans, the Calvinistic Reformers and early Presbyterians. In the denominations that practice *a cappella* exclusive psalmody (with which I am familiar) the worship services are virtually identical to the services as practiced in the Reformation churches of Holland, England, Scotland, Switzerland, France and Germany. In fact, the historical situation is the exact opposite of what Schlissel alleges: the early Puritans and Presbyterians were far stricter than today’s RPW denominations (with some exceptions) over issues like holy days, head coverings, sabbath-keeping, church discipline, etc. Please also explain how the Calvinistic Reformers and pastors, elders and theologians who composed the great creeds and confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries considered their deliberations on the RPW to be evolving documents that would soften over time to fit new historical circumstances. Are we supposed to believe that the old divines regarded their carefully thought-out and crafted statements to be mere suggestions that should be cast off when Romanism was less of a threat? Schlissel has created a historical fantasy to justify his own departure from the Reformed faith.

¹⁴⁵ All the Calvinistic Reformers and all Reformed Churches adhered to the regulative principle. In the early days of the Reformation, if the Lutheran theologians and the Reformed theologians had been able to agree over worship (in particular the Lord’s supper), there probably would have been one church rather than two. Calvin’s view of the regulative principle can be found in his *Institutes* I, XI, 4; XII, 1 and 3; II, VIII, 5 and 17; IV, X, 1 and 8-17; cf. his commentary on Jer. 7:31; sermon on 2 Sam. 6:6-12; his tract on “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” and the confession drafted by Calvin for the Reformed churches of France (1652). John Knox’s view is clearly set forth in *A Vindication of the Doctrine That the Sacrifice of the Mass Is Idolatry* (1550). The Reformed creeds also teach the regulative principle of worship: cf. the Belgic Confession (1561) Art. VII, XXIX, XXXII; the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 96; the Westminster Standards: Confession 1:6, 7; 20:2; 21:1; Shorter Catechism Q. 51; Larger Catechism Q. 108, 109. A strict interpretation of the regulative principle can be found in the writings of George Gillespie, William Ames, Samuel Rutherford, Jeremiah Burroughs, David Dickson, Thomas Watson, Matthew Henry, John Owen, James Begg, James Bannerman, William Cunningham, Thomas Ridgeley, Thomas Boston, John Cotton, Thomas Manton, William Romaine, R. L. Dabney, James H. Thornwell, John L. Girardeau, John Murray, and many others. Anyone who advocated Schlissel’s views would have been defrocked in any of the Reformed denominations of the past, whether English, Dutch, Scottish, German, French or American.

¹⁴⁶ There are, however, “Particular Baptists” and so-called “Reformed Baptists” (i.e., Calvinists) who do adhere to the regulative principle. The London Confession, article 7 (1644), says, “The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and

government. Reformed worship is squarely founded upon the regulative principle. Once that foundation (and the worship and government that rest upon it) is removed, the word Reformed means nothing. This makes the following comments all the more alarming: “Not more than one or two sourpusses have responded bitterly to our series so far. Sweet mail received from ministers and elders (TR variety) in the PCA, the OPC¹⁴⁷ and other Presbyterian denominations was almost uniformly positive (a pleasant surprise), with many expressing sincere gratitude for the salty series” (3:1). Apparently there are elders and ministers in the PCA, OPC and other Presbyterian denominations who consider themselves or are considered by Schlissel to be “TR” (i.e., Truly Reformed as opposed to semi-Reformed “evanjellyfish”) who approve of Schlissel’s denunciation of the Reformed faith. Did not these men take vows to uphold the Westminster Standards? Should not these men be honest and resign their positions? Such men are Reformed in name only.

Schlissel’s False Definition of the Regulative Principle

The first issue that needs to be addressed is foundational and thus affects a number of Schlissel’s assertions. Note that Schlissel, throughout all three articles, repeatedly gives and builds arguments upon a false definition of the regulative principle. He demonstrates a classic case of setting up a straw man (which unfortunately many Christians do not have the theological knowledge to recognize) in order to easily knock it down. What is truly sad regarding this tactic is that, given the works that Schlissel cites in his endnotes, this deception is *apparently deliberate!* There is the possibility, however, that he has not read all of the works he cites, or is incapable of understanding them because of his presuppositions.

In order to prove this assertion let us compare Schlissel’s definition of the regulative principle with the standard Reformed definitions offered by apologists for Reformed worship. Schlissel writes, “At the time of the Reformation, the nausea induced in the godly upon their awakening to the sinful Romish excesses and superstitions in worship gave rise to a radical, but not fully thought out solution, the Regulative Principle of Worship: *If it is not commanded in Scripture to be performed in worship, it is forbidden in worship.* It is sometimes said in other words: Only that which God has commanded is permitted.... Anything which could not pass the somewhat arbitrary test for ‘commanded’ was viewed with grave suspicion as the very thing which would cause—or begin to cause—the Reformed churches to return to Babylon.... The RPW, however, adds another requirement pertaining to worship, saying that *in worship*, if God does not command it, it is forbidden” (1:2, 7). Schlissel’s second article begins: “We have been arguing that the Regulative Principle of Worship—*if it is not commanded, it is forbidden*—is not the principle given by God to regulate worship in the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This definition is repeated a number of times in the second and third articles.

Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man’s inventions, opinions, devices, lawes, constitutions, or traditions unwritten whatsoever, but only the word of God contained in the Canonick [sic] Scriptures.” The Second London Confession (1677) I.6, XXII.1, An Orthodox Creed (1679), art. XL, and the London Baptist Confession of 1689 (which are adaptations of the Westminster Confession of Faith) also contain explicit statements of the regulative principle.

¹⁴⁷ The PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) and OPC (Orthodox Presbyterian Church) are conservative (i.e., they adhere to biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, literal miracles, vicarious atonement, a literal resurrection and the five points of Calvinism) Presbyterian denominations that confessionally adhere to the regulative principle. Both, however, have seen the rapid spread of the so-called celebrative worship (i.e., Arminian, charismatic style worship), in the last thirty years.

Is the regulative principle merely “if it is not commanded it is forbidden,” as Schlissel asserts?¹⁴⁸ Although it is not uncommon to see regulativists give a statement (such as Schlissel’s) as a brief statement or definition 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 only* 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 *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.

What is particularly bizarre regarding Schlissel’s false presentation of the regulative principle is that it leads him to quote this section of the Confession as a corrective to the false version he sets up in his articles. He writes, “Though this does not stop them from serving the Lord’s Supper to women. This is an inconsistency in their system, since there is no clear NT

¹⁴⁸ After this author’s critique of Schlissel’s articles was distributed, a person in agreement with Schlissel’s position wrote a “refutation” of the critique and argued that this author completely misrepresents Schlissel’s version of the regulative principle, that “Schlissel never limited the RPW to ‘explicit commands’ in the first place.” In other words, Schlissel really does present the historically received broad definition of the regulative principle and is totally misrepresented in this author’s critique. Is this charge accurate? Is this author guilty of setting up a straw man? No. If one carefully reads the three *Messiah’s Mandate* articles or the five shorter articles in *Chalcedon Report* (entitled “All I Really Need to Know about Worship...I Don’t Learn From the Regulative Principle”), one will note the following. First, Schlissel always defines the regulative principle as “if it is not commanded, it is forbidden” (1:2, 3, 4, 7; 2:1, 4, 5; 3:1, 3). He never states or interacts with the real, broad definition of the regulative principle in the body of his articles. Second, it is very clear from Schlissel’s argumentation against the regulative principle that he regards it as referring only to a “clear” or “explicit command.” Note the following quotations from Schlissel’s articles: “And he [the regulativist] 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 this principle, if God commanded naught concerning what ought to be done, then all was forbidden” (1:7). “Who, then, has the authority to introduce into worship the public reading of the Prophets? If we may only do what God explicitly commands, we’d need a command to legitimate the reading of anything besides Moses in public worship” (2:4). “Beginning with their ‘principle,’ they go through the New Testament looking for commanded elements” (2:5). “That leaves us with no clear command to sing in Christian worship services” (2:6). “But where did this worship principle come from in the first place? Does the Bible really teach that ‘only that which God has commanded may be done in worship?’” (2:1) Schlissel’s argumentation presupposes the false, absurdly-narrow definition of the regulative principle. The phrases “only that which God has commanded,” “only do what God explicitly commands” and “that leaves us with no clear command” come directly from Schlissel. Thus this author’s assertions regarding Schlissel’s position are accurate.

command to do so. The same method that leads us to recognize women as fit recipients of the Supper can lead us to see covenant children as fit candidates for baptism. It's called 'good and necessary consequence.' WCF, I vi." (2:8, endnote 1).¹⁴⁹ Schlissel chooses an interpretation of the regulative principle that is absurdly narrow, one that was *never* held by the Puritans and early Presbyterians, and then quotes the Westminster divines who were very strict regulativists (cf. Confession of Faith 20.2, 21.1; Larger Catechism 109; Shorter Catechism 51) to prove the unreasonableness of it. Schlissel quotes the real, correct understanding of the regulative principle against his straw-man version. This is incredibly sloppy scholarship, to say the least.

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."¹⁵⁰ This accurate definition was formulated by Parker by reading the available Puritan literature of his day (the seventeenth century). When one reads the Puritans and encounters the statement "that which is not commanded is forbidden," one should keep in mind the overall teaching of the Puritans and Presbyterians on the subject. As Schlissel writes, "The RPW has a historic discernible, commonly received meaning" (2:5). But *he is the one who completely ignores the historic, discernible, commonly received meaning!*

Here are more examples of definitions of the regulative principle that expose Schlissel's version as false and absurdly narrow:

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 the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, *is forbidden.*"¹⁵¹

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 thing. 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."¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Although this endnote is given in connection with a discussion of anti-paedobaptists, it is clear from the context that Schlissel is comparing regulativists to Baptists. He writes, "As we have seen, we have here a matter inextricably bound up with the way we approach and handle the Bible. In this it is not unlike the issue of baptism. Antipaedobaptists insist that the New Testament is so entirely new that our obligations are limited to what is commanded therein. Moreover, if it is not commanded in a certain way it is still forbidden, particularly regarding the sacraments. Hence, for Baptists, the absence of a clear NT command to baptize babies, joined to the many clear examples of adult baptisms following profession, leads to their conclusion that babies, covenant or otherwise, may not be lawfully baptized. This conclusion is inevitable once their premises are granted, but it is precisely their premises which are in need of repair. *You see a remarkably similar handling of Scripture by regulativists.* They assume their principle and make it the unchallengeable starting point" (2:1).

¹⁵⁰ Samuel Parker as quoted in John Owen, "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship" in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:462.

¹⁵¹ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, Pa.: New Covenant Publication Society, 1980 [1888]), 9.

¹⁵² James H. Thornwell, "Boards and Presbyterianism," in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1875]), 4:255.

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.”¹⁵³

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.”¹⁵⁴

William Young writes, “The mode of prescription need not be that of explicit command in a 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.”¹⁵⁵

In Schlissel’s first article (endnote 2) he quotes (but does not reference) a book that gives the following as a definition of the regulative principle: “Whatever is not commanded by Scripture in the worship of God 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).”¹⁵⁶ Another book that Schlissel cites (cf. 3:5, endnote number 31) is Michael Bushell’s *The Songs of Zion*. Apparently either he did not read the whole book or purposely ignored the excellent chapter on the regulative principle. 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

¹⁵³ W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Church in Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1848), 1:15 as quoted in Thornwell, 4:256.

¹⁵⁴ 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.

¹⁵⁵ William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, Va.: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.), 10. One could multiply quotes from Reformed authors who understand the broad nature of the regulative principle as inclusive of approved historical examples and logical influence from Scripture. For example read: Robert Shaw, *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival, n.d. [1845]), 16. Frances 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. A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961 [1869]), 39. B. B. Warfield, “The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” in *Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [1931]), 6:226-27 (originally published in *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* [1893]), 4:582-655.

¹⁵⁶ Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1996), 4. Schlissel quotes from page 9.

“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*.¹⁵⁷

Schlissel’s repeated misrepresentations of the regulative principle are inexcusable.

Whether he means to or not, Schlissel impugns the Calvinistic Reformers (Calvin, Knox, Farel, etc.), the Presbyterians, the Puritans, the Dutch Reformed and the French Huguenots, by falsely portraying them as incompetents and hypocrites. According to Schlissel these geniuses and giants of the faith did not fully think out the regulative principle. In his mind, they haphazardly adopted the idea “that if there is not an explicit divine imperative found somewhere in Scripture for a worship ordinance or practice, then it is forbidden.” Yet the theologians of this period repeatedly used scriptural inference and inspired historical example to prove infant baptism, first-day sabbath, presbyterian church government, and so on. The truth is not that these godly scholars professed one thing and practiced another, but that they all (contrary to Schlissel’s assertions) believed in, taught, and used divine imperatives, good and necessary consequences from Scripture, and inspired historical example. Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of Reformed teaching on worship would not take his articles seriously at all. They are full of outright misrepresentations and falsehoods.

Now that we have established that all three of Schlissel’s articles are founded upon a total misrepresentation of the regulative principle, let us dispense with the arguments that are derived from this falsehood. His first argument based on this falsehood is that: (a) the worship of the synagogue was never commanded by God; (b) Christ and the apostles attended and approved of synagogue worship, therefore, (c) Christ and the apostles rejected the regulative principle. Schlissel 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 if 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! (1:7).

If we accept Schlissel’s false version of the regulative principle (that an explicit divine imperative must be found for every worship practice) then this would be a good argument. However, since good and necessary consequence and approved historical examples are sufficient, this argument is worthless. The fact that Jesus Christ participated in synagogue worship without the slightest hint of disapprobation is warrant enough. Further, there are many

¹⁵⁷ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 122-23.

passages by which synagogue sabbath worship can be deduced. Leviticus 23:3 says, “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.” 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.¹⁵⁸

Note the words of James in Acts 15:21, “For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.” Psalm 74:8 says, “They said in their hearts, ‘Let us destroy them altogether.’ They have burned up all the meeting places of God in the land.” Matthew Poole writes, “All the *synagogues of God in the land*, i.e., all the public places wherein the Jews used to meet together to worship God *every sabbath day*, as is noted, Acts xiii. 27, and upon other occasions. That the Jews had synagogues is manifest, both from these and other places of Scripture... it is undeniable that they did worship God publicly, in every Sabbath, and other holy times, even then when they neither did nor could go up to Jerusalem...”¹⁵⁹

Not only can one deduce weekly synagogue worship from the Bible, but also the basic worship elements of Scripture reading and exposition (cf. Neh. 8:7-8; Lev. 10:8-11; Deut. 17:8-13; 24:8; 31:9-13; 33:8; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:7-9; 19:8-10; 30:22; 35:3; Ezra 7:1-11; Ezek. 44:15, 23-24; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:1, 5-8; Mt. 4:23; 9:35; 13:54; Mk. 1:21, 39; 6:2; Lk. 4:15-22, 44; 13:10; Ac. 15:21; etc.) and prayer (2 Chr. 6:34-39; Neh. 8:6; Isa. 56:7) can be deduced. Virtually all regulativists recognize that the Christian church was the natural outgrowth of the synagogue, in which the covenant people conducted weekly non-ceremonial public worship.

The Regulative Principle of Worship vs. Human Tradition

Because Schlissel misunderstands the regulative principle with its approved historical examples and good and necessary consequence (in addition to explicit commands), he not only sets up straw-man arguments but also mistakenly argues that human traditions *in worship* can be and are acceptable to God. He writes, “To see how comfortable Jesus was with human traditions which properly honored God, it is only necessary to see Him in the synagogue. When we find Him attending synagogue, ‘as was His custom,’ we must remember that He was attending a service of worship at the institution which had no divinely authorized blueprint. The standards for establishing one, administering one, or disestablishing one, were all derived from ‘human tradition’” (2:4).

How does Schlissel justify human tradition in worship? First, he either wrongly attributes worship passages that require divine warrant solely to the temple or he simply rejects the obvious meaning of the passage in question (this will be dealt with below). Second, he completely misunderstands and misrepresents the standard historically received definition of the regulative

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 1:535-36.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Edinburgh: the Banner of Truth Trust, 1975 [1685]), 2:117-18.

principle, rendering it absurdly narrow. Third, he assumes that when we encounter worship practices in the Bible that have no prior inscripturated divine imperative, these practices must have originated from human tradition. All three of these justifications are related in Schlissel's thinking. All of the errors in Schlissel's articles are related in some manner to these three points.

Let us contrast Schlissel's faulty reasoning with the standard Puritan and Reformed way of thinking. First, they properly interpret the many regulative principle passages as demanding biblical warrant for all worship practices. Second, they hold to the (genuine) broad definition of the regulative principle of worship which includes approved historical examples from the Bible, and good and necessary consequence. Third, based on the analogy of Scripture (Scripture cannot contradict itself and is its own best interpreter) and the clear need of divine warrant, it is assumed that historical examples that are not accompanied by explicit commands are based on some prior revelation that did not make it into the canon. 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 being not recorded in the 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 so 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.¹⁶⁰

In the Bible we find Abel offering an acceptable blood sacrifice by faith (Gen. 4:4; Heb. 11:4), even though there is no previously recorded explicit command by God to do so. Faith presupposes that Abel's blood sacrifice was done as a result of belief in God's word. As Paul says "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).¹⁶¹ We also encounter godly Noah offering sacrifice of clean animals, even though there is no previously recorded legislation or imperatives by God to do so. After the resurrection of the Lord the universal practice of the apostles and all the churches was Lord's day public worship. Yet once

¹⁶⁰ John Owen, "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship" in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644] 13:467.

¹⁶¹ Opponents of the regulative principle will probably argue that the reference to Abel and Noah offering sacrifice in accordance with a prior revelation (that was not inscripturated) is an argument of begging the question (i.e., assuming that which one sets out to prove). The idea that Abel and Noah's offering sacrifice was based on prior special revelation, however, is not simply an assumption based on silence but is inferred from the overall teaching of Scripture. In Hebrews 11:4 we are told that "by faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." 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. Furthermore, throughout both the Old and New Testament we are repeatedly told that the only worship that is acceptable to God is worship that is of divine appointment. One of the most fundamental principles of biblical interpretation is that Scripture cannot contradict itself. Therefore, when one assumes that the sacrifices of Abel and Noah were by divine institution one is simply using Scripture to interpret Scripture. Thus our argument regarding Abel and Noah is not an argument from silence but an argument from the analogy of Scripture. When Schlissel argues that a practice of Christ or the apostles is founded upon a human tradition because it is not accompanied by an explicit divine imperative he violates the analogy of Scripture.

again, there are no explicit commands to do so. Given the testimony of Scripture regarding human tradition and adding or subtracting from what Jehovah says, the Puritan view of approved historical examples (because not all prophecies and divine imperatives were inscripturated) makes perfect sense. Schlissel's procedure of *assuming* that human traditions are the foundation of worship practices that are not accompanied by explicit inscripturated divine imperatives violates the analogy of Scripture and cannot be proven from the Bible. It is nothing but an assumption. Thus, a large portion of Schlissel's argument against the regulative principle is nothing but pure speculation—a speculation that contradicts Scripture and supports the foundational principles of Romanism and rabbinical Judaism.

Truly Reformed Doctrine or Evangelical Pap?

Schlissel bids us to forsake *sola Scriptura* and go down the path toward Rome, all the while claiming to be truly Reformed. He does say, "It is not, for us, a question merely of whether an observance can be traced to 'human tradition,' but it is also a question of fidelity to Scripture, propriety in worship, and profitability to the people of God" (2:4). Aside from the fact that his position itself is contrary to Scripture, let us consider the logical outworking of allowing human tradition with Schlissel's supposed "minimalist" conditions. Suppose the elders of a church decide that "Christian drama" should be introduced into public worship. Is it expressly forbidden in Scripture? Can it be profitable to the people of God? Can it be done in a tasteful orderly manner? Suppose the elders decide that readings from the Apocrypha and notable Christian authors should be introduced into public worship. Is it forbidden? Can it be profitable? Can it be done decently and in order? How about a new sacrament? Why not? It is not forbidden. The people will regard it as edifying. We promise it will only be done with proper solemnity. Or, why not establish a new holy day to commemorate the martyrs of the Reformation? One could come up with thousands of innovations which meet Schlissel's conditions. Schlissel himself may not want to introduce such things into worship. He may even have a very old-fashioned, traditional Reformed service. However, the only difference between Schlissel and pastors who introduce such innovations is personal preference. Schlissel's position regarding human tradition in worship is nothing but the typical evangelical understanding of worship.

Liberty of Conscience

Another area in which a sharp contrast exists between Schlissel's position and the Puritan-Reformed position is over the issue of liberty of conscience. Schlissel argues that the regulative principle is "an imposition upon the consciences of those forced to accept it." Is it true that the regulative principle is a human imposition while Schlissel's position is one of true Christian liberty? No. It is Schlissel's view that leads directly down the path of ecclesiastical tyranny. With the regulative principle, people are only required to do that which can be proven from Scripture. Everything in worship must have divine warrant. But with Schlissel's position, people are forced to submit to the traditions, ordinances and commandments of men.

If the elders of a church which follows Schlissel's principles decide to add a holy day, or a sacrament, or a drama group, or some other such thing, are the church members required to participate in these services? Is attendance during the practice of such human inventions voluntary? If optional, are church members allowed to leave the service during the optional portions? Are church members disciplined who refuse to submit themselves to these human additions? If so, on what grounds? Is Schlissel willing to argue that these human additions have

an authority over his church members? If these human additions (which he admits are not based on divine warrant) have an authority, where does this authority come from? When one argues that authority comes from the church fathers, or long-standing tradition, or the decision of the session, then that person has in principle embraced popery and prelacy in this matter. If one argues that we can prove these practices from the word of God (divine warrant), then he has denied his own position and embraced Reformed worship. We challenge our dear brother to explain how human traditions, the commandments of men, and all such additions in worship in the church can be authoritative.

It is impossible for men to impose human innovations in public worship without violating their congregants' Christian liberty. All man-made rites and ceremonies in public worship invariably involve some type of human compulsion. Believers are commanded by God to attend Sabbath day public worship. When bishops, pastors or sessions place a man-made rite or ceremony in the public worship service, they force their congregants either: (a) to participate in non-authorized will worship or (b) to separate themselves from the unbiblical corruptions. The non-regulativist's idea that human traditions are permissible in public worship (from the standpoint of Christian liberty) can only be defended in two ways, both of which are unbiblical and arbitrary.

One method of defense is to argue that God has given the church a power independent of Scripture. In other words, not only can bishops, pastors and sessions add their own inventions to public worship, they also have an authority to order church members (under the threat of discipline and excommunication, if necessary) to submit to the new human ordinances. This position is nothing less than popery and prelacy at its worst. (This author is unaware of any anti-regulativist "Reformed" or "Presbyterian" writers who have used such a blatantly Romanist argument.)

The most common defense is that humanly devised rites and ceremonies are within the sphere of *adiaphora* or matters indifferent. The problem with this view is that it is based on a false, arbitrary definition of *adiaphora*. What are indifferent matters? For something to be indifferent, it must be: (1) a matter that is not determinable or required by Scripture, (2) something that is truly circumstantial to worship and not an element or essential part of it, (3) something that is optional or voluntary or (4) something that is unnecessary (i.e., something that can be eliminated at any time, *unlike* prayer, preaching, the Lord's supper, etc.). When a congregation adds a human tradition to the public worship service, that practice cannot honestly be regarded as *adiaphora*, for (1) as part of the service it is no longer optional or voluntary, unless one leaves or refuses to attend, (2) it is placed alongside of and receives the same treatment as commanded elements, (3) it is part of essential worship or (4) as part of public worship it is enforced by implicit and/or explicit compulsion. Although churches may refer to human traditions as *adiaphora* to justify their use in public worship, they never act as if the additions are indifferent in practice. When words are defined in an arbitrary manner, one can prove any proposition. The *adiaphora* argument is an excuse founded upon a lie.

Arguments for Human Tradition in Worship Refuted

Since the major difference between Schlissel's view and Reformed worship is over whether or not human traditions are permitted, a brief consideration of his other arguments in favor of allowing human tradition are in order. Schlissel's other arguments are:

1. Jesus partook of a Jewish Seder with all its human additions to the original Passover feast (2:4).
2. Christ read from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue.
3. The apostles quoted from “uninspired texts and practices”; therefore, “All the New Testament authors are comfortable with tradition” (2:4).
4. Paul observed “Jewish customs, even ritualistic Temple-centric customs” (2:2).
5. Jesus “honored Chanukah by His presence at its celebration in John 10:22.”
6. The Jews “quite apart from any divine precept or command, took it upon themselves *and their descendants* to observe a special holiday every year, forever” (2:3).

An examination of these arguments will show that they are based on false assumptions and poor reasoning.

First, Schlissel argues that Jesus partook of the Jewish Seder. What is the evidence for this assertion? There is no evidence! It is simply *assumed* that since Christ and the apostles had wine with their meal, they also participated in a Seder with its additional rituals. Note: *Not one* of the Jewish additions—the ritual of the Seder—is mentioned in the various accounts of the Last Supper. What about the use of wine? Is the use of wine a violation of the regulative principle, as Schlissel asserts? No, for the Passover was a meal, and the drinking of a beverage is an ordinary, necessary circumstance of eating. 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. According to Schlissel’s *caricature* of the regulative principle, this would be a week when most Israelites would die of thirst. The fact that Christ and the disciples drank wine with 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. Further, if one assumes that Jesus practiced the Passover in the same manner as most of His Jewish contemporaries who followed the teachings of the Pharisees,¹⁶² then one involves the sinless Savior in a blatant hypocritical contradiction with His own doctrine. For the Jewish Passover involved periodic ritual hand washings during the meal.¹⁶³ Earlier in Christ’s ministry He unequivocally condemned ritual hand washings and refused (along with His disciples) to participate in this man-made tradition (see Mt. 15:2ff.; Mk. 7:2ff.). There are other problems with the idea that Jesus followed the Seder according to the Mishnah. For instance, the gospel accounts do not speak of four cups but merely one which was shared by all the disciples. Schlissel’s presuppositions regarding the behavior of Jesus and the apostles at the last supper are exegetically and theologically impossible.

¹⁶² There is the distinct possibility that the Mishnah (a compilation of rabbinical oral traditions that date from around 200 B.C. until about A.D. 200, compiled primarily by Rabbi Judah [“Ha Nasi” or “the Prince”], along with other scholars, around A.D. 189) does not even accurately reflect the common practice of Jews during the life of Christ. Edersheim (a preeminent nineteenth century expert on Judaism), along with other scholars, believes that 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” (Alfred Edersheim, *History of the Jewish Nation after the Destruction of Jerusalem under Titus* [Grand Rapids: Baker 1979 (1856)], 381).

¹⁶³ For a discussion of Pharisaical additions to the Passover meal read Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Service as They Were at the Time of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 239 (see fn. 4 on the same page); M. R. Wilson, “Passover” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:677.

Second, Schlissel argues that when Jesus read from Isaiah in the synagogue, He clearly violated the regulative principle; therefore, He obviously did not believe in such a principle. This argument is flawed for a number of reasons: (1) It is not based on the true definition of the regulative principle, but on Schlissel's straw-man version. The reading and exposition of the Scriptures is easily inferred from the Bible. (2) The passage he refers to (Deut. 31:9-13) is a command regarding the reading of the law every seven years at the feast of tabernacles when the whole nation came together. It is not even speaking to the issue of synagogue worship. (3) The New Testament authors under divine inspiration used the term "law" to denote the whole Old Testament (cf. Jn. 10:34; Rom. 3:19). In 1 Corinthians 14:21, Paul says, "in the law it is written" and then quotes Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 28:11-12). All the Old Testament Scriptures carry an equal authority. If Schlissel was fair to his opponents and used a correct interpretation of the regulative principle, he would not offer such ludicrous arguments.

Third, Schlissel argues that the apostles were comfortable with human tradition because they quoted from uninspired texts and practices. With this type of argument, one could say that the apostle Paul was comfortable with Greek paganism, for he quotes from both Aratus (Ac. 17:28) and Epimenides (Ac. 17:28; Tit. 1:12). Does the fact that R. J. Rushdoony in his *Institutes* quotes from *Playboy* magazine, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-Tung, and the Marquis de Sade reflect in any way on his attitude toward their traditions? No, of course not! Such an argument is absurd.

Fourth, Schlissel notes that Paul observed "Jewish customs, even ritualistic/temple centric customs." There is no question but that the first generation of Jewish Christians was permitted to engage in various Jewish ceremonial practices. However, we should note that: (a) no works-righteousness was attributed to these practices; (b) these practices were not man-made traditions but were based upon Old Testament revelation; (c) these practices were not allowed to be imposed upon the Gentile believers (cf. Rom. 14:5ff; Ac. 21:25); and (d) these practices were permitted because of unique historical circumstances. The first generation of Christians lived in a period in which the old order was coming to an end. Christ brought to an end all the ceremonial aspects of the law when He died on the cross (e.g., animal sacrifices; Jewish holy days; circumcision, etc.). Yet, prior to the end of the age when the Jews were divorced and judged as a nation and the temple was destroyed (A.D. 70), God allowed a period of transition. If Schlissel wishes to argue that modern Jewish believers should continue keeping certain ceremonial laws, perhaps he could explain why that which is anticipatory, typical, and thus temporary, should continue. That which the Bible calls the inferior (Heb. 9:11-15), the shadow (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), the obsolete (Heb. 8:13), the symbolic (Heb. 9:9), and the ineffectual (Heb. 10:4) does not continue.

Fifth, Schlissel argues that Jesus "honored Chanukah by His presence at its celebration in John 10:22." John 10:22 says, "Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the Temple, in Solomon's porch." Whether or not Jesus honored Chanukah cannot be ascertained from this text for a number of reasons.¹⁶⁴ (1) The text does not

¹⁶⁴ Regarding the Feast of Dedication, Hendriksen writes, "This feast was (and is even today) the commemoration of the purification and rededication of the Temple by Judas the Maccabee in the year 165 B.C. (on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, which approximates our December), exactly three years after it had been defiled by the wicked Antiochus Epiphanes.... It is an eight day joyous festival, marked by illumination of the dwellings (hence, also called 'Feast of Lights') and family reunions. Though it is not one of the three great pilgrim feasts, it nevertheless drew many people to Jerusalem" (William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953], 119-20). The defeat of the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes and the purification and rededication of the Temple clearly qualifies for a special time of thanksgiving. What regulativists disagree with is the taking of special days of thanksgiving (which is law-

say that Christ went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Dedication, but merely that He was in Jerusalem at that time. Hengstenburg (as Meyer, Weiss and many others) says that Jesus had been staying in Jerusalem since the Feast of Tabernacles. (2) The Feast of Dedication was not a feast that occurred only in Jerusalem, but was celebrated throughout the whole nation. John is not making a statement regarding Jesus' attitude toward Chanukah, but is giving us an historical setting to the addresses that follow. (3) Even if Christ went to Jerusalem to be there during the feast, the chapter as a whole indicates that He went there to teach. There is not a shred of evidence that He participated in any 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.) (4) Most commentators who discuss the significance of the mention of the Feast of Dedication 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. A theory, hypothesis or speculative interpretation should never be used to overturn the clear teaching of Scripture. Since the Old Testament, Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul condemn human traditions in matters relating to worship, it is exegetically irresponsible to portray our Lord as a sinful hypocrite. Further, the whole idea that Jesus was setting forth his approbation of human traditions is an argument from silence. Once again, Schlissel does not prove his point with real, tangible evidence. He merely offers unprovable assumptions.

Sixth, Schlissel argues that human traditions are permitted in worship because the Jews made up their own holy day, "quite apart from any precept or command." He is referring to the Feast of Purim. Schlissel and many others point to Purim as a justification for man-made holy days such as Christmas and Easter. The problem with this argument is that it uses days of thanksgiving (which are lawful) to justify special religious holy days (which clearly are not). The events of Purim are: "Joy and gladness, a feast and a good day...and of sending portions to one another, and gifts to the poor" (Est. 8:17; 9:22 KJV). There were no special worship services. There were no ceremonies. There were no levitical or priestly activities. Purim did not come about because the people or church officials got together and decided to invent 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. 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.

If men are permitted to invent holy days as they see fit (as Schlissel asserts), then why was God so angry with King Jeroboam for setting up a feast day "in the month which he had devised in his own heart" (1 Kgs. 12:33)? (We can safely assume that Scripture does not contradict itself.) Further, 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 properly defined.

Has Schlissel offered any solid biblical reasons why Reformed believers should abandon the regulative principle and allow human traditions in worship? Has he proven his case by a careful exegesis of Scripture? No. Rather, he has offered numerous assumptions coupled with fallacious reasoning. Having considered Schlissel's straw-man tactics (i.e., his false definition of

ful), and turning them into religiously significant recurring holy days that are set up alongside the commanded festival days with their own religious rituals, and so on.

the regulative principle that undergirds a large portion of his argumentation), his implicit denial of liberty of conscience, and his major arguments for the use of human tradition in worship, we will now turn our attention to his other major contentions.

Does the Regulative Principle Apply Only to the Tabernacle/ Temple Worship?

Schlissel's second major argument against the regulative principle is that it *only* applied to the sacrificial system of worship. He refers to this worship as "the Sinai approach." According to Schlissel, the ceremonial, priestly, Levitical worship of the tabernacle and temple was strictly regulated in particulars "while the decentralized synagogue worship was never so regulated." Since Christ did away with the whole ceremonial law by His death, Schlissel asserts that there is no regulative principle at all in the new covenant era. Schlissel argues that the proof texts used by regulativists for well over 400 years actually prove no such principle. According to Schlissel, these texts have either been taken out of context, or have been made to teach that which they were not meant to teach. He then argues that regulativists "skip the synagogue." In other words they purposely overlook the non-ceremonial, non-regulated synagogue worship because it destroys their position.¹⁶⁵ Schlissel spends a lot of time dealing with Deuteronomy 12:32: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it, nor take away from it." His basic contention regarding this verse is that regulativists completely ignore the context and thus apply this verse beyond the worship of the central sanctuary. Thus, the regulative principle applies not to "worship *per se*, but the sacrificial worship of Jehovah, that is the tabernacle/temple service" (1:2). Schlissel says that this ultra-strictness was, "because in the Tabernacle/Temple, God was displaying 'preaching' Christ, His Person and work, prior to His incarnation" (1:2).

This is Schlissel's cleverest argument. It at least appears to be based on the exegesis of Scripture. However, his restriction of the regulative principle to the tabernacle/temple worship must be rejected for a number of reasons. First, there is no textual reason to assume that since Deuteronomy 12:32 comes in a section that deals with the law of the central sanctuary, it must be restricted to the worship of the tabernacle. The passage comes in a section (12:1-13:19) that also speaks to the repression of idolatry and the syncretistic admixture of heathen rites with the service of Jehovah. Are we supposed to believe that the verse which immediately precedes verse 32 which discusses child sacrifice is only directed to temple worship? No, of course not! If the Israelites would worship God in a manner that He has authorized, then idolatrous practices would not be introduced. Given Israel's subsequent history and the analogy of Scripture on this matter, the authors of the Reformed confessions were justified in giving this passage a broad application to all worship practices. Further, if Schlissel wants to argue that the tabernacle/temple service is restricted, while human tradition in worship elsewhere is permitted,

¹⁶⁵ One of the most ridiculous accusations that Schlissel makes against regulativists is that they completely miss the significance of the synagogue for the worship of the new covenant church. The truth is that Presbyterians have written more on the subject of the synagogue as it relates to the church than those of any other denomination (e.g., Samuel Miller; William Cunningham; James M. Willson; John Owen [Puritan-Independent]; James Bannerman; J. L. Girardeau; John McPherson; Douglas Bannerman; etc.). How does Schlissel tell us of the significance of the synagogue as it relates to the church? He quotes from Marcus Dodds, John MacPherson, and Douglas Bannerman, all of whom were Presbyterian. Virtually every book written by Presbyterian regulativists against the use of musical instruments in public worship has a section dedicated to proving that New Covenant worship was patterned after the synagogue. Why do regulativists emphasize the synagogue so much? Because the synagogue's non-ceremonial worship helps us understand the worship of the early church!

he also must explain away the virtually identical *sola Scriptura* phraseology found in other passages such as Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:6; and Ecclesiastes 3:14.

Second, Schlissel's argument 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. Schlissel exaggerates the antithesis between temple and synagogue worship when he says that the regulative principle applied solely to the temple. Regulativists do not deny that the ceremonies of the temple typified Christ and His work. However, the temple was also a place of worship. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father" (Jn. 4:21). He also said, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'" (Mt. 21:13). If the regulative principle applied to the temple worship, then it also regulated the non-ceremonial worship that occurred there. Thus, the regulative principle cannot be restricted to ceremonial ordinances.

Third, there are a number of passages that apply the regulative principle outside the sphere of tabernacle/temple worship. If even one passage can be shown to apply the regulative principle outside of tabernacle/temple worship, then Schlissel's whole argument is worthless. We will briefly consider three passages. In Matthew 15:13, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for adding ritualistic washings to the law that *occurred in the home and not the temple*. "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?'" Schlissel argues that Jesus only condemned "human tradition which obscured, nullified, set apart or contradicted the Word of God" (2:4). Yet here our Lord refused to submit to and condemned something as apparently innocent as washing one's hands. "Washing of the hands is a thing proper enough; one could wish it were oftener practice; but to exalt it into a religious rite is a folly and a sin."¹⁶⁶ 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."¹⁶⁷ "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."¹⁶⁸

Note also that the apostle Paul, writing several years after the regulative principle was supposedly abolished, enforced the regulative principle. He explicitly condemned man-made doctrines, commandments, and will-worship. "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why as though living in the world do you subject yourself to regulations—'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false, humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:20-23). Paul says that any addition to what God has commanded or authorized is self-imposed religion, or as the King

¹⁶⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revel, 1987), 201.

¹⁶⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, 5:210-11.

¹⁶⁸ David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1987 [1647]), 207.

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.”¹⁶⁹ “The gist is that these ordinances are forms of worship or religious service chosen by man according to the will of man, not means chosen by God. This is the essence of corrupt worship, when men seek to establish their own forms of religious service. We might call it *free-will worship*, since the advocates of man-made worship are claiming that men possess the right (or freedom) to institute acceptable means to worship God.”¹⁷⁰

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....”¹⁷¹ As Paul says, man-made rules and regulations are “of no value” to the believer (Col. 2:23).

We ask our brother: What is lacking in the worship that God has appointed?¹⁷² Why are you so angry with those who just want to adhere strictly to what God has authorized in His word? What is arrogant or wrong in submitting to God’s commands without departing to the right or to the left? How has strictly adhering only to that which has divine warrant hurt the church? Has it not left the church in the exact place of purity as the apostolic church? Yes, it is true that there has been declension in denominations that profess to adhere to the regulative principle. But was this because of the regulative principle itself? Or, was it because the principle was abandoned or redefined? History shows clearly that it was the latter.

When Jesus 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. “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 true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth’” (Jn. 4:21-24). Note the phrase, “the hour is coming and now is.” The need to worship God “in spirit and truth” was not a new principle, for it was already in effect when Jesus

¹⁶⁹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978 [1884]), 199-200.

¹⁷⁰ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995), 56.

¹⁷¹ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1986), 63.

¹⁷² The idea that men are permitted to add their own innovations to authorized worship is also a denial of the sufficiency and perfection of God’s word. Are the ordinances that God has given to the church sufficient or are they inadequate? If one believes that they are not sufficient, please identify what is lacking. If one believes that the Scriptures are sufficient, then why add worship ordinances that are not needed? Also, please explain how the doctrines and commandments of men can perfect God’s word and lead to edification. Did not the apostle Paul warn the church that human commandments are not real wisdom and do not sanctify (Col. 2:23)? What would a great painter such as Claude Monet (1840-1926) have thought if imbeciles and children were given paints and then permitted to alter and “perfect” his paintings as they saw fit? Such acts would be the height of stupidity and arrogance. Yet men do far worse when they add to the holy, sufficient and perfect Scriptures of God.

spoke these words. According to Jesus, God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth, *not because the temple represents 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."¹⁷³ This passage of Scripture by itself refutes Schlissel's whole theory that the temple was strictly regulated while the synagogues were not, for when Jesus begins this discussion, it is clear that He is 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 synagogues. Thus, the idea that the regulative principle only applied to the tabernacle/temple worship is unscriptural. It is a clever attempt at circumventing the clear teaching of Scripture in order to cling to human tradition.

Schlissel's Dismissal of the "Which I Commanded Them Not" Passages

Another one of Schlissel's arguments against the regulative principle is that "regulativists find it where it isn't" (1:3). His main contention in this section of his article is that regulativists misuse passages which say, "which I commanded them not," by turning them into an extra-scriptural worship principle, when the point of each passage is merely to condemn what was already forbidden. Schlissel accuses regulativists of purposely ignoring the fact that the context shows that what the Israelites were doing was explicitly forbidden. He writes, "When the context explicitly reveals that Israel is condemned for worshiping idols, the regulativists leave it out. When the context explicitly reveals that Israel is condemned for child sacrifice to demons (1 Cor. 10:20), the regulativists don't tell you. I told you before that at some point the RPW took on a life of its own. This is evidenced in the controlling influence it has exerted over their exegetical methodology. The same texts are carted out and mishandled in similar ways in virtually all their works (better get used to it!). RPW advocates edit Scripture in an attempt to make it conform to a conclusion they have determined in advance must be reached. This is completely unacceptable" (1:4-5). The author does not know what books Schlissel has used on this subject, because when quoting from regulativists he usually leaves out the references. However, the author does know that his statement is totally false.

Here is a quote from a book that Schlissel may have read (because he quotes from it in 1:8, endnote 8). "Idolatry, murder and child sacrifice are explicitly condemned in the law and the prophets. Yet, Jeremiah cuts to the essence of idolatrous worship. Judah was worshipping in a manner that did not originate from God's heart. Judah's worship was not founded upon God's command."¹⁷⁴ Note, the context is clearly acknowledged before the comments regarding the

¹⁷³ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, [1980] 1993), 149, 151-52.

¹⁷⁴ Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1995), 12. Note also how William Young acknowledges the context: "A most remarkable passage bearing on the question is Jeremiah 7:31: 'They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart.' How clearly does this passage show that God does not view sin as does man. Man would revolt at the unnatural and in-

regulative principle are made. Unfortunately Schlissel's articles are riddled with straw-man argumentation and false accusations regarding his opponents. Regulativists freely acknowledge that the phrase "which I commanded them not" is found in situations in which the people have violated the express commands of God (e.g., Jer. 7:31; 19:5). The question that needs to be answered is: If God in these passages is merely condemning violations of His law and is not also reminding the covenant people of God of the important principle that human innovations in worship are forbidden, then why is the phrase 'which I commanded them not' in these passages at all? Schlissel apparently assumes that if it can be shown that an express violation of God's law has occurred, then explicit statements of the regulative principle by the Holy Spirit can be ignored. The statement "which I commanded them not" is the regulative principle. The prophet's covenant lawsuit preaching clearly presupposes that the regulative principle is an integral part of God's law. It presupposes that God's people are only to base their worship practices on divine revelation. It makes perfect sense for God not only to condemn explicit violations of His law, but also to remind His people of the principle that underlies purity of worship.

If Schlissel is correct, and these passages merely condemn sinful behavior, then what does this phrase mean? Does it mean what it plainly says, or is it just there for dramatic effect? Schlissel acts as if this phrase were not even there. He does recognize the plain meaning of Jeremiah 19:5 when he says, "They were not condemned *merely* for doing something which God had not commanded, but for *doing* what God had expressly forbidden" (1:4). Regarding this statement, we concur. But, apparently he takes it back in his very next statement: "Obviously, if God had forbidden it, then 'neither came it into my mind' is not to be read in a wooden fashion, but rather as plainly expressing that God would never take *pleasure* in such an act" (1:4). In other words, let's not take the passage literally (at face value) in order to fit it into our own non-Reformed paradigm.

Should we carefully consider the contexts of these passages? Yes, absolutely. But we should not use the context in an attempt to circumvent the plain meaning of the text itself. Calvin's exposition of Jeremiah 7:31 captures the plain meaning of the prophet. He writes,

God here cuts off from men every occasion for making evasions, since he condemns by this one phrase, "I have not commanded them," whatever the Jews devised. There is then no other argument needed to condemn superstitions, than that they are not commanded by God: for when men allow themselves to worship God according to their own fancies, and attend not to his commands, they pervert true religion. And if this principle was adopted by the Papists, all those fictitious modes of worship, in which they absurdly exercise themselves, would fall to the ground. It is indeed a horrible thing for the Papists to seek to discharge their duties towards God by performing their own superstitions. There is an immense number of them, as it is well known, and as it manifestly appears. Were they to admit this principle, that we cannot rightly worship God except by obeying his word, they would be delivered from their deep abyss of error. The prophet's words then are very important, when he says, that God has commanded no such thing, and that it never came to his mind; as though he had said, that men assume too much wisdom, when they devise what he never required, nay, what he never knew.¹⁷⁵

human cruelty of the burning of the fruit of one's own body before an idol. But in God's mind this is but secondary, the essential evil being that it is worship which He did not command, neither came it into His heart" ("The Second Commandment" in Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, ed., *Worship in the Presence of God* [Greenville Seminary Press, 1992], 85). Other regulativists who acknowledge the context of the Jeremiah passage are John Owen, George Gillespie, John Calvin, etc.

¹⁷⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:413-14.

Another passage in which Schlissel circumvents the plain meaning of the text is Leviticus 10:1-2: “Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censor and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane [or “strange,” KJV] fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them.” It is Schlissel’s contention that the problem with Nadab and Abihu’s behavior was that they violated the prohibition in Exodus 30:9 regarding the offering of strange incense. He even mocks those who teach that the problem was not strange incense, but strange fire. He writes, “Well, now, we find ourselves here entering the arena of Clintonian rhetoric.... It was a package deal. ‘Strange fire’ clearly encompasses the incense which it was burning. To parse these as regulativists try to do is like unto saying, ‘It depends on what the word “is” is.’” (1:8, endnote 2).

There are a number of problems with Schlissel’s argument. First, if the text meant strange incense, why wouldn’t it say strange incense? This would only be logical considering the fact that strange incense is expressly forbidden. In addition, some doctrines are proven by and dependent on the presence of one word. Who is really guilty of Clintonian rhetoric? Those who argue that the text means what it says? Or those who give the text a different meaning? Second, if it is a “package deal,” as Schlissel asserts, Nadab and Abihu were still guilty of offering strange fire. Third, the fact that they were consumed by fire certainly favors the interpretation that their sin was strange fire and not strange incense. The problem for Schlissel is not just the mention of “strange” (*zar*) or “unauthorized” fire, but the explicit statement of the regulative principle in verse 1. Once again we ask the question: To what does the phrase “which He commanded them not” refer? One cannot simply explain this phrase away by arguing that the sin was strange incense. The Holy Spirit says that their sin was that they did something that was not commanded. They offered fire without divine warrant. Whether Schlissel likes it or not, that is an explicit reference to the regulative principle. If the passage does not mean what it says, then he must tell us what it does mean. Schlissel would have us ignore what the passage says and pretend it says something very different. Instead of “which He commanded them not,” he wants us to pretend it says, “Which He had expressly forbidden.” Wishful thinking and pretending are no substitute for true biblical exegesis.

Conclusion

After examining Schlissel’s arguments on worship, we have noted the following:

1. Schlissel does not understand what the regulative principle is. He repeatedly gives a false definition of the regulative principle and bases much of his argumentation on this misrepresentation. This is the old “straw-man” methodology.
2. Schlissel shows a contemptuous disdain for the historic, confessional Reformed view of worship. To appear as a friend of the Calvinistic Reformers, he engages in historical relativism (i.e., what was ethical then is now unethical today).
3. Schlissel denies liberty of conscience by intruding human traditions into the worship of God.
4. Schlissel falsely accuses regulativists of skipping the synagogue. Besides being untrue (as noted above), this whole argument is based on a false understanding of the regulative principle.
5. Schlissel offers several arguments for the use of human tradition in worship. We have noted that many of these arguments are based on assumptions which are then read back into the text. We also noted faulty reasoning and sloppy exegesis.

6. Schlissel argues that the regulative principle applied only to the tabernacle/temple worship. We noted that his exegesis of Deuteronomy 12:32 is fallacious. We also noted that there are clear passages of Scripture that applied the regulative principle outside the sphere of tabernacle/temple worship and that the temple worship itself contained non-ceremonial aspects.
7. Schlissel argues that regulativists find the regulative principle where it is not. We have noted that: He falsely accuses regulativists of ignoring the context. He assumes that if a statement of the regulative principle is given in the midst of rebukes for behavior that is prohibited by Scripture, we then can either ignore the explicit statement of the regulative principle, or regard it as teaching the opposite of what it says. He assumes that Leviticus 10:1-2 says what it does not, and once again simply pretends the explicit statement of the regulative principle in this passage is not there.

Schlissel has totally failed in his attempt to disprove the continuing validity of the regulative principle in the new covenant era. We would ask our brother to go back and do his homework so that at least he could interact with the real regulative principle instead of his “straw-man” version of it.

What Schlissel offers as a replacement for confessional Reformed worship is not new. In essence, it is no different than the typical conservative evangelical understanding of worship. Evangelicals reject the regulative principle and in its place say that we must not do what is forbidden and we must make sure our worship is biblical. This is the old Lutheran-Episcopalian conception of worship. He says that our biblical theology must guide our worship, and that a biblical theology would produce biblical worship.¹⁷⁶ Most conservative Lutherans, low-church Episcopalians or conservative Evangelicals would agree. Why? Because Schlissel has abandoned the reformed understanding of worship for a conservative Lutheran conception! He openly admits that he believes that human tradition in worship is acceptable.

Schlissel wants us to abandon the regulative principle and adopt his view because he believes his position can better withstand “exegetical attack” and thus will better preserve biblical worship. How will allowing human tradition in worship preserve biblical worship? How can allowing what Jesus and Paul explicitly forbid withstand exegetical attack? We live in a time in which many human innovations are coming into the churches—even Reformed ones. The pastors and elders in “Reformed” churches which have puppet shows, sermonettes for children, drama groups, musical groups, dance troupes, liturgical calendars, and unauthorized holy days love these articles by Schlissel. Why? Because his articles justify human autonomy, i.e., human tradition in worship! If one were to talk with a CRC or PCA pastor who practiced such things, one would find essential agreement with Schlissel’s arguments. People despise the regulative principle of worship not because it is itself an innovation but because they know it condemns

¹⁷⁶ There is no question that that doctrine affects worship. Sacerdotalism (as Schlissel points out) leads to an exaltation of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper over the preaching of the Word. However, we should also note that worship can affect doctrine. When Presbyterians and Congregationalists abandoned exclusive psalmody and replaced their Psalters with effeminate, unbalanced, emasculated, man-centered “revivalistic” hymns, the path to Arminianism and eventually Modernism was made much easier. Hymnals speak much about God’s love and very little if anything about God’s hate, wrath, judgment, etc. I am not familiar with any imprecatory hymns. When denominations speak and sing about nothing but love (especially the false humanistic version of love found in many churches), they become unwilling to confront evil in the church and in society. The result is no church discipline (except perhaps for gross sexual sins). As a result, heretics are allowed to infiltrate all the church’s main institutions, and a false pietistic non-involvement in politics and society is the inevitable consequence.

their best-loved human worship inventions. It condemns all will-worship. Schlissel may object to the so-called “celebrative” worship described above. But, according to his own principles, there is really nothing he can do to stop it, for these things are not expressly forbidden by Scripture. (Where *is* the list of forbidden worship practices in the New Testament?) All that Schlissel can do is argue that such worship is not “majestic” enough, or that it is not done decently and in order. The proponents of such worship would of course disagree. They would argue that it is session-controlled, very orderly, and wonderfully “majestic.”

The regulative principle of worship (i.e., truly Reformed worship) is the only principle that can withstand all exegetical attacks and stem today’s sweeping tide of human worship innovations. It can withstand all exegetical attacks because it is founded upon the sacred Scripture and nothing else. It can stem the tide of human innovation in worship because it cuts off, at the root, all innovation, all human tradition and will-worship. The seeds of will-worship are killed before they can sprout. Humanly originated worship traditions are forbidden at the outset, and are thus not given the opportunity of taking root and displacing that worship which God has instituted. Everything in worship must have a divine warrant; i.e., it must be proven from the word of God. Thornwell writes, “As under the Old Dispensation nothing connected with the worship or discipline of the Church of God was left to the wisdom or discretion of man, but everything was accurately prescribed by the authority of God, so, under the New, no voice is to be heard in the household of faith but the voice of the Son of God. The power of the church is purely ministerial and declarative. She is only to hold forth the doctrine, enforce the laws, and execute the government which Christ has given her. She is to add nothing of her own to, and to subtract nothing from, what her Lord has established. Discretionary power she does not possess.”¹⁷⁷

It is our prayer and desire that our brother would cease his arrogant attacks upon Reformed worship and instead use his many talents to work for the reformation of worship in these times of serious declension.

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¹⁷⁷ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1872), 2:163.