

Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship

Summary and Conclusion

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This study regarding *sola scriptura* and its relation to the regulative principle of worship has proved a number of important assertions.

First, it has shown that the scriptural law of worship formulated by the Calvinistic reformers and set forth in all the Reformed creeds and confessions is thoroughly biblical. Reformed worship should be embraced by all professing Christians. Those men who mock the regulative principle and who urge Reformed believers to abandon this crucial pillar of the Reformation should not be heeded at all. (Indeed, they should be intellectually honest and join an Episcopal church.)

Second, an analysis of non-Reformed views of worship has uncovered a number of insurmountable theological, exegetical, logical and ethical problems that are intrinsic to all such theories:

(1) The idea that men are permitted to add to the worship authorized by God in his word contradicts the express teaching of Scripture. There is simply no way that men can circumvent the plain meaning of the *sola scriptura* passages without ignoring or altering their obvious contextual and historical meaning. Jehovah says, “Do not add or detract from what I have commanded.” There is nothing complex or difficult or esoteric regarding the regulative passages. A charge that is so often made is that the regulative principle itself is a human addition to Scripture. This charge is totally unfounded. God says, “Do not add or detract,” and therefore regulativists refuse to add or detract. The regulative principle is simply a theological restatement of the plain teaching of God’s word. To those who regard the regulative principle as an unbiblical addition, we ask: How can a strict obedience to what the Bible teaches be wrong? Has the church been harmed when she followed the teaching of Scripture without turning to the right or to the left? Are regulativists guilty of sin when they refuse to obey the traditions of men that have no warrant from God’s word? Can a church member be disciplined for refusing to participate in a man-made ritual? If the answer to this question is yes, then please explain how a Christian can be disciplined when nothing in Scripture was violated. Romanists and prelatists have an answer to this question. However, we do not heed the words of Antichrist.

(2) 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, then 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.

(3) Non-Reformed theories do not properly take into account God's nature and character (e.g., his infinite holiness, majesty, righteousness, etc.), and man's sinful nature. The idea that men (even regenerate men) after the fall can acceptably approach in worship a thrice-holy God on their own terms, according to their own rules, is contrary to Scripture and sanctified common sense. James Begg writes,

Man as a sinner, as all true Christians will admit, has no right to approach into God's presence at all. The amity which previously existed in Eden was broken up by the Fall. God "drove out the man," and He alone is entitled to say whether, and on what conditions, he shall ever again be permitted to approach His throne. It is manifest presumption on the part of fallen creatures to dictate to God either that there shall be worship at all or what form it shall assume. In entering the courts of earthly monarchs, even where a right to enter is conceded, every rule and form of the court must be carefully observed; and far more is this important in entering, by gracious permission, into the immediate presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords.¹

The worship of Jehovah must be sincere, through Jesus Christ, and it must be of divine appointment. Fallen human reason should never have an *independent* creative role in determining doctrine, ethics, or worship ordinances. It must be totally dependent on Scripture.

(4) 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-regulativists' 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,

¹ James Begg, *Anarchy in Worship*, 4-5.

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.²

Third, an analysis of the most common objections to the regulative principle has shown that these objections are not based on a careful exegesis of Scripture but upon misunderstandings, misrepresentations and pure speculation. Some arguments are founded upon a misunderstanding of the *sola scriptura* passages and *adiaphora*. Others are based on a false definition of the regulative principle. Similarly, others are dependent upon a false understanding of the circumstances of worship. Most arguments, however, are based on pure speculation. Theories are developed using extra-biblical materials (e.g., the Mishnah) and then are imposed upon the passage of Scripture in question.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the regulative principle of worship must be taught, emphasized, and rigorously defended in our day of declension, ignorance and apathy. The heroic struggle by men such as Calvin, Knox, Melville, the English Puritans and Scottish Covenanters for the reformation of worship must continue. This point cannot be too strongly pressed in the present day when biblical worship is attacked from all sides; when the greatest opponents of Reformed worship come from the supposedly Reformed and theonomic camp. Such men, in defiance of Scripture, seek to “improve” the worship of God by their own inventions. They seek to remove the liberty that we have in Christ from the doctrines, commandments and traditions of men. They arrogantly mock the Reformation attainments of our spiritual forefathers. These so-called teachers of the law offer us human autonomy and the tyranny of church officials, all in the name of Christian liberty. What is the “weighty” evidence that is offered to lead us to abandon our creeds and confessions in favor of adding human traditions to worship? It is primarily speculations founded upon the Mishnah. A love of human traditions has caused many normally competent teachers and scholars to resort to exegetical gymnastics and twisted reasonings of the

² There are other serious problems with the non-regulativist position that need to be addressed. A very serious problem that every Christian should note from Scripture and church history is that human additions to the ethics, worship, doctrine, or church government set forth in the Bible invariably drive out what God has warranted in favor of the man-made traditions. What happens is that men simply do not have the self-restraint to carefully limit their own traditions. An innovation is added here and there and these new additions eventually become loved and “indispensable” to the church governors and their congregations. A few man-made traditions may not seem to be much of a problem at first, but one must keep in mind that the church is a very old institution. Over time man-made innovations accumulate until the doctrine and worship of a church are radically changed. Over many generations so many man-made doctrines, commandments and worship innovations are added to the church that pure gospel worship, and even the gospel itself, is obscured and even lost. This has happened in different degrees to Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, evangelicalism and even many Reformed churches. People who reject the regulative principle do not have any solid limiting factor upon their additions. How many innovations are acceptable? When should we stop adding more? Pastors who argue against the regulative principle say that there is no need for concern, “the session will keep the additions under control.” The truth, however, is that apart from the regulative principle it is almost impossible to get rid of human traditions. Once a tradition is loved and accepted by a congregation (e.g., Christmas), woe unto the pastor who attempts to rid the church of such non-commanded elements! The only dependable, safe method for avoiding man-made corruptions is to draw the line on worship content and ceremony where God draws the line. To allow sinful men to draw and redraw the line as they please has been a total disaster for the church. Jesus’ rebuke to the Pharisees has a very broad application: “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Mt. 15:6).

worst sort. Our best defense against all such Romanizing arguments is a vigorous offense. The great truth of *sola scriptura* taught and accompanied by the Spirit of God will penetrate the mists of confusion and ignorance, rending asunder the pillars of popery and prelacy. To secure this great end, let us earnestly work and pray.

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