

A Brief Critique of Steven M. Schlissel's Articles against the Regulative Principle of Worship

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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 an 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).¹ 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).

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, Puritans) Schlissel offers up some historical relativism.²

¹ As used in this paper, “(3:1)” means article number 3; page 1.

² 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

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 and human tradition that is 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.³ What separates the Reformed Confessions from Luther and Calvinistic Baptists⁴ is not soteriology, but worship 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

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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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 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.

ministers and elders (TR variety) in the PCA, the OPC 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 gives us 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 my 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.

Is the regulative principle merely “if it is not commanded it is forbidden,” as Schlissel asserts?⁵ Although it is not uncommon to see regulativists give a statement (such as Schlissel’s)

⁵ 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, not at all. 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

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 just* to explicit commands of Scripture, but also to approved historical examples within the Bible and to good and necessary consequence, i.e., a particular worship practice or ordinance is inferred from many passages of Scripture. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* I.VI. 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 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).⁶ Schlissel chooses an interpretation of the

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 totally accurate.

⁶ 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).

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 XX.II., XXI.I.; 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.”⁷ 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*.”⁸
- 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.”⁹
- 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.”¹⁰
- 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.”¹¹
- 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

⁷ 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.

⁸ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, Pa.: New Covenant Publication Society, 1980 [1888]) p.9.

⁹ James H. Thornwell, “Boards and Presbyterianism,” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1875]) 4:255.

¹⁰ W. M. Hetherington, *History of the Church in Scotland* (Edinburg, Scotland, 1848), 1:15 as quoted in Thornwell, 4:256.

¹¹ 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]), p. 33.

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."¹²

In Schlissel's first article (endnote 2) he quotes (but does not reference) from 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)."¹³ 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 "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.¹⁴

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, a 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

¹² William Young, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, Va.: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.) p. 10.

¹³ Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness, 1996) p. 4. Schlissel quotes from page 9.

¹⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant, 1993 [1980]), pp. 122-123.

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* worshipped 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 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."¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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..."¹⁷

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; Dt. 17:8-13;

¹⁵ All Scripture New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, Va.: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.) 1:535-536.

¹⁷ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1700] 2:117-118.

24:8; 31:9-13; 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 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.¹⁸

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. 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 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 proved 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.

¹⁸ John Owen, "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship" in *Works* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644] 13:467. 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. 1. 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. John Brown writes, "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 of expiatory sacrifice, and that his religion consisted merely in an acknowledgement 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" (*Hebrews* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1963 (1862)], pp. 493-494). 2. 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.

Truly Reformed 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’s not forbidden. It certainly can be edifying. We promise it will only be done with proper solemnity. Or, how about 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.

The Issue of 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 proved 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, then on what basis? 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.

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.

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 (Dt. 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 up 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 quotes from

Playboy magazine, Karl Marx, Mao Tse-Tung, and the Marquis de Sade in his *Institutes* 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.¹⁹ 1. The text does not 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. Once again, Schlissel doesn’t prove his point with real, tangible evidence. He merely offers more unprovable assumptions.

¹⁹ 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] pp. 119-120). 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 lawful), 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.

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 make up a holy day. It came about because of a unique historical event in Israel’s salvation history. The festival was decreed by the civil magistrate (the prime minister, Mordecai, and the queen, Esther). Religious leaders had nothing to do with it. After the civil decree, it was agreed to unanimously by the people. 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 make up 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 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.²⁰ Schlissel spends a lot of time dealing with Deuteronomy 12:32:

²⁰ 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 any other denomination (e.g., Samuel

“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, 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. We 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

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!

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.”²¹ 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.”²² “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...”²³

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 commanded. Rutherford writes,

And when the Pharisees saw some of the disciples eat bread with unwashed hands, they found fault. The challenge was for an external omission of an outward observance which may be seen with the eyes. Ergo, these traditions are not condemned by Christ because they were contrary to God’s word, or impious, but in this, that they were contrary because not commanded. For in the external religious act of washing hands, there was no impiety of a wicked opinion objected to Christ’s disciples, about the piety of these traditions, nor about any inward opinion. Nor is there any question between the Pharisees and the Lord’s disciples, whether the traditions of the elders should be esteemed the marrow and sum of all religions, as Vasquez saith; but only anent external conformity with walking in the traditions of the elders, or not walking, as is most clear in the text. It is true, Christ objected they accounted more of the traditions of men, nor of God’s commandments, as papists and formalists do; but that was not the state of the question between the disciples of Christ and the Pharisees. 2. Christ rejecteth these traditions, by an argument taken from the want of a lawful Author, while he calls them precepts of men, opposed to the commandments of God.²⁴

The arguments offered by Schlissel (and others such as Doug Wilson) regarding the regulative principle are not new but are (in general matters) restatements of old prelatival 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

²¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987) p. 201.

²² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, Va.: MacDonald; n.d.) 5:210-211.

²³ David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1987 [1647]) p. 207.

²⁴ Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication, etc.* (London: John Field, 1647) p. 138.

by the church and bishops, and which command nothing contrary to the Word of God. But that this argument is false, may be proven by certain declarations connected with those passages of Scripture to which we have referred, which likewise reject those human laws, which, upon their own authority, prescribe anything in reference to divine worship which God has not commanded, although the thing itself is neither sinful nor forbidden by God. So Christ rejects the tradition which the Jews had in regard to washing their hands, because they associated with it the idea of divine worship, although it was not sinful in itself, saying, “Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man, but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.” “Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; for ye make clean the outside of the cup and platter, but within ye are full of extortion and excess.” (Matthew 15:11; 23, 25). The same thing may be said of celibacy and of the distinction of meats and days, of which he calls “doctrines of devils,” although in themselves they are lawful to the godly, as he in other places teaches. Wherefore, those things are also which are in themselves indifferent, that is neither commanded nor prohibited by God, if they are prescribed and done as the worship of God, or if it is supposed that God is honored by our performing them, and dishonored by neglecting them, it is plainly manifest that the Scriptures in these and similar places condemn them.²⁵

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 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...’²⁶ “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.”²⁷

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

²⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d. [from 1852 edition]), pp. 518-519.

²⁶ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979 [1884]), pp. 199-200.

²⁷ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications) 1995, p. 56.

cream as well...”²⁸ 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? 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 with 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, 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 spoke these words. According to Jesus, God is to be worshipped 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.”²⁹ 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

²⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, [1692] 1986), p. 63.

²⁹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, [1980] 1993), pp. 149, 151-152.

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 worshipping 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.”³⁰ Note, the context is clearly acknowledged before the comments regarding the 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 wasn’t 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

³⁰ Brian M. Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Southfield, MI: Reformed Witness; 1995) p. 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 Himnon, 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 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 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], p. 85). Other regulativists who acknowledge the context of the Jeremiah passage are John Owen, George Gillespie, John Calvin, etc.

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.³¹

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 it 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

³¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:413-414.

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 (cf. [endnote 20](#)), 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.³²

³² 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

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 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 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 proved 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.”³³

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.

³³ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1872), 2:163.

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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[HOME PAGE](#)