

The Regulative Principle

by Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

The regulative principle is currently the subject of no small controversy in Reformed circles. Some Reformed thinkers and churches have appealed to it to bar the use of contemporary praise songs in public worship, some to insist on the use of Psalms only, and some even to eliminate musical instruments. Partially in response to this, others have determined that the regulative principle is unbiblical, and that it should be abandoned altogether.

I would like to suggest that all these viewpoints are incorrect. The regulative principle is quite biblical, if it is properly understood and applied. Unfortunately, today it is very often misunderstood and misapplied, such as by those who would use it to prohibit the use of modern praise songs or of instruments.

I think it is helpful to conceive of the regulative principle in terms of the following various emphases:

1. Worship was more tightly regulated by Old Testament Law than were many other areas of life. This gives credibility to the belief that we should be more concerned with specific scriptural teachings regarding worship than we should about its statements on other areas of life such as car mechanics, grocery shopping, etc. Thus, the motivation behind the regulative principle is correct.
2. The Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1 provides a very common statement of the regulative principle:

“The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”

The word “prescribed” has frequently led to the types of narrow assertions listed above, i.e., that we ought not to sign songs other than the Psalms or to use musical instruments in worship. A more helpful formulation of the regulative principle is: “We must have positive biblical support for all that we do in worship.” This formulation keeps us from a Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or other model. But it also acknowledges the hermeneutical complexities of deriving directives for worship from the Bible.

3. The regulative principle was developed primarily: a) to exclude Roman Catholic idolatry from worship; and b) to protect the liberty of conscience against the enforcement of Anglican liturgical orders. These two concerns are just as relevant today as they were when the regulative principle was developed — we must continue to reject idolatry and to protect liberty of conscience.
4. To apply the regulative principle appropriately today, we cannot simply repeat the way it was applied in earlier centuries. Rather, we must identify the idols and attacks on liberty of conscience that are present among our churches today. This will differ from church to church and from time to time. One of the principles which the Reformation embraced was *ecclesia semper reformanda est* — the church is always reforming. This means that we cannot represent the Reformed tradition without re-presenting it. Simply to repeat it is not to represent it at all.
5. What idols do we have in our churches today? Each church must answer this question with sincere self-evaluation. It is worth noting in this regard that our modern churches frequently employ five popular models which involve much idolatry. Evangelicals tend to reduce the throne room experience of worship to: a) a classroom for learning; b) a family reunion for mutual encouragement; c) a welcome wagon for visitors and seekers; d) a therapist's couch for psychological healing; and/or e) a variety show for entertainment. None of these models is entirely wrong, but when any of these becomes the central model for worship, it also becomes idolatrous.

In many Reformed churches today, the idol is intellectualism. We turn worship into a classroom for learning. This emphasis on intellect was appropriate in earlier historical periods, and may become necessary again some day. But just as Hezekiah destroyed Moses' bronze serpent because it *became* an idol, we must destroy the tendency toward intellectualism that has *become* an idol in worship for many of us. There are other worship idols as well, and these must become the focus of our attention as we apply the regulative principle today.

6. What are the attacks on liberty of conscience in worship today? It is difficult to identify such attacks today because we have so much freedom to choose between one church or another. Conscience can be followed in the situations in which most of us find ourselves today. Ironically, perhaps the closest thing in Reformed circles to the Anglican book of prayer is the insistence of some on particular practices such as Psalm singing. The biblical support for insisting that Psalms be sung (and sometimes exclusively) in every worship service is weak to say the least. In effect, it reflects the convictions of some being forced on others. This violates the regulative principle, and must be rejected in the spirit of the reformation.

It is time for those devoted to continuing the Reformation to revive commitment to the regulative principle. The regulative principle has characterized our tradition for centuries, and we must stop yielding exclusive claim to it to those who have idealized its past applications. We should move forward by applying it in new ways so that we may worship God in the Spirit and in truth.