

The Regulative Principle of Worship in American Presbyterianism¹

Of all of the doctrines maintained historically by the Calvinistic branch of Christendom, perhaps none has been subject to as much controversy within that tradition as the regulative principle of worship.

Over the past two or three decades, there have been increasing numbers of books, pamphlets, and articles on the subject of worship within the Reformed community. Even before the recent plethora of material, ecclesiastical struggles spawned concern over the nature of worship. However, not all of the writings from purportedly Reformed men have held to this *sine qua non* of Reformed worship, viz., the regulative principle.

Before we take an historical overview of how the regulative principle of worship (sometimes abbreviated "RPW") has fared over the past couple of generations within the Reformed world, we need to understand what is meant by the principle itself.

I. The Regulative Principle

The term "regulative principle of worship" does not appear in the creeds and confessions of the Reformation and Post-Reformation era. However, this term, which may not have been used until the twentieth century, sums up the teaching of the Reformed church. The principle is quite simple: whatever is commanded by God for worship is required, and whatever is not commanded is forbidden. This principle therefore goes contrary to the view of worship embraced by Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism, viz., that whatever is not forbidden in worship is allowed. Or, to put it another way, the Calvinistic perspective is that we are not only forbidden to employ in worship what is *proscribed*, but we are limited in worship to practice only according to what Scripture has *prescribed*.

The regulative principle does not simply prescribe principles that may be expressed in a variety of ways. Rather, the regulative principle prescribes the actual practices or elements of worship.

The Calvinistic branch of the Reformation, in contrast to the Lutheran branch, maintained this stricter view. However, it was in the Post-Reformation development of the Puritan movement that the principle became more refined; and it was in the Westminster Standards that the principle came to its classic expression.

Chapter XXI of the Westminster Confession of Faith states: "The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and

¹ For a more extensive treatment of the material in this paper, please consult the following articles: "Recent Reformed Writings on Worship." *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 4 (2008), pp. 227-252; "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part One (1946-1999)." *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 2 (2006), pp. 89-164; "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part Two (2000-2006)." *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 3 (2007), pp. 155-215; "Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore." *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 1 (2005), pp. 116-50.

served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But 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.”

Furthermore, the proper way to worship has implications with regard to Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. Chapter XX of the Westminster Confession says that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.”

Other Reformed creeds and confessions also reflect the regulative principle. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord’s Day 35, answers Question 96 (“What does God require in the second commandment?”) this way: “We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.”

But while this prescriptive principle had a solid creedal and confessional basis, and a strong attestation by countless theologians and churchmen throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its influence waned in the eighteenth century, and it largely lost its hold in much of the Reformed community by the early nineteenth century. The reasons for this development are multi-fold.

One could cite the petering out of Reformed piety and orthodoxy in general, particularly in Europe, but also in America. From the jeremiads of New England Puritans, as they mourned the lack of pervasiveness of genuine faith in what was to be a “city set on a hill”, to the various secession movements out of the Church of Scotland, to the theological confusion and ecclesiastical turmoil and division in American Presbyterianism, the hollowness of what was once a solid doctrinal core echoed across both sides of the Atlantic. This twin blow—the cooling of fervor and the rise of heterodoxy—had a devastating and profound effect on the church’s worship.

Another factor was the rise of secularism—a movement which was given official blessing by American Presbyterians when they amended the Westminster Confession of Faith to tolerate pluralism. The result of this modification had a profound effect on how the church regarded the Second Commandment. Previously, the law of God was regarded as having universal application, including with regard to the civil magistrate. However, if how God wants to be worshipped was not universally applicable, then how could one claim that there was only one way to worship?

The several revival movements also had a detrimental effect on a traditional Presbyterian understanding of worship. This is true not only because of the emotionalistic approach to spiritual matters, but also because of the breakdown in denominational distinctives—the “least common denominator” phenomenon.

And yet another reason for the diminishing of the traditional Reformed perspective on worship was an increasing rationalism, which led to the diminution of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. As Julius Melton has noted, even Old School Presbyterians in the early

nineteenth century did not appeal only to the Bible, but pointed to that which is “reasonable,” as justification for various worship practices.

With the loss of the foundational principle came the loss of many of the distinctives of Presbyterian worship. By the end of the nineteenth century, practices such as Psalmody and *a capella* singing were distant and fading memories for much of Presbyterianism. The Presbyterian Church was pulled in two somewhat disparate directions: toward an evangelicalism that drank deeply from the well of maudlin Romanticism; and toward a high church liturgical perspective which aped Anglicanism.

At the same time, full-blown liberalism was making serious inroads in mainline Presbyterianism in America, especially in the North. For conservative churchmen, making common cause with “Fundamentalists” across denominational lines seemed more important than concern over the details of worship, even though the co-belligerency with believers not of the Reformed faith would lead to a further dilution of doctrine.

Not until the intra-denominational reform movements of the twentieth century—movements which led to ecclesiastical separation—would there be a serious reconsideration among conservative Presbyterians in America of the doctrine of worship.²

II. The 1940s—Beginning to Rediscover Reformed Worship

From the mid-nineteenth century up through the 1940s, there was a serious decline in Calvinistic doctrine and thought. During these several decades, churches were few in number which upheld Calvinistic teaching in actuality rather than in name only. However, as conservatives awakened to the dangers of liberal theology, they also began to re-discover their theological roots. Among “Northern” Presbyterians, this theological renewal came to expression most especially in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

The OPC Debate

² For the purposes of this article, we will basically be examining only the conservative branches of the Presbyterian and Reformed world. In our estimation, liberals who reject *sola scriptura* as a general principle, are unlikely to adopt it with respect to worship. Moreover, when denominations have to debate the propriety of goddess worship, the regulative principle of worship must seem to that constituency to be a quaint, not to mention antiquated, notion. Our observation of the non-relevance of the regulative principle to liberal Presbyterians was confirmed when, on November 30, 2004, we telephoned the two Associates for Worship in the Office of Theology and Worship at the Louisville headquarters of the Presbyterian Church (United States of America). When we asked Dr. Paul Galbreath about writings in the PC(USA) context regarding the “regulative principle of worship,” he responded by saying, “Meaning what?” After we explained to him the term, he referred us to the Directory of Worship. The Rev. Chip Andrus responded, after a long pause, by saying, “What do you mean by the ‘regulative principle of worship’?” He referred us to a work entitled, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), as well as to an ELCA web site, www.renewingworship.org; found at that web site was a publication, *Principles of Worship*, which, among other things, encouraged the use of the arts, dance, and modern technology (audio-visually, etc.) in worship. He also suggested a book by Harold Daniels, *To God Alone Be Glory*, as well as *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, both of which address the reasons behind liturgical renewal; and to the writings of Gordon Lathrop (a professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia). He also mentioned that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church *might* (his emphasis) have some resources on the subject. We would have spoken with Mr. Andrus the day before, but, according to the message on his telephone answering machine, he had taken the day off, as it was the first day of Advent.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) was embroiled in the Modernist-Fundamentalist battle. The most prominent of the conservatives in the theological fight for the soul of the denomination was J. Gresham Machen. When Machen and others were suspended from the ministry by the liberal denomination, a new denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, was formed.

From its start in 1936, this new denomination earned a reputation for being doctrinally careful and precise. With a desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the OPC often formed General Assembly study committees on controversial matters, in order to try to discern God's revealed will.

One of the early professors at Westminster Theological Seminary was John Murray. Raised in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Professor Murray held to a strict view of the Sabbath and of worship. Particularly, the Scotsman believed in and taught that only inspired songs should be sung in public worship, and that the congregational singing should be done without musical accompaniment.

In the 1940s, as the OPC began to consider the publication of its own hymnal, the question arose as to the propriety of singing uninspired hymns in public worship. Accordingly, the OPC General Assembly in 1944 appointed a committee to consider the matter.

A unified report was presented to the 1946 General Assembly, which affirmed the regulative principle of worship. The next year, however, with regard to the content of worship song, the committee split into majority and minority reports.

The minority report, signed by Professor Murray and William Young, maintained that the content of worship song should be confined to inspired song. The majority report, headed by Robert Marsden, held that "hymns" of human derivation could also be sung in public worship.

The Murray-Young report criticized the majority report for abandoning the regulative principle that the whole committee had supported the previous year. Without a doubt, the majority position had not proven its case Biblically, per the requirement of the regulative principle—a reality admitted by Chairman Marsden a year later.³

However, the failure of the Marsden report to maintain the regulative principle was not only in terms of the outcome, but also the presuppositions. The majority report assumed that two elements of worship—the singing of praise and the praying of prayer—were essentially identical. In other words, the OPC majority report conflated these two separate practices of worship, and asserted, in essence, that prayer could take place through the medium of singing. By not understanding the uniqueness of each of the elements of worship, the OPC was setting itself up for yet further confusion on the nature of an element of worship—confusion that would become evident in the writings of more than one scholar at Westminster Seminary in the 1970s.

³ In a 1948 article in the *Presbyterian Guardian*, Mr. Marsden wrote: "it would be impossible to prove that uninspired songs are authorized in the Scripture, and to demand such proof before one could in good conscience sing uninspired songs is to demand the impossible!"; cited in G. I. Williamson, "Trinity Hymnal or The Content of the Book of Praise in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," a chapter in Edward A. Robson, John M. McMillan, Philip W. Martin, eds., *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1974), p. 274. As will be the case throughout this article (unless otherwise noted), the emphasis in the quotation is in the original.

The Southern Presbyterian Experience

As their conservative brethren were being ejected from the ministry in the PCUSA, conservatives in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS, commonly called the Southern Presbyterian Church) were gearing up for battle. Foremost among the efforts to call the Southern Church back to her heritage was the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*.

Founded in 1942, the *Journal* focused much of its attention on opposing merger with the PCUSA, at least in part because of the Northern Presbyterian “loose” subscription (in contrast to “strict subscription”) to the Westminster Standards. But the publication also called attention to the departures from orthodoxy within the Southern Church itself.

In 1948, Dr. R. E. Hough’s article, “The New Altar,” came out strongly in favor of the regulative principle of worship. Pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, Dr. Hough wrote: “[The Church] is in a world which has many new forms and ceremonies, in themselves often attractive, to tempt her from the path of obedience, and from the spiritual worship laid down in the Scripture. Sad to say in many instances [she] seems to be yielding to this seduction, and on the pretext of adorning the service in such a way as to attract people to them. . . . If the attraction of people is the purpose of the service, then by all means let us go all the way and put on a good show that will compete with the attraction and amusement of the world.” He also wrote: “It is high time, many believe, for the Church to restudy the matter of public worship, not from the aesthetic and popular viewpoint, but as to what pleases God. We are no more left to our inclination and taste in fashioning altars and crosses and candles than was Ahab in fashioning his altar.”⁴

Johannes G. Vos

The son of famed Princeton Theological Seminary professor Geerhardus Vos, J. G. Vos built on the Biblical-theological (“history of redemption”) insights of his father. J. G.’s commitment to *sola Scriptura* led him out of “mainline” Presbyterianism into the much smaller Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), a group often known by its nickname, the “Covenanters.”

Becoming a missionary and minister in the RPCNA, and later a member of the faculty at Geneva College (the denominational school in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania), Professor Vos championed the exclusive psalmody and *a capella* singing of his adopted church. He did so in a time when many even in the RPCNA did not understand or appreciate the regulative principle of worship, and did not know why they held to their distinctive worship practices.

Vos observed: “Unless we can succeed in convincing people of the validity of this principle [i.e., the regulative principle of worship], our opposition to particular details of false worship will seem to them to be merely a stubborn insistence on our customs of worship over against their customs of worship. To seek reform in particular matters of

⁴ R. E. Hough, “The New Altar,” *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (January 1, 1948), p. 7; cited in Frank J. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Silver Anniversary Edition* (Lawrenceville, Georgia: Presbyterian Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 18-19.

worship, without gaining acceptance of the underlying principle of worship, is like trying to build a beautiful and substantial house with no foundation under it but sand.”⁵

Professor Vos posed a question—“What figure of speech is often used in the Bible to bring out the hateful wickedness of false worship?”—and he answered: “The figure of a wife who is unfaithful to her marriage vows.”⁶

For J. G. Vos, then, failure to maintain the prescribed practices of worship, necessarily entailed compromise, and an infidelity on a par with worshiping false gods.

III. The 1950s and 1960s—A Growing Calvinistic Awakening

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a growing number of churchmen, seminary students, and lay people were becoming aware of Calvinism. Aiding the Calvinistic re-emergence was the appearance of The Banner of Truth Trust, a British-based organization dedicated to re-publishing sixteenth and seventeenth century books, including that of the Puritans, as well as the fruit of contemporary authors.

The Banner of Truth was not homogeneous, but represented a wide diversity of generally Reformed beliefs. Accordingly, its efforts focused mostly on Biblical commentaries, biographies, and devotional material; and it tended to avoid what might be considered the divisive issues of ecclesiology, polity, and worship.

Three exceptions to this general observation were the republication by the Banner of Truth of James Bannerman’s *The Church of Christ*; the appearance of William Cunningham’s “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle” in *The Reformation of the Church*, and an essay on worship by John Murray in his *Collected Writings*. The Bannerman book contained three essays relevant to the regulative principle of worship: “Church Power Exercised in Regard to Ordinances,” “Extent of Church Power as Regards the Public Worship of God,” and “Limits of Church Power as Regards the Public Worship of God.” In these chapters, and in the one by Cunningham, these nineteenth century Scotsmen clearly advocated the regulative principle of worship. The late John Murray, another Scotsman, also unambiguously championed the historic position; however, only one brief essay on the subject appears in the collection of his writings published by Banner of Truth—not the full treatment one would expect when trying to do justice to the writings of a man for whom the doctrine was so central to his thinking.⁷

Nevertheless, despite staying away, for the most part, from issues of ecclesiology, the Banner of Truth helped sow seeds of interest in historic Reformed theology, including Puritanism; and those seeds were destined to grow in the decades to come.

William Young

⁵ Ibid., p. 289.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 288-89.

⁷ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1960); William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle,” in I. H. Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1965; repr. 1987); John Murray, “Worship,” *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1976), Vol. 1, pp. 165-68.

Meanwhile, there were a few churchmen who contended for traditional Presbyterian and Reformed worship. Among these was Dr. William Young, whom we have already noted as the co-signer of the 1947 OPC minority report on the content of worship song.

A philosophy professor (who during his career taught at Christian colleges as well as the University of Rhode Island), Dr. Young penned an article in 1947 for *Christian Opinion* magazine on the second commandment.⁸

After dealing with the matter of circumstance (using especially the writings of seventeenth century theologians George Gillespie and John Owen),⁹ Dr. Young adduced the validity of the regulative principle on the following doctrinal grounds: (1) the nature of the sufficiency of Scripture, and of Scripture's nature as the only infallible rule of faith and practice; (2) the sovereignty of God; (3) man's total depravity, which means that manmade worship will always be unacceptable; (4) Christ's exclusive kingship over the Church; (5) the fact that, even as the church's doctrine, government, and discipline are prescribed, even so she may not invent new ways of worship.¹⁰

Professor Young then appealed to various Scriptures in support of the regulative principle. The first such passage was the second commandment itself (Exodus 20:4, 5), which, in its prohibition of idolatry, implies that "every product of man's brain and hand introduced into God's worship is, in the very nature of the case, an idol."

Dr. Young also referenced Jeremiah 7:31, which says, "They have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and daughters in the fire: which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart." He commented: "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."¹¹

Dr. Young also utilized several Scriptural examples which illustrate the regulative principle: (1) the sacrifices of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:3, 4); (2) Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1, 7); and (3) various others, including, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16); Moses smiting the rock at Kadesh (Numbers 20); the rejection of Saul (I Samuel 13); and the handling of the ark (I Chronicles 15:13).¹²

G. I. Williamson

Ordained in the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA), G. I. Williamson eventually served for a number of years in the Reformed Churches of New

⁸ William Young, "The Second Commandment: The Principle that God is To Be Worshipped Only in Ways Prescribed in Holy Scripture and That The Holy Scripture Prescribes The Whole Content of Worship— Taught by Scripture Itself," *Christian Opinion*, Vol. 5, no. 2 (1947). This essay has through the years been reprinted in several places, including in Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, Eds., *Worship in the Presence of God: A collection of essays on the nature, elements, and historic views and practice of worship* (Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1992); the page references to Dr. Young's essay will be taken from this book.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

Zealand, and more recently in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He is perhaps best known for his classic study guides on the Westminster Confessional Standards.

In his 1964 study on the Westminster Confession of Faith, Pastor Williamson taught the regulative principle of worship. In dealing with the Confession's Chapter XXI, he illustrated the difference between non-mandated worship and commanded worship by means of circles: only the "inner" circle (worship that is commanded) is maintained in Reformed churches; and it alone has the blessing of God.¹³

Continuing Church Movement

In the Southern Presbyterian Church, conservatives started as early as the 1940s to call for separation from the mother denomination, with a view towards a Continuing Presbyterian Church. As noted above, key to this movement was the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* (renamed in 1958 the *Presbyterian Journal*).

The earlier efforts in the *Journal* to call to faithfulness with respect to worship intensified in the 1960s, as more "experimental" worship became in vogue. Perhaps most notorious in the development of experimental worship in the Southern Church was the "New Days! New Ways?" conference held under denominational auspices at Montreat, North Carolina, in August 1968, featuring face masks at the Sunday morning worship service and a psychedelic communion service that evening.¹⁴

The next month, the *Journal* editorialized:

If there is anything the Bible says clearly, it is that God is very particular about the way (the manner, the form) of worship. Cain's offering was rejected, while Abel's was accepted. The Lord Jesus said to the woman at the well, "God wants people to worship Him in spirit and truth." Idolatry (in part) is the devising of false forms of worship, such as images, medals, candles, prayer wheels, flagellation, drugs, entertainment—most of which have their place, but not necessarily in church.

If proper worship is what *I* want to do, then the Hindu's bed of spikes, the Mohammedan's barefoot pilgrimage, the mountaineer's snake-handling, are all praiseworthy. And if worship is the appeal to someone in his own idiom, then let's bring the discotheque into the sanctuary.

Come to think of it, what' what they've done!

But isn't that rather a sign of the secularization of the Church, rather than of valid worship?¹⁵

Overview

¹³ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: For Study Classes* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964).

¹⁴ Smith, *History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p.27.

¹⁵ "Re: 'Experimenting'," *Presbyterian Journal* (September 28, 1968), p. 12, emphasis in the original; cited in Smith, op. cit., p. 495.

Starting in the 1940s, a re-awakening Calvinism occurred among conservative Presbyterians, some of whom were forced out of the “mainline” Northern Church, and some of whom remained in the Southern Church to fight the battle against modernism. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a time often seen as one of theological decline, there was a strengthening of resolve—perhaps we might say a sharpening of doctrinal understanding, including with respect to worship—among those who were willing to count the cost of fidelity to the Lord of the church. The conservatives in the Southern Presbyterian Church, in particular, re-called their Puritan heritage, in the on-going war against theological liberalism.

IV. The 1970s—Uncertainty and Confusion

RPCNA

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), a denomination often referred to by its nickname (“Covenanters”), has been in existence since the eighteenth century. Despite some challenges to its worship views, particularly in the twentieth century, it has always maintained *a capella* exclusive psalmody. However, the church as a whole has not always understood why it continued to hold to that traditional Presbyterian position.¹⁶

In 1973, the RPCNA undertook a symposium on the doctrine of worship. The various essays were gathered in a book in January 1974, entitled, *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship: A Symposium to state and clarify the Scriptural teachings concerning worship with emphasis on the use of the Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship*.¹⁷ Several of the essays dealt directly with the regulative principle of worship.

However, even though there were essays which defended the traditional understanding of the regulative principle of worship, there were others which did not. The contributions by Dr. John H. White, who would later serve as President of Geneva College, the denominational school in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, and by Professor Norman Shepherd, then a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, both show confusion on the matter. The inclusion of these essays in this collection is a significant indication that the RPCNA did not overall understand the doctrine of worship.

Francis Schaeffer

¹⁶ This is not to say that there were not ministers and others who did understand. Nor is it to say that the RPCNA did not maintain a general orthodoxy. Citing Nancy E. Clark’s M.A. thesis at Butler University (“A History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church”), John Allen Diluvik contends that the reason why the “New Light” Reformed Presbyterians (i.e., the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod—the group that ultimately merged into the Presbyterian Church in America) changed its denominational worship, is because of a doctrinal decline; see John Allen Diluvik, *The Doctrine and History of Worship in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1982), p. 178.

¹⁷ Edward A. Robson, Philip W. Martin, John M. McMillan, eds., *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship: A Symposium to state and clarify the Scriptural teachings concerning worship with emphasis on the use of the Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship* (N.p. [Pittsburgh, Pa.]: Board of Education and Publication, 1974).

One of the great popularizers of evangelical Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s was Francis Schaeffer, founder of L' Abri in Switzerland. An American who helped countless Europeans and Americans to discover “true truth” (in contrast to the relativized “truth” of a post-Christian era), Dr. Schaeffer emulated a Christian lifestyle (as seen in his radical hospitality), and worked for cultural transformation in the face of a dying Western Civilization. He was a minister in the Bible Presbyterian Church, which later became the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1961-1965), and then the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES).

One of his concerns was that the church be relevant for the modern times. Accordingly, in dealing with the church at the end of the twentieth century, Dr. Schaeffer utilized the concepts of form and freedom in an effort to maintain absolute truths while at the same time allowing flexibility in the church's practice. The result was a confused formulation regarding the authority of the church.

Francis Schaeffer wrote:

My primary point as we prepare for the end of the 20th century is, on the one hand, that there is a place for the institutional church and that it should maintain the form commanded by God, but, on the other hand, that this also leaves vast areas of freedom for change. It is my thesis that we cannot bind men morally except with that which the Scripture clearly commands (beyond that we can only give advice), similarly, *anything the New Testament does not command in regard to church form is a freedom to be exercised under the leadership of the Holy Spirit for that particular time and place.* In other words, the New Testament sets boundary conditions, but within these boundary conditions there is much freedom to meet the changes that arise both in different places and different times.¹⁸

Lest there be any misunderstanding of his view, Dr. Schaeffer stated: “It seems clear to me that the opposite cannot be held, namely that only that which is commanded is allowed. If this were the case, then, for example, to have a church building would be wrong and so would having church bells or a pulpit, using books for singing, following any specific order of service, standing to sing, and many other like things. If consistently held in practice, I doubt if any church could function or worship.”¹⁹

However, what Francis Schaeffer evidently did was to fail to distinguish between matters which are substantive and matters which are circumstantial. Given his stature in the Reformed world, it is perhaps surprising that a trained philosopher and veteran minister would have made such a mistake. However, it is important to remember that he was a product of his time—a time when the regulative principle of worship was only beginning to be rediscovered. Dr. Schaeffer therefore represents a fundamentalist understanding of worship. His basic misunderstanding of the regulative principle led him both to caricature and to reject it.

¹⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1970), pp. 66-67; emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67 (footnote 1).

PCA

In 1973, out of the Continuing Presbyterian Church movement, the denomination now known as the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was organized. Most of the congregations and ministers who initially formed the PCA had withdrawn from the Southern Presbyterian Church, because of its manifest departure from Reformed orthodoxy.²⁰

The Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church asked the Rev. Dr. Morton H. Smith, founding faculty member of Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, to write a theological defense of the anticipated action to separate from the mother denomination. Dr. Smith responded with his magisterial *How is the Gold Become Dim*, a volume which took its title from Lamentations 4:1. In tracing the decline of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), the book dealt with the decline of the worship of God among Southern Presbyterians.

Dr. Smith noted that the Protestant Reformers “spoke of worship as one of the marks of the church”; and he cited questions and answers from the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms regarding the second commandment to demonstrate the Presbyterian position of the regulative principle of worship. He lamented the eventual observance of a church or liturgical calendar (religious holy days), which downplayed the significance of the Sabbath; and commented that “there is no Biblical basis for such a calendar.” He shared the consternation of many Southern Presbyterians with an overemphasis at the General Assembly on rituals and liturgies. He mentioned the “psychedelic worship service” that occurred in Montreat, North Carolina, on August 4, 1968, under the auspices of a denominational agency, and the subsequent inaction by the General Assembly to condemn said experimental worship, as an example of the General Assembly condoning “sacrilegious, unbiblical forms of observing the Lord’s Supper”; and claimed that the General Assembly “has departed from being a true Church in this particular area.” He also stated “a marked decline in the worship of the PCUS is to be found in the use of various pictures and symbols as aids to worship. . . . Pictures of Christ, crosses and other such religious symbols are to be found in many Churches and Sunday School rooms.” He concluded his chapter by saying: “As the Continuing Church comes into being, it is the hope of the present writer that we shall see a concern for pure worship, and thus a reform in this area as well as in doctrine. The two go hand-in-hand together. Orthodoxy in doctrine should be expressed in orthodoxy in worship.”²¹

However, as events would prove, there was a disconnect in the PCA between those who committed wholeheartedly to the Confessional standards, and those who were merely fellow travelers—broadly evangelical, but not particularly Presbyterian or Reformed. Or, one could say that there was a marked difference between, on the one hand, the official documents which not only valued worship for its own sake but maintained that it is subject to strict regulation; and, on the other hand, a significant

²⁰ For a fairly comprehensive treatment of the formation of the PCA, see Smith, *History of the Presbyterian Church in America*.

²¹ Morton H. Smith, *How is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions* (2nd edition; N.d.: The Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, Faithful to the Scriptures and the Reformed Faith, 1973), pp. 95-105.

portion (possibly a majority) of the constituency, who viewed the worship service primarily as a time for evangelism.

One could also note the irony of the setting for one of Dr. Smith's presentation of material from this chapter, including opposition to "pictures of Christ." The Convocation of Sessions, a preliminary meeting leading up to the official founding of the PCA, was held in May 1973 at the historic Westminster Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia; and from the pulpit, which is under a stained-glass window "picture of Jesus," Dr. Smith voiced his desire that the new church would be faithful to the Standards regarding such images.

The Westminster Seminary Connection: Poythress and Frame

Vern S. Poythress

In 1974, Dr. Vern Poythress, a young, brilliant professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, wrote a two-part article for the *Westminster Theological Journal* which challenged the doctrine of exclusive psalmody.²² What is especially important for our present study is the fact that, while purportedly adhering to the regulative principle, Professor Poythress largely guts it of any significance by attempting to negate the distinctions among several distinct elements of worship.

In the first half of the article, Dr. Poythress states that in Ezra 3, "we find a decided emphasis on the regulative principle. The passage says again, and again, implicitly or explicitly, that worship was conducted in accordance with the law of Moses and the appointments of David."²³

However, he later writes:

As for present-day congregational singing of believers, we regard teaching-by-singing and teaching-in-the-narrow sense as simply two forms of teaching, each particularly effective in meeting certain needs and expressing certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Each has its advantages and limitations, due to the nature of the medium of expression. We challenge the exclusive psalmist position to prove *from Scripture*, rather than *assume*, that teaching-by-singing and proclaiming are "two separate elements of worship." To us they appear little more "separate" than preaching to a visible audience versus preaching over the radio. If the unity of Ezra 3 is to be maintained, Christ's work cannot be divided into fragments, and neither can our worship *in Christ*.²⁴

Dr. Poythress gives expression to at least two other peculiar views with regard to the "elements" of worship. One is that he believes that because there is a continuum of speech, the distinction between the spoken and the sung word is merely arbitrary; and

²² Vern S. Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody," *Westminster Theological Journal* (1974).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 225-26; emphases in the original.

thus cannot be used to distinguish a separate element that is characterized by singing.²⁵ Another is that because there is a continuum between “words of a translation” and “words of preaching and counseling,” it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between singing and preaching.

Both the translation of Scripture and words of preaching and counseling are phases or aspects of application of the canonical word of God to people. The translation has to be relatively close to a one-to-one (formal) rendering, since it must serve for many, many varieties of application that believers will then derive from it. Preaching and counseling are relatively more dynamic and interpretative renderings of Scripture, since they are directed more to *a* specific application. But a continuum lies between the two. The argument that [G. I.] Williamson (legitimately) uses to point out that a translation can still be the word of God also shows that preaching and counseling can faithfully communicate the word of God.²⁶

Dr. Poythress later summarized his position as this:

The exclusive-psalmody position tends to see “singing” as a separate “element” of worship alongside prayer and preaching. The didascalia-position sees singing as another means, alongside poetic speech and prose speech, to praying, praising, confessing, teaching, preaching, admonishing, etc.²⁷

There are several problems with Dr. Poythress’ views. First, on the basis of his position, it would be impossible to distinguish meaningfully in public worship between the reading and the preaching of the word. The minister properly says, “Hear now the word of God as it comes to us from [whatever the Scripture text is].” If all speech is a continuum, and if there is a continuum between translating and preaching (such that there is no meaningful distinction), then how can one distinguish between reading from God’s Word and preaching one’s own text?

Secondly, the specialness of the reading of the word of God is taken away when the professor writes that the reason why there must be formal translation of Scripture is because of its value of application. No, on the contrary—even though Scripture does get applied, it is applied in its reading. The reason why we should try to be as faithful to the original and as accurate in our translation is, in the primary place, simply because Scripture is the word of God and is to be handled as such.

Thirdly, this seminary professor, in essence, denies that there are “elements” of worship at all; rather, in his view, there are mere “aspects” of worship. Accordingly, the regulative principle, which is designed to specify not simply content, but the actual acts in worship, is denied.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 226.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 227; emphasis in the original.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 231.

John M. Frame

The views expressed by Professor Poythress are not unique to him. Indeed, many of them were derived from one of his professors at Westminster Theological Seminary, John M. Frame.

From 1968 to 1980, Professor Frame taught at the Philadelphia campus of Westminster Seminary, and then moved to California to help start Westminster's branch campus in Escondido. After two decades in California, he was called in 2000 to be a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

Over the course of his professorships, Dr. Frame has promulgated his peculiar beliefs on a wide variety of topics. However, his views regarding worship are among the most novel within putatively conservative Presbyterian circles.

In the 1990s, Professor Frame would publish two books on the doctrine of worship, which we will consider later. But his peculiar views were formulated decades before then, as witnessed in his class lectures at Westminster Seminary.

Here is the basic problem in Professor Frame's position. The regulative principle means that the particular elements or parts of worship are prescribed; but in his view, it is merely aspects (prayer, praise, teaching, exhortation, etc.) which are Biblically mandated—aspects which can come to expression in a variety of ways. Accordingly, even the reading of Scripture would not necessarily be a prescribed element of worship, since all Christians agree that extra-Scriptural words may be used in teaching. As a matter of fact, neither the reading of the Word nor the preaching of the Word could be considered to be mandated under Professor Frame's system. If it is true that whatever you may preach you may also sing, then there is nothing to prohibit someone from singing a sermon rather than preaching it.

“New Life” worship

Founded by the late C. John Miller, New Life Presbyterian Church in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had a profound influence on the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as the Presbyterian Church in America.

Godly, gracious, and aggressively evangelistic, Dr. Miller pioneered a style of ministry which embraced radical hospitality and folksy, informal worship in a context of Reformed theology. The New Life Church, which attracted numerous students from Westminster Theological Seminary (where Dr. Miller was a professor of practical theology), was known for not only guitar accompaniment of congregational singing, but also liturgical dance. Worship was conducted in an atmosphere of “sharing” with one another; but, in fairness, also featured strong, and convicting, preaching. Nevertheless, both in style and substance, the New Life approach did not celebrate the regulative principle of worship.

New Life's influence was felt because of the numerous seminarians who worshipped there; because of the evident success of the New Life model; and because of other churches around the OPC which emulated this approach. At one time the largest OPC congregation, the original congregation, and most of its satellite churches, transferred into the PCA in the late 1980s.

Michael Bushell

In 1977, a Westminster Theological Seminary student by the name of Michael S. Bushell wrote a treatise defending exclusive psalmody. Entitled *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, the volume was originally published in 1980, and has gone through three more editions (1993, 1999, and 2011).²⁸

In the first edition of this book, Mr. Bushell laid down the regulative principle as a necessary foundation for the discussion of the content of worship song. However, the later editions presented the arguments for the sufficiency of the psalter first, and then the regulative principle itself.²⁹

In writing of the historical background for the regulative principle, the author avers that “those who consider themselves to be children of the Calvinistic Reformation and yet who disparage to give due emphasis to the regulative principle of worship are Reformed in name only. The regulative principle is not merely an optional appendix to the Reformed faith. In a very real sense it is the Reformed faith.”³⁰

Michael Bushell’s treatment of the regulative principle is one of the most significant ones in the twentieth century. Although we would respectfully suggest that he is just a bit “fuzzy” regarding the categories of substance and circumstance, the basic thrust of his presentation is quite correct, and in accord with the traditional understanding of the regulative principle. Moreover, in this book, he advances the cause, and especially does so, by fighting the contemporary attacks on the doctrine.

Overview

In the 1970s, as the Presbyterian Church in America took its place on the church stage, it found that it now had to define not what it was against, but what it was for. Almost immediately, cracks appeared in what was supposed to be a united front against the PCUS liberals—cracks which eventually developed into deep divisions between those in favor of “traditional” Presbyterian worship (which for the most part meant mid-twentieth century Southern Presbyterian piety), and those for whom the worship service was a means to an end of evangelism and saving the lost.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, what had been regarded a bastion of Reformed orthodoxy, Westminster Theological Seminary, began to enter a period of engaging in experimental theology. “Linguistical analysis” became the fashion, and, with it, the breaking down of meaningful distinctions, including among various elements of worship. The enormous emphasis on a Biblical-theological approach, in contrast to systematic theology, contributed to an inability to embrace proper systematic theological rubrics (categories). The “unofficial” seminary of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) helped to shape that denomination in a direction that was accepting of “New Life” worship, which openly fostered liturgical dance and other innovations. At the same time,

²⁸ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1999).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

up and coming scholars, such as Michael Bushell, were rediscovering the Puritan roots of the Westminster Standards to which all conservative Presbyterians pledged allegiance.

V. The 1980s

Robert G. Rayburn

In 1980, Robert G. Rayburn, well-beloved President of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, wrote a book on worship, entitled *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church*.³¹ As the title implies, the work was designed for a broader audience than a specifically Reformed one.

Perhaps because of the intended readership, Dr. Rayburn hardly dealt with the regulative principle of worship, mentioning it in only the most cursory fashion. Moreover, at points where he seemed to allude to it, his subsequent comments in context demonstrate that the burden of his remarks were in a different direction from the classic expression of this doctrine.

Reformed Worship

In 1986, a journal called *Reformed Worship* began publication, under the auspices of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). It is perhaps the most misnamed magazine in church history. There is absolutely nothing distinctively Reformed about its content. Instead, its appearance helps to illustrate the theological downgrade within the CRC.

As a matter of fact, a search of its web site yielded no matches for the term “regulative principle.” However, under the category of “classic” articles, one can find information on the use of drama, handbells, and movie clips in worship; songs for various seasons (Lent, Ascension, Pentecost, etc.); and avant garde themes of worship and social justice—very fitting, given the CRCNA’s increasing ecumenical ties with liberal Protestantism, as well as with Roman Catholicism.³²

Kevin Reed and Presbyterian Heritage Publications

Kevin Reed is the founder of Presbyterian Heritage Publications, which seeks to publish both historic and contemporary defenses of Presbyterian orthodoxy. In 1984, he penned a stinging critique of James Jordan and his compatriots in Tyler, Texas. Reflecting the affinity of the Tyler folk towards high-church Anglicanism, Mr. Reed’s booklet carries the outrageously funny title of *The Canterbury Tales*.³³

Mr. Reed writes that *The Geneva Papers*, which were produced at Tyler under the auspices of Geneva Divinity School, reveal

³¹ Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980).

³² See http://www.reformedworship.org/cprw_classics.htm.

³³ Kevin Reed, *The Canterbury Tales: An Extended Review and Commentary Based upon the Geneva Papers*.

many alarming trends within the Tyler mentality of worship. Specifically, the activities of the church contain many corruptions of worship, under the guise of liturgical reconstruction. This corruption is evident by (1.) their repudiation of the Reformed regulative principle of worship; (2.) their reintroduction of superstitious and unwarranted practices into the church; (3.) their rejection of confessional Presbyterianism.³⁴

More positively, Kevin Reed set forth a standard explanation of the regulative principle in a 1995 booklet, *Biblical Worship*.³⁵ The first chapter declares: “We believe that the scriptures contain a general prohibition against all elements in worship besides those which God himself has instituted. In other words, the burden of proof falls upon those who wish to introduce a practice into worship, to prove that God has required it in his word. This is the force of the scriptural law of worship; it guards against man-made innovations in worship.”

The second chapter deals with worship in the Old Testament. Besides making the usual appeal to the Second Commandment, there is also a survey of Old Testament history in order to illustrate this principle: “The Lord detests corrupt worship and he punishes this sin.”

The third chapter, on worship in the New Testament, appeals to Matthew 15 to discern Jesus’ attitude regarding worship:

The Pharisees paid lip service to God. We know they made long prayers, fasted twice a week, and arranged financial bequests to the temple. As formalists, they were exceedingly concerned about outward conformity to man-made regulations. At first, we might not link their practices to “public worship,” since many of these activities were conducted outside the temple and synagogue services. Yet, their traditional observances are accounted by Christ a measure of their worship. And their worship is declared to be *vain*. It is vain because it ignores scriptural directives; it is vain because it exalts human innovations (called traditions), thereby violating the spirit of the second commandment; and it is vain because it leads to perdition (Matt. 15:13-14).

Jesus’ dealings with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 make clear that worship must be “in spirit and in truth.” The term “spirit,” according to Mr. Reed, implies sincerity; the term “truth” implies that

our worship must be in conformity to God’s written revelation. There is, indeed, an outward measure for our worship. In the present day, it is common to hear comments that the “heart” is all that matters: a mistaken concept that sincerity of motive and fervent emotion are the substance of

³⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

³⁵ Kevin Reed, *Biblical Worship* (Dallas: Tex.: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995).

genuine worship. But Christ does not confine the essence of worship to worship in spirit; he adds the measure of truth. Acceptable worship is more than the gushy effervescence of a fervent heart. Without truth, such fervor is an offense before God; it is zeal, “but not according to knowledge” (Rom. 10:2).

Kevin Reed also writes in this regard that the grouping of “fellowship” with acts of worship in the classic text on the gathering of the early church, points to the corporate nature of public worship. “It is in the context of the congregation assembled corporately that we find many expressions of public worship and service. Therefore we see why it was mentioned as an important factor that the early Christians continued steadfastly in apostolic *fellowship* (Acts 2:42). Corporate worship is the highest public expression of adoration rendered.”

Carl Bogue

In 1988, Dr. Carl Bogue, long-time pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church (PCA), Akron, Ohio, wrote *The Scriptural Law of Worship* for Presbyterian Heritage Publications. This is a standard, traditional defense of the regulative principle. The booklet deals with the nature of worship, the Scriptural law of worship, a specific example from the Bible of the principle (Nadab and Abihu), and results when the principle has been violated.³⁶

Part of his burden is to point out that denying the regulative principle enervates criticism of Roman Catholic superstition:

When you make an opening in the door of God’s house large enough to admit divided chancels, candles to aid worship, holy days and seasons such as Ash Wednesday (dare I say Easter and Christmas?), that same hole is likely in time to admit the worship of the Virgin Mary, prayers to St. Peter, confession to a priest, holy water, kissing the Pope’s toe, and a whole host of pollutions and monstrosities from which the Church, by God’s grace, escaped in the great revival of biblical Christianity during the Reformation of the sixteenth century.³⁷

William Harrell

On May 6, 1986, the Rev. William Harrell, pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Norfolk, Virginia, presented a paper to the Tidewater Reformed Ministers Fellowship. This paper (along with a postscript) was later published and distributed, at least partially in reaction to the opening worship service at the 1986 PCA General Assembly (see below). Entitled *Concerning Worship*, the pamphlet not only champions the regulative principle of worship per se, but also notes various consequences, including the hindering of evangelism:

³⁶ Carl Bogue, *The Scriptural Law of Worship* (Dallas, Tex.: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988); later reprinted, with slight modification, as *Scriptural Worship* (Dallas, Tex.: Blue Banner Books, 1993).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11

. . . For many, the public worship of God is considered to be not so much a sacred and awesome duty and privilege, as it is a joyful (translated “entertaining”) spectacle, where everyone either wants to or is encouraged to get into the act. Hence we have adult choirs, children’s choirs, special music (often followed by applause!), lay readers of Scripture, orchestrated hand-raising and foot-stomping (purportedly as signs of the movement of the Holy Spirit), altar calls, elaborate liturgies, dramas, mimes, and the list goes on.

Such things gain their entrance into the Church under the heading of “every member ministry.” It is maintained that because a woman can sing a song, or a man can play a tuba, such abilities constitute spiritual gifts which must be exercised in the public worship of God, lest we grieve the Holy Spirit. Yet, does the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Word of God, lead us to believe that it is really His will for us to obscure the glory of Christ? For the obscuring of Christ is just what happens when a collection of professedly pious sideshows crowd around the preaching of the Word of God.

However people may seek to justify such intrusions in public worship, the practical message is very clear. It proclaims in actions (which speak louder than words) that if Jesus Christ, as He is presented to us in the gospel, is too offensive, or is not engaging enough, then there are other things in the program designed to arouse and hold one’s interest. This is nothing other than strange fire.

Indeed, such corruption has even invaded the preaching of the Word in those instances in which the minister jokes, illustrates, simplifies, and abbreviates his message, lest he lose or offend his audience. The definite signal emitted from such preaching is apologetic in the worst sense. It is as if to say God’s Word is harsh and boring and full of antique complications which have no practical bearing on our lives, thus requiring the nice man in the pulpit to spice up the message. Is this not strange fire?³⁸

Both William Harrell and Carl Bogue represent what might be termed “traditionalists” in their denomination. This is a broad term, and encompasses not only people who hold to a strictly Confessional understanding of the meaning of the regulative principle of worship per se, but also some who have subtly changed the meaning of the doctrine. Even among those who subscribe to the Confessional view of the regulative principle, not all would consistently maintain the implications of the doctrine on matters such as the content of worship song or the use of musical instrumentation. The unifying theme of “traditionalists” would include a rejection of “contemporary” worship (in the sense of “experimental”), particularly when such intrudes upon the proper reverence that should characterize public worship.

PCA

³⁸ William Harrell, *Concerning Worship* (Norfolk, Va.: Immanuel Publications, 1987), pp. 5-6.

But while traditionalists tried to hold the line in the PCA, other forces were moving the denomination in an opposite direction. Church bureaucrats spent thousands of dollars in 1983 on a multi-media presentation slated for the annual General Assembly meeting as part of “worship.” When the docket was adopted, the nomenclature was changed so that the event was no longer billed as a service of worship, but was rather an “inspirational service.” Even so, the slide show featured a “picture of Jesus.”

Three years later, the PCA General Assembly in Philadelphia deliberately included multi-media presentations as part of several worship services, and a local (non-PCA) church choir had the stage rocking during one of the times of public worship. Fifty commissioners to the General Assembly signed a formal protest which noted the “preponderance of musical presentations encouraged applause . . . and a standing ovation . . . ; practices which are in conflict with the Reformed understanding of worship, where recognition is given to God, not man.” The protest alleged that “the overall effect of these worship services was to produce approval and acceptance of non-Reformed traditions of worship, rather than to reflect the biblical basis and strength of our own distinct theology and practice of worship.”³⁹

The General Assembly voted to answer the protest, and an ad hoc committee proposed a response that made a favorable reference to liturgical dance and bongo drums and endorsed applause during worship as a way of showing “appreciation to the singer and thanks to God as the author of all our gifts.” The response argued that “Insofar as the evening program contained worship, that worship was agreeable to Scripture [and] was a Biblical expression of the Regulative Principle of Worship.” The General Assembly, after a brief but spirited debate, approved the response.⁴⁰

Besides the obvious difficulties that this response poses in trying to reconcile it with a genuine understanding of the regulative principle of worship, what is also striking is the confusion evident in the minds of the members of the ad hoc committee. Their justification of various practices in what was billed as a worship service was predicated on their noting the fact that “The evening programs were intended to combine a worship time with programs which would illustrate and advance the great commission through the committees of the General Assembly. The programs were to include worship, but were not intended to be exclusively worship.”⁴¹ But, if the regulative principle has any meaning, and if there is not to be total confusion in our worship practices, then surely there must be services of worship which are dedicated totally to worship, and which are not cluttered or interfered with by matters of human innovation or of purely mundane interest.

Paradoxically, the same General Assembly took exception to the minutes of Texas Presbytery for its employment, in an installation service, of elements “not prescribed” in the Confession of Faith. Although not specified in the Committee on Review and Control report, the two practices which that presbytery had un-Constitutionally utilized were musical instrumentation and the singing of uninspired songs.⁴²

³⁹ *Minutes of the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America* (N.p.: Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, 1986), pp. 141-42.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

Overview

In the 1980s, a growing re-awakening of interest in Puritanism clashed with the views of others who advocated what amounted to a “high-church” liturgical approach. The Presbyterian Church in America, ostensibly committed to the Westminster Standards, largely rejected an historic Presbyterian understanding of worship; while at the same time, PCA traditionalists could point, perhaps in a pollyannaish fashion, to little victories as a portent of better days to come.

VI. The 1990s

Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman

In 1992, more than a decade’s worth of labor came to fruition with the publication of *Worship in the Presence of God: A collection of essays on the nature, elements, and historic views and practice of worship*.⁴³ Edited by a Presbyterian Church in America pastor (Frank J. Smith) and ruling elder (David C. Lachman), the volume was designed as the first treatment in the twentieth century of all of the elements of worship from the traditional Presbyterian and Reformed perspective.

Several of the essays clearly set forth the regulative principle. In the introductory chapter, “What is Worship?”, Dr. Smith contends that worship is special (distinct from other areas of life), dialogical (in the form of a dialog between God and man), and prescribed. He writes:

The parts of worship have often been called elements of worship. ‘Element’ is almost metaphoric, invoking images of scientific reality. What we are contending for is the truth that whether speaking of a chemical element or an element of worship, the term ‘element’ signifies that which is fundamental, foundational, irreducible—in chemical terms, you can’t boil it down any farther.

When we argue for the necessity of ‘forms,’ we are not saying that the forms exist independently of the elements or that the forms must be preserved for their own sakes. We are, however, maintaining that an element comes as a package deal; that it generally has form, purpose, and content; and that we cannot divorce these constitutive aspects from one another and still have the element. It is significant that the main mark of the Church has form as well as content: it is the *preaching* of the Word, and not just the Word itself.⁴⁴

⁴³ Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God: A collection of essays on the nature, elements, and historic views and practice of worship* (Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1992).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Other essays also teach the regulative principle. For example, Kevin Reed's historical piece, "John Knox and the Reformation of Worship in the Scottish Reformation," extensively illustrates Knox's commitment to the principle, as well as to its corollary, the purity of worship. The author applies Knox's teaching to today, by writing: "*The Church needs to reaffirm the regulative principle of worship.* Nothing should be admitted into the worship of God, unless it possesses a clear Scriptural warrant. This principle is merely an extension of the *sola scriptura* perspective of Protestant theology, as applied to the realm of worship. Anything less is a violation of the demands of the living God, who says, 'You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.' 'Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not to it nor take away from it.'" Kevin Reed also avers: "In the modern pluralistic age, the Church has lost a sense of the immorality of false worship. False religious opinions and practices are not simply academic differences; they are a form of moral corruption which destroys the souls of men. This truth should provide the Church with a sense of urgency as it confronts men in their false worship."⁴⁵

James B. Jordan

In response to the Smith/Lachman book, James Jordan collated a series of articles into a book entitled, *Liturgical Nestorianism: A Critical Review of Worship in the Presence of God*.⁴⁶ In this book, Dr. Jordan mischaracterizes the traditional regulative principle position. To the best of our knowledge, no one in the RPW camp doubts that God has prescribed the church's worship not only by direct command, but also by approved example and by good and necessary consequence.

James Jordan calls those who hold to the "sect" form of the regulative principle "Minimalists," and he accuses them of being "dispensational."⁴⁷ Furthermore, he accuses the Minimalists of being rationalists, since their concern for "spiritual" worship means "immaterial and intellectual, which is a Greek understanding of the term." In his view, "the Minimalists think that structure is opposed to Spirit, an idea thoroughly bathed in the thinking of the Enlightenment, so that while worship in the Old Creation was structured, now worship in the New Creation is 'spiritual.' All of this shows the influence of pagan irrationalism; none of it has Biblical foundation."⁴⁸ Dr. Jordan also accuses his opponents of being pagan in their philosophical orientation.⁴⁹

In response, let it be noted that the standard Reformed Protestant position regarding the regulative principle, including corollaries such as those which would be in opposition to the continuation of an outward showiness with respect to worship, is not based on Stoicism, but is based on the very Biblical distinction between the ceremonial worship of the Old Covenant, and the fulfilled, heavenly-oriented worship of the New Covenant.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 331, 332.

⁴⁶ James B. Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism: A Critical Review of Worship in the Presence of God* (Niceville, Florida: Transfiguration Press, 1994).

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

Dr. Jordan accuses the Minimalists of tending “to be gnostic and anti-historical.” He writes: “They assume that the ‘simple’ worship of the New Testament era must establish the boundaries of worship for all time, as opposed to setting the direction for the course of liturgical development.”⁵⁰

It is clear that Dr. Jordan rejects the regulative principle of worship. It is also clear that part of his theological misunderstanding comes from an inability to comprehend that the regulative principle, by definition, deals with systematic theology—a branch of learning that, of necessity, searches for unifying factors and universal rubrics. But Dr. Jordan does not adhere to systematic theology.⁵¹ When he rejects traditional Reformed systematic theology, believing that its formulations lead to intellectualism, Gnosticism, and legalism, it is easy to see why he rejects Reformed worship as well.

Finally, we would note that James Jordan maintained a position which implies that there is not a radical distinction between God and man. It is true, as Dr. Jordan has noted, that the Lord Jesus is both God and man, with two natures, and in one person, forever. However, it does not logically follow that therefore man qua man has been raised to a status of being able to determine how he should worship an infinitely holy God. To deny to man any such authority is not to be guilty of “Nestorianism.” On the contrary, it is Dr. Jordan’s assertions which call into question his own orthodoxy on such a matter as the Creator-creature distinction.⁵²

Various Publishers

Dr. Morton H Smith, founding faculty member at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in South Carolina, wrote a book advocating the regulative principle.⁵³ In this same time period, Old Paths Publications, Still Waters Revival Books (SWRB), *The Blue Banner* magazine, and Naphtali Press also advocated for historic Puritan worship.

John M. Frame

In a 1992 article in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Professor John Frame posed “questions” regarding the regulative principle of worship⁵⁴; and in so doing, helped to demonstrate his continued misunderstanding of the principle.

Although he professed not to have betrayed the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards, that was precisely what he has done. He refused to make a sharp distinction between life in general and worship in particular; however, without that sharp distinction, there is no regulative principle as historically understood and maintained by

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 24-25; emphasis in the original.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 61-63.

⁵² Other works by James Jordan on worship include *The Liturgy Trap* and *Theses on Worship*. Reviews of these and Liturgical Nestorianism appeared in *The Blue Banner* magazine; see “Beyond Canterbury. Reviews of James B. Jordan’s Views on Worship,” v. 4 #3-4 (March/April 1995). On *The Blue Banner* see more later in this section below.

⁵³ Morton H. Smith, *The Regulative Principle of Worship: Is It Biblical?* (Greenville, S.C.: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1995).

⁵⁴ John M. Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (Fall 1992), pp. 357-66.

the Puritan forefathers. Moreover, he alleged that the Westminster Confession contradicts itself. Perhaps for someone who is given over to tri-perspectivalism, this is no difficulty. However, for those who hold to basic rules of logic (such as the law of non-contradiction), this allegation would create problems with regard to one's theological system and doctrinal subscription.

Four years after that article in the *Westminster Theological Journal*⁵⁵, Professor Frame encapsulated his ideas in a book entitled, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship*.⁵⁶

After quoting from the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21.1, Mr. Frame writes: "The operative word is 'prescribed.' Eventually this restriction of worship to what God prescribes became known as the 'regulative principle' of Reformed and Presbyterian worship."⁵⁷

However, having enunciated the Confessional principle, Professor Frame promptly, and subtly, begins to render it meaningless. He does so by making the "regulative principle" to apply to all of life ("worship in the broad sense", to use his nomenclature); and by carving out a novel category of "application" which allows for human innovation.

Having repudiated the foundation of the regulative principle, Professor Frame, in his chapter "What to Do in Worship," proceeds to gut the principle in its entirety. With regard to the Puritan (and Westminster Confessional) notion of "parts" or "elements" of worship, he writes that "there are serious problems with this approach. The most serious problem is that there is no scriptural warrant for it! Scripture nowhere divides worship up into a series of independent 'elements,' each requiring independent scriptural justification. Scripture nowhere tells us that the regulative principle demands that particular level of specificity, rather than some other."⁵⁸

The professor contends that the New Testament "gives us no systematic or exhaustive list of the events that were authorized for such services [of public worship]. Certainly it gives us no list of elements in the technical sense of Puritan theology—actions requiring specific scriptural authorization, as opposed to circumstances or applications that do not.

"Another problem with the concept of elements of worship is that the things we do in worship are not always clearly distinguishable from one another. Singing and teaching, for example, are not distinct from one another. When we sing hymns with biblical content, we teach one another (Col. 3:16). And many hymns are also prayers and creeds. Prayers with biblical content contain teaching. The entire service is prayer, since it is uttered in the present of God, to his praise. Perhaps it would be better to speak of 'aspects' of worship, rather than 'elements' or 'parts.'"⁵⁹

However, if there are no particular "elements" of worship, but merely "aspects" which may be expressed in a variety of ways, then what, pray tell, is left of the regulative principle? How does Mr. Frame's position differ substantially from the Lutheran or Anglican view?

⁵⁵ John Frame's thoughts as expressed in the *Westminster Theological Journal* have appeared elsewhere, such as the internet; see http://www.christiancounterculture.com/articles/worship_reg-principle.html. See also his "Reply to T. David Gordon," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (Spring 1994), pp. 181-83.

⁵⁶ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996; xvii + 171).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Further confirming the confusion that has gripped his mind, Professor Frame claims that the “New Testament does not give us an exhaustive list of what was and was not done at early Christian meetings. However, as in the case of the Old Testament synagogue, we may, by appeal to broad theological principles, gain assurance as to what God wants us to do when we gather in his name.”⁶⁰

Mr. Frame proceeds to develop a “list of things to do in worship.” His list includes Greetings and Benedictions, Reading of Scripture, Preaching and Teaching, Charismatic Prophecy and Speaking in Tongues, Prayer, Song, Vows, Confession of Faith, Sacraments, Church Discipline, Collections/Offerings, and Expressions of Fellowship.⁶¹ However, these categories do not fit with standard definitions.

For example, not only does he equate “preaching” and “teaching,” but he further confuses matters when he attempts to justify “drama” as a form of “preaching.”⁶²

We could note other ambiguities and outright errors in Professor Frame’s “list.” However, we will at this point simply concentrate on the final item, viz., “Expressions of Fellowship.” Here, he sets forth his belief that “worship has both vertical and horizontal aspects—that in worship we should be concerned above all for God’s glory, but also for our fellow worshipers as our brothers and sisters in Christ.” In his opinion, fellowship meals, holy kisses, and announcements can be appropriate for worship. Beyond that, he writes: “It is not wrong in worship to honor human beings, as long as that honor does not compromise the supreme honor due to the Lord. Nor is it wrong for the congregation to express that honor with a song, applause, hand holding, or hugs.”⁶³

At this point, one hardly knows what to say. It is, to say the least, breathtaking to think that a Reformed theologian would suggest that, in worship, honor ought to be offered to mere mortals. However, we are certain that the Lord of the universe has some definite—and very condemnatory—thoughts about the offering of praise to men during a time that is to be reserved for the worship of God.

Professor Frame’s peculiar perspective also has led him to countenance female leadership in worship, and the celebration of Christmas.⁶⁴ He also contends that liturgical dancing is kosher: “God is pleased when we dance before him in worship, but he does not expect us to do it every time we meet in his name. . . . [I]t is not a ‘necessary element’ of worship, but something that provides enrichment of worship from time to time.” Encouraging the clapping of hands and lifting up of hands in public worship, Professor Frame claims that these also constitute “‘music of the body.’ God wants body as well as spirit to be engaged in his worship.” He writes: “If people want to stand up and move rhythmically to the songs of praise, they should be encouraged to do so. Dance in worship is first of all the simple, natural, physical dimension of the reverent joy we share in Christ. Most of us, even those who are not very demonstrative in our worship, find it natural to sway, however slightly, to the rhythm of the songs we sing. That movement itself is a simple form of dance. If that is justifiable, who is to draw the line to show precisely how much movement is permitted? And if such simple movements are

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 55-60. Professor Frame does note that Charismatic Prophecy and Speaking in Tongues, although part of New Testament worship, “were special gifts of God for the founding of the church and should not be expected in our time.”

⁶² Ibid., p. 93.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 64-66 (and see note 4 on p. 75).

justifiable, why not greater movement, especially in light of the biblical references to dance?”⁶⁵

What are we to make of Professor Frame’s views? Despite his protestations to the contrary, his position denies the regulative principle of worship, even while he professes allegiance to it. Moreover, his views have led him to all kinds of bizarre conclusions, including the endorsement of liturgical dance and drama, and the honoring of men during worship.

The confusion evident in Mr. Frame regarding worship is emblematic of the deeper problem in his theological system, viz., tri-perspectivalism. His academic work has been predicated upon an advocacy of three “perspectives”—the normative, the situational, and the existential—which are equally ultimate. This means that the normative—presumably, that of Scripture—is simply one perspective that informs us in a given situation. The result, of necessity, is that the entire theological enterprise becomes subject to subjectivism, rather than having a solid, objective, Biblical anchor. It is therefore no wonder that Professor Frame’s views on worship have gone so far astray from the genuine regulative principle of worship.⁶⁶

T. David Gordon

Presbyterian Church in America minister T. David Gordon was in the forefront of those in his denomination who have advocated a “traditional” approach to worship. Besides being a seminary and college professor, Dr. Gordon has also been a pastor, and thus in a position to bring his beliefs to bear in practical application.

In addition to some published exchanges with John Frame regarding worship, Professor Gordon has written unpublished papers, some of which have gained wide currency on the internet and other places. One of his papers is entitled, “Nine Lines of Argument in Favor of the Regulative Principle of Worship.” His nine points are: Argument from the Limits of Church-Power (the regulative principle of church government lying behind the regulative principle of worship); Argument from Liberty of Conscience (“to require a person, in corporate worship, to do something that God has not required, forces the person to sin against his/her conscience, by making them do what they do not believe God has called them to do”); Argument from Faith (“God cannot be pleased by worship which is unfaithful, that is, worship which is not an obedient response to his revelation”); Argument from the distance between the Creator and the creature; Argument from the character of God as jealous; Argument from those passages where piety is described as doing exclusively what God wishes; Argument from the severity of the temporal punishments inflicted upon those who offer to God worship other than what

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 131-32.

⁶⁶ Mr. Frame himself acknowledges the connection between his “perspectivalism” and his views on worship: *ibid.*, p. 62 (note 3) and p. 76 (note 12). Other critiques of his book have been made, including by Kevin Reed (“Presbyterian Worship: Old and New: A Review and Commentary upon *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, a book by John Frame”; available on the internet at <http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/regulativeprinciple.html>); and Dr. Joseph Pipa (Rev. of *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, *Presbyterian & Reformed News* v. 2, #4 [Fall 1996], pp. 10-11; available on-line at www.presbyteriannews.org). At the time of his review, Dr. Pipa was a colleague of Professor Frame at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

He has prescribed; Argument from the sinful tendency towards idolatry; and Argument from Church History.

However, Dr. Gordon has also carved out a third category in his dealing with the doctrine of worship—in addition to “elements” and “circumstances,” he is a staunch champion of the notion that the elements may come to expression by a variety of “forms.” By “forms,” he means that the particular language in which an element of worship may be expressed is a matter of indifference, rather than being fixed.

While it is true that with regard to some of the elements of worship, the content is not fixed (such as the praying of prayer and the preaching of the word), it is also true that that principle is not universally valid for all of the elements of worship. For example, the content for the reading of the Word is, by definition, fixed, since we are confined to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments for that element. Similarly, we would suggest that the content of the singing of praise is likewise fixed. The point to be maintained here is that Scripture itself will determine whether the “form” is fixed or free; and that each element must be handled on an individual basis.

Steve Gonzales

In 1995, Steve Gonzales, an organizing pastor for the Presbyterian Church in America in Clifton Park, New York, published a booklet which utilized the regulative principle in opposition to the use of drama in worship.⁶⁷ Among other points, he urges that worship is not entertainment, and worship does not aim to make people “feel good.”⁶⁸

Mark Dalbey

In 1999, Mark Dalbey became Dean of Students and Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. At the same time, he completed his D.Min dissertation at Covenant Seminary, entitled, “A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Look at the Regulative Principle of Worship.”⁶⁹

By his own admission, Dr. Dalbey largely follows the views of John Frame with respect to worship. Therefore, there is the same Frame format of distinguishing among “elements,” “circumstances,” and “applications,” although Professor Dalbey tends to use terms such as “forms” and “styles.”

Among the churches which were observed in order to evaluate contemporary worship was a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Lutheran, Evangelical Presbyterian, and PCA congregations were also looked at. However, one of the weaknesses of the study is that “traditional Presbyterian worship” was not defined in terms of the view of the Westminster Standards; accordingly, other than a few passing references to the worship at the chapel at Geneva College, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America school in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, there was no consideration of a genuinely Presbyterian service of worship.

⁶⁷ Steve Gonzales, *The Regulative Principle & Drama in Worship* (N.p. [Greenville, S.C.]: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1995).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁶⁹ Mark L. Dalbey, “A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Look at the Regulative Principle of Worship” (unpublished dissertation, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1999).

In dealing with a couple of PCA churches in Indiana where he had been pastor, Dr. Dalbey notes that introducing contemporary worship had caused division in the those congregations. However, his view of producing unity in the church appears to be that of “traditionalists” learning to submit to the imposition of new “forms” and “styles,” with never a thought given to how the others might learn to worship in accord with the norms of the Presbyterian faith.

Terry Johnson

Presbyterian Church in America pastor Terry Johnson has served quite capably since 1987 as senior pastor of the historic Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia. Besides helping to revive the ministry of an old downtown congregation, he has also helped revive interest in traditional worship, especially by taking the lead in the production of the Trinity Psalter, an inexpensive, words-only version of the metrical psalter conceived as a supplement manual of praise for churches familiar only with hymnals.

In 1996, Pastor Johnson published *Leading in Worship*, designed to aid modern churchmen in the practice of worship.⁷⁰ In a brief introduction, he postulates that not all forms of worship are suitable to perpetuate Presbyterian theology (“Charismatic [and] Episcopalian buckets [cannot] carry Presbyterian water. . . . repetitious choruses and litanies cannot accommodate the subtlety of Reformed theology”), laments the contemporary liturgical diversity among Presbyterians (“We may face the defection of *a whole generation* if we do not achieve a greater uniformity of worship”), and advocates the rediscovery of the regulative principle.⁷¹

Regarding the regulative principle, the Georgia minister argues for its validity not so much on the basis of proof texts, as from the character of Reformed theology as a whole: “Can the creature know how to please the Creator apart from His self-revelation? Can fallen humanity create a form of worship that is approved by a Holy God? May the church legislate ceremonies and rituals for use in public worship not commanded by God in His Word? The Reformed doctrines of Scripture’s sufficiency, God’s transcendence, man’s infinitude, sin’s corruptions, the limits of church power, and the Christian’s liberty of conscience, to name a few, all require the restrictions of the regulative principle.”⁷²

However, Pastor Johnson’s presentation is not totally satisfactory. He does properly list the various elements of worship, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith; however, he then says: “While these elements are fixed and unchanging, *circumstances* (e.g., time of meeting; place of meeting; systems for lighting and voice amplification, etc.) and *forms* (e.g., written prayer vs. extemporaneous; hymns vs. Psalms; topical vs. expository sermons) are determined by the ‘light of nature and Christian prudence,’ leading us to expect more variety in these areas.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Terry L. Johnson, ed., *Leading in Worship: A Sourcebook for Presbyterian Students and Ministers Drawing Upon the Biblical and Historic Forms of the Reformed Tradition* (Oak Ridge, Tennessee: The Covenant Foundation, 1996).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3; emphasis in the original.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The problem, of course, is that his category of “forms” is too broad. While it is true that there is “freedom of speech,” so to speak, with respect to those elements of worship where the actual words are not prescribed (prayer and the preaching of the Word), it is not true to say that that same diversity applies to other elements of worship (such as in the singing of praise). Or, to put the point somewhat differently, the content of each of the elements of worship is prescribed as being a necessary part of that element, but in some elements the divine prescription allows for spontaneity, while in others (the singing of praise and the reading of the Word) it does not.

Furthermore, Pastor Johnson demonstrates his willingness to have the church’s worship modified based on practices of antiquity, rather than based solely on what is indicated in the Bible.⁷⁴

Another example of his willingness to appeal to what is historical is his favorable treatment of “seasonal services.”⁷⁵

Terry Johnson therefore represents a moderate regulative principle position. He very much wants to restrict worship to the several elements of worship. However, he uses an expanded concept of forms—a modification that can allow for the singing of uninspired hymns during public worship.

Overview

In the 1990s, discussion of the regulative principle became more fashionable within mainstream conservative Presbyterianism, with a resulting growth in the amount of literature, both pro and con. The publication of *Worship in the Presence of God* signaled a significant interest in the doctrine, and even the attack on the book by James Jordan was indicative of the manner in which the book was viewed.

In this decade also, various publishers, such as Still Waters Revival Books, Old Paths Publications, and *Blue Banner*, likewise contributed support to a traditional understanding of this doctrine. Less consistently, others supported the principle in general terms, but with sufficient modifications as to decrease its full import.

Further to the left, the conception of the regulative principle itself was being questioned, not only by James Jordan’s writings, but by people such as Westminster Seminary professor John Frame, who utilized the term “expressions” as a way of trying to insert into worship practices that, in his view, were neither properly “circumstantial” or

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 103-04. Perhaps Terry Johnson is unaware of this, but James Hastings Nichols is a liberal, and certainly no friend to conservative Presbyterians. Nichols contended that “The Reformers did not . . . attempt to emulate the forms of worship of the apostolic church,” but that they “accepted, rather, the patterns established in the second century and maintained by Catholic tradition.” He also wrote: “New Testament worship, . . . in its variety and flexibility, questions the finality of all liturgical regulations, and by its refusal to admit the cultic as such, it sets authenticity of religious life above all aesthetic criteria. In this sense the Reformers were faithful to the New Testament precisely in declining to pursue either New Testament or patristic patterns literally.” See James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 19, 23. See also William Stacy Johnson, “Equally Yoked,” in *Presbyterian Outlook*, May 28, 2001, commenting on “Affirmation 2001,” a document which advocated homosexual ordination: “Made public at the Downtown United church of Rochester, N.Y., ‘Affirmation 2001’ claims to stand in the impressive tradition of Harry Emerson Fosdick, James Hastings Nichols, Henry Sloan Coffin and the Auburn Affirmation published in January 1924.”

“elemental.” In the PCA, a “consensus” statement, that appeared the year before Professor Frame’s *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, used similar terminology.

VII. The New Millennium

R. J. Gore, Jr.

R. J. Gore, Jr., represents one of several scholars who desire to move from “simple” and “prescribed” worship, to a type of worship that is ecumenical in scope.

Dr. Gore pastored in the Bible Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America. In 1996, he was hired to teach systematic theology at Erskine Theological Seminary, the denominational school of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, located in Due West, South Carolina; and is now the Dean at that institution.

His Ph.D. is from Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and the 1988 dissertation, “The Pursuit of Plainness: Rethinking the Regulative Principle of Worship,” was a critique of the Puritan understanding of worship. Throughout the 1990s, Professor Gore continued to develop his anti-Confessional ideas,⁷⁶ and then summed up his thoughts in 2002 with his book, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle*.⁷⁷

Dr. Gore begins his treatise by sketching an autobiographical pilgrimage, from a position of enthusiastically adopting the Puritan perspective, to one of questioning it. One key factor in that journey was his increasing inability to understand the difference between using “a visible, physical, and tangible symbol” such as a wooden cross, and the Bible’s literary use of that symbol. Another factor was his having been highly uplifted by means of a highly liturgical worship service at a presbytery meeting, and his not knowing how to reconcile that experience with what he “professed to believe.” A third key factor was his becoming a U.S. Army National Guard chaplain in 1986; as a result of his chaplaincy, he found himself having to justify his unwillingness to participate in a generic Protestant service—complete with altar set-up consisting of a brass cross and candlesticks—stipulated by the Army. As he read numerous books which defended the Puritan principle, he

found a disturbing pattern. Many of the writings borrowed heavily from other sources favorable to the Puritan regulative principle of worship and provided little interaction with current developments in worship. There was much indicting of ‘will-worshippers,’ but little effort was made to articulate a positive exposition of the regulative principle in light of

⁷⁶ For example, see his review of Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, eds., *Worship in the Presence of God: A collection of essays on the nature, elements, and historic views and practice of worship*, *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994), pp. 443-47; “Reviewing the Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship,” *Presbyterion* 20.1 (1994), pp. 41-50; and “Reviewing the Regulative Principle. Part II,” *Presbyterion* 21.1 (1995), pp. 29-47. *Presbyterion* is the official scholarly journal of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis.

⁷⁷ R. J. Gore, Jr., *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002).

cultural challenges. Indeed, a great deal of the literature was little more than sloganeering. Furthermore, the exegesis of the key texts upon which the principle was based often appeared overstated and unconvincing.

He then confesses that as he tried to apply the regulative principle, he was led “to conclusions that challenged much of what I had previously believed about Reformed worship.”⁷⁸

Dr. Gore also mentions a final factor in his theological transformation, viz., the sobering fact “that so few Christians embraced the Puritan regulative principle of worship.” Of the 2.1 billion Christians in the world, only a tiny percentage would be evangelical Presbyterian (those in the United States representing about 0.019 percent of all Christians worldwide), and “an even smaller subset would profess to follow the Puritan regulative principle of worship.” While conceding that “the lack of adherents, in and of itself, does not negate the Puritan regulative principle of worship,” he also suggests not only an approach of humility by Presbyterians, but also a willingness to “learn from the church catholic.”⁷⁹

Given his presuppositions, it is understandable why Dr. Gore opposes this Presbyterian doctrine. One of the ways in which he does so is by trying to drive a wedge between Presbyterian and Puritan worship. He writes: “In true pendulum-like fashion, the corrective efforts of the Westminster Assembly were at times excessive. James F. White observes that ‘when the Reformers did rebel against prevailing practice, justifiable anger at contemporary abuses often led to the elimination of things of genuine value that had become distorted in the course of time.’”⁸⁰

Professor Gore also had previously made reference to James White, “a leading expert on worship,” who “places Puritan worship, a seventeenth-century development and major influence on Presbyterian faith and practice, midway between Reformed and Anabaptist traditions of worship. According to White’s analysis, Presbyterians must trace their liturgical lineage back not only to the practices of Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox, but also to the practices of the English Puritans.”⁸⁰

From the footnotes, one can glean that the sources for this perspective are from liberal sources: John Knox Westminster Press, and *Christian Century* magazine. Moreover, who exactly is this “leading expert on worship”? James F. White is the long-time professor of liturgical studies at the University of Notre Dame, and a champion of an ecumenical approach to church life.⁸¹

It is one thing to utilize scholarly works in order to gain insight into various historical phenomena with regard to the practice of worship. But it is quite another thing altogether to quote favorably from enemies of historic Presbyterianism in order to denigrate the position of one’s spiritual forefathers.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 4-7.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁸¹ “James F. White . . . has devoted his professional life to teaching liturgy and equipping others for this ministry. He has been involved in liturgical reform and is the author of sixteen other books on liturgy. He has been involved in liturgical reform and is the author of sixteen other books on liturgy” (<http://www.stgabriel.com/pages/LP61564.html>).

This is a pattern which one finds throughout Professor Gore's work. He quotes favorably from Robert Webber, an erstwhile Reformed Presbyterian⁸² who at one time taught at Covenant College but later joined himself to High Church Anglicanism (the "smells and bells" crowd); and from Thomas Howard, raised as a fundamentalist but one who subsequently converted to Roman Catholicism. Dr. Gore writes: "Howard . . . challenged evangelicals to restore the Lord's Table to a place of importance, as 'the center of the liturgy.' Through these writings, Webber and Howard addressed the evangelical community at large with questions—and proposed answers that demand a hearing."⁸³

Dean Gore contends that the difference between Calvin and his theological heirs in England and Scotland should not be attributed to "natural, logical development"—the "traditional" historiographical view—but should be understood as a "paradigm shift." He mentions that this challenge to the traditional view came through "some scholars" in the 1970s and 1980s—again, without noting that many of these scholars represent a liberal theological perspective with an ecclesiastical ax to grind.

In a chapter entitled, "Worship, Geneva Style," the Erskine professor distinguishes sharply between Calvin and the Puritans regarding "(1) the use of formal liturgical worship, (2) the role of ceremony, and (3) the propriety of certain traditional acts of worship."⁸⁴ He also suggests that both Anglicanism and Puritanism, who were spiritual heirs of Calvin, emphasized different aspects of his thought, and thus distorted some of the richness of Calvin's teaching.⁸⁵

According to Dr. Gore, the "more radical Puritans differed from Calvin in two specific ways." First, "they interpreted the regulative principle far more rigorously than did Calvin." The difference is between "whatever is consistent with Scripture" (Calvin) and "whatever is commanded by Scripture" (Puritan). Secondly, "the Puritan application of the regulative principle differed from Calvin in its more rigorous requirements for circumstances and its restrictive understanding of *adiaphora*. The Puritan position is related to Calvin's position, but as an exaggeration, a more extreme rule that does achieve the full biblical balance and catholicity of Calvin's position."

Professor Gore maintains that the Puritan view of worship entailed numerous errors. It was "the Puritan tendency toward rationalism" that led Puritanism to emphasize worship as a solely mental activity. What caused this imbalance? According to Dr. Gore, Stoicism and neo-Platonism worked in tandem with "the Puritans' own ascetic leanings."⁸⁶ Puritanism was guilty of hermeneutical errors, including overly-proof-texting, failing to read texts in light of the whole Scripture, and a failure "to take into account organic biblical developments" (i.e., redemptive history).⁸⁷ The regulative principle does not take into account the practice of the Lord Jesus, and cannot account for the legitimate existence of the synagogue.⁸⁸

⁸² That is, of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES) variety.

⁸³ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, pp. 14-15. Buried in an endnote is the fact that Thomas Howard did later convert to Roman Catholicism (p. 168, note 12).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-100.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-10.

In a chapter on “Your Reasonable Service,” R. J. Gore argues that covenantal life is worship. The professor does correctly note that the concessions by Norman Shepherd and John H. White, who profess adherence to the regulative principle of worship but believe that “the regulation of worship is but a specific application of the regulation of life,” work to “undermine the nature of the Puritan regulative principle of worship.”⁸⁹ In his eyes, the regulation of worship and of life are essentially the same: “Worship is regulated, even as life is regulated, based on the clear, sufficient teaching of Scripture, which sets boundaries and limits actions, but provides liberty and freedom of response within those parameters. Francis Schaeffer has pointed out that both form and freedom are grounded in creation and both must be asserted—in balance.”⁹⁰ Furthermore, the author’s approach calls for a “covenantal consciousness,” for worship and life, leading to the following conclusion:

Worship was never intended to consist in simple conformity to a comprehensive set of guidelines. Even in the Mosaic economy, filled with ceremonial and typical elements, basic to true worship was the exercise of dominion as faithful obedient creatures. Now, in the cultural diversity of the New Testament church, the occasion for exercising such stewardship has vastly increased.⁹¹

In the same chapter, Professor Gore rings the changes on the notion of *adiaphora*, or things indifferent.⁹²

However, at this point, we must confess that we are confused as to the professor’s cogency. It is one thing to suggest that there has to be a category of circumstance in order for the church to function—a fact that all Protestants recognize. However, it is quite another to suggest that the Lutheran and Anglican approaches to that category are virtually synonymous with that of Calvin and Knox.

Finally, Dr. Gore sets forth his view of a “covenantal principle of worship,” the term he has coined to describe his peculiar views.⁹³ The “most significant” aspect is that

the covenantal principle of worship includes the freedom to worship in any manner warranted by the Scriptures. That is, the covenantal principle of worship says that whatever is consistent with the Scriptures is acceptable in worship. Here is where the major difference with the Puritan formula appears. For the Puritan, all worship was either commanded or unlawful. If commanded, it was either directly commanded (or logically necessary; thus essential) or indirectly commanded, by general principle and Christian prudence (and therefore circumstantial).

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 112-14.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 119-24.

⁹² Ibid., pp. 125-35.

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 138ff.

Professor Gore calls upon Reformed believers to be both “open” to others in the Body of Christ, and humble. He goes beyond urging Pentecostals and High Church Episcopalians learning from each other, and claims that “Protestants in general should be able to learn from the traditions of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. After all, does not the sacramental focus of the Roman Catholic Church have something to say to Presbyterians whose worship, sadly enough, all too frequently has been desacramentalized? And does not the Orthodox tradition of mystery have something to contribute to the churches of the Reformation and their tendency toward intellectualized, overly didactic worship? Worship that is catholic requires the willingness to hear the truth contained in other traditions, even when that truth has been obscured by nonbiblical accretions.”⁹⁴

In answer to the two rhetorical questions in the preceding paragraph, we would most definitely answer, “No!” Our Presbyterian doctrine already includes a proper understanding of the sacraments, and already properly celebrates the mystery of worship. (Is Dr. Gore simply not aware of the literature in the Reformed heritage?)

More than that, at this point, we see even more clearly where Dr. Gore’s spiritual pilgrimage is taking him. It appears that he is not only embarrassed by the small numbers of conservative Presbyterians, but also by the relative smallness of the Protestant church vis-a-vis Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Regarding worship that is “culturally sensitive,” he writes that “change in worship has been part of God’s ongoing plan of redemption. Even Scripture itself is filled with changes in worship from the patriarchal stage to the Mosaic, from the Mosaic to the Davidic, and from the Davidic to the New Covenant. The biblical imperative for the church in relation to culture, then, is adaptation and transformation, redeeming that which is ‘noble and wholesome.’” He adds: “The genius of Reformed liturgy is revealed every time cultural adaptation of the liturgy is achieved.”⁹⁵

Really? We thought that the genius of Reformed worship is revealed every time the church conforms to the regulative principle of worship. But what is more shocking is the assumption that change in worship within Scripture, gives warrant for extra-Biblical change to the practice of worship. A final observation with regard to this topic has to do with his assertion that the church must redeem in culture “that which is ‘noble and wholesome.’” The reference to “noble and wholesome” comes from a book published by Paulist Press, and written by Anscar Chupungco,⁹⁶ a Roman Catholic from the Philippines.

We must say that, on one level, it is refreshing that someone who denies the regulative principle of worship would be candid enough to admit it. But since the Rev. Dr. Gore admits that he is out of accord with the Westminster Standards on such a major matter as the doctrine of worship,⁹⁷ then why does he continue to enjoy status as a

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 151-52.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 153-54.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 192, note 41.

⁹⁷ Not to belabor the point, but, in case there is any question as to Professor Gore’s hostility to the Presbyterian position, here is a sampling of his own words: “. . . the Puritan regulative principle of worship was imbalanced in a number of ways”; “*Jesus, in his practice, violated the Puritan formulation of the regulative principle of worship*” (emphasis in the original); “The forced exegesis and arguments from silence demonstrated the inadequacy of the Puritan formula”; “. . . the regulative principle, as formulated by the Puritans, adopted by the Westminster Assembly, and embraced by the various Presbyterian

Presbyterian teaching elder? (Would it not be the honorable course of action for him to relinquish his ministerial credentials?) Indeed, why did a purportedly conservative denomination (the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church) employ him as a faculty member at (and at one point Dean of) their official seminary?⁹⁸

PCA Ministers

In the 2000s, two ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America wrote books which argued against the regulative principle of worship.

A pastor in St. Louis, Missouri, Jeffrey J. Meyers has been involved in what he and others call “liturgical renewal.” In 2003, his substantial book (448 pages), *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship*, was published by Canon Press.⁹⁹ In this volume, he clearly and unambiguously tarred the Puritan faith with the brush of Marcionism. Marcion’s heretical views—such as denying inspiration to much of Scripture, and positing that the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament—put him well beyond the pale of Christianity.

Peter J. Leithart was for many years a senior fellow of theology and literature at New St. Andrews College, Moscow, Idaho. He has long been an advocate of paedocommunion, and has long imbibed of the exegetical fancies that have characterized the writings of James Jordan. In 2003, Dr. Leithart wrote *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution*,¹⁰⁰ a book which continues in the same vein.

The author specifically rejects the Reformed regulative principle of worship. “In the hands of at least some writers,” he writes, “the regulative principle is, in practice, hermeneutically wooden and theologically Marcionite. It is wooden because an explicit ‘command’ is required for every act of worship, and it is Marcionite because it ignores the abundant Old Testament liturgical instruction in favor of exegeting a few passages of the New.” In a footnote, he explains: “Marcion was the early church heretic who believed that the god of the New Testament was a different deity from the god of the Old. I am using ‘Marcionite’ in this context to describe a system of theology (in this case, liturgical theology) that sharply separates between the Old and the New.”¹⁰¹

Dr. Leithart summarizes his thesis this way:

David’s reorganization of worship at the tabernacle in Jerusalem was based on Mosaic ceremonial law, yet it was an expansive and creative application of the law, without ceasing to be an application. David’s liturgical revolution thus provides a *canonical* illustration of how the law

churches, is flawed and unworkable”; “. . . the Puritan regulative principle of worship [is] flawed” (ibid., pp. 92, 106, 110, 111, 139).

⁹⁸ Within the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Dean Gore is not alone in the desire to destroy traditional Presbyterian worship. In Spring 1996, the Editor of *Faith and Practice: A Journal of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church*, Joel Gillespie, wrote approvingly of R. J. Gore, and of Boyce Wilson in their incorporating “contemporary worship elements into the worship of your church” (p. 4)

⁹⁹ Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁰ Peter J. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003).

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 15-16.

was applied to liturgical matters. By examining these portions of Scripture, furthermore, we can see that the church’s “sacrifice of praise” grew out of an application of Levitical law. By showing the subtlety of the law’s relation to Davidic worship, this study offers some hints about the scriptural regulation of worship in general and shows the relevance of Levitical liturgics to Christian worship.¹⁰²

Instead of a “regulation-by-explicit-command,” David’s approach, according to Dr. Leithart, was “regulation-by-analogy.” Applying this principle would lead the church today to place both candles and a tablecloth on the communion table (despite the absence of any such command), since such adornments “are consistent with the analogy—the *scriptural* analogy—between the Lord’s Supper and a wedding feast.”¹⁰³

However, as Presbyterians (such as seventeenth century theologian George Gillespie) have noted, the types of worship practices being urged by Dr. Leithart do go beyond Scriptural teaching, and actually impugn the integrity of the Bible by suggesting that the Word of God is not sufficient for our worship. Furthermore, there really is no stopping point once such a scheme is put into practice; and there are no adequate safeguards to prevent the kinds of abuses to which a Romanizing tendency has subjected the church.

Significantly, both Drs. Meyers and Leithart were later charged with heresy because of their views on several key doctrines, including justification by faith alone and the nature of baptism—issues that were raised because of their affinity with Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul.

Brian M. Schwertley

The Rev. Brian M. Schwertley has long rejected the Anglican (and other non-Reformed) approaches to worship, and has long embraced a Presbyterian understanding. His book, *Sola Scriptura and The Regulative Principle of Worship*,¹⁰⁴ lays out the traditional Calvinistic perspective on the regulative principle.

D. G. Hart and John R. Muether

In April 2002, D. G. Hart and John R. Muether published *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship*.¹⁰⁵ The book unabashedly advocates a traditional approach to worship. The authors write that, for the Reformed Church (in contrast to the Lutheran), “*sola Scriptura* means the reformation of doctrine, polity, and worship. All three are essential to the ministry of the church. Consequently, in applying the regulative principle to worship, the Reformed permitted only what God expressly prescribed in the Bible, believing that Scripture forbids in the church corporately identified whatever God does not command explicitly or by good and necessary

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 16; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 104-05; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁴ Brian M. Schwertley, *Sola Scriptura and The Regulative Principle of Worship* (Southfield, Mich.: Reformed Witness, n.d.).

¹⁰⁵ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002).

consequence. In contrast to the normative principle, the *silence* of Scripture regarding a specific practice in worship, such as lighting candles or displaying banners, is just as much a prohibition as a direct condemnation of such a practice.”¹⁰⁶

The book argues that the casual approach to worship taken by many contemporary Christians parallels the views of Marcion, a second century heretic.

Although the early church condemned him, Marcion could be the patron saint of many contemporary Christians because all too often we come to worship thinking like Marcion. Yes, God was strict in the Old Testament; Leviticus tells us that. But he became loving in the New Testament, or so it seems. New Testament worship is no longer formal or strict or highly regulated. The church needs to become informal, spontaneous, and user friendly—words that hardly fit the image of Leviticus.¹⁰⁷

Towards the end of the book, in dealing with “Discernment in Worship,” the authors draw parallels between the liberals whom J. Gresham Machen confronted in the 1920s and 1930s, and liturgical innovators today.

Of course, we are not claiming that worship innovators are inevitably liberal in the old-fashioned sense. But in Reformed circles, when it comes to the meaning of the Reformed creeds and catechisms in their teaching on worship, we do find a similar kind of evasiveness about the historic meaning of these confessional statements that govern Presbyterian and Reformed church life. The point is that people will sometimes employ biblical and confessional language, wrongly understood, to baptize innovations. The implication is that Christians should not merely take other believers at their word but also look at their deeds. And one of the telltale signs of whether a person, congregation, or denomination is Reformed is worship. For faith cannot be divorced from practice.¹⁰⁸

In their estimation, theology undergirds worship. Therefore, “Our only standard for worship is what is revealed in Scripture, not our emotions, or what church-growth experts recommend. God’s Word is at the heart of Reformed worship, and it is the best way to be discerning about the way we gather to honor and give thanks to God.”¹⁰⁹

D. G. Hart

In April, 2003, D. G. Hart published *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition*.¹¹⁰ Dr. Hart believes that the real divide in American

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 78; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 181-82.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 182-83.

¹¹⁰ D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003).

Protestantism is not between liberals and evangelicals. Rather, since the 1700s, “the real divide, not just in American Protestantism but in American Christianity, has been between formalists and antiformalists, that is, liturgicalists and pietists. The popularity of revivalism combined with cultural factors in the United States that favor individualistic expressions of Christianity have made Protestant liturgicalism scarce. But a high view of the church and the ministry of Word and sacrament was a substantial part of historic Protestantism prior to the middle of the nineteenth century. What is more, . . . high-church Calvinism may prove a welcome antidote to some of the coarseness and sentimentality that have prompted some evangelicals to look to Canterbury, Rome, or Constantinople for relief.”¹¹¹

In a chapter entitled, “The Irony of American Presbyterian Worship,” Dr. Hart explores the reasons why many so-called “conservative” Presbyterians are liturgical innovators, and why many “liberal” Presbyterians are traditionalists with respect to worship. In doing so, he compares and contrasts the works of Hughes Oliphant Old, a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and John M. Frame, a minister initially in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and now in the Presbyterian Church in America.

The differences between the two books stand out based on a cursory glance at the table of contents. Old organizes his book around the traditional elements of Reformed worship, devoting separate chapters to baptism, the Sabbath, praise, the Word, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. Frame, however, approaches the matter inductively, gearing his argument toward specific issues in contemporary debates. . . . In the “liberal” PCUSA, if Old’s book is any indication, the traditional elements and rites of historic Reformed liturgy are firmly in place. But in the “conservative” PCA, using Frame as a guide, the conventional pieces of Reformed worship are in flux.¹¹²

Professor Hart attributes this curious reversal of roles to American Presbyterian history, going back to the revivalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Revivalistic piety, with its emphasis upon (often emotional and dramatic) conversion experiences, undid the traditional Reformed high-church perspective.¹¹³

In the twentieth century, this “Presbyterian predicament” centers around evangelism and the debate over Biblical inerrancy. The pragmatic evangelistic thrust that trumps all other considerations, made conservative American Presbyterians susceptible to John Frame’s approach, which is that of ensuring the “intelligibility” of worship to visitors. Regarding the nature of the Bible, Dr. Hart suggests that “conservative Presbyterians congenitally regard tradition with suspicion because it appears to put human wisdom on a par with the Bible. In contrast, mainline Presbyterians, perhaps because they stress the humanity of Scripture, are more comfortable with the work that humans do in the service of God.”¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 182-83.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 188-94.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 194-98; the quote is from pp. 196-97.

The professor concludes that, in a Wesleyan culture and Pentecostal age, “American Presbyterians are faced with a dilemma. To make worship accessible to persons for whom informality is as common as the air they breathe is to gut Reformed worship of its reverence, dignity, and simplicity. But to do justice to the rigor of Calvinist worship is to burn fire that may please God but certainly smells foul to residents of the United States. American Presbyterians have tried to dodge that dilemma for almost two centuries, and the consequences have not propitious for the propriety, uniformity, and dignity that Calvin believed should characterize Reformed worship.”¹¹⁵

Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America

In 2003, the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of America (RPCNA) approved a study on worship which had been previously commissioned in response to queries from one of that denomination’s ministers who was questioning the historic stance of his church. The report concluded that the regulative principle of worship, taught in the Westminster Standards and in the RPCNA Testimony, “is an essential part of Scripture’s doctrine of worship”; and adduced many of the standard arguments in favor: “the need to preserve the purity of the gospel, God’s holiness and man’s creatureliness, the second commandment, the need to guard the liberty of conscience of the Christian worshiper together with the limited delegated authority of the Church on earth, and the unity of the Church expressed in her worship.”¹¹⁶

Overview

In the first few years of the new millennium, the topic of worship continued to be of tremendous interest. The most important writings that advocate a traditional approach are the extensive writings by Brian Schwertley, and the academic and historical evaluation offered by D. G. Hart.

Within the conservative Presbyterian world, the “mainstream” position, increasingly, has been either to reject the regulative principle, or to interpret it in a manner that makes it barely recognizable. On the other hand, some scholars have continued to maintain the doctrine; but, for the most part, they are not in the larger (conservative) denominations, or have been marginalized within them.

Of particular significance is the fact that the regulative principle of worship has, as it were, entered the “popular culture” of Christendom (as witnessed by a variety of web sites which have taken up and have even embraced the doctrine). At the same time, the larger denominations seem, at an “official” level, to be going in an opposite direction. Do these conflicting trends perhaps portend that in the future, assuming a large-scale reformation and re-discovery of Puritanism, the larger “conservative” churches will be left behind?

VIII. Observations

¹¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

¹¹⁶ Committee on the Study of the Doctrine of Worship, *The Worship of the Church: A Reformed Theology of Worship* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant, 2004), pp. 10-11.

At this point, several observations may be made.

(1) There was a general rediscovery of Reformed beliefs, starting in the 1930s and 1940s; and out of this renaissance (if we may use that term in this context) of Calvinism, has come a renewed interest in Reformed worship.

(2) The regulative principle of worship (or RPW) is essential to a Reformed or Presbyterian understanding of worship.

(3) The RPW includes, of necessity, the notion of “elements” and “circumstances.” Doing away with the traditional understanding of these, does away with the regulative principle, as historically understood. Furthermore, there is no legitimate place for a third category, such as “expressions,” which may be used as a backdoor method for justifying various worship practices.

(4) Most everyone in the conservative Presbyterian and Reformed world today professes to believe the RPW; however, there is not uniformity as to what is meant by the term, which has led to much confusion.

(5) Furthermore, part of the confusion is that all kinds of things are being justified in the name of the RPW—things such as liturgical dance—that would have been regarded as bizarre by the Reformers who helped develop the RPW doctrine.

(6) Regarding the doctrine itself, there are some who deny it (R. J. Gore), others who modify it (Jeffrey Meyers, Peter Leithart), others who redefine it or explain it away (John Frame, Vern Poythress, Richard Pratt), and others who effectively neglect it; while still others who apply it inconsistently (Joseph Morecraft, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary).

(7) Historiographically, it is the worship innovators, who have an ax to grind, who tend to drive a wedge between Calvin and the Puritans. In this matter, the tendency is to follow liberal scholarship, which has great antipathy to the Post-Reformation developments of the seventeenth century. Conservative scholarship would say that the Puritans did not repudiate Calvin, but appreciated and built upon his insights and theological foundation.

(8) The RPW depends upon holding to systematic theology, not just Biblical theology. For example, Westminster Theological Seminary, which has had a heavy emphasis upon “redemptive history” to the detriment of systematics, has been weak, to say the least, on the doctrine.

(9) It is also noteworthy that those who reject the RPW tend to be heterodox in other ways (such as with regard to justification). This is not a one-to-one correspondence; plus, some might cite Norman Shepherd as a counter-example. However, even with Professor Shepherd, it is interesting to note that the manner in which he formulated the doctrine—by not making a significant distinction between the way in which worship is regulated and the way in which life in general is regulated—is not sound. Another example is Peter

Leithart, who suggested that Protestants and Roman Catholics need to experience a rapprochement. And still another example may be found in the views of John Frame, whose writings not only argue for making images of Christ, but at points suggest that God is other than pure Spirit.

(10) The worship wars, including regarding the RPW, tend to be fought with respect to music.¹¹⁷ Although the RPW concerns matters other than music, the debate over music continues to be among the most emotional, and the area upon which the discussion often focuses.

IX. Conclusion

There has been an increased interest in Puritan worship over the past two decades; and all kinds of discussion over the internet (even from the enigmatic “Brother John”). At the same time, other (competing) views have come to expression: high church liturgy (sometimes in the form of “Reformed Catholicity”), covenant renewal, New Life approach, contemporary worship, “informed principle of worship”, and “covenantal worship.”

Various “Presbyterian” denominations, even “conservative” and “evangelical” ones, have refused to take the RPW seriously; and, far from enforcing this doctrine, tend to drive out (whether formally or otherwise) those who seek to uphold it. Those denominations, we would suggest, will not in the long run experience God’s blessing.

As in the time of the Protestant Reformation, the church today has tremendous opportunities to communicate rapidly. What the printing press was to the sixteenth century, the internet is at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As information spreads more quickly, the truth regarding the regulative principle of worship will also spread, and, in God’s providence, be maintained.

The church today faces tumultuous times—new ethical issues, times of war, persecution, proselytizing by Roman Catholicism, doctrinal decline, even a Muslim threat. But, the church in the Reformation faced the same kinds of issues. And it was out of that turmoil that there was a reawakened, apostolic, perhaps we could say prophet-like, vision of what it meant to worship God.

For those whose breasts beat in harmony with a millennial hope of a Golden Age for the church, it may not be too whimsical to believe that someday, not only will the fluff which passes for worship be swept aside, but also the worship offered by Christ’s Bride will be self-consciously in accord with her Lord’s commands. But the expectation that the traditional Presbyterian advocacy of regulated worship will eventually triumph, will only be realized when men’s hearts are changed. It will only become a reality when the gospel itself triumphs, in a day when the knowledge of the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

¹¹⁷ John Frame devotes a significant portion of his book, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, to the questions of exclusive psalmody and musical instrumentation; see pp. 123-30. See also R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, pp. 183-84, note 31.