

The Regulative Principle of Worship

by

Terry L. Johnson

Jesus rejects the worship of the Pharisees saying their worship was futile because they were teaching their doctrines rather than God's doctrines. They were worshipping according to their will rather than according to His will.

In Taylors, South Carolina on March 11th 2003, the Rev. Mr. Terry Johnson, Senior Minister at Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia, opened the spring theology conference for Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary with an address on the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW).

A minister in Central Georgia Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Mr. Johnson began with the subject of the importance of worship, stating, "You can make a case that there is a true sense that the whole Bible is the story of the establishment of the true worship of the true God." Citing John 4:22, Mr. Johnson proceeded to defend the biblical basis for the regulative principle.

Because the whole Old Testament is in a sense the story of the establishment of the true worship of the true God, Biblically there could be no more important subject, and certainly that is also true of our Reformed tradition. Carlos Eire, in his 'War Against the Idols', reminds us that the central focus of the Protestant Reformation was this very issue. Furthermore, the Puritans and the British monarchs battled over it for 100 years, and today the importance of worship is being underscored again.

He made reference to the cowboy church spoken of by Dr. Joseph Pipa in his introductory remarks. As reported in USA Today, March 11, 2003, the Cross Trails Church, Fairlie, Texas, has the following Ten Commandments: Just one God; Honor yer Ma & Pa; No telling tales or gossipin'; Git yourself to Sunday meeting; Put nothin' before God; No foolin' around with another fellow's gal; No killin'; Watch yer mouth; Don't take what ain't yers; Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff. Baptisms are performed out of a horse trough, and "Happy Trails To You" constitutes the sung benediction.

Mr. Johnson rhetorically asked, "What's next? A skateboarders' church? A Valley Girls' church? Where is the unity of the saints and the catholicity of

the church if we are constantly dividing into smaller and smaller divisions? Where does it all end? Roger Williams sitting in a closet with his wife? Unless I have exactly the culture, the language, the music that appeals to me, I guess I can't worship with anyone else. And so the course we're on is a course that will divide and subdivide the church further and further. The worship wars are raging, tearing apart churches and denominations, and giving shape to the life and piety of generations to come."

Worship, explained Pastor Johnson, is the ultimate expression of our theology and should be consistent with that which we profess. Worship services are what they are because of the theology that inspires them. That's why we have a Roman Mass. That's why we have Charismatic praise services. That's why the orthodox worship as they do. Worship expresses, reinforces, and teaches theology, and we can never just graft our theology onto any form and expect it to survive. There must be forms that are adequate to express and carry the content of the theology that we hold to. This is an especially important concept in light of the fact that we will reach from 75 to 90 percent of our people in worship services and nowhere else.

The Regulative Principle, which is the historic way by which Reformed people have addressed the worship issue, speaks both to truth and spirit. In John 4, we have the two fundamental sides of the regulative principle of worship. Jesus answers the Samaritan woman in verse 21, "Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall you worship the Father."

"I believe that's the single most radical, the single most revolutionary statement made in the whole Bible, because up to this point it has mattered whether you were in Samaria or Jerusalem." With this statement, said Mr. Johnson, Jesus is sweeping away the worship of God as instituted in the Old Testament. The speaker went on to point out differences between Old and New Testament worship, with Old Testament worship being typological and external and concerned with location and ritual in a way that New Testament worship is not. In this passage particularly, Jesus emphasizes truth over against Samaritan errors and ignorance. He emphasizes spirit as opposed to concern for place and procedure.

Sincerity, then, is an important issue of motive and heart, but earnestness does not substitute for inattention to form, something that very much matters

to God. Worshiping God in truth means worshiping God according to Scripture. The advantage the Jews had over the Samaritans was the Bible which instructed them in the acceptable way of approaching God. Calvin says that lawful worship is only that which God has established by Himself. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by Himself and so limited by his own revealed will that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations or devices of men or the suggestions of Satan under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.” That is the classic statement of the RPW.

Mr. Johnson went on to discuss the anchoring of the regulative principle in the Scriptures, citing first the second commandment, saying, “God has the right to authorize the way in which he is to be worshiped and he had determined that he is not going to be worshiped through images.” Other proof Scriptures include the golden calf of Exodus 32 and the strange fire offered up by Nabad and Abihu in Leviticus 10. God was, said Johnson, making a statement to the ages that when you approach Him, you must do so in the way He has commanded and that this is what it means to treat God as holy.

The Savannah pastor also referred to the warnings of Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32 not to add to or take away from God’s commands and to I Samuel 15:22 and the rejection of Saul’s unprescribed worship. Saul has good intentions and is sincere in wanting to guarantee success and please God. God says it’s no good because it wasn’t done as commanded. Saul hasn’t obeyed, and his sacrifice is not as good as obedience.

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In addition to the explicit teachings of Scripture, whole doctrines assume if not teach that these things must be:

- 1.** The doctrine of God in relation to man. God is infinite and we are finite. However are we to know how to approach him? How would we ever conceive of God aright and conceive of the right worship? There has been no tradition, no system of theology that has appreciated more the vastness of that gap between God and man. Of course we need to turn to Him to find out who he is and what he wants of us.

2. The doctrine of sin: Is there any theology that has so emphasized the devastating effects of the fall on human nature as has Reformed theology? There is none who seeks God. So not only are we finite, we're corrupt. And we're attempting to approach one who is not only infinite but holy. And, as Calvin says, our hearts are factories of idols. We are not competent to devise God-honoring worship. This is the natural implication of the understanding of the doctrine of the fall and of sin.

3. The doctrine of Scripture: No tradition has so elevated the authority and sufficiency of Scripture to the heights that our tradition has. Scripture alone is finally authoritative for the faith and practice of God's people; Scripture alone can order the worship of the people of God. It is sufficient to equip us for every good work, and that includes worship.

4. The doctrine of the church: God has given true declarative and ministerial power and authority to His church. We declare and administer God's truth in the church, but we may by no means bind the conscience by creating rules and forms of worship not addressed or commanded or implied by Scripture. The Regulative Principle is an expression of the limits of church power such that the church in its worship may require of its members only that which Christ requires and no more.

5. The doctrine of God's sovereignty: God alone can order His worship, and God alone does order His worship. So, it was asked rhetorically, "What HAS God authorized for our worship?" Quoting from the Westminster Confession of Faith, Mr. Johnson's answer was, "Prayer with thanksgiving, the reading of the Scriptures with Godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the word, the singing of psalms with grace in the heart, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments by Christ are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God."

We can further define what we mean by the Regulative Principle when we speak of forms, circumstances; and elements. Scripture authorizes this limited number of elements to be used in worship, but then we can also speak of the forms that those elements take and the circumstances within which they are expressed. It is important to understand the difference between elements, forms, and circumstances. Preaching is an element, but you can't dance it. There must be consistency with the nature of the element to uphold the integrity of the RPW. For instance, preaching is a spoken word, so it

would be inconsistent with the nature of the spoken word to dance it. We must not compromise the integrity of the element by choosing the wrong form.

Circumstances of worship are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence. An example of a circumstance would be the question of illumination at an evening service or the need for amplification of voices to be heard by all.

Worship must be filled with Scripture

The second major point of the address is that worship in truth means that our worship must be filled with Scripture. It not only provides the structure of our worship and determines the elements we are to use but also provides the content.

Pagan worship is non-cognitive, but we are called to worship God with our minds, and that which we are supposed to have fill our minds is Scripture. The language of Christian worship is Scripture. We are either reading it or expanding upon it through exposition, singing it, or praying it. We do this because faith comes by hearing the word of God; it is the Gospel that is the power of God unto salvation.

The preacher admonished, “Do You believe that we are born again by the Word, that we grow as we feed upon the pure milk of the Word, that the Word performs its work in us, that when the Apostle Paul preaches it’s in demonstration of the Spirit and the power? That we are sanctified by the truth? That God’s Word is truth? So, if it’s by the word that we’re converted and by the word that we’re sanctified, and by the word that we’re matured, and if it’s faith that comes by hearing the word of God, then our worship services must be full of Scripture.”

Most alarming to Pastor Johnson is the rapid decline of the amount of scriptural content in worship over the last century. It is, he believes, an accelerating decline, even in conservative Presbyterian denominations. The decline has occurred in the amount of Scripture read in typical worship services as well as in a failure of preachers to preach the whole counsel of God, working their way sequentially and expositively through the books of the Bible.

“I grew up hearing evangelistic sermons addressed only to the lost. In college

I started attending Grace Community Church where John McArthur was preaching verse by verse through First John in the morning and First Corinthians in the evening. There was a period of time where I was particularly consistent where I walked in one person and walked out a different person every Sunday.” The sermons were expositions of Scripture — simple Biblical preaching.

We are, according to Mr. Johnson, also singing less Bible. We ought to be singing the Psalms and experientially, theologically rich hymns patterned after the Psalms. We went from these rich hymns to Gospel songs with even less Bible, and then on to choruses which have even less Bible. There is some Bible, but there is all the difference in the world in singing an entire Psalm and one verse repeated over and over.

“Be reminded also of the way Protestant ministers used to pray. Then visit the typical contemporary service and go ahead and clock how much time is being given to prayer. And note what kind of prayers are being offered. It’s an embarrassment to the tradition when you consider the frivolous, limp, and weak prayers that are typically being offered in our services today.” The Bible gives us the language of prayer, and many churches seldom use it.

“People are coming to church and just hearing a bunch of talk and singing a bunch of songs,” says the preacher. But faith comes by hearing the Word of God, and if it’s not being preached, sung, read, and prayed, and if the content of our services are decreasingly Biblical, it is an ominous thing that is happening — a tragedy unfolding before us of monumental proportions.”

Author

Terry Johnson was born and raised in the Los Angeles area. His home church was Baptist, his sport was baseball, and his favorite class was history. As an undergraduate at the University of Southern California, he continued to play baseball and study history. But he also began to grow spiritually and over time sense a call to the gospel ministry. This led to two years at Trinity College, Bristol, England (an Anglican theological college), two years at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, and ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America. After 5 years in Coral Gables, Florida as an assistant minister, Terry married the former Emily Billings, and within 6 months they moved to Savannah to take the call of the Independent Presbyterian Church, which they have served since 1987. Terry is the author/compiler of the Trinity

Psalter and Leading in Worship, and author of The Case for Traditional Protestantism, Reformed Worship, and the trilogy, When Grace Comes Home, When Grace Transforms, and When Grace Comes Alive.

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