

The Regulative Principle:

Let's take a closer look at the Regulative Principle of worship by sketching a series of common arguments in favor of it. These are all taken from an unpublished class syllabus titled, *Public Worship in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition*, by T. David Gordon.

The Regulative Principle teaches that what is not commanded is forbidden in the corporate worship of God. This principle forbids adding segments ("elements") to the worship service which are not prescribed in the Bible. Why?

For starters, in Exodus 20:5 God regulates his worship warning that he is a jealous God. The best way to avoid knowingly provoking God's jealousy is by restricting our worship practices to what he has set down in the Bible.

There are also places such as Deuteronomy 12:29-32 which forbid taking away or adding to what God has said to do.

The most common defense of the Regulative Principle is drawn from the severity of God's judgment on people who seek to worship him in ways other than how he has prescribed. Leviticus 10:1-2 records such an incident.

Man's propensity to commit idolatry is another reason to refrain from making up our own ways to worship God. If man is by nature idolatrous (Rom. 1:21-32), he is not qualified to invent ways to worship.

Public worship is the corporate gathering of the church with whom God has made a covenant. Since the covenant is a divine, sovereignly imposed administration, man is not in the position to assert himself. Man is the subject and God is the king. Therefore, God directs the covenant worship service, and man follows God's Word.

Another reason why the Bible restricts the public worship service is because church power is restricted by the Bible. Ministers are not authorized to impose upon the church mandates and doctrines of men (Col. 2:22). They are ministers of the Word (Mt. 28:18-20). They are ambassadors who do not speak for themselves, but for the one who sent them. Ministers who introduce worship practices which are not in the Bible exceed the limits of their authority and commission.

Christian charity would also require keeping innovative, unbiblical segments out of the worship service. It is one thing to require the congregation to do what God has said. But charity ought to prevent a minister from requiring church members to do what the Bible has not founded. Put another way, if a member of the congregation has a troubled conscience about doing something in worship, which the Bible does not require, charity demands that such scruples be respected. The only way to do this is by sticking to the Bible.

Worship is an act of faith. Faith should not be placed in the devices of man, but in God and his promises as we obediently submit to, and follow what he has revealed in the Bible. This union of faith and God's revelation is only

present when worship is controlled by the Bible alone. Since faith is an obedient response to God's revelation rather than man's invention, worship that institutes things other than Biblical measures diverts faith, creating worship which applauds worldly man-centered desires.

There is a great distance between the Creator and the creature which can only be (and is) breached by the gracious condescension of God to man through revelation. God is clothed in mystery and greatness (Is. 40:12). How can we know what would possibly please God without him telling us. We only know what pleases ourselves.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT:

If only historical precedent were an argument for the regulative principle, but it is not. The saddening story of Christian worship in church history is one of decline. A main reason for the Protestant Reformation, according to John Calvin's recollection, was to reclaim the proper worship of God from the withered, unfaithful hand of the Roman Catholics. What progress was gained by the Reformation was undone on American soil by Revivalist, Charles Finney, who believed that the Bible gave no directives for worship.

THE NORMATIVE PRINCIPLE:

In contrast to the Regulative Principle is the Normative Principle, which is more widely held by Evangelicals. It proposes that what the Bible does not command is permitted in public worship, so long as Scripture does not forbid it. In other words, only what is forbidden is forbidden. While John Calvin held to the Regulative Principle, Martin Luther believed the Normative Principle governed worship.

But, rather than applying to the worship service, Presbyterians believe that the Normative Principle governs the way we live outside of public worship (1 Cor. 10:23) where all things are lawful if they are not forbidden by God's Word. Therefore, we believe that outside of worship only what is forbidden is forbidden, but within public worship that which is not commanded is forbidden. The Normative Principle governs our daily lives, but the Regulative Principle governs our weekly assembly of worship.

THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS:

The Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms are our church's secondary doctrinal standards. The Confession of Faith says: "But 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 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" (WCF 21:1). "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship" (20:2). Our catechisms teach this in their explanations of the 2nd Commandment.

-Pastor Ferry