

The Regulative Principle

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April 28-29, 2004

A. Confessional statements

1. WCF 1.6, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.[12] Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word:[13] and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.[14]”
2. WCF 20.2, “God alone is Lord of the conscience,[10] 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.[11] So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience:[12] and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.[13]”
3. WCF 21.1, “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 served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might.[1] 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 worshiped 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.[2]”
4. WCF 21.5, “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear,[17] the sound preaching [18] and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence,[19] singing of psalms with grace in the heart;[20] as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of

the ordinary religious worship of God:[21] beside religious oaths,[22] vows,[23] solemn fastings,[24] and thanksgivings upon special occasions,[25] which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.[26]”

5. WLC, Answer 109, “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising,[1] counseling,[2] commanding,[3] using,[4] and anywise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself;[5] tolerating a false religion;[6] the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever;[7] all worshiping of it,[8] or God in it or by it;[9] the making of any representation of feigned deities,[10] and all worship of them, or service belonging to them;[11] all superstitious devices,[12] corrupting the worship of God,[13] adding to it, or taking from it,[14] whether invented and taken up of ourselves,[15] or received by tradition from others,[16] though under the title of antiquity,[17] custom,[18] devotion,[19] good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever;[20] simony;[21] sacrilege;[22] all neglect,[23] contempt,[24] hindering,[25] and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.[26]”

B. Main Idea

1. Worship is first of all for God, not ourselves.
2. Therefore, he must tell us what brings him pleasure and what does not (implicit in the second commandment).
3. The consequences of “self-imposed worship”: (Col. 2:23) can be disastrous: Lev. 10:1-3, 1 Sam. 13:7-14, 2 Sam. 6:6-7, 1 Kings 12:32-33, 15:30, 2 Chron. 26:16-23, 28:3, Jer. 7:31, 1 Cor. 11:29-30.
4. So Scripture is sufficient (Isa. 29:13, Matt. 15:8-9) for worship as for all of life (Deut. 4:2, 12:32, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

C. Puritan Elaborations

1. “Elements” (parts, substance, essence)
 - a. The basic things we do in worship, as in WCF 21.5.
 - b. The list in WCF 21.5 is not exhaustive and makes no claim to be. For example, it does not mention calls to worship, benedictions, congregational responses, offerings, or even prayer. Vs. treating the Confession as sufficient, which compromises the sole-sufficiency of Scripture. The Confession has authority (secondary to Scripture), but it is not sufficient as a guide to faith or worship.

- c. Bushell, “An essential or substantial element of worship . . . is any action which has been invested, by divine or human prescription, with *religious* or spiritual significance.”
 - d. On the strict Puritan view, elements in Bushell’s sense must be *prescribed* in Scripture. In these, the church has no discretion.
 - e. The prescriptions must be *specific* to each particular kind of worship. Burnt offering, for example, is prescribed for temple worship, but not for the worship of the NT church. Since it is not prescribed to the NT church, it is forbidden.
 - f. The elements must also be *independent* of one another in a sense. John Murray argues that the biblical warrant for song is distinct from its warrant for prayer, for the two are distinct elements. So we must not, e.g., determine what to sing by determining from Scripture what to pray.
2. Circumstances (also, accidents, forms, expressions)
- a. The accidents of which the elements are the substance (Aristotle).
 - b. Bushell: three kinds of circumstances.
 - (i) Specific words used in singing, prayer, preaching (sometimes called “expressions” or “forms”). These have religious significance, so on Bushell’s view they must be taken directly from Scripture. They overlap the category of “element.”
 - (ii) Actions “common to human actions and societies,” WCF 1.6.
 - (A) Like the time and place of worship, pews or chairs, etc.
 - (B) On these matters we have discretion, and the church may prescribe how they are carried out.
 - (iii) Actions “which have no connection at all with worship *per se* and the alteration of which has no effect on the act of worship itself.”
 - (A) such as the clothing people wear to church, church architecture.
 - (B) The church may not prescribe how these are to be carried out.

D. JF Response

- 1. Scripture makes none of these distinctions explicitly.
 - a. We do need some distinction of this sort (as we do in everyday life). Scripture’s prescriptions are always somewhat general, rather than perfectly specific.
 - b. But there is no reason to adopt the precise distinctions noted above.

- c. Certainly there is no need to divide worship into “substances” and “accidents,” following the pagan philosopher Aristotle.
 - d. Better:
 - (i) Elements are what we do in worship. Must be prescribed.
 - (ii) Circumstances are what we do to carry them out.
 - (iii) Circumstances are not prescribed, but must be within the “general rules of the Word” (WCF 1.6); that is, they must be permitted rather than forbidden.
2. There is no biblical reason to assume that prescriptions for elements must be specific to each particular form of worship.
- a. For many specific forms of worship, there are no biblical prescriptions of elements at all: private worship, family worship, national worship, special thanksgivings, the synagogue, the hours of prayer and teaching at the temple. Not to mention worship in the “broad sense.”
 - b. It is exceedingly difficult to find biblical prescriptions for every element of NT church worship, even those accepted by people who hold the Puritan elaborations.
 - (i) Sermon as an element of worship.
 - (ii) Baptism as an element of worship.
 - (iii) Salutations, Benedictions, Confessions. I think one can argue cogently that these are appropriate, but not that they are “prescribed.”
 - (iv) More generally: These writers generally admit that biblical warrant can consist either of explicit commands, approved examples, or theological inference. (The last two are somewhat controversial among these writers.) But from the last two, one cannot usually deduce “prescription,” only appropriateness.
 - c. Important to ask how specific a warrant must be, and not to demand that God reveal his will more specifically than he has chosen to reveal it.
 - d. To demand a specific warrant for every element of NT worship as opposed to the worship of the synagogue and temple is essentially dispensationalist. E.g.: “we may not have choirs and instruments, even though they were prescribed for the temple, for they lack a specific prescription for NT worship.”
 - e. But wasn’t the temple worship abolished in Christ?
 - (i) No. We worship in the true temple, as the true temple.
 - (ii) Animal sacrifices are abolished, but not prayer, praise, teaching, which were also parts of the temple services.

3. There is no biblical reason to suppose that each element of worship must be *independent* of the others and must therefore have an independent biblical warrant.
 - a. Many songs are prayers, and prayers are songs.
 - b. All worship is teaching, for it is all based on Scripture.
 - c. All worship is prayer, for it involves words uttered in the presence of God.
4. Difficult to determine what is of “religious significance.” Time of meeting, clothing can affect the quality of worship.
5. Bushell’s view that matters of “religious significance” must come directly from Scripture goes too far. It would entail that, not only the content of song, but also the content of prayers and sermons, be taken directly from Scripture.
6. It is often difficult to distinguish between elements and circumstances (and between circumstances of different types).
 - a. song: an independent element, or a form of teaching, prayer, etc.
 - b. musical instruments: elements or circumstances.
7. Does WCF 20.2 require us to have a different regulative principle for worship than for the rest of life?
 - a. I think not. I can subscribe to what this section actually says.
 - b. It does *suggest*, contrary to my view, that God’s Word functions differently in worship from the way it functions in other areas of life. But 1.6 arguably denies this distinction.
8. Do we need the traditional view in order to “put teeth into the regulative principle?”
 - a. We dare not make the principle more strict than Scripture does.
 - b. One might as easily ask, how can God regulate marriage, if he doesn’t spell out precisely what married partners may and may not do in the home?
9. Scripture itself more flexible.
 - a. “Which I did not command,” usually a figurative way of saying that God forbade it: Lev. 10:1-2, Jer. 7:22, 31, 14:15.
 - b. Hezekiah’s second chance Passover, 2 Chron. 30.
10. Is the Regulative Principle Anabaptist?
 - a. Anabaptists to Oecolampadius: should we forbid what is not prescribed?
 - b. O: no. But worship according to the Scriptures.
 - c. JF: accept the RP, but don’t assume that the divine prescriptions will be more specific than they are.

