

The Regulative Principle of Worship

I. Biblical

- A. Deut. 12.29-32
- B. Jer. 7.29-31; Jer. 19.3-5
- C. Mark 7.7-8; Matt. 14.9 (citing Isa. 29.13)
- D. Col. 2.20-23 ("*manmade religion*" or "*will-worship*")

II. Confessional

- A. WCF 21.1 (Cf. WCF 1.6)
- B. WLC #109, WSC #51

III. The Second Commandment — No "making for ourselves" in worship.

- A. The commandments speak in *particular* terms regarding broad *general* moral principle. Thus idolatry is here a particular application of the broader general principle regarding worship.
- B. This command speaks to the issue of God's authority in the *object* and *means* of worship.
 - 1. No man-made images of an object of worship (the Triune God).
God reserves to Himself the sole authority to represent Himself visibly.
 - 2. No man-made means of worship.
God reserves to Himself the sole authority to determine how He will be worshipped.

IV. The Regulative Principle of Worship Explained

- A. Statement of the doctrine
 - 1. ***We may do in worship only that which God in His Word has authorised.***
 - 2. Whatsoever is not commanded as a worship action is forbidden.

B. **Divine Warrant** — What constitutes Divine Authorisation?

What do we mean by "divine authorisation?" There are necessarily three forms of divine authorisation as revealed by the Regulative Principle itself.

1. Express Command

The regulative principle is an express command.

2. Approved Examples

- a. God approves of worship actions if and only if He has authorised them.

(This is a restatement of the express command.)

- b. God approves of this or that worship action in Scripture.

(For example, Abel's sacrifice as opposed to Cain's.)

- c. Therefore, God has authorised the worship action in question.

(This conclusion follows necessarily from the Regulative Principle.)

3. Necessary Inference

- a. Point B.2 is itself an argument of necessary inference and proves this point.

- b. That which necessarily follows from the express propositions of Scripture is equally the will of God and just as binding as those express propositions of Scripture.

c. Examples

- i. Sunday is the Christian Sabbath

- ii. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Holy Trinity

- iii. The Lord Jesus Christ is one person but with two distinct natures, one human and one divine.

- iv. Properly qualified females are to receive the Lord's Supper.

C. **Worship Actions** — What constitutes that which "we may do in worship"?

*This is the **object** of the divine command. What do we mean by worship actions?*

1. Definition

- a. Worship Actions are

- i. Worship **Ordinances**, or

- ii. **Elements** of Worship

- b. Religiously significant prescribed rituals or ceremonies
 - c. These are ordered, structured actions of worship with spiritually significant **form and content**.
2. Worship Ordinances (*Elements of Worship*) are the things we may do in worship only if they are divinely authorised.
- a. Worship ordinances are the *subject* of the Regulative Principle, the *object* of the divine command.
 - b. About these the church has absolutely **no discretionary power**.
 - i. We may not invent new worship rituals, ordinances, or spiritually significant worship actions.
 - ii. God alone has the authority to institute ordinances of His holy worship.
- D. **Discretionary Power** (Discretionary Authority)
- This regards the authority of the Church to determine some matter.*
1. Discretionary Power explained and defined
- a. Discretion exists only where the command requires something not commanded.
 - i. There are matters necessarily related to the worship of God but which God has not particularly addressed in His Word.
 - ii. These are
 - a) some matters of **form and content** of worship ordinances, and
 - b) certain **circumstances** of worship.
 - b. **The discretionary power of the Church extends only so far as the commanded action requires it**
 - i. This is just an ordinary principle of the commands of God as applied to the Church in the context of worship under *sola scriptura*.

Cf. WLC #99.6
 - ii. When this power is rightly exercised it must be **required** in order to obey the command.

- iii. It must be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

Cf. WCF 1.6

2. Form and Content of worship ordinances

a. Form

- i. Meaning the shape, method, or structure of the worship ordinance.

Note that form is directly related to the substance of the worship ordinance.

- ii. When the commanded action *as such* may have more than one form then it is at the Church's discretion to determine the form.

- a) This is not discretion to change the ordinance into something other than what is commanded.

- 1) Preaching of the Word must be *preaching* and not, for example, interpretative dance, but that preaching may be expository or topical.

- 2) Reading of the Word must be reading and not, for example, drama.

- 3) Singing of Psalms must be singing and not, for example, orchestral special music, but that singing may be in the form of unmetred plainsong (a chant) or of metred song.

- 4) Bodily posture, to the extent that it conveys religiously significant meaning in the worship ordinance, is limited to the approved examples of God's Word the *ordering* of which is under the discretion of the Church.

- b) This is discretion to fulfil what is required by God's command in the worship ordinance and is limited by the *form requirements* of the commanded action.

b. Content

- i. Meaning words or material used in the worship ordinance.
Note that content is directly related to the substance of the worship ordinance.
 - ii. When the content of a commanded worship ordinance is not provided, then it is required by the command to provide the content.
 - a) This is not discretion to disregard commanded content!
 - 1) Preaching and Reading of the **Word** is limited to the Word, but may be from this or that portion of the Scriptures.
 - 2) The command to pray and the absence of a divinely provided "prayer book" *requires* us to provide our own words in prayer.
 - b) This is discretion to fulfil what is required by God's command in the worship ordinance and is limited by the *content requirements* of the command.
3. Circumstances of worship
- a. Defined
 - i. A matter ***inseparably*** connected to the worship of God, but
 - ii. ***Not distinctive*** of worship, that is, not entering into the meaning or substance of the act of worship itself
 - b. **Inseparability**
*This speaks to the matter of **necessity**.*
 - i. A circumstance of worship is something necessary to the **doing** of worship, that is, without it the worship service or worship action could not take place.
 - ii. A circumstance of worship is something necessary to the **decency and order** of worship, that is, without it the worship service could not be conducted in the general manner God requires.
 - iii. Examples and applications
 - a) Positively
 - 1) The time and place of worship are matters inseparable from the worship service -- without them being

determined the worship service cannot take place or cannot take place with decency and order.

- 2) Consequently, as God has commanded corporate worship, but has not set the time of day or the place of worship, since a time and place are necessary to obey the command the Church has discretion to determine the time and place of worship.

b) Negatively

- 1) The colour of clothing is a circumstance which is **separable** from the worship service -- the colour of clothing has nothing to do with whether the service may take place, and generally speaking it has nothing to do with the decency and order of the service.
- 2) Consequently, the Church has no discretion to determine colour of clothing.

c. **Not distinctive or definitive** of worship

- i. These are matters common to all societies in similar situations, to all orderly solemn gatherings of people.
- ii. These are not matters unique to a worship service as such, that is, not matters which would distinguish this as a worship service.
- iii. Examples and applications

a) Positively

- 1) A building, parking, seating, air conditioning, and all similar matters are common and necessary determinations for any orderly public gathering and are not distinctive of a worship gathering.
- 2) Consequently, as these are matters inseparably related to an orderly public gathering, and not distinctive of a worship gathering nor particularly addressed by God in His Word, they are matters within the discretionary determination of the Church and are to be ordered by Christian prudence according to the general principles of the Word.

b) Negatively

- 1) Removing footwear is not a common practice when entering a public gathering (in the West).
- 2) Anointing oneself is not a common practice when entering a public gathering.
- 3) Consequently, as these are not matters common to orderly solemn public gatherings as such these are not matters within the discretionary power of the Church.