

## **Lecture 11- The Regulative Principle of Worship**

*“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. 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; 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.”*

*Westminster Confession of Faith 21-1*

### **Key Concepts**

- Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW)

### **Lecture Objectives**

- Introduce the concept of the RPW
- Explore the narrow and broad use of the RPW
- Propose a brief “solution” to the debates

### **Preliminary Questions**

- How devotedly do you pursue, individually and in your church, to worship God according to the way *He* desires?
- How can one go about evaluating a church’s worship according to the RPW, with the appropriate boldness and humility?
- What role should the commands, prescriptions, and examples of the Old Testament play in one’s formulation of the RPW?
- In what ways has your culture shaped and formed your church’s views or application of the RPW (for better or worse)?

## **The Regulative Principle of Worship**

### I. God Calls His People to Worship Him as He Desires

- A. Goal and desire is to worship God according to His word
- B. Don’t presume that only those committed to RPW have this desire!
- C. Yet the regulative principle of worship grows out of this desire

### II. What is the Regulative Principle of Worship?

- A. Concept of regulating worship is quite old but phrase RPW not used until 20th century
- B. Usage in Presbyterian tradition is Westminster Confession Faith 21-1:
 

“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.”

  1. What is the meaning of “prescribed”
    - a. Only what is commanded is allowed - direct biblical warrant? Or...
    - b. Biblical warrant from biblical commands, principles, and examples?
  2. Often stated in negative limitations of reflected in 21-1
- C. Other relevant 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. 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; 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.”

- a. What is included in “circumstances”?
- b. How does WCF 1-6 relate to WCF 21-1?

2. WCF 20-2:

“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship.”

- a. Historical context: the imposition of the Anglican liturgy
- b. Are there varying applications of the RPW?
- c. Can those applications be imposed upon all?

D. Clarifying biblical principles and application of biblical principles

1. Application to worship and music allows for some variance
2. Blended or “convergent” worship draws on wide repertoire of resources from past and present to enhance Gospel-centered worship

III. Broader Understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship

A. Martin Bucer in Strasbourg (page 303 in J. Meyers, *Lord’s Service*)

“Nothing should be introduced or performed in the churches of Christ for which no probable reason can be given from the Word of God”

B. Hodge comments on WCF 21-1 [page 314 in Meyers, op. cit.]

“That God in His Word has prescribed for us how we may worship Him acceptably; and that it is an offence to Him and a sin in us either to neglect to worship and serve Him in the way prescribed, or to attempt to serve Him in any way not prescribed.”

C. John Frame - broader application and understanding RPW (worship in spirit and truth, P & R)

D. R.J. Gore - Covenantal Principle of Worship (*Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan RPW*. P & R, 2003)

1. Broadens understanding of “circumstance” and “adiaphora”
2. Worship to be - simple, orderly, free, glorifying, edifying, catholic, culturally sensitive, balanced, Christ-centered

E. Steve Schlissel - “Informed Principle of Worship”

1. If the Bible commands it, should we do it? Yes!
2. If the Bible forbids it, should we do it? No!
3. If the Bible neither commands or forbids it, should we do it? It depends ...

F. T. David Gordon [Westminster Theological Journal 65 (2003): 345-56]

1. Elements
2. Forms: Content of the elements
3. Rubrics: The way in which things are put together
4. Circumstances (narrowly conceived)

IV. A Suggested Solution in Progress... Mark Dalbey

- A. Commanded elements: Only those elements given by command or example are to be included

- B. Biblical content: The elements must contain and express biblical content
- C. Gospel shape or arrangement – See lecture 12
- D. Variety of valid expressions: Worship will not be everywhere the same
- E. Circumstances unique to local churches