

## **The Regulative Principle of Worship**

Let us pray.

*Father, we thank You for Your faithful love to us in Christ. Thank You for bringing us from death to life, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Your Son. Thank You for justifying us, adopting us into Your family, and for pledging by the blood of Christ Himself that You will one day make us like Him. We pray, Father, that You would give us hearts that love you, that desire to be faithful to You and to Your Word, that are submissive to Your Spirit's work in us and through us. We pray now that as we look at this specific understanding of what it means to worship the way You desire for us to worship You, that You would give us wisdom and insight. Help us to be careful not to step beyond what You have said but not to be overly restrictive beyond what You have said, either. So we look to You now and seek Your blessing. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

We are talking about the regulative principle of worship (RPW). One of the first things I want to say is that I believe that inherently all Christians everywhere who love Jesus and His Word want to worship God the way God wants to be worshiped. It is part of belonging to Christ and wanting to honor Him with our lives. For me to say as a husband that I really love God but do not care what He says about how to treat my wife, that I am going to do it my way, I would be in serious danger. Or I could say I really enjoy spending all of my non-working hours at the local casino. I might borrow to the limit of all my credit cards and not care about what God says. I still tithe and that is what really matters. I can gamble away the rest even though I am married and have three children. Well, Christians do not talk like that or live like that. If we do we should repent of it and be called out on it. There is a sense in which it does not work to not care about what God says about how He wants to be worshiped. And let us not presume that unless you are committed to the RPW that you do not care about what God thinks about worship. That is very unfair to people beyond the circles that some of us live in. Yet the desire to worship God the way He wants to be worshiped is the core out of which this idea of the RPW grows and develops.

The concept of regulating worship has been around for quite a while. The phrase “regulative principle of worship” was not used until the twentieth century, as best as we can discover. We sometimes talk about the RPW as though we were able to have a discussion with one of the Westminster fathers and they would know exactly what we were talking about. They would think of it as Chapter 21 of the *Confession*. Its usage in the Presbyterian tradition is from *The Westminster Confession*, 21.1, as we have looked at before. It 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 and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.” To me, the key word in that section of Chapter 21 is the word “prescribed.” What is the meaning of that word? Does it mean that only what is commanded is allowed? In other words, to do anything in worship there must be a direct biblical command, prescription, or warrant saying this is what you must do. Or is it possible that we derive what God wants from direct commands, biblical principles, and biblical examples? I have mentioned before that if it is the first, we have a hard time coming up with an offering as an element of worship. If it is the second, we are all right because we have apostolic example. If it is only the first, it is a little tough to come up with the first day of the week as the day we are to have corporate public worship. But if it is the second, we can see from apostolic example and trying to understand what John is saying in Revelation 1 about the Lord's Day that it is pretty strong on saying that God wants us to worship on the first day.

There are other relevant confessional statements that need to be brought to the discussion of the RPW.

One of them is found in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1.6. I often ask which one comes first in the *Confession*. Obviously Chapter 1 comes before Chapter 21. The *Confession* has already taught in Chapter 1 about the nature of the Word of God and what we can learn and understand from it. Chapter 21 talks about what God prescribes in His Word. Therefore Chapter 1 should inform our understanding of Chapter 21.1. Let us look at what 1.6 says:

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.

That is a bit of a mouthful, but it is very helpful. Things like about how long the sermon should be or how many sermons we should have are by good and necessary consequence derived from Scripture rather than finding a direct passage. A good statement of faith or doctrinal standard sets the parameters of the room that we are to live in. This first chapter does that in terms of our understanding of Scripture. Scripture is the vehicle that God uses to set the parameters of all kinds of rooms in the Christian life. That is what the Westminster fathers have done here. They have done it with some application even to the worship of God explicitly stated in this statement: “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.” I believe that argues for biblical principle to apply to some of the figuring out of what we do in worship. It addresses what is required and where we have some liberty of application and practice. The question is this: what is included in “circumstances” in 1.6 and “prescribed” in 21.1? If we could have complete agreement on those two words, we would have a lot more agreement than we do now on the narrow or broader understanding of the RPW. Where we stand on that should be most informed by Scripture with the guide of this confession.

Let us talk about how Chapter 1.6 relates to 21.1. I think 1.6 allows 21.1 to breathe a little bit. It does this particularly in areas where the Bible does not tell us what we are to do. Are we to come forward to receive the elements of the bread and the cup in the Lord’s Supper? Or should we remain seated or get into a big circle around the perimeter of the worship space? I have not found any passages of Scripture that reference that. But what does that mean? If we have to have the Bible tell us something before we can do it then we cannot have communion because we do not know whether we are to sit, come forward, or stand in a circle around the room. Certainly that would be contrary to what the Bible wants. The statement, “As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you are proclaiming the Lord’s death until He comes,” seems to be saying He wants us to eat the bread and drink the cup. But it does not tell us specifically and logistically how to do that. So would the manner of administering the elements of the Lord’s Supper fall under “circumstances”? If so, you would use the general rules of the Word and the light of nature and Christian prudence. For instance, you may have a congregation of people, many of whom are not physically able to get up, walk, and come forward or even get to the outer perimeter of the room. If so, you may decide that Christian prudence and the light of nature, namely how well people can walk, would mean that you should probably serve the congregation in their seats. You may be personally convinced that it could be more meaningful and significant to do it in some other way. In other circumstances you might do it differently.

Some people have argued a very narrow definition of both “prescribed” and “circumstances.” They say that “circumstances” only has to do with the appointed hour for gathering for corporate public worship and the arrangement of furniture in the worship space. It is a circumstance whether you sit on the floor, stand, sit in chairs or pews, or do it indoors or outdoors. It is only talking about the place and time of worship. But I happen to think that it is more than that. Some people argue that it is only psalms, and it is without instruments. They argue for the minimalist perspective from the English puritans. But you still have to decide which psalms you are going to sing, how many, what passage you are going to preach from, for how long, and how many preachers are going to preach that day. Does the Bible say one preacher only? While I was preaching at a local church, the one preacher of the day, three of the assistant pastors at my church were taking a turn at preaching in the same service. My church had three mini sermons last Sunday while this other church had one. Does that fall under general circumstances? Does the Bible address that specifically? If it does not say how long the sermon should be, does that mean I cannot preach? No, I still preach, and I figure out what seems best for this people on this day. I think through where I am in the Scripture and how I present it. The Bible does not say that you should preach from a pulpit, so does that mean we should not have pulpits? Does whether or not you have a pulpit fit under circumstances of worship? There is room to figure that out in a local church in a specific way.

Dr. R. J. Gore has introduced another passage to the discussion in his new book, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship*. He references Chapter 20.2, which says, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.” He argues that this seems to give room for varying applications of the RPW. The binding of the conscience is not something that is intended. You have a strange dynamic going on. The puritans, more than anyone else, said to the Church of England, “Do not bind our consciences.” But without intending to they bound the consciences of others by forbidding certain things. They bound the consciences of others around this minimal place because the Bible does not explicitly say so. I think the Bible does generally say so and gives room for specific expansion and application of that.

David’s work of expanding the musical instrumentation and vocalists in worship at the temple was a huge step forward from Moses, as we saw in our biblical survey. David felt he was on good, solid ground and was consistent with the principle that had been revealed. He had room and liberty to do that. We do not have recording that I can find of a direct command from the Lord to have 4000 Levites. It seemed good to them in the worship of God to strengthen their worship with song by having people devote themselves to music at the temple day and night. And they provided the instruments that they needed. They creatively made new instruments to be used in the worship of God. Just because the Bible did not mandate it David was not inhibited or prevented. He was consistent with what God had said. Look at all the psalms that David wrote about praising God with this instrument or that instrument.

I am in favor of multiple valid applications of the RPW. They should focus more on the biblical elements that the Bible mandates and less on the particular implementation, application, and arranging of those elements in a given time or place. You should focus more on prayer; Scripture reading; preaching; singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; observing the sacraments; and collecting the offering. And you should give a lot of room for the manner in which those are expressed and arranged in an order of worship. They should be specific to the time and place. In the long stream coming from Calvin to the present, even in Reformed and Presbyterian circles, that is most consistent with our heritage. It is not out of accord with 21.1 and 1.6. As I tried to point out earlier in the statement of the directory of worship, I do not think it is out of accord with what they told parliament about their own directory of worship. I can speculate about what I think went on, though I am living 350 years past the

writing of the Confession. Frame, Gore, and others say this—I think they wrote a document, particularly if you include the Westminster Directory of Worship—that gave more room for future generations than they themselves were practicing.

Dr. Calhoun, a professor at Covenant Seminary, pointed out when we were discussing this particular issue that the Scottish Presbyterians were mainly observers at the Westminster Assembly. And they practiced celebrating the Lord's Supper by setting tables with chairs around them in the front of the worship space. They would have people come out of their rows and be seated at the table. They would be served at the table and go back to their rows. They would do this until everybody came up, was seated at the table and served, and went back. This is the fellowship meal idea that Butzer was emphasized, which influenced Calvin, Knox, and Scottish Presbyterians. The English puritans at the Westminster Assembly felt that the elements of the Lord's Supper should be served to people where they were seated in rows. The men from Scotland asked if that meant that if they were going to adhere faithfully to what comes out of the Westminster Assembly they could not celebrate the Lord's Supper the way that they had been. The puritans said they would accommodate them in the way that they practiced things currently. It seems funny to us that that would be of such significance. But that shows the latitude and the willingness, even at the time, to let the Scottish brothers and sisters implement some of their practices differently than the English puritans did. There was flexibility, even at the time that they were writing this supposedly very narrow understanding of "prescribed" and "circumstances."

This is a repeating theme in my dissertation. We dare not confuse biblical principle with the application of a biblical principle. For instance, let us suppose that I decide the best way for the congregation to pray the Lord's Prayer is to sing the Lord's Prayer. There is a biblical principle that relates to either praying the Lord's Prayer with words only or praying with music in a worship service. It is to use the Lord's Prayer when you pray. The element is prayer. Under this heading of prayer, the Lord's Prayer is a legitimate actual prayer to pray and a model of ways in which we should pray. My application of praying this biblical prayer is that I decide to sing it. Suppose I think this is so wonderful, so impacting, and so faithful to the Bible that I am going to say that you are not praying the Lord's Prayer properly in your church unless you sing it. If I do that I have turned an application of a biblical principle of prayer and a particular kind of it into the biblical principle itself.

We confuse principle with application in worship, too. People find a worship expression that is exciting, has a sense of being faithful to God, and rings true with the worshipers gathered in this time, place, and local church. People's lives are being impacted and changed by the Gospel in this worship service. They long to have other people experience the same blessings that they are. Some of these people may have come out of other kinds of worship experiences where that was not happening. Therefore they are suspicious of anything other than how they do it as being legitimate before God and impacting to the people. You can see how people get to that point. We could turn a lot of good, biblical applications of things in worship into new laws for people to have to abide by. That is what I am most passionately against. When I am around people who, when it comes to style of worship, are strict traditionalists, I tend to nudge them. I affirm where they are and the principles behind it. But I say, "This is not the only legitimate way that the principles that you hold dear and are applying in this way have to be done by everybody else. Are you paying attention to the demographic realities, generational dynamics, socioeconomic, and ethnic aspects? There are people whose voice in song and worship is potentially being pushed down or off to the side. You are so convinced that your one right way of doing it must be true of every time, place, people, and class." When I go to churches where they are committed to only contemporary worship, with no hymnals or organs, I try to affirm what is right about what they are doing. I also nudge them toward realizing that the world is bigger than where they live. I challenge the attitude that is a whole lot like the attitude on the other side. It is interesting.

My goal is not some perfect formula of blended worship. If it is all ancient hymns that really serve the Gospel story and purposes of this worship service and they do it the best, let us do them. Some week it may be that the rewrites of those hymns or contemporary hymns may better serve what we are doing. One time in a church that I served we did *A Mighty Fortress is our God* with the piano and the full band. We did it in a Tommy Walker arrangement that had been done at Promise Keepers. After the second and third stanzas there is an interlude. We had guitars, drums, and a trumpet going with it. A woman met me at the door after the service and said, “Mark, I did not appreciate the fact that you brought something contemporary into my part of the service.” She had in her mind that the early part of the service would be only the piano with traditional hymns. Later in the service she would tolerate and put up with the more contemporary stuff. That is the problem that the blended mindset can get into. Someone may say, “I am agreeing to some changes in this church as long as it does not go past this percentage or you do not mess with a hymn by arranging it in a way that feels contemporary.” That is problematic. That woman probably felt that she had already stretched a long way to allow and be all right with people in the church needing to have some things that are different than what she needs. She was working hard to try and prefer others in love. But we had crossed a line in messing with that hymn. She looked forward to doing it with the piano only in a traditional way without some of the syncopation in between. As a pastor I explained these principles to her. Then I went to our worship team and said that we probably should not do that with that hymn for a while because some people were struggling with it. A rewrite of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* lends itself to so many different kinds of arrangements. It can be done with the organ, blue grass instruments, or with syncopation. But *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, in this woman’s mind, was a favorite hymn that should be done in a certain way. It was in a part of the service that she had figured that she would be able to fully enter into and enjoy. Then she would ask the Lord to give her “heroic forbearance,” to quote Reggie Kid, to live with it when other instruments join in during these other songs. We were asking her to exercise, in her mind, heroic forbearance not only in this part of the service, but now in her part of the service she had to stretch, too. I have empathy toward that. It was not necessary to have to do *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* that way. I am not sure that we ever did *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* again that way in the last two years I was there. That is part of my wanting to prefer others in love as well. I did not agree with her that that was her part of the service, though. I think we need to be willing to draw on any and all kinds of resources, ancient and present, that serve the Gospel purposes at any point in the service. Blended worship, to say this many hymns and this many songs, limits our repertoire of what can be used to accomplish Gospel-centered worship on any given Sunday. Some people might not like *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* and view it as part of the old traditional church. For them, this new expression of it allows a great hymn to be brought forward in a way that may connect better. My grandchildren may only know it in this version. I remember when James Ward’s new tune to *Rock of Ages* came out. People loved it, and I love it. But I would have people ask me if we were ever again going to do the old *Rock of Ages* tune. They would like to do that one, too. It meant a lot to them in their growing-up years.

I define “blended” to mean the best of blended. It means always being open to using a vast array of ancient prayers, hymns, and reading along with new ones. At any given point we should ask what serves best what we are trying to do at this point in the service. Approaching it that way is still sensitive to the congregants who are there. When we introduced a new tune or Scripture song in a worship service, I knew some of the older people would be wondering about it and not really enjoying this new hymn. So I would deliberately go out of my way to try to also use an older, loved hymn for most of the people who struggled with the new one. I would not just do this to use a hymn they would love, but it also had to fit in with what I was trying to accomplish in that service. If I could not find one, I would not just include a hymn to “throw one out to the old folks.” I asked myself what was from their most loved repertoire that would accomplish what I wanted. In this service with this people we learned to do what the Westminster

Assembly fathers told parliament they wanted to do regarding being “studious to please others rather than ourselves.” I want to love the whole congregation well. I hoped that in the process they came to love each other’s style preferences.

In another church our music director, Mindy Deckard, would use one of the 13-week Sunday school time periods to meet with the teenagers. They would study the content of songs as they learned to sing them. Mindy and I agreed these songs should be added to the church’s repertoire of singing in the coming year. They were either new tunes for old hymns or just new songs. We would pick eight or ten, and they would work on them over that time period. We would have the Sunday evening teen choir event. They would teach the congregation the songs. If we learned them or already knew them we were welcome to join in. It was not a performance concert. Different teens would take their turn in introducing the next song. When we did Kevin Twit’s tune to *Arise My Soul Arise*, one of the eighth graders stood up and talked about what Christ as our surety means. Most of the adults who may sing the hymn are not sure how Christ is our surety. But here was an eighth grader talking about what it meant and what it meant to him. A lot of times the people in the congregation who are most against this “new stuff” are the parents or the grandparents of those teenagers. It is pretty hard for them to be against seeing their teenage children or grandchildren get up and talk about the beauty and wonder of Christ as our surety and what that means for their lives in terms of being in Him. Then they sang this lively version of *Arise My Soul Arise*. You may or may not like it, but how could you be against your children or grandchildren being enthusiastic about their walk with the Lord?

That is what I often will do when I go to places and hear from adults who want to add to the musical repertoire and worship some of the songs that the younger generation will like. They wonder how they are going to do that. The organist may not know how to play the tunes, and they may not know how to teach it to the congregation. I suggest that they could go to their youth group and talk to the youth director. They could ask if he could talk with the youth about picking two of their favorite songs that they sing when they get together as a youth group. They need to be songs that they think the rest of the congregation is most likely to enjoy. Practice them, and let a couple of the elders come and hear. Then at a Sunday night service, or during special music in a Sunday morning service, you could have the teens use guitars and a keyboard to sing a song that the congregation could add to the repertoire and sing someday. Once a church is convinced that there is something they could do with music, they often already have the resources and the people who are doing it. And often there is great musical excellence among some of the youth or college age in their congregation. They could be gradually and easily incorporated into the life of the church.

In this church we did not change the repertoire as much as we added instruments. Some of the teens played instruments in the 10-instrument ensemble. I found that something amazing happened with this. I did not change my sermons; we did not change the service. We just added some instruments and let teens come up front and play them. I noticed that when I was preaching, most of the teenagers in church began to pay attention in ways they had not before. They did this because we had engaged them and used their gifts to serve the Body in bringing glory and honor to God. It was an amazing thing. That was not the reason for doing it, but we started to see the fruit of it. On the other side, there were people in the church who came from independent, fundamental Bible churches from the past who had songs in the hymnal that they loved. But that would not make any edition of the Trinity Hymnal because of the theology. They said they had these great loved hymns that they wished they could sing more of. I asked them to write down their 10 favorite hymns that we never did at Christ Presbyterian Church. I could not promise that we would ever do all of them or how soon we would get to any of them. But if I knew what they loved as I was planning worship services, I could have this in front of me and look at it from time to time. I might realize that there are several people who want to sing a particular song that is not in the

Trinity Hymnal. I could insert it in the bulletin and sing it some Sunday when it ties in well with the sermon or the focus in the worship service. Doing that tells them that you love them and care about them. But you do it in a way that is not necessarily compromising biblical theology or what you are planning to do in any given worship service. There are a lot of things you can do to engage people, include them, and let them be a part of things. That then wins their confidence and trust, which bears fruit in other ways in the life of the church. Worship really is one place in which we can show one another we love each other well. We can do this by accepting some of the things that are not our first preference.

We are talking about the broader understanding of the RPW. Let us go through a few quotes on this topic. Martin Butzer in Strasbourg said, “Nothing should be introduced or performed in the churches of Christ for which not probable reason can be given from the Word of God.” That is not exactly the understanding of the RPW, but he is after the same thing. He is saying we are pretty sure this is consistent with what the Word of God would direct us to be doing. It is in the area of application. A. A. Hodge comments on 21.1 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. He says, “God in His Word has prescribed for us how we may worship Him acceptably. It is an offense 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 that is not prescribed.” What is different about that is he inserted a positive formulation in it. The last part is mostly the same as the last phrase of the Confession. He inserted “to neglect to worship and serve Him in the way prescribed.” That is a positive statement. Let us do all that He has prescribed and nothing he has not prescribed. Usually it is formulated, “nothing He has not prescribed.” If I had read that and asked you what the tone of the statement was, you might not have said it was negative. You have read Frame some, and we have talked about the broader application and understanding.

Gore broadens the understanding of “circumstance” to relate it to Romans 14, which talks about weaker and stronger brothers and things of indifference. We decide in the context of the local church whether or not we should have the drum set or sing in the garden, for example. This seems to be an over-romanticized thought. “I have come to the actual garden. He walks with me, He talks with me.” That is an old hymn and the theology is pretty suspect in it, though it is after a nice idea. That is one that gets on the list of the older folks’ favorites. I am not comfortable using it in a worship service. That is why I want more than their one favorite one so I can pick some of the others in which the theology is a little better. That last comment may have upset some people. There was a circumstance where I was willing to sing that song. Every week on Wednesday I would go to one of the local nursing homes. I can play the piano and sight read hymns, so I would lead some singing and then give a devotional. The best part for all of them was that I walked around and actually shook their hands and talked with them. I let them pick anything in the hymnal that was there that they wanted to do. If someone picked a hymn that I probably would not do on a Sunday morning for the worship service, we would go ahead and sing the first stanza of it. I did that out of love for them and ministry to what is favored by them. If they were singing a hymn that denied that Jesus was God, wanted to pray to mother earth, or something like that I would still draw my lines, even at the nursing home. At the end of Gore’s book, he says some positive things that worship should be. He says it should be simple, orderly, free, glorifying, edifying, catholic, culturally sensitive, balanced, and Christ-centered. I commend to you that last section of his book if you want to look at some of that.

A man named Steve Schlitzel said the strictness of the regulation of the sacrificial system now seems to be put on the theology and doctrine of the person and work of Christ. Galatians 1:8 says, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” Schlitzel also says that everything he needed to learn about worship he did not learn from the RPW. You can see his attitude in there, which I have a problem with. He talked about

what he calls the informed principle of worship. His practice of worship looks very much like strict regulativists. Everyone says if the Bible commands it, we do it. If the Bible forbids it, we do not do it. There is nothing distinctively Presbyterian about those two statements. All Christians everywhere should agree that if the Bible commands something we should do it, but if the Bible forbids something we should not do it. Here is where the problem comes in deciding your view of worship. If the Bible neither commands nor forbids something, we need to decide what to do. It depends on the circumstances. The historic, strict articulation of the RPW would say that you do not do it. The Lutheran principle of worship would say that if it is neither commanded nor forbidden, it is all right to do if it is within the general principles of the rest of Scripture. I think that if it is neither commanded nor forbidden, we have to be very careful. We need to make sure we are operating within general principles of Scripture. Most of this is in the realm of application. It goes back to the questions of how many preachers, how long of a sermon, and how many Scripture readings should you have. The Scripture neither commands nor forbids the wearing of a robe to preach in. Should we do it? The argument of the English puritans was that the Bible does not command it, therefore we cannot do it. You are beyond Scripture. This is the way God regulates worship. If He has not said it in the Bible, we dare not do it. At the end of the day, to say no to things neither commanded nor forbidden becomes pretty unworkable in the planning and practice of worship. There are so many things we have to make a decision about. If we are not talking about the actual elements of worship but the manner of expressing them and the way of arranging them, this falls under Chapter 1.6 of “circumstances.” It talks about the general rules of Christian prudence, light of nature, and the general rules of Scripture always applying.

I was present at a retreat where it was the plan to have clowns serve communion. There was a miming of the meaning of the Lord’s Supper that was acted out. Then they came around and served communion. I have blocked most of it out of my mind because I did not enter into it. I sat in a place where they could not get to me. I felt there was some violation of some biblical principle going on. It was well meaning and well intended. Why would I forbid the serving of communion by people dressed as clowns? It is hard not to argue from general principles that apply. We need to look at how Jesus instituted this. Let us assume that they are clowns who are using Coca-Cola and Doritos chips as the elements. Often this happens when people start to ask, “Would it not be cool if...?” Be careful when you hear, “Would it not be cool if we could do this in worship?” It may be trying to bring something into worship that should not be there. We often function at the level of what is neither commanded nor forbidden. Later we will talk about drama and art. Just because something can be done to the glory of God does not mean it should or must be done in a corporate public worship service. It may not be fitting to the occasion. I have been in gymnasiums where I preached with the pulpit set up right at the three-point line. I used to play basketball, so I could pull out a basketball, turn, shoot a three-pointer, and make it to the glory of God. I could then say that I institute as a regular element in all biblically sound worship services that the preacher should make a three-pointer before he preaches. But there would be something wrong with that. Just because something can be done to the glory of God does not mean it must be done in corporate public worship. That is my answer to a lot of things that might be “cool” to do.

Like a lot of things, we press the Scripture to be more detailed and black and white than God has given us. Would it not be nice in most marriage relationships if God had determined for all eternity for every married couple that the husband takes out the trash and the wife does all the dishes? And the right way to squeeze the toothpaste tube is from the bottom up with the rolling of it. Just think of all the arguments that would be avoided. God has not given us all the details that we need to functionally practice the worship elements and principles that are in His Word. He has invited us relationally to enter into a walk with Him, His Word, and His people. It uses an element of creative imagination to put together these things that He has commanded that we use for worship in a way that serves Gospel purposes.



My last point is about a called, suggested solution in progress related to the RPW. The RPW requires several things. One is the use of commanded elements in worship. Later we will talk more about what these are. It includes the reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, prayer, the sacraments, offerings, and testimonies. That is not all there is to the RPW, though. If I started to pray before preaching by saying, "Oh mother earth..." that would not be pleasing to God. Even though I am using a commanded element by praying, it is not pleasing to God. The commanded elements have to be filled with biblical content. I have heard some sermons that I do not think were glorifying to God because they were denying essential truths of the Gospel. It is commanded elements filled with biblical content. This is how we determine the prayers we pray, the songs we sing, and the sermons we preach. Are they filled with biblical content? But biblical content all by itself with commanded elements could be put together one after another in a worship service in a way that has no logical Gospel progression to it. Technically I could begin the service with the benediction and end the service with the call to worship. I am using commanded elements with biblical content, but it is contrary to the way the progression of a service should go. The third thing, in addition to using commanded elements filled with biblical content, is to arrange them in a Gospel shape or arrangement. We will look at that more, too.

I would argue that we should be able to virtually evaluate any and every worship service based on these three things. Are they using commanded elements? Are they being filled with biblical content? And did they take Gospel shape or arrangement in the way they are ordered? They do not have to look exactly alike to accomplish this, though. This is because fourthly, there are a variety of valid expressions. One example is the singing of the Lord's Prayer rather than the stating of it. Or you could use it to form a larger prayer. You could say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Then you could invite people to pray prayers of honoring God's name. You could move through a 10-minute time of prayer that uses the structure of the Lord's Prayer without ever having prayed the whole prayer or sung it. That is a valid expression of prayer in a worship service. Fifthly, these things all need to take place in the midst of circumstances or context that is unique to a local church. If I could conceivably be at all of the PCA churches in this town on a given Sunday, I would notice that all of them made use of commanded elements filled with biblical content that were arranged in a Gospel shape. I would see a variety of expressions of these things, though. I would have to look behind what is seen on the service. They would reflect the uniqueness of each local church that has its own worshiping personality.

What is acceptable in worship is narrow. The diversity and flexibility of expression is broad. I should not go to my church and say that because they did not have a unison prayer of confession they did not worship God in the way He says He should be worshiped. The pastor there might point out a song they sung that was a prayer of confession. Or the prayer of invocation might have included asking God for forgiveness for our sins. Any of us, in any church, in the services that we are involved in planning and leading, should be able to show how we follow these three requirements. Then there will be a lot of flexibility in what that looks like. It might differ in the style of music, the instruments used, whether you are wearing a coat and tie, whether you stand, kneel, or raise your hands, have three assistant pastors preach or one senior pastor, have a woman give a testimony, or have teenagers read portions of Scripture. There are a lot of different manners of expressing these things. Our unity is over the first three requirements. We have a right to ask each other the hard questions about whether or not we are doing worship the way God wants in these areas. Then we need to give a lot of room to each other in the last two areas. It is as unique as any local church that gathers to worship. This helps us; it gets behind the expressions to the core substantive issues. I am finding this and things like this that are being said out there in the PCA. People are rallying to this. They are finding it unifying with room to breathe. They are saying they are in the room; they know where it is to go outside of the room. But look at the folks over here taking the liberty that they have within this room we have agreed on. This is a beautiful picture of

how God works with the unity and diversity of the Body of Christ. I go to Africa and I am able to look at how they do the element of the offering. That impacts me, not to go copy it, but to change the way I do it to make it more expressive of what the Bible calls us to in terms of cheerfulness in giving.

Let us talk briefly about how churches should change to reflect the demographic changes of the neighborhood in which the church has been for a long time. There needs to be a constant evaluation of the circumstances unique to the local church. This should then inform a potential adjustment of the variety of valid expressions. All the while, biblical elements should be kept in a Gospel shape. The changing demographics of this particular church neighborhood may mean we need to tap into more of the variety of valid expressions. The unity stays in the top three requirements. The substance of worship as God requires it does not change. At the same time, you need to challenge people who are very comfortable with the way it has always been to consider being different for the sake of the mission of the church. We are a worshiping community on a kingdom mission that begins in a Jerusalem right around us. As a result, for missional reasons, we may need to consider changing the expression of worship to be able to accomplish that mission better.