

WORSHIP

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF WORSHIP IN HISTORY

by Reg Barrow

...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 (WCF 21:1).

What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it (Deut. 12:32).

But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Matt. 15:9).

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments (Exod. 20:4-6).

It was an amazing discovery to read, for the first time, of the regulative principle of worship about a year ago.¹ This was over ten years after my eyes had been opened to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and also after having spent a number of years in a Bible Presbyterian Church (in which I never even once heard this great controlling principle mentioned).² Sadly, this was also after a number of debates had taken place in this church over music and liturgy, all of which could have easily been settled by an appeal to the confessional standards that the BP elders had vowed to uphold (i.e. the *Westminster Confession of Faith*). The sufficiency of the WCF in this area can be easily illustrated, (especially concerning the use of

instrumental music in public worship), by a quotation from pages 31-32 of James Begg's book *Anarchy in Worship*,³

When we come down to the Westminster Assembly, by which our present Standards were framed, it is unnecessary to repeat how clearly these Standards embody the same principle, viz., that pure and acceptable worship must be "prescribed," or "appointed" by God himself. But it may be important to bring out the clear evidence which we have, that during the second Reformation our ancestors insisted on uniformity of worship and the Commissioners at Westminster and the Assembly in Scotland, regarded their principle of worship as clearly excluding instrumental music, and all other things abolished, along with the peculiarities of the temple service. By an Act of the Assembly of Scotland, 1643, a directory for worship was appointed to be prepared and reported to next assembly, to the intent "that unity and uniformity might be observed throughout the kingdom in all parts of the public worship of God." Our Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, including the most eminent ecclesiastics then in Scotland, reported on May 20, 1644, that "plain and powerful preaching" had been set up, and "THE GREAT ORGANS AT PAUL'S AND PETER'S IN WESTMINSTER TAKEN DOWN," and "all by authority in a quiet manner, at noonday without tumult." In answer, the General Assembly here, June 4, 1644, writes to the Assembly at Westminster: "We were greatly refreshed to hear by letter from our Commissioners there with you, of your praiseworthy proceedings, and of the great good things the Lord hath wrought among you and for you. Shall it seem a small thing in our eyes that....the door of a right entry unto faithful shepherds is opened; many corruptions, as altars, images, and other monuments of idolatry and superstition, removed, defaced, and abolished; the service-book in many places forsaken; and plain and powerful preaching set up; THE GREAT ORGANS AT PAUL'S AND PETER'S TAKEN DOWN; that the royal chapel is purged and reformed; sacraments sincerely administered, and according to the pattern in the mount?" From this it is clear that the Westminster Divines, and our own Church in those days, would have made short work with the Dunse case, and with all questions of instrumental music in worship. This was certainly regarded as one of the last corruptions introduced, dating only from about the eighth century, and never having found admission into the Greek Church at all.

At this point some may be asking, What is this regulative principle? James Glasgow gives us a succinct answer,

That principle was substantially this, that for all the constituents of worship, you require the positive sanction of divine authority, either in the shape of direct command, or good and necessary consequence, or approved example; and that you are not at liberty to introduce anything else in connection with the worship of God, unless it comes legitimately under the apostolic heading of 'decency and order.'⁴

After citing the instance of Begg's quote concerning the Westminster Assembly (supra), Glasgow further illustrates this principle,

They (the Westminster Divines--RB) contended, I think unanswerably, that the truth of this principle is involved in what the Scripture teaches concerning its own sufficiency, God's exclusive right to settle the constitution, laws, and arrangements of His kingdom, the unlawfulness of will worship, and the utter unfitness of men for the function which they have so often boldly usurped in this matter.⁵

Of course, whole volumes have been written regarding this definition. But, continuing on, in that this definition has been generally accepted among Presbyterian/Puritan Christians, Cunningham sets the stage for more of our historical survey, (while at the same time excluding the charge of trifling over inconsequential matters), when he writes,

There is a strange fallacy which seems to mislead men in forming an estimate of the soundness and importance of this principle (the regulative principle--RB). Because this principle has been often brought out in connection with the discussion of matters which, viewed in themselves, are very unimportant, such as rites and ceremonies, vestments and organs, crossings, kneelings, bowings, and other such *ineptæ*, some men seem to think that it partakes of the intrinsic littleness of these things, and that the men who defend and try to enforce it, find their most congenial occupation in fighting about these small matters, and exhibit great bigotry and narrow-mindedness in bringing the authority of God and the testimony of Scripture to bear upon such a number of paltry points. Many have been led to entertain such views as these of the English Puritans and of the Scottish Presbyterians, and very much upon the ground of their maintenance of this principle. Now, it should be quite sufficient to prevent or neutralize this impression to show, as we think can be done, 1st, That the principle is taught with sufficient plainness in Scripture, and that, therefore, it ought to be professed and applied to the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs. 2d, That, viewed in itself, it is large, liberal, and comprehensive, such as seems in no way unbecoming its Divine author, and in no way unsuitable to the dignity of the church as a divine institution, giving to God His rightful place of supremacy, and to the church, as the body of Christ, its rightful position of elevated simplicity and purity. 3d, That, when contemplated in connection with the ends of the church, it is in full accordance with everything suggested by an enlightened and searching survey of the tendencies of human nature, and the testimony of all past experience. And with respect to the connection above referred to, on which the impression we are combatting is chiefly based, it is surely plain that, in so far as it exists *de facto*, this is owing, not to anything in the tendencies of the principle itself or of its supporters, but to the conduct of the men who, in defiance of this principle, would obtrude human inventions into the government and worship of the church, or who insist upon retaining them permanently after they have once got admittance. The principle suggests no rites or ceremonies, no schemes or arrangements; it is purely negative and prohibitory. Its supporters never devise innovations and press them upon the church. The principle itself

precludes this. It is the deniers of this principle, and they alone, who invent and obtrude innovations; and they are responsible for all the mischiefs that ensue from the discussions and contentions to which these things have given rise.⁶

Now we can continue to view the historical position that the Christian church has taken regarding the regulative principle (with special emphasis on instrumental music). Concerning the Early church Dr. N. R. Needham has written,

The Early church did not use instrumental music in its worship.... They considered the practice as pagan or Jewish rather than Christian. Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old, in his work *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* says: "As is well known, the ancient church did not admit the use of instrumental music in worship. It was looked upon as a form of worship which like the sacrifices of the Jerusalem temple prefigured the worship in spirit and truth...." This concern for the distinctiveness of New Testament worship, and for spirituality as its central feature, was typical of the early Church fathers. In harmony with this, the situation in early Church worship was one of "plain" or unaccompanied singing of psalms.... The use of musical instruments was rejected as contrary to the tradition of the Apostles--a feature of sensuous pagan or Old Testament Jewish worship, but not of the spiritual Christian worship.⁷

Continuing our walk through history (and the instrument music example) we can observe how and by whom this principle has been greatly violated,

With reference to the time when organs were first introduced into use in the Roman Catholic Church, let us hear Bingham:⁸ "It is now generally agreed among learned men that the use of organs came into the church since the time of Thomas Aquinas, Anno 1250; for he, in his Summs, has these words: 'Our church does not use musical instruments, as harps and psalteries, to praise God withal, that she may not seem to Judaize.'...Mr. Wharton also has observed that Marinus Sanutus, who lived about the year 1290, was the first who brought the use of wind-organs into churches, whence he was surnamed Torcellus, which is the name for an organ in the Italian tongue....Let us pause a moment to notice the fact, supported by a mass of incontrovertible evidence, that the Christian church did not employ instrumental music in its public worship for 1200 years after Christ....It deserves serious consideration, moreover, that notwithstanding the ever-accelerated drift towards corruption in worship as well as in doctrine and government, the Roman Catholic Church did not adopt this corrupt practice until about the middle of the thirteenth century....When the organ was introduced into its worship it encountered strong opposition, and made its way but slowly to general acceptance. These assuredly are facts that should profoundly impress Protestant churches. How can they adopt a practice which the Roman Church, in the year 1200, had not admitted...Then came the Reformation; and the question arises, How did the Reformers

deal with instrumental music in the church?...Zwingle has already been quoted to show instrumental music was one of the shadows of the old law which has been realized in the gospel. He pronounces its employment in the present dispensation "wicked pervicacity." There is no doubt in regard to his views on the subject, which were adopted by the Swiss Reformed churches...Calvin is very express in his condemnation of instrumental music in connection with the public worship of the Christian church...In his homily on 1 Sam. xviii. 1-9, he delivers himself emphatically and solemnly upon the subject: "In Popery there was a ridiculous and unsuitable imitation [of the Jews]. While they adorned their temples, and valued themselves as having made the worship of God more splendid and inviting, they employed organs, and many other such ludicrous things, **by which the Word and worship of God are exceedingly profaned** (emphasis added--RB), the people being much more attached to those rites than to the understanding of the divine Word..." Whatever may be the practice in recent times of the churches of Holland, the Synods of the Reformed Dutch Church, soon after the Reformation, pronounced very decidedly against the use of instrumental music in public worship. The National Synod at Middleburg, in 1581, declared against it, and the Synod of Holland and Zealand, in 1594, adopted this strong resolution; "That they would endeavor to obtain of the magistrate the laying aside of organs, and the singing with them in the churches...." The Provincial Synod of Dort also inveighed severely against their use...The Rev. Charles H. Spurgeon, ...upholds an apostolic simplicity of worship. The great congregation which is blessed with the privilege of listening to his instructions has no organ "to assist" them in singing...The non-prelatic churches, Independent and Presbyterian, began their development on the American continent without instrumental music. They followed the English Puritans and the Scottish Church, which had adopted the principles of the Calvinistic Reformed Church...It has thus been proved by an appeal to historical facts, that the church, although lapsing more and more into defection from the truth and into a corruption of apostolic practice, had no instrumental music for twelve hundred years; and that the Calvinistic Reformed Church ejected it from its services as an element of Popery, even the Church of England having come very nigh to its extrusion from her worship. The historical argument, therefore, combines with the scriptural and the confessional to raise a solemn and powerful protest against its employment by the Presbyterian Church. It is heresy in the sphere of worship.⁹

Though our standard is unequivocally *sola Scriptura*, the historical argument illustrates how a practice which was a very late comer to church practice, (not to mention instituted by the Pope of Rome), has gained almost universal acceptance in our day of declension. Without strict adherence to the regulative principal, as historically exegeted and espoused by our Presbyterian and Puritan forefathers, the door to unscriptural innovation in worship is endless. This principle in worship is the equivalent of God's sovereignty in soteriology. That is, the "Christian" humanists (Arminians) try to ascribe salvation to their **own wills** and not to God's will as the Bible clearly proclaims (John 1:13, Romans 9). Similarly the Bible condemns human invention in worship as will worship (Col 2:23), the only acceptable worship being that which is mandated via God's own will as revealed in the scripture. Girardeau cites Calvin's commentary on the Psalms, pinpointing the error in this particular practice and also exposing **the source** of many of the ecclesiastical abuses of worship that have crept into the modern church,

"To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery," says Calvin, "unquestionably

formed a part of the training of the law and of the service of God under that dispensation of *shadows and figures*; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving."10 He says again: "With respect to the *tabret, harp, and psaltery*, we have formerly observed, and will find it necessary afterwards to repeat the same remark, that the Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were yet tender and like children, by such rudiments until the coming of Christ. But now, when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the *shadows* of the law and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time."11 He further observes: "We are to remember that the worship of God was never understood to consist in such outward services, which were only necessary to help forward a people as yet weak and rude in knowledge in the spiritual worship of God. A difference is to be observed in this respect between his people under the Old and under the New Testament; for now that Christ has appeared, and the church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the gospel should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation. From this it appears that the Papists, as I shall have occasion to show elsewhere, in employing instrumental music cannot be said so much to imitate the practice of God's ancient people as to ape it in a senseless and absurd manner, exhibiting a silly delight in that worship of the Old Testament which was *figurative* and terminated with the gospel."12

Once again citing a lengthy section from Girardeau, (which ends the first chapter of his *Instrumental Music in Public Worship*, the "General Arguments from Scripture"), we read,

The principal (the regulative principle, scripturally proved in the preceeding 22 pages of this highly recommended book--RB) that has been emphasized *is in direct opposition to that maintained by Romanists and Prelatists, and I regret to say by lax Presbyterians, that what is not forbidden in the Scriptures is permitted*. The Church of England, in her twentieth article, concedes to the church "a power to decree rites and ceremonies," with this limitation alone upon its exercise, "that it is not lawful for the church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's written word." The principle of the discretionary power of the church in regard to *things not commanded by Christ in his Word*, was the chief fountain from which flowed the gradually increasing tide of corruptions that swept the Latin church into apostasy from the gospel of God's grace. And as surely as causes produce their appropriate effects, and history repeats itself in obedience to that law, any Protestant church which embodies that principle in its creed is destined, sooner or later, to experience a similar fate. The same, too, may be affirmed of a church which formally rejects it and practically conforms to it. The reason is plain. The only bridle that checks the degenerating tendency of the church--a tendency manifested in all ages--is the Word of God: for the Spirit of grace Himself ordinarily operates only in connection with that Word. If this restraint be discarded, the downward lapse is sure. The words of the great theologian, John Owen--and the British Isles have produced no greater--are solemn and deserve to be seriously pondered: "*The principle that the church hath power to institute any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either as to matter or manner, beyond the observance of such circumstances as necessarily attend such ordinances as Christ Himself hath instituted, lies*

at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution, and wars, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world (all emphases added)."

In view of such considerations as these, confirmed, as they are, by the facts of all past history, it is easy to see how irrelevant and baseless is the taunt flung by high churchmen, ritualists and latitudinarians of every stripe against the maintainers of the opposite principle, that they are narrow-minded bigots who take delight in insisting upon trivial details. The truth is exactly the other way. The principle upon which this cheap ridicule is cast is simple, broad, majestic. It affirms only the things that God has commanded, the institutions and ordinances that he has prescribed, and besides this, discharges only a negative office which sweeps away every trifling invention of man's meretricious fancy. It is not the supporters of this principle, but their opponents, who delight in insisting upon crossings, genuflexions and bowings to the east, upon vestments, altars and candles, upon organs and cornets, and "the dear antiphonies that so bewitch their prelates and their chapters with the goodly echo they make;" in fine, upon all that finical trumpery which, inherited from the woman clothed in scarlet, marks the trend backward to the Rubicon and the seven-hilled mart of souls.

But whatever others may think or do, Presbyterians cannot forsake this principle without the guilt of defection from their own venerable standards and from the testimonies sealed by the blood of their fathers. Among the principles that the Reformers extracted from the rubbish of corruption and held up to the light again, none were more comprehensive, far-reaching and profoundly reforming than this. It struck at the root of every false doctrine and practice, and demanded the restoration of the true. Germany has been infinitely the worse because of Luther's failure to apply it to the full. Calvin enforced it more fully. The great French Protestant Church, with the exception of retaining a liturgical relic of popery, gave it a grand application, and France suffered an irreparable loss when she dragooned almost out of existence the body that maintained it. John Knox stamped it upon the heart of the Scottish Church, and it constituted the glory of the English Puritans. Alas! that it is passing into decadence in the Presbyterian churches of England, Scotland and America. What remains but that those who still see it, and cling to it as to something dearer than life itself, should continue to utter, however feebly, however inoperatively, their unchanging testimony to its truth? It is the acropolis of the church's liberties, the palladium of her purity. That gone, nothing will be left to hope, but to strain its gaze towards the dawn of the millennial day. Then--we are entitled to expect--a more thorough-going and glorious reformation will be effected than any that has blessed the church and the world since the magnificent propagation of Christianity by the labors of the inspired apostles themselves.¹³

So as not to leave myself open to the objection that little exegetical proof has been cited in this short newsletter format, I offer the following three considerations.

First, it would be ridiculous to think that all (or even a slight percentage) of the testimonies herein adduced, in favor of the regulative principle, were reached on a basis other than intense scriptural exegesis. A close inspection of the sources cited in the footnotes will amply testify of the careful and precise exegetical work that has been done in this area.

Second, the historical testimony should be recognized as coming from those who have held the highest regard for scripture. Many of the men holding to this position put their lives on the line over Scripture, while those opposing them often tried to mute their testimony with persecution and even death. Furthermore, this Presbyterian/Puritan testimony for the regulative principle (and against the use of musical instruments in public worship) makes up the most totally unanimous historical witness I have come across in any contested area of theology. At least equal in clearness to that of the sovereignty of God in **salvation**--this being the sovereignty of God in **worship**. Third, in conjunction with all this, it is clear that many of the most abominable innovations in worship were introduced by Rome. The cavil that the Reformers were *merely* reacting to Rome *per se*, in upholding the regulative principle, is simplistic at best. It is admitted that the earlier Reformers were reacting, but righteously reacting against Rome's false and Judaizing hermeneutic. This hermeneutic, drawing from the *shadows, figures and types of the abolished ceremony* of the Old Testament (Heb. 7-10), justified not only musical instruments in public worship, but also the mass (a false sacrifice), a false priesthood, and any number of other detestable practices. Moreover, it implies that the work of Christ in fulfillment of *these shadows and types* is not satisfactory or complete. Rome's "harlot hermeneutic," being as it is, radically opposed to *sola Scriptura*--the great cry of the Reformers and the Reformation--necessitates an unbiblical deviation in worship. This is not surprising. What is surprising is that some of the Romanist innovations in worship (such as instrumental music in public worship) are now being practiced by denominations that profess to hold to the Reformed faith, Confessions and hermeneutic.

In conclusion I will simply state that any Reconstruction of the Church must begin with a thorough understanding (and the subsequent practice) of the regulative principle. To deviate here is to open the floodgates of humanistic innovation in worship, condoning worship devised by a false hermeneutic and therefore the will of man--***Arminianism in worship in short***. This is the seedbed of idolatry and a sure route to a shipwrecked church. John Knox's battle to reform Scotland and his call for purity of worship is most instructive here. Knox states,

The matter is not of so small importance, as some suppose. The question is, whether God or man ought to be obeyed in matters of religion? In mouth, all do confess that only God is worthy of sovereignty. But after many--by the instigation of the devil, and by the presumptuous arrogance of carnal wisdom and worldly policy--have defaced God's holy ordinance, men fear not to follow what laws and common consent (mother of all mischief) have established and commanded. But thus continually I can do nothing but hold, and affirm all things polluted, yea, execrable and accursed, which God by his Word has not sanctified in his religion. God grant you his Holy Spirit rightly to judge.¹⁴

Will-worship has proved disastrous in the past, thus we must heed the warnings of history, a history *also* filled with testimony to the clear Biblically based hermeneutic of our Presbyterian and Puritan forefathers--proclaiming the sovereignty of God in worship and over every area of life!

CHRISTIAN REFORMATION TODAY Issue #18-19 July.-Oct., 1991. Revised Nov., 1995. WRITE FOR A FULL CATALOGUE OF DISCOUNTED REFORMED BOOKS, TAPES, VIDEOS AND TRACTS STILL WATERS REVIVAL BOOKS 4710-37A Ave. Edmonton, AB Canada T6L-3T5 Written and © 1991, 1995 by Reg Barrow. Permission granted to reprint if proper credits are cited.

FOOTNOTES:

1. A friend while visiting Edmonton had lent me his copy of *The Scriptural Law of Worship* by Carl Bogue (Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988), which I eagerly devoured, my journey towards the Presbyterian/Puritan view of worship having *finally* begun.
2. I later found out that some of the elders at that BP had never heard of the regulative principle either.
3. As this book (first published in 1875) is not easily accessible, SWRB is stocking copies which can be obtained (postpaid) by sending \$5.
4. From *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorized*, (Belfast: Aitchison & Cleeland, late 19th century), p. 4. This *exceedingly* rare book can also be obtained (post paid) in bound photo-copy format from SWRB for \$15. This book is an exegetical treasure which demolishes what the Westminster Divines, together with the whole Puritan party (cf. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, pp. 137, 138), called 'the badge of Popery,' i.e. the innovation of introducing instrumental music into Christian worship.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, [1862] 1989), p. 35, 36.
7. Musical Instruments in Worship: Historical Survey" *The Presbyterian*, issue 32, May 1990, pp. 25, 26. Available from: 9 Church Road, Thornbury, Bristol BS12 1EJ, England.
8. Girardeau cites: *Works*, Vol. iii., p. 137, ff.
9. John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA.: New Covenant Publ. Society, [1888] 1983), pp. 158, 159, 161, 165, 170, 179. Again this book is available in bound photocopied format (postpaid) from SWRB for \$10.
10. Calvin on Ps. lxxi. 22.
11. Calvin on Ps. lxxxii. 3.

12. Calvin on Ps. xcii. 1. All Calvin cited in Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, pp. 63, 64.

13. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, pp. 23-26.

14. Knox, Works VI:14 cited in John Knox, *True and False Worship* (Presbyterian Heritage Publications, rpnt. 1988), p. x.

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

Biblical Worship by Kevin Reed

Concerning Close Communion by W.J. McKnight

Shunning the Unlawful Rights of the Ungodly by John Calvin

Reformation Worship and Separation from Idolatry by Reg Barrow

Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church by J.L. Girardeau

Making Shipwreck of the Faith: Evangelicals and Catholics Together by K. Reed

The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody by M. Bushell

Foundation for Reformation: The Regulative Principle of Worship by Greg Price

The Badge of Popery: Musical Instruments in Public Worship by R.J. George

Paleopresbyterianism Versus Neopresbyterianism by Michael Wagner

A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies by George Gillespie

Westminster Confession of Faith by the Westminster Divines

Selected Writings of John Knox by John Knox

Close Communion by R.J. George

All titles above available from Still Waters Revival Books at: <http://www.swrb.com/pcopy/photoc.htm>.

The book, *The Canterbury Tales: An Extended Review and Commentary Based upon the Geneva Papers*, can be purchased from Still Waters Revival Books at the address listed below.

An electronic version is also available free of charge on our web page at: [The Canterbury Tales: An Extended Review and Commentary Based upon the Geneva Papers](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Canterbu.htm)

Free at: <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Canterbu.htm>

Still Waters Revival Books, 4710-37A Ave., Edmonton, AB, Canada T6L 3T5
(Reformation resources at great discounts!)

E-mail: swrb@swrb.com

Home page at: <http://www.swrb.com/>

Contact us today for your FREE mail-order catalogue!

**FOR FURTHER STUDY SEE ALL THE
DEEPLY DISCOUNTED WORSHIP
RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN OUR
Reformation Worship Super Sale at:**

<http://www.swrb.com/Puritan/reformation-worship.htm>

[Back to swrb home page](#)

"