

The Regulative Principle in Worship: A brief article.

by C. Matthew McMahon

The Regulative Principle was given its classical and definitive statement in the reformed Confessions formulated in the 17th century. It is stated in identical language in Chapter 21 paragraph 1 in both the Westminster confession and Chapter 22 paragraph 1 in the 1689 London Baptist confession. The following is taken from the 1689 Baptist Confession:

"The light of Nature shews that there is a God, who hath Lordship, and Sovereignty over all; is just, 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 all the Soul, (a) and with all the Might. But the acceptable way of Worshipping the true God, is (b) 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 representations, or (c) any other way, not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."

Simply the Regulative Principle States this: True worship is only commanded by God; false worship is anything not commanded. This was the Puritan's view of worship. As Samuel Waldron has said, "It seems that one of the major intellectual stumbling blocks which hinders men from embracing the Regulative Principle is that it involves the idea that the church and its worship is ordered in a regulated way different from the rest of life. In the rest of life God gives men the great precepts and general principles of his word and within the bounds of these directions allows them to order their lives as seems best to them. He does not give them minute directions as to how they shall build their houses or pursue their secular vocations. The Regulative principle, on the other hand, involves a limitation on human initiative in freedom not characteristic of the rest of life. It clearly assumes that there is a distinction between the way the church and its worship is to be ordered and the way the rest of human society and conduct is to be ordered. Thus, the Regulative Principle is liable to strike many as oppressive, peculiar, and, therefore, suspiciously out of accord with God's dealings with mankind and the rest of life." True enough.

It should be seen as appropriate at that house of God be ordered by God's rules. It should be seen as appropriate that God's people are to be ordered by God's rules. It should be seen as appropriate that worship, that which shows reverence, piety, love, desire, and joy in God, be structured and ordered according to God's word and His biblical principles lying therein. Worship for the Christian should be an expression of God's heart back to God. We ought to reflect back to God how wonderful and most blessed He is. It is impossible to worship God by human invention. It is impossible to worship God by human ingenuity. It is impossible to worship God in an atmosphere that has not been structured and ordered by God and His word. The Regulative Principle which is found in the Bible and expressed clearly in its climactic expression by the Puritans should not be placed by the way side because we and our contemporary culture are more fascinated and captivated by being entertained rather than by worshipping God.

The Presbyterian Puritans, in assembling the Westminster standards, and the Reformed Baptist Puritans, in assembling the 1689 London Baptist Confession, were both aiming at the same thing: acceptable worship to Christ. Let us first look at the 1689 confession and then we will look at the Biblical arguments which support this statement of worship. The Confession first states,

"The light of Nature shews that there is a God, who hath Lordship, and Sovereignty over all; is just, 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 all the Soul, (a) and with all the Might." Here we find the biblical and philosophical arguments for the existence of God preceding the worship of that God which exists. The very light of nature, if one was to argue through in his apologetics, would come to the conclusion that there is a God. This God is the Sovereign Lord of the universe. Not only does this statement say that God is sovereign, but also that God is sovereign over all. He is the God who rules and who reigns over every living thing, every creature, every rock, every atom, anywhere in the entire universe. He is God over all. Because there is such a God who is good, just, does good unto all, or at least may do good unto all, he is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, might and soul. If this God is holy, then there is a right and wrong way of approaching this God. In God's word Jesus Christ has given mankind not only the ability to approach God but also all of the directives are by which we may approach him. His atonement assures this to the elect. The confession states that God is to be served, in essence, because he is God. So we see that the Puritans could not begin by just stating how worship is to be ordered and structured without first stating something about the God who is to be worshipped.

The second part of the paragraph says this, "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 representations, or any other way, not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures." The word "acceptable" is used on purpose which intimates that there is an unacceptable way of worshipping the true God. They chose their words carefully stating that worshipping God is instituted by God himself. And since, then, it is instituted by Himself, it is limited by what God has revealed about Himself. Only those things which are found in the Scriptures, which expressly state certain conditions of worship, are acceptable worship to God. What man may make up, what he may devise, what he may add, what he may take away, or what he may be tempted to do by listening to the devil, is not acceptable. And the Puritans were sure to state that the worship of God is not to be done by any visible representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. Thus they were combating the idolatry of Catholicism with its images and idols, and of any kind of will-worship. (We will see what will-worship is in a moment.) Thus, from the 1689 Baptist Confession, we see that the Puritans were aiming at purity of worship; worship that was pleasing to God, and worship that was taken completely from the Scriptures alone. They could not in good conscience allow sinful men to dictate to God the means by which sinful men may approach God. And it ought not to be that any good Christian would think himself so above sin to be able to tell God how he should approach God. God alone, being holy and pure, is able in and of Himself, to dictate to human beings how they may approach Him.

There are four biblical arguments for the Puritan Regulative principle of the church and its worship seen in the 1689 Baptist confession. First,

- 1) It is the prerogative of God alone to determine the terms on which sinners may approach Him in worship. Samuel Waldron quotes James man in his pamphlet on the Regulative Principle, "The fundamental principle that lies in the basis of the whole argument is this, that in regard to the ordinance of public worship it is the province of God, and not the province of man, to

determine both the terms in a manner of such worshipped. The path of the approach to God was shut and barred in consequence of man's sin: it was impossible for man to renew that which had been so solemnly closed by the Judicial sentence which excluded him from the presence and favor of God. Could that path ever again be opened up, and the communion of God with man and of man with God ever again be renewed? This was a question of God alone to determine. If it could, on what terms was the renewal of to take place, and in what manner was the fellowship of the creature with its creator again to be maintained? This, too, was a question no less than a former for God alone to resolve." But not only is God just in His prerogative, but the Bible shows that He exercises it as well. (Genesis 4:1-5; Exodus 20:4-6) Should God decree that He will be worshipped only by those wearing white T-shirts, He would have the right to do so. If God did decree that every Christian should wear a white T-shirt to worship Him, I would imagine that all Christians, who truly love the Lord, will go out and buy a whole bunch of white T-shirts so that they never run out again. They would come to church wearing the white T-shirt that God commanded they wear for worship. God is the one who commands worship of us. What arrogance for man to think that he has the least business in determining how God will be worshipped!

The second Puritan principle of the regulative principle in worship is this,

2) The introduction of extra Biblical practices into worship inevitably tends to nullify and undermine God's appointed worship. (Matthew 15:3,8,9; 2 Kings 16:10-18) 2 Kings 16:10-18 is explained well by Samuel Waldron. He states that this is a marvelous illustration of the way in which extra biblical practices inevitably, but often with great subtlety displaced the appointed worship of God. He shows us that King Ahaz in his apostasy from God and alliance with Assyria says set his heart on having another alter like that which he saw in Damascus. He ordered the construction of such an altar and that it should be placed in the central place occupied by the old bronze altar. This altar displaced the old altar as the place upon which the regular morning and evening offerings shall be offered; but the old God appointed altar is, however, not destroyed. Of course not! It is simply placed in a corner, verse 14. In a footnote to his decree on this matter, King Ahaz assures his more traditional subjects that no insult was intended to the old God appointed altar. That decree concludes, "But the bronze altar shall be for me to acquire by", verse 15. Human innovators pay lip service to the God appointed elements of worship and simultaneously, in the very act, nullify them. How strikingly this illustrates the subtlety with which extra biblical practices have the tendency to displace the divine the appointed altars of biblical worship! This tendency is illustrated in evangelical churches today were mundane or silly announcements, special music, testimony times, mime, puppet shows, liturgical dance and Christian movies either completely replace or severely restrict the ordained parts of worship. These or other traditions of men, for instance, often leave only 20 minutes for preaching.

The third principle the Puritans drew from the Scriptures is this,

3) That if sinful men were to add any unappointed elements into worship, they would, by this action, be calling into question the wisdom of Jesus Christ and the complete sufficiency of the Scriptures alone. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states this, "all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that a man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." The man of God referred to in this text is not a

reference to every individual Christian. There are compelling reasons rather to identify "the man of God any", as the man who like Timothy was charged to provide order and leadership to the Church of God. The elders in a church are to use the Scriptures in such a way to dictate what the order and structure of worship is to be. It is not that the elders implement their own worship, rather, by holding steadfastly to the word of God, they implement what God states and desires for worship for the people of God. The Scriptures then, are able to fully equip the man of God for every good work in the Church of God, for the glory of God in worship.

Fourthly,

4) The Puritans were very adamant to prove that the Bible explicitly condemns all worship that is not commanded by God. Scriptures proving this are the following: Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 17:3; Deuteronomy 4:2; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Joshua 1:7; 23:6-8; Matthew 15:13; Colossians 2:20-23. We will look Leviticus 10:1-3 and then two New Testament verses that are listed here both in Matthew and Colossians.

Leviticus 10:1-3 states, "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not.

And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said unto Aaron, This *is it* that the LORD spake, saying, I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified. And Aaron held his peace." The text first shows us that Nadab and Abihu came to offer incense to God. They offered incense and God did not accept it. God was not pleased with what they offered. They offered "strange fire". Now this is somewhat of an odd statement. God never told them that they could not offer this strange fire. You would look through the Scriptures in vain to find the commandment which stated they were not allowed to do this. Rather, we do find what God does tell them. Though God did not expressly forbid this strange fire to be brought, we see from the text that God did not approve of it, and killed them on the spot for offering it. Nadab and Abihu took it upon themselves to offer to God something He did not expressly ask for and God "smote" them for it. The principle here does not die. God will be "sanctified" by those who draw near to Him. That means He will be regarded as holy, utterly separated by His people. God will receive His due glory whether it be in justice upon Nadab and Abihu for offering strange fire, or by right worship. They did not offer right worship and so were consumed. God desires right worship. Nadab and Abihu's sin was offering that which God did not command. God never threatened to kill them if they offered strange fire, but He killed them nonetheless. This would also show us that God's Word must be carefully exegeted to find its proper meaning, lest we ourselves become the victims of His wrath. God is very picky about His worship.

(This text has been masterfully exegeted by Jeremiah Burroughs in his book "Gospel Worship". Burroughs gives a number of expository sermons on these few verses numbering over 400 pages. The first sermon will be on this section of the web page soon. An excellent treatment of these verses.)

The second Scripture to look at is Matthew 15:8-9, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men." This is a very striking statement.

Jesus explains that the people, though they profess Him, really do not possess Him because they do not truly worship Him. They honor Him with their mouth by their testimony. They say they are Christians, they say they love Him, they say many things. (And please note, that in this context He is speaking about the Pharisees who seem to have their religion neatly packaged "just for God".) But Jesus goes on to say that their hearts are not near Him. Their hearts are somewhere else. They do not belong to Christ. They do not really worship Christ. Rather, they add things to God's worship and thus teach as "doctrines" (or Gospel truths) the vain imaginations of men. The commandments which men make up (like additions to worship) are condemned here because they do not truly honor Christ. Man is not given the right to create the ambience of worshipping and drawing near to God. Jesus condemns any creation of this on the part of man.

The third Scripture to examine is Colossians 2:20-23, "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh." Here Paul is refuting the false worship which men may impose on others. Worship not rightly divided from the word of God is called "will-worship". It is, in essence, a worship of the self, because it is a worship from the self and what the "self" likes. Will-worship is when the human factor is the agent by which worship is dictated. Often, this is when the pew dictates to the pulpit what is preached, and how the worship is structured. Oftentimes churches cater to the world and create an atmosphere "unthreatening" to the world so they fill up the church. Unfortunately, the church then becomes like the world, instead of the conversion of souls to make the world the church. Worship then becomes a matter of taste, and convenience. Human desire becomes the deciding factor. Imagine if Nadab and Abihu were allowed to come and visit the contemporary church—they would fall to the ground and weep bitterly knowing that their sin is still carried on today with acceptance.

The Puritans desired simple, biblical worship. They regulated their worship by the Bible instead of their own "wills". They had no desire to offer strange fire no matter how "exciting" the strange fire would be to the spectators. They were not interested in putting on a show. When Elijah was on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18, he asked the people if they were ready to follow God or Baal. When posed with the question, the people were silent. When Elijah said he wanted to have a "contest" with the priests (a "show"), what did the people do? They were all excited about it. "Yes! Let's have a show!" And so they did. The "contemporary church" is the same today. They want a show. They want fire to fall from heaven. They want the spectacular, or at least as entertaining as "church may be". But God is displeased. And if it were not for the grace of God, most "churches" today would be consumed as Nadab and Abihu were.

May the God of worship open the eyes of the blind that they may see.

<http://www.apuritansmind.com/PuritanWorship/McMahonRegulativePrinciple.htm>