

SHORT STUDIES

SOME ANSWERS ABOUT THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

T. DAVID GORDON

Professor John Frame very accurately entitled a recent article, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," since questions, rather than solutions, dominated the article. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Often the road to cogent answers is first charted by raising cogent questions. Unfortunately, neither the questions raised nor the answers proposed were especially precise or cogent. It was never clear to this reader, for instance, *whose* regulative principle Frame was evaluating, or *whose* understanding of the "circumstances" of worship were problematic, or *why* a new category, "mode," was deemed necessary, since the three existing categories of Reformed worship (elements, circumstances, and forms) would appear adequate to his concerns. Nor was it clear that Frame recognized the regulative principle to be an ecclesiological doctrine, designed to protect liberty of conscience against the abuse of church power. Since he has expressed a desire "to learn from my readers,"¹ I will attempt to provide at least a provisional response.

It is not clear with whom Frame is debating. Although he quotes the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, he mentions the following, somewhat ill-defined designations for those with whom he disagrees (all emphases mine): "some traditional ways of understanding the principle" (p. 357); "in case *anyone* supposes" (p. 358); "some with covenantal views" (p. 360); "sometimes been regarded as a *simple* procedure for determining what may be done in worship" (p. 360); "Some people" (p. 364); "many would dispute that" (p. 360). The essay would have been much more helpful had some specific understanding of the regulative principle, as articulated in a particular confession or in a particular author's writings, been identified. The lack of specificity makes it unclear to the reader whether Frame's difference is with historic, clearly defined understandings of the principle, or with some of the particular individuals he may have met in his lifetime, who may not represent any other individuals than themselves.

¹ John M. Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," WTJ 54 (1992) 357.

Is Frame debating the regulative principle as articulated by the Westminster Assembly, by George Gillespie,² by John Owen,³ by James Bannerman,⁴ or by the Southern Presbyterians (Dabney,⁵ Girardeau,⁶ Thomas E. Peck⁷)? It is not clear that his debate is with any of these, and if it is, he has misunderstood them all. Frame's understanding of "circumstances," and how they are governed, is not (apparently) influenced by the very passage of the *Westminster Confession* he quotes (see further discussion of circumstances, below). By not restricting himself to a clearly defined opponent, it became easy for Frame to erect straw men that were then easily defeated: "Some people have suggested that these passages require *explicit* and *specific* divine warrant for practices in

² *A Dispute Against the English-Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the Church of Scotland* (1662; repr. Edinburgh: Ogle, Oliver, and Boyd, 1844). Note that the first major argument of Gillespie, occupying pp. 3–20, is that the ceremonies "obtruded" on the Church of Scotland "take away our Christian liberty."

³ "A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God," and "A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition," in vol. 15 of *Works of John Owen* (ed. W. H. Goold; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1862), and "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship," in vol. 13 (pp. 462–506). In these three essays, Owen discusses the true nature of NT worship, especially focusing on the challenges made to it by the Church of England. His discourse regarding the imposition of liturgies is one of the most thorough and forceful arguments for the regulative principle of worship as the only principle which safely guards the Christian conscience from the abuse of church power. Similar thoughts appear in a less polemical context in the discussion of the Word of God as worship's sole rule.

⁴ James Bannerman, "Church Power Exercised in Regard to Ordinances," in *The Church of Christ* (1869; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960) 1.322–91. On pp. 335–75, Bannerman discusses "Extent of Church Power as Regards the Public Worship of God," and "Limits of Church Power as Regards the Public Worship of God." Here especially we see a demonstration of the relation between the regulative principle and church government. The interested reader may wish to read the earlier discussion of "The Extent and Limits of Church Power," 235–48. On pp. 346–48, Bannerman demonstrates from 1 Corinthians 8 and Acts 15 that love of the brethren and regard for liberty of conscience require the church not to do anything, even something indifferent in itself, that would wound the conscience of another.

⁵ Robert Lewis Dabney, "Dr. Girardeau's 'Instrumental Music in Public Worship': A Review" (Richmond, VA: Whittet and Sheperson, 1889). Ostensibly a review of Girardeau, this brief tract is also a forceful discussion of the regulative principle.

⁶ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond, VA: Whittet and Sheperson, 1888; repr. Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983). This book provides a thorough discussion of the role of instruments in public worship in the various eras of the history of redemption. Girardeau argues that instrumental music was employed only in private or family worship, in national assemblies, and in Temple worship. He argues convincingly that instruments were no part of tabernacle or synagogue worship, concluding from this observation that they were specifically limited to the (typological) Temple.

⁷ Thomas E. Peck, "The Wisdom of Man vs. the Power of God," in *Miscellanies of Rev. Thomas E. Peck* (ed. T. C. Johnson; Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1895) 1.99–129. A junior colleague of Dabney, Peck taught at Union Seminary in Virginia in the latter half of the nineteenth century. On p. 111, Peck said, "The liberty, on the part of the rulers of the church, to make laws which Christ has not made is simply and really the liberty to put an intolerable yoke upon the necks of the people."

worship.”⁸ Yet, as Frame recognized in the next clause, such would be contrary to the Assembly’s understanding of “good and necessary consequences.” The reader is left wondering about the identity of the “some people,” who are apparently not the framers of the *Confession*, nor any publicly known adherent of the regulative principle.

It appears that Frame is unfamiliar with the relevant writings of the authors mentioned above, for if he were, he could hardly have missed the point so significant to them all: the issue that gave birth to the regulative principle was the nature and limits of church power. The issue was not, for them, “worship” versus “the rest of life,” but “those aspects of life governed by the church officers” versus those aspects of life not governed by the church officers. Bannerman, for instance, says this about *WCF* 1.6:

The direct object of the *Confession* in this passage is no doubt to assert the right and extent of liberty of conscience; but along with that, it very distinctly enunciates the doctrine, that neither in regard to faith nor in regard to worship has the Church any authority beside or beyond what is laid down in the Bible; and that it has no right to decree and enforce new observances or institutions in the department of Scriptural worship, any more than to teach and inculcate new truths in the department of Scriptural faith.⁹

This is similarly the issue as articulated by a more contemporary author, Edmund P. Clowney.¹⁰ Frame’s attempt to put “all of life” under one umbrella, whether RP1 or RP2, is doomed to futility, because it does not address the very issue the regulative principle was *designed* to address, the limits of church power and the liberty of conscience. If there is no distinction between what is lawful for an individual and what is lawful for the church to require of everyone, then Paul’s discussions in 1 Corinthians 7–9 and Romans 14 make no sense. Such texts presuppose, and in fact positively teach, that there are things an individual may freely do which cannot be required of others.

Frame mentions several qualifications to the regulative principle within the *Confession* itself which he believes undercut the force of the principle. First, he believes that the recognition of due and necessary consequences loosens the principle in the following specific way: “The first qualification somewhat weakens the force of the term ‘command.’”¹¹ This does not

⁸ Frame, “Some Questions,” 364.

⁹ *The Church of Christ* 1.337.

¹⁰ “Distinctive Emphases in Presbyterian Church Polity,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark. Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (ed. C. G. Dennison and R. Gamble; Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986) 99–110. Clowney, following Owen and Bannerman, demonstrates that the regulative principle of worship is merely a consistent application of Presbyterian beliefs about the scope of church power and the liberty of conscience.

¹¹ Frame, “Some Questions,” 359.

weaken the force of the term "command." Biblical usage has been followed in theological usage, and that which God sanctions is commonly enough referred to as a command. So, e.g., Acts 13:47: "For so the Lord has commanded [ἐντέταλται] us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" Here in Acts, a revelation of God's purpose for his servant is spoken of as a command. The Assembly had surely not intended to teach that the lawful elements of worship could only be communicated by the grammar of an imperative mood; rather, they intended to teach that the lawful way of worshipping God could only be known by what God had revealed to be his own desire for such worship.

Frame indicates an awareness of the category of "circumstances"; however, he does not define them by any common definition, but rather gives examples ("time and place of worship, use of a building, use of pews, etc.").¹² These are accurate *examples* of circumstances, but the lack of a precise definition leads to an incorrect understanding of how they are determined. A "circumstance" is not determined by "something like RP2."¹³ It is determined (in the *WFC* 1.6) clearly enough: "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.*" In Gillespie, Owen, and Bannerman the distinction is between those things that are *circa sacra* and *in sacris*.¹⁴ There are things which are religious in themselves (prayer, singing praise to God), while there are things surrounding religious events (*circa*) which are not religious themselves (speaking, instructing, singing). These things are to be governed by "the light of nature, and Christian prudence," not by "something more like RP2." The Scriptures will never forbid singing seven hymns, but the light of nature and Christian prudence might dictate that seven hymns might be too many (or not enough) for a particular service.

It is not evident to this reader, however, how the Assembly's recognition of circumstances "loosens the apparent force of the original principle somewhat." It does not loosen, but clarify. Those things which surround a religious service, which have no religious nature in themselves, are not to be excluded on that score. Thus, amplifying the human voice is not a religious matter; it is a matter of prudence, done in both religious and nonreligious assemblies (as is providing illumination, etc.). The Assembly did not "loosen" the regulative principle by this clarification; to the contrary, it

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ So Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* 2.349: "And so, likewise, there are matters not *in* the public worship of God, but *about* the public worship of God, in regard to which the law of nature comes in. The *ceremonies* and institutions of Church worship are properly and distinctively matters *in sacris*; the *circumstances* of Church worship, or those that belong to it in common with the ordinary proceedings or peculiar solemnities of men, are properly and distinctively matters *circa sacra*" (emphases his).

protected against the very kind of over-restrictive proof-texting regarding every detail which Frame himself seems to wish to avoid.

Frame also appears concerned that this "second qualification also injects controversy into the discussion."¹⁵ How so? Apparently, because it is not always easy to determine whether a matter is circumstantial or elemental. True enough, there are some difficult matters, but surely a professor of systematic theology has run into difficulties before with other doctrines, and presumably without disposing of them. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is not without difficulty, but Professor Frame is not prepared to dispense with the doctrine for that reason. Professor Van Til's apologetic is, one might say, controversial, but this has not prevented Professor Frame from teaching such apologetics with a view toward settling the controversy. In point of fact, the practical controversy, which has threatened the peace of church life from the sixteenth century to our own, is caused by those who refuse to restrict the public worship of God to biblically revealed elements. William Cunningham correctly observed that adhering to the regulative principle was a great protection against controversy:

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. . . . in all their intrinsic littleness and paltriness, they are really characteristic only of those who contend for introducing or retaining them.¹⁶

Cunningham's observation could be substantiated a thousand times over in the experience of the church. Churches that impose on people in public worship elements without biblical warrant have unceasing disharmony and controversy. By contrast, churches that impose no such matters on people have church fellowship free of controversy or bitterness regarding this aspect of church life (though they may very well have occasions for controversy in other areas, fallen nature being what it is).

¹⁵ Frame, "Some Questions," 360. Frame's example of the use of an instrument to establish pitch or tempo for congregational singing is an excellent example of a genuine difficulty. Yet, this matter is not impossible to resolve. If a person argues on *religious* grounds that an organ should be played in church, the organ should be excluded, because there is no scriptural basis for reaching this conclusion. By contrast, if one argues on merely circumstantial grounds that an instrument assists in keeping tempo and pitch, then the argument is merely circumstantial, and the question is to be decided by the "light of nature and Christian prudence." In fact, R. L. Dabney argued against the organ on just these circumstantial grounds, that it was not percussive (and so tended to obliterate tempo rather than establish it), and that it tended to disguise the lyrics rather than distinguish them. (Dabney noted that in Italy, the home of the lyrical opera, an organ had not once been employed to accompany singing for this reason; see his "Dr. Girardeau's 'Instrumental Music in Public Worship.'")

¹⁶ "The Reformers and the Regulative Principle," reprinted in *The Reformation of the Church* (ed. I. H. Murray; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965; repr. 1987) 42.

Frame's third (and, to my knowledge, novel) category of worship, "mode," is a new category not really necessary. Everything he wishes to say about it is either a circumstance or a form. What he calls a "mode" most others would have considered a circumstance (such as how many sermons, or their length, or how loudly one should preach).¹⁷ Frame has omitted the category of "form." In liturgical discussions among Presbyterians, the word "form" has often been employed to describe the *content* of a particular element of worship.¹⁸ For some reason, however, in discussions of Reformed worship, the category "form" appears to be less well-known than the categories "element" or "circumstance." At any rate, due to the omission of the category of "forms," Frame creates a problem: "If song is an element, then it falls under RPI, and we must find commands to tell us what words we may sing in worship."¹⁹ The regulative principle has never argued that the *forms* of worship are fixed by scriptural command; to the contrary, to fix and require them would have been considered an objectionable imposition of a liturgy. In fact, the regulative principle was largely developed as a defense against such imposition by the Church of England.

Professor Frame considers it a "difficulty" that God would give a different approach to exegesis regarding worship than to exegesis in other areas of life. He apparently believes that, if God wanted worship to be governed differently than other areas of life, he would have given a "directory for worship," or something like it, free from the "hermeneutically problematic methods by which we seek to discover God's will in other areas

¹⁷ Frame, "Some Questions," 359.

¹⁸ *Larger Catechism* Question 186 says: "The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in the duty of prayer; but the special rule of direction is that *form* of prayer which our Savior Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer." Again, *Shorter Catechism* Question 99 says: "The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that *form* of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer." Similarly, the following directions from the Directory of Worship of the Presbyterian Church in America would find parallel in the older, earlier forms of government from which these statements had been derived:

47-6. The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed *forms* for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness.

52-4. Ministers are not to be confined to fixed *forms* of prayer for public worship, yet it is the duty of the minister, previous to entering upon his office, to prepare and qualify himself for this part of his work, as well as for preaching.

63-3. Family worship, which should be observed by every family, consists in prayer, reading the Scriptures, and singing praises; or in some briefer *form* of outspoken recognition of God.

¹⁹ Frame, "Some Questions," 360. If Frame were right, every element would face this difficulty, including preaching and prayers.

of life.”²⁰ I found no cogency in this difficulty, nor did I find it a difficulty, and was therefore relieved that Frame did not consider this “properly, an argument against adopting RPI.” In point of fact, however, the regulative principle does provide a different hermeneutic. In other areas, exegesis (with all its attendant difficulties) *proscribes* what may be done, leaving other practices open. In faith and worship, exegesis (with all its attendant difficulties) *prescribes* what is permissible, leaving other practices closed. To be sure, exegesis is still exegesis, and there is no shortcut to exegesis or systematic theology. But requiring positive biblical warrant for that which church officers require of church members is hermeneutically meaningful.

Here again, it appears that Frame’s discussion is profoundly influenced by individuals he may have met, rather than by the historic proponents of the view itself. He seems to believe that the regulative principle was promoted because it was an easy or simple way of directing worship.²¹ In point of historical fact, none of its proponents argued for it on that ground; therefore, it is no argument against the principle that it imposes the same exegetical (and theological) difficulties as any other matter of Christian concern.

Frame attempts to establish a hermeneutic free from the (misperceived) “difficulty” of the regulative principle, whereby he would subject all of life to a common hermeneutic, requiring positive warrant from God’s Word. Note, however, the equivocation that occurs when he attempts to establish such an alternative. Frame changes the Assembly’s “free from any commandments which are *beside* scripture,” if in faith or worship, into any command which assumes *ultimate authority*;²² but these are not the same things. The civil magistrate, for instance, would not necessarily assume ultimate authority in requiring a speed limit of fifty-miles mph. Are we free from this command? For the Assembly, the answer is “no,” because while it is “beside” Scripture, in the sense that Scripture does not address the speed-limit question, it is not a matter of faith or worship. But for Frame, it is not clear what his answer would be, and it may demonstrate the impossibility (or meaninglessness) of his RPI over all of life theory; everything would get swallowed up in giving glory to God, but nothing more specific could be said. The Assembly said nothing about the degree of “ultimacy” given to the law; for them, the only issue was whether it was “beside” the Scripture, regardless of ultimacy, in areas of faith or worship.

²⁰ Ibid., 361. It could as easily be objected that if Christ wished to be the exclusive Lord and Head of his Church, he would have revealed a Book of Church Order. In point of fact, however, the theological enterprise must recognize the necessity of following “good and necessary consequences” in every area of theological inquiry, ecclesiology included.

²¹ He notes that it has “sometimes been regarded as a *simple* procedure for determining what may be done in worship” (ibid., 360).

²² Ibid., 363.

From Frame's perspective, "The larger lesson we should learn from this discussion is that it is very difficult, in general, to separate 'life' from 'worship' in a biblical framework."²³ This is true enough, within *his* framework. Divorce the regulative principle from the doctrine of the church, and you do indeed have a problem. But place the doctrine where the Assembly, Gillespie, Owen, Bannerman, et al. placed it, and it is a very meaningful, directive doctrine. It is not at all difficult to distinguish those things the church officers may lawfully require from things they may not lawfully require. The Assembly's purpose in framing the doctrine was to declare the limits of church power, and thus to protect the liberty of conscience.

Frame's divorcing of this doctrine from its matrix in the doctrine of the nature and extent of church power leads to the not surprising conclusion of affirming RP1 "while denying that this principle for worship is any different from the principle by which God governs other areas of human life."²⁴ One can only imagine the consequences of this: the church can require of anybody anything not prohibited in Scripture, a position with which the Anglicans would have been most happy and the Westminster Assembly most hapless. That question so crucial to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the limits of church power as regards liberty of conscience) would completely evaporate. If any individual could argue that some act in some way brought glory to God, then, by Frame's reasoning, the church could require this to be done as an act of corporate worship. Yet, it takes only a few steps of argument *ad absurdum* to demonstrate the fallacy. Presumably, for instance, the man who is "fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom 14:5) is free to observe a day as religiously distinct. Yet, for Paul (but not for Frame) this individual is not free to do *anything* (put it in a bulletin) which might induce another to observe such a day contrary to his own conscience. As another (admittedly absurd) example, giving my children a bath before bedtime is a matter which I believe gives glory to God (and a much-deserved rest to their mother!). It promotes their health, it calms them down for bedtime, and is "good, clean fun." However, as an officer in the church, I cannot bring a bathtub into our service of worship, place the girls in it, and give them a bath "to the glory of God," *requiring others* to observe the rite. In fact, Frame's own example makes a pretty good *ad absurdum* argument. He says: "Buying cabbages, like all human actions, is a matter of concern to God," and he goes on to indicate that cabbage-buying is an activity addressed by the Word of God, citing 1 Cor 10:31.²⁵ Since that is so, and since he wishes to have no different hermeneutic governing the worship of God than that which governs other aspects of life, would Professor Frame suggest that cabbage-buying is a lawful element of Christian worship? Can it possibly be that a professor of Christian theology

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 366.

²⁵ Ibid., 362.

finds biblical mandate for cabbage-buying as an act of Christian worship, but does not find biblical mandate for preaching in Christian worship?²⁶

Professor Frame's investigation had led him to a dilemma: "I have run into some questions which either I am unable to answer correctly or which call for changes in some traditional ways of understanding the principle."²⁷ From what he is written, I am confident that the first alternative is true, but I am less sure about the second. That there may be many questions properly raised about the *contemporary* misunderstanding of the regulative principle does not imply that the *traditional* understanding (Frame's stated concern) needs adjustment.

If there is to be intelligent, ultimately fruitful discussion of the Reformed understanding of worship, such discussion must have sufficient respect for the Reformed tradition to engage the significant, published expressions of that tradition. If Frame had engaged such literature, he could hardly have failed to put the question differently than he did. The regulative principle of worship does not address worship as distinguished from the rest of life. It addresses what an individual may do, obliging no one else, as distinguished from what the church officers may require of the assembled saints. It is not clear in his article that Frame has familiarized himself with "traditional ways of understanding the principle." Therefore his comments do not contribute significantly to a discussion of the Reformed *tradition's* understanding of worship.

At the same time, Frame is not entirely tilting at windmills. In the present situation it appears that very few of either the friends or the foes of the regulative principle understand it as it was traditionally understood. Ignorance of ecclesiology may very well be greater today than ever before. What Stuart Robinson feared in the middle of the last century has reached epidemic proportions by the end of our century. Robinson observed an "anti-evangelical churchism" on the one hand, and an "anti-ecclesiastical evangelicalism" on the other, the latter of which is surely prominent in our generation.²⁸ For this very reason, then, I believe questions of ecclesiology, even more so than other questions, will be fruitfully discussed only within a history-of-doctrine framework.

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
130 Essex Street
South Hamilton, Massachusetts 01982

²⁶ "There is no specific biblical command, as far as I can tell, to have sermons in worship" (ibid., 366 n. 10).

²⁷ Ibid., 357.

²⁸ *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Wilson, 1858) 11.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.