

Chapter Two

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

There are two basic approaches that advocates of the exclusive use of the Psalms in worship have used. The first approach reasons from the sufficiency and inspiration of the Psalter and argues that men have no right to place songs of merely human composition alongside the divine songs of Scripture. In worship-song, as in all things, God deserves the best that we have to offer. No pious man can in clear conscience offer up one sacrifice of praise to God when prudence dictates that another would be better. The Psalter is a sufficient manual of praise and, being inspired by God, is far superior to any similar production of uninspired men. This being the case, any attempt to supersede the Psalter, or even to supplement it, with hymns of human composition can only be seen as an act of foolish arrogance.

The second approach to exclusive Psalmody reasons from the regulative principle, which asserts that nothing may be introduced into the worship of God unless it has the positive warrant of Scripture. The second of these two approaches thus places the burden of proof on the advocates of uninspired hymns to show that the Scriptures give a warrant for the introduction of such compositions into the worship of the Church.

The former of the two approaches is actually more basic than the latter, because the Regulative Principle is essentially an application of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture to the question of worship practice. We have nevertheless chosen in our own presentation to subordinate the argument from the sufficiency of Scripture to that from the Regulative Principle, primarily because most contemporary treatments of the subject have done so. We shall deal at some length at a later point with the implications of the sufficiency of the Psalter as a manual of praise, but we shall concern ourselves first of all with the historical and exegetical foundations of the Regulative Principle and with its application to the question of the content of song in worship.

THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

The strength of the Protestant Reformation, its glory, and its power to remove whole nations from the clutches of Popery lay in the fact that it gave the

Bible back to the common people, to peasants and merchants who for centuries had been denied the right to hear and read the Scriptures in their own tongue. The doctrine of justification by faith alone and the assertion of the supremacy of the believer-priest over an ecclesiastical priesthood were certainly close to the heart of the Reformation movement, but the essence of the Protestant Reformation lay to a large extent in its view of Scripture as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Protestant view stood in sharp contrast to that of the Roman Catholic Church which declared at the Council of Trent that in addition to the Books of the Holy Scriptures, it received "with an equal feeling of piety and reverence the traditions whether relating to faith or morals, dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in continuous succession within the Catholic Church."¹

The Council further asserted that every believer must accept the sense of Scripture as taught by the Church and that no one was to oppose the unanimous consensus of the Church Fathers.² They thus denied to the individual believer the right, so strenuously defended by the Reformers, to read and interpret the Scriptures for himself. The following analysis of the situation by the Roman Catholic Cardinal Bellarmine is especially revealing:³

The controversy between us and heretics consists in this—that we assert that all necessary doctrine concerning faith and morals is not expressly contained in Scripture, and consequently, besides the written Word there is needed an unwritten one; whereas they teach that in the Scriptures all such necessary doctrine is contained, and consequently there is no need of an unwritten word.

The boundary lines could hardly have been drawn in a clearer fashion. The Roman Catholic Church denied the final, definitive authority of Scripture. The Reformers asserted and defended it courageously.

The firm conviction of the absolute authority of Scripture was from the beginning a central tenet of both the German and Swiss branches of the Reformation. Luther had stood defiantly before the Diet of Worms declaring in immortal words that the Scriptures were a sufficient and authoritative rule of faith:⁴

Unless I am refuted and converted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience.

At this point Luther and Calvin are one. None of the other Reformers or their spiritual descendants ever made a stronger statement of the final, definitive authority of Scripture in all matters of controversy, a statement that is all the more remarkable for the fact that Luther's very life was endangered by his presence at Worms.

The Reformers, then, to a man, believed in the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and life; and many of their followers died the death of martyrs with that assertion on their lips. But when one goes beyond the bare assertion of the fact of the authority of Scripture to the application of that principle to the life and worship of the Church, some very important differences appear between the Lutheran and Calvinistic views. The differences are aptly summarized by William Cunningham. The Lutheran Reformers, he says,⁵

generally held that the church might warrantably introduce innovations into its government and worship, which might seem fitted to be useful, provided it could not be shown that there was anything in Scripture which expressly prohibited or discountenanced them, thus laying the *onus probandi*, in so far as Scripture is concerned, upon those who opposed the introduction of the innovations. The Calvinistic section of the Reformers, following their great master, adopted a stricter rule, and were of opinion, that there are sufficiently plain indications in Scripture itself, that it was Christ's mind and will, that nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in Scripture.

The difference between the two positions is often characterized as the difference between permitting what is not forbidden (Lutheran) and forbidding what is not commanded (Reformed). The latter concept, which has come to be called the "Regulative Principle," is a distinctive characteristic of Reformed worship practice, as can be most clearly seen by comparing the most important of the Reformed and Lutheran creeds. We will examine first of all a few of the pertinent Lutheran confessions.

Although the earlier Lutheran confessions are not quite so clear on the matter, the later Lutheran creeds, such as the Torgau Book (1576) and the Formula of Concord (1580), contain firm and emphatic declarations of the absolute authority of Scripture. The Formula of Concord, for example, asserts "that the only rule and norm, according to which all dogmas and all doctors ought to be esteemed and judged, is no other whatever than the prophetic and apostolic writings both of the Old and New Testament."⁶ But this high view of Scripture did not lead to an equally high view of the relationship between Scripture and liturgy. Article X of the Formula of Concord does say "that ceremonies or ecclesiastical rites (such as in the Word of God are neither commanded nor forbidden, but have only been instituted for the sake of order and seemliness) are of themselves neither divine worship, nor even any part of divine worship,"⁷ but it does not argue that such ceremonies are therefore to be forbidden. In fact, it goes on to say, "It is permitted to the Church of God anywhere on earth, and at whatever time, agreeably to occasion, to change such ceremonies, in such manner as is judged most useful to the Church of God and most suited to her edification."

Both the Schmalkald Articles and the Augsburg Confession, says Thomas Lindsay,⁸

expressly assert that human traditions are among abuses that ought to be done away with; but they do not condemn them as authorities set up by their opponents in opposition to the Word of God, only as things that burden the conscience and incline men to false ways of being at peace with God.

The Lutheran churches were thus willing to permit in the worship of God any rites or ceremonies which are not expressly condemned in Scripture, subject only to the restriction that they serve the peace and edification of the Church, and so long as they are not seen as essential to salvation. The Augsburg Confession, for example, says concerning "ecclesiastical rites (made by men)" that⁹

those rites are to be observed which may be observed without sin, and are profitable for tranquility and good order in the Church; such as are set holidays, feasts, and such like. Yet concerning such things, men are to be admonished that consciences are not to be burdened as if such service were necessary to salvation.

With such a view of the discretionary power of the Church in matters of worship practice, it is not at all surprising that the Lutheran Church retained a large portion of the ceremonial, ritualistic and governmental structures of the Catholic Church, the root causes of the corruption in the Church against which Luther had rebelled in the first place. We might add that the lack of effective church discipline which characterized the Lutheran churches from the beginning can be traced to precisely this same weakness. If the church will not rule its own worship by the Word, it will never be able to govern the lives of its people by that standard.

It is precisely at this point that the differences between the Lutheran and Reformed streams of the Reformation can be most clearly seen. The doctrinal differences between Luther and Calvin were not as great as is often presumed.¹⁰ But the differences between the Lutherans and Calvinists with regard to the regulation of public worship were basic and tended with time to widen the breach between the two until at last meaningful reconciliation was impossible.

Before passing on to the Reformed creeds, it bears observing that the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, though basically Calvinistic in doctrine, exhibit this same permissiveness with regard to the discretionary power of the Church in matters of worship. Article XXXIV of that creed reads:¹¹

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been diverse, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word.

Article XX of the Thirty-nine Articles reads:¹²

The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith; yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any

thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so beside the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation.

It should, of course, be pointed out that Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles does contain a very strong statement of the authority of Scripture, but it must be seen in the light of Article XX just quoted. The power to decree rites and ceremonies not enjoined in Scripture is a rather considerable power and can only be had by denying absolute authority to Scripture in those realms. There is no substantial difference at this point between the Thirty-nine Articles and the Lutheran Creeds examined earlier.

The Reformed theologians, as we have said, took a much stricter view of the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the permissible modes or manners of worship. All of the Reformed confessions, from the earliest to the latest, contain very clear and precise statements as to the authority of Scripture. Already in 1536, we read in the First Helvetic Confession that "Canonic Scripture, the word of God, given by the Holy Spirit and set forth to the world by the prophets and apostles, the most perfect and ancient of all philosophies, alone contains perfectly all piety and the whole rule of life."¹³ The basic difference between the Lutherans and Calvinists on this score was, as we have said, that the latter applied the principle of the absolute authority of Scripture more consistently to the various aspects of the life of the Church, its worship, its government, and its doctrine. Thus applied, the doctrine of the absolute authority, perfection and sufficiency of Scripture gave rise quite naturally to what we now call the Regulative Principle of Worship, which in Cunningham's words teaches "that it is unwarrantable and unlawful to introduce into the government and worship of the church anything which has not the positive sanction of Scripture."¹⁴ Another writer puts it, "a divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the Church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, is forbidden."¹⁵

A detailed analysis of Calvin's views on the Regulative Principle is beyond the scope of this treatise, but since his views on the subject are sometimes misunderstood, a few brief comments are in order. Reflecting on a difficult passage in the **Institutes** (IV.X.5),¹⁶ one writer says, "It is not clear that Calvin was opposed to the **institution** of new forms of worship. His primary opposition was to the **imposition** of novel forms of worship."¹⁷ While admitting the difficulty of the passage in question, we do not agree with this assessment of the situation. If there is anything that is clear in Calvin's view of worship, it is that he was **strenuously** opposed to the institution of new forms of worship. However this passage is to be understood, it cannot be seen as a denial of the Regulative Principle. Calvin speaks too often and too clearly on

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the subject to be misunderstood on that score. A few quotes from the *Institutes* will suffice to show this:¹⁸

It must be regarded as a fixed principle that all modes of worship devised by man are detestable. (I.XI.4)

The Lord cannot forget Himself, and it is long since He declared that nothing is so offensive to Him as to be worshiped by human inventions. (IV.X.17)

The doctrine of the true worship of God is not to be sought from men, because the Lord has faithfully and fully taught us in what way He is to be worshiped. (IV.X.8)

He has been pleased to prescribe in His law what is lawful and right and thus restrict men to a certain rule, lest any should allow themselves to devise a worship of their own. (I.XII.3)

All worship of man's device is repudiated by the Holy Spirit as degenerate. (I.V.3)

Calvin did not invent the Regulative Principle,¹⁹ but, as in so many other things, he rescued it from the oblivion into which it had been cast by the Roman Catholic Church. We can thus trace the Regulative Principle as a distinctive of Reformed worship practice all the way back to Geneva and the Reforming efforts of John Calvin.

The recognition of the importance of the Regulative Principle was not, however, limited to Geneva. Everywhere the Reformed faith spread, it took the Regulative Principle with it as a man takes his heart. John Knox, who spent most of his five years of exile (1554-1559) in Geneva, speaks no less emphatically on the subject than Calvin:²⁰

Disobedience to God's voice is not only when men doeth wickedly contrary to the precepts of God, but also when of good zeal, or good intent, as we commonly speak, men doeth anything to the honour or service of God not commanded by the express word of God . . . And that is principal idolatry when our own inventions we defend to be righteous in the sight of God, because we think them good, laudable, and pleasant. We may not think us so free nor wise, that we may do unto God, and unto His honour, what we think expedient.

This beautiful statement by Knox is more or less characteristic of all subsequent Puritans. In fact, the Regulative Principle "may be regarded as, in a historical sense, the originating and also the unifying principle of Puritanism."²¹ This, at least, is how the enemies of the Puritan movement in England saw the situation. Samuel Parker, for example, an ardent opponent of the Puritan cause, refers to the "foundation of all Puritanism" as that principle which teaches "that nothing ought to be established in the worship of God but what is authorized by some precept or example in the Word of God, which is the complete and adequate rule of worship."²²

It is worth noting at this point that the term "Puritan" originated as a derogatory name for those who desired to see the Church of England purged of

all unbiblical forms of worship.²³ This fact in itself points to the importance attributed to the Regulative Principle in the period of the Westminster Assembly. It may be said, in fact, and without exaggeration, that the Regulative Principle of worship was the central concern of that convocation of learned and godly men. The advocacy of a principle of liberty with regard to modes of worship was rightly seen as the central cause of all the problems which had made the Protestant Reformation necessary in the first place.

John Owen, a contemporary of the Westminster Assembly and one of the ablest theologians of the period, writes as follows:²⁴

That the church hath power to institute and appoint any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either as to matter or manner, beyond the orderly 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 and persecution, and wars, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian World.

Those, therefore, who consider themselves to be children of the Calvinistic Reformation and yet who disparage to give due emphasis to the Regulative Principle of Worship are Reformed in name only. The Regulative Principle is not merely an optional appendix to the Reformed faith. In a very real sense it is the Reformed faith.

THE CONFESSORIAL BASIS OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

The Regulative Principle finds more or less explicit expression in all of the important Reformed creeds.²⁵ The **Irish Articles of Religion** (1615), for example, state that "all worship devised by man's phantasy besides or contrary to the Scriptures . . . hath not only no promise of reward in Scripture, but contrariwise threatenings and maledictions."²⁶ The **Belgic Confession** asserts that "the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written"²⁷ in the Holy Scriptures, while according to the **Heidelberg Catechism**, God requires in the Second Commandment "that we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word."²⁸

The **Westminster Confession of Faith** represents the high-water mark of confessional Calvinism, and it is not surprising to find in it a set of statements relating to the Regulative Principle unmatched elsewhere for clarity and discernment. This is perhaps the most appropriate place to set before us those places in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms which have a direct bearing on the regulation of worship:²⁹

Confession of Faith

I.VI. 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.

XX.II. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

XX.I. The light of nature sheweth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is 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 with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Larger Catechism

Q. 109. What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God Himself; tolerating a false religion; the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it; the making of any representation of feigned deities, and all worship of them, or service belonging to them; all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretense whatsoever; simony; sacrilege; all neglect, contempt, hindering, and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.

Shorter Catechism

Q. 51. What is forbidden in the second commandment?

A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word.

There are, of course, other portions of the Westminster Standards which could be mentioned at this point.³⁰ All of Chapter XXI, for example, deals with the ordinances, elements and principles of worship. But these are certainly the ones which have the most direct bearing on the question of the Regulative Principle and the ones which are most often discussed in treatments of the subject. Our purpose now is to discuss the most important aspects of the Regulative Principle as it finds expression in the Westminster Standards. It may prove helpful first of all to give a concise summary of the Confession's position in this regard. This we do in the words of James Bannerman:³¹

The doctrine, then, in regard to the exercise of Church power in the worship of God held by our standards is sufficiently distinct. The Church has no authority in regulating the manner, appointing the form, or dictating the observances of worship, beside or beyond what the Scripture declares on these points,—the Bible containing the only directory for determining these matters, and the Church having no discretion to add to or alter what is there fixed.

A full discussion of all the questions involved in the subject at hand is beyond the scope of this treatise, but there are certain questions concerning the position of the Confession of Faith with respect to the Regulative Principle of Worship, which, because controversial and often misunderstood, must be considered in any worthwhile treatment of the subject. It is to several such questions that we now turn.

1. The Negative Character of the Principle—According to the Confession of Faith (XXI.I), God may **not** be worshiped in any way **not** prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. This way of stating the principle, in the form of a double negative, emphasizes in a rather striking way its negative, or prohibitive, character. Whatever in the worship of God is not commanded is in the nature of the case prohibited. We may never presume to add to the worship which God has instituted in His Word. The negative character of the Regulative Principle is certainly that aspect which is most offensive to fallen man, because it dethrones his autonomy in worship, but it is in this aspect that the essence of the principle is to be seen most clearly. That essence lies in the fact that the Regulative Principle, again and again, drives man back to God's Word to find a warrant for his behavior in worship:³²

The principle is, in a sense, a very wide and sweeping one. But it is purely prohibitory or exclusive; and the practical effect of it, if it were fully carried out, would just be to leave the Church in the condition in which it was left by the Apostles, in so far as we have any means of information; a result, surely, which need not be very alarming, except to those who think that they themselves have very superior powers for improving and adorning the Church by their inventions.

The most important practical consequence of the prohibitory character of the Regulative Principle is that it places the burden of proof squarely on the shoulders of those who would introduce innovations or disputed practices into

the worship of God. When there is a disagreement between two parties over whether a given practice (the singing of non-canonical songs, for example) should be introduced or continued in stated services of worship, the burden of proof rests with those who favor the practice. If a clear warrant cannot be produced for the practice in question, it must be prohibited. Whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden.

2. The Character of Man's Relationship to God—The prohibitory character of the Regulative Principle arises at least in part from the nature of man's relationship to God. Almighty God is the Sovereign Lord of the universe. His creatures have no rights or privileges above, beside, or beyond those which He has been pleased to bestow upon them. The manner in which men may approach the throne of God is in the nature of the case limited by the awe and respect which an infinite God demands from finite creatures. For this reason the specification of the terms of man's communion with God is and always has been the sole prerogative of the Lord God. This was true even before the Fall, but it is true in a heightened sense now that sin has entered the world. The character of worship was altered drastically by the Fall. It now has a soteriological aspect to it that was entirely missing before, and this soteriological aspect is at its very heart restrictive. Worship now requires a mediator between God and man and is restricted by a series of positive enactments designed to protect the sinner from the wrath of God and to shield the holiness of God from the defilement of sin:³³

Public worship is no other than the manner and the way in which sinners, associated together in a Church state, are permitted in their collective capacity to hold intercourse with God, to maintain in a right and befitting way their fellowship with Him, and to approach Him day by day in acceptable communion. The manner of such intercourse, as well as the conditions on which it was possible to renew it at all, is a matter in regard to which it was the province of God, and not man, to dictate.

The Regulative Principle may therefore be seen, in a particular sense, as a natural inference from the doctrine of total depravity. The two are tied together, for example, in Exodus 20:25: "And if you make an altar of stone for me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool upon it, you will profane it." Any work of man's own hands that he presumes to offer to God in worship, is defiled by sin and for that reason wholly unacceptable.

Viewed from a slightly different angle, the Regulative Principle may be seen as the liturgical counterpart of the theological doctrine of salvation by grace. If it is true that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6), it is likewise true that every act of worship which we presume to perform without a divine warrant, is an abomination to God. Worship is the natural outgrowth of salvation, the inevitable and necessary response of the sinner to the grace of God. But if we have nothing to add to the salvation sovereignly bestowed upon us by God, is it likely that we should have anything to add to the worship prescribed for us in Scripture? An admixture of human effort to salvation is

salvation by works (Eph. 2:8-10; Rom. 11:6). An admixture of human prescription of the worship of God is "will-worship" (Col. 2:20-23). Both are condemned by God in the strongest of terms, and yet the history of mankind could not be better characterized than as one of inordinate zeal for these very things. Both are the inevitable tendencies of depraved and fallen hearts. This is why efforts to purify the worship of the Church have always met with such stiff opposition:³⁴

Such is the corrupt nature of man, that there is scarce any thing whereabout men have been more apt to contend with God from the foundation of the world. That their will and wisdom may have a share (some at least) in the ordering of His worship, is that which of all things they seem to desire.

An awareness of this tendency in the human heart would go a long way towards rectifying the deplorable situation that exists in most of our churches. Men must be taught to be very wary of the suggestions of their own hearts with regard to the question of what patterns of worship are acceptable to God.

3. The Sufficiency of Scripture—The Regulative Principle is inseparable from and is a direct consequence of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. We have in Scripture "the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life" (Confession of Faith, I.VI). "The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience" (Larger Catechism, Q. 3). The sufficiency of Scripture cannot be seen as a purely abstract quality of the Word of God, divorced from the practical concerns of the Church. If the Scriptures are sufficient, then they are sufficient **for** something. If the Word of God directs us how to worship God, it does so in a manner sufficient to the needs of the Church and the satisfaction of God's holiness. If, therefore, it were necessary for us to add anything by way of precept or ordinance of worship to that divine record, it would have fallen short of its purpose. The only way to deny this chain of reasoning is to deny the sufficiency of Scripture.

We might add here that the freedom of conscience from the doctrines and commandments of men spoken of in XX.II of the Confession is likewise founded upon the sufficiency of Scripture. Only the Scriptures may bind the conscience of man in matters of faith and worship because only the Scriptures are a sufficient rule in those areas. The Westminster Divines, being good Puritans,³⁵

held that in all departments of the Church's life, as well as in profession of faith, there has been given to us a sufficient and a divine directory. Whatever we have by way of precept or of pattern, of ordinance or of example, is ours that we may follow it. It was their conviction that the Head of the Church has given in His Word not only a correct, but a comprehensive and sufficient, pattern and model.

The Regulative Principle and the sufficiency of Scripture are thus intimately bound up with one another. One cannot consistently deny one and maintain

the other. The importance of this fact for the question of worship song cannot be overstressed. The canon of Scripture contains a rather extensive collection of songs intended for use in the worship of God. It is our contention that this collection, the Book of Psalms, is a sufficient manual of praise in song, its sufficiency arising directly from its presence in the canon of Holy Scripture. There is no more warrant for supplementing the Book of Psalms with uninspired hymns than there is for supplementing the rest of Scripture with uninspired prose. The sufficiency of the Psalter absolutely precludes its supplementation, not to mention its replacement. It would appear, therefore, that commitment to the use of uninspired songs in worship and profession of belief in the sufficiency of Scripture are fundamentally incompatible. One cannot consistently adhere to both at the same time.

4. Proof by Inference—When we say that each element of worship requires a divine warrant, we do not mean that an explicit command in a single text is required in every instance. Commandment in the narrow sense of the term is not necessary to establish divine prescription. Approved example or inference from relevant Scriptural data is sufficient to determine the proper manner of worship. The Confession of Faith clearly operates on the assumption that principles derived from the Word by “good and necessary consequence” are every bit as binding upon us as those “expressly set down in Scripture.” It is remarkable that there is so much confusion in Reformed circles concerning the validity of this essential principle. No less a scholar than Charles Hodge, in one fell swoop, denies both the Regulative Principle and the principle of inference upon which it is based. The occasion of his comments was a dispute with J. H. Thornwell over the discretionary power of the Church, particularly in connection with the question of the legitimacy of church boards:³⁶

We grant that what a man infers from the Word of God binds his own conscience. But the trouble is, that he insists that it shall bind mine also. We begged to be excused. No man may make himself the lord of my conscience, much less will any man be allowed to make himself lord of the conscience of the church . . . Dr. Thornwell told us that the Puritans rebelled against the doctrine that what is not forbidden in Scripture is allowable. It was against this theory of liberty of discretion, he said, our fathers raised their voices and their arms. We always had a different idea of the matter. We supposed that it was in resistance to this very doctrine of inferences they poured out their blood like water . . . It was fetters forged from inferences our fathers broke, and we, their children, will never suffer them to be reweld. There is as much difference between this extreme doctrine of divine right, this idea that everything is forbidden which is not commanded, as there is between this free, exultant Church of ours, and the mummified forms of medieval Christianity. We have no fear on this subject. The doctrine need only be clearly propounded to be rejected.

It is difficult to believe that a man of Hodge's stature and learning could make such a statement. Everything that he says here is flatly and em-

phatically contradicted by I.VI and XXI.I of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which was, after all, the very epitome of Puritanism. Hodge was certainly aware of these passages, so his comments are very little short of amazing. Thornwell's reaction is well worth recording:³⁷

When we first read this remarkable passage, we rubbed our eyes, and thought we must be mistaken. It is so flagrantly untrue that we cannot imagine how Dr. Hodge has been deceived. We have not been able to lay our hands upon a single Puritan Confession of Faith which does not explicitly teach that necessary inferences from Scripture are of equal authority with its express statements; nor have we found a single Puritan writer, having occasion to allude to the subject, who has not explicitly taught the same thing.

The debate between Hodge and Thornwell has more than purely historical importance. What is left of conservative American Presbyterianism is in large part a result of what the Presbyterian Church was in the nineteenth century. Hodge is important because he reflects an area of strategic weakness in the old Presbyterian Church, a weakness which has been passed on, perhaps unconsciously, to our own churches. It is a weakness that we cannot afford to ignore. The assumed validity and binding character of argument by inference from Scripture is an essential part of the life of every Christian and lies at the base of every statement of doctrine or belief that goes beyond the express words of Scripture. Certainly we may want from time to time to question the validity of inferences which some people draw, but that is a different question altogether from that of whether or not the Church **may** bind the conscience of a believer on the basis of an inference from Scripture.³⁸

If it is not able to do so, then we must admit that the idea of a Confessional Church falls dismally to the ground, and along with it any meaningful concept of the authority of Scripture. This is perhaps why present trends away from confessionalism are so disturbing.³⁹ The desire to do away with confessions and "get back to the Scriptures" may at first glance seem very pious, but it is in reality an attack on the authority of Scripture itself, because it is based on a denial of the authority of inferences from Scripture. Such a position makes it absolutely impossible to apply Scripture authoritatively to any situation not directly or explicitly addressed in Scripture. The Scriptures cannot be applied authoritatively without deriving authoritative inferences from them. Our subordinate standards clearly operate on this assumption:⁴⁰

The Confession is only zealous, as it declares that only Scripture is the authoritative rule of faith and practice, so to declare that the whole of Scripture is authoritative, in the whole stretch of its involved meaning. It is the Reformed contention, reflected here by the Confession, that the sense of Scripture is Scripture, and that men are bound by its whole sense in all its implications. The reemergence in recent controversies of the plea that the authority of Scripture is to be confined to its express declarations, and that human logic is not to be trusted in divine things, is, therefore, a

direct denial of a fundamental position of Reformed theology, explicitly affirmed in the Confession, as well as an abnegation of fundamental reason, which would not only render thinking in a system impossible, but would discredit at a stroke many of the fundamentals of the faith . . . If the plea is valid at all, it destroys at once our confidence in all doctrines, no one of which is ascertained or formulated without the aid of human logic.

There is of course a careful distinction to be made between the Word of God and inferences drawn from the Word of God. We may challenge the validity of inferences drawn **from** Scripture and attempt to determine whether they are indeed Scriptural, but we may never in the same way challenge the validity of the explicit statements of Scripture. The words and statements of Scripture are absolutely authoritative. Their authority is underived and indisputable. The authority of valid inferences drawn **from** Scripture, on the other hand, is derivative in nature, but one cannot argue that such inferences are therefore less authoritative than the express declarations of Scripture. They simply make explicit what is already expressed implicitly in Scripture.

What we are insisting upon, then, is that the validity of applying the Word of God inferentially and authoritatively to situations not dealt with expressly in the Scriptures is an essential part of the Reformed approach to Biblical hermeneutics. It is necessary to give special emphasis to this fact because, surprisingly enough, one not infrequently finds advocates of **both** sides of the Psalmody question denying the validity or authority of inferences from Scripture. Advocates of exclusive Psalmody are sometimes hesitant to admit the authority of inferences from Scripture because they realize that, at least in Reformed circles, arguments for the use of uninspired hymns in worship usually proceed from the Regulative Principle itself on the basis of the assumed validity of certain inferences from Biblical data. Rather than face the sometimes difficult task of demonstrating the fallacy of such inferences, advocates of exclusive Psalmody sometimes react, or overreact, by denying the authority of inferences in general. Such people see the principle of inference as a somewhat subtle means of subverting the true intent of the Regulative Principle. Advocates of the use of uninspired hymns in worship, though for very different reasons, also tend to be rather skeptical of the validity of inductive reasoning. This skepticism arises more often than not from a perhaps understandable fear of the legalistic extremes to which both the Regulative Principle and the principle of inference can be and have been pushed. It was this fear that motivated Hodge's stern denunciation of both of these principles. But while we share to some extent the fears expressed by both sides in the matter, we must still insist that the principle of inference is essential to the proper understanding and application of Scripture. And so far from being the linguistic forge for legalistic shackles that Hodge perceived it to be, the principle of inference is in fact that aspect of the Regulative Principle which moderates and controls its inevitable tendency towards legalism. The principle of

inference is not therefore to be feared, either as the pillar and ground of legalism or as a subtle means of subverting the true intent of the Regulative Principle. It is rather that which gives life to the Regulative Principle and permits its application to new situations in a culture that is radically different from that of the New Testament Church.

Additional light may perhaps be shed upon these observations by the consideration of an example of their application found in our confessional standards. A particularly interesting and revealing instance of the application of the principle of legitimate inference occurs in the list of rules given in the Westminster Larger Catechism for the interpretation and application of the Ten Commandments. The sixth such rule states that "under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto" (Question 99). This rule applies, of course, not only to the interpretation of the Ten Commandments, but to all the other commands of Scripture as well. It asserts in substance that every command in Scripture contains an implicit warrant for the use of whatever lawful means are necessary for adherence to the requirements of the command in question.

A rule of this nature is certainly open to abuse and its application must be carefully qualified, lest it become a virtual denial of the Regulative Principle, of which it is a corollary. Certainly it is true that the unqualified assertion that in worship practice and Church government "the end justifies the means" is the absolute antithesis of the Regulative Principle, but that is not what is intended by the rule being presently considered. All that the rule intends to assert is that when there is a necessary connection between a command in Scripture and the means or circumstances which are required for its fulfillment, then those means or circumstances possess the same divine warrant as the command itself.

It is important to defend this principle from abuse and misuse, but it is just as important to defend it from those who would either deny its validity altogether or, under the guise of safeguarding the Regulative Principle, so qualify its application as to make it practically useless. Among the defenders of the Regulation Principle there have always been those who, perhaps out of misplaced zeal, have pushed its application to such unscriptural extremes that they have, in practice if not in theory, completely denied the validity of legitimate inference. We would do well at this point to remember the words of William Cunningham which he uttered as a warning against such abuse of the Regulative Principle:⁴¹

In regard to questions of this sort there are two opposite extremes, into which one-sided minds are apt to fall, and both of which ought to be guarded against. The one is to stick rigidly and doggedly to a general principle, refusing to admit that any limitations or qualifications ought to be permitted in applying it; and the other is to reject the principle altogether, as if it had no truth or soundness about it, because it manifestly cannot be

carried out without some exceptions and modifications, and because difficulties may be raised about some of the details of its application which cannot always be very easily solved. Both these extremes have been often exhibited in connection with this principle. Both of them are natural, but both are unreasonable, and both indicate a want of sound judgment. The right course is to ascertain, if possible, whether or not the principle be true, and if there seems to be sufficient evidence of its truth, then to seek to make a reasonable and judicious application of it.

Principal Cunningham is not here denying the merit or necessity of strict and unswerving adherence to the truth. But he is concerned that we comprehend the folly and danger of **blind** obedience to abstract principles. General principles, precisely because they are general, must be applied cautiously and, as Cunningham says, judiciously. The application of general principles to specific cases is quite often a dangerous undertaking. And the more general the principle, the greater is the danger involved and the greater is the need for caution. We must never permit our gaze to become fixed so steadfastly upon one general principle of Scripture that we fail to interpret and apply it in a manner that is consistent with the rest of Scripture. Scripture must always be permitted to interpret Scripture and Scripture must always be permitted to qualify and limit its own principles. It takes very little theological acumen to appreciate the crucial importance of this basic rule of Biblical interpretation. But however much we might wish that it were not so, it is true that adherents to the Regulative Principle have all too often failed to give it the proper place in their thinking. We must not permit that to happen in the present instance. We must not become guilty of pitting the general principles of Scripture against one another. The principle of inference and the legitimate use of necessary means must be as carefully guarded and asserted as the Regulative Principle itself. They are essential to a right understanding of the Regulative Principle, and their judicious application is essential to prevent the Regulative Principle from becoming a legalistic and Pharisaical noose, fit only to dis-honor God and choke the life out of His Church.

5. The Scope of the Regulative Principle—Up to this point we have emphasized primarily the application of the Regulative Principle to what the Confession calls "religious worship." Some writers have suggested, however, that viewed from a broader perspective, the Regulative Principle can be seen as having a number of distinct realms of application. God, for example, exercised supreme and absolute authority over all creation. Through His works of creation and providence the Lord determines and controls whatsoever comes to pass, and His will may be seen in one sense, it is said, as the "Regulative Principle" of the universe. This, according to Norman Shepherd, is "the Regulative Principle in the most fundamental and absolute sense."⁴² If God has not decreed that a certain event should come to pass, it is in the nature of the case beyond the realm of possibility. With reference to human behaviour Shepherd speaks of "the Regulative Principle for human life." We are admonished that

whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we are to do all things to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). Everything that we do is in one way or another ethically conditioned by the demands of Scripture. It is not always and in every case easy to show how this is so, but it is so nonetheless. There are no neutral areas in our lives that are beyond the reach of the Word of God. Hence, says Shepherd,⁴³

In the ultimate sense, there are no adiaphora; for all actions must be an expression of the love for God required of us, and no man is to devise or refuse actions which add to or take from the law of God. The so-called adiaphora, as well as man-made laws, fall under the regulative principle for life.

The Confession of Faith recognizes this breadth and scope in applying the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. The Scriptures contain the whole counsel of God, not only for man's faith and salvation, but for his life as well.

Granting the essential truth of what Shepherd says, we must nevertheless disagree with his formulation of the subject. Even if we wish to speak in terms of a universal application of the Regulative Principle, we must not lose sight of the distinctive character which the principle takes on when applied to religious worship.

It is certainly possible to conceive of two senses to the term "regulative principle," a broad sense (the sufficiency of Scripture for life) and a narrow sense (the sufficiency of Scripture for worship), but the two senses are not at all the same conceptually. And the term itself has been reserved historically for use in the narrow sense. In our opinion, therefore, the use of the term "regulative principle" in two conceptually different senses can only add unnecessary ambiguity to an already confusing subject. Such ambiguities can only serve to obscure the distinctive character of the Regulative Principle of worship. In the religious worship of God, the primary governing principle is, "Whatsoever is not commanded, is forbidden." But this principle simply does not hold for life in general. An individual has a certain discretionary power in the ordering and formulating of his day-to-day activities, subservient to the general rules of Scripture, which he simply does not have when it comes to self-conscious acts of worship. The Scriptures make it quite clear that within that realm the requirements are far more specific and far more rigorous. For this reason we feel that it is rather misleading to speak of a "regulative principle for life." The principle that "whatsoever is not commanded is forbidden" applies only to matters of faith (i.e. doctrine) and worship. Outside of these two realms, a broader principle, namely, "Whatsoever is not prohibited is permitted," is valid. This is what is in view in XX.II of the Confession of Faith, which says, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship." The clear implication is that in matters **not** pertaining to faith or worship, the conscience **may** be bound by the doctrines and commandments of men, so long as nothing is

sanctioned which is contrary to Scripture. It is only in matters of faith and worship that the doctrines or commandments neither prescribed nor proscribed in Scripture are prohibited. In other words, the Regulative Principle, narrowly (and we believe properly) conceived, applies only to matters of faith and worship. The Church may neither add to nor take away from either the doctrines of Scripture or the manner of worship therein prescribed, but in other matters it has broader discretionary powers.

But having pointed out that the Regulative Principle, as presented in the Confession of Faith, applies only to matters of faith and worship, we must go on to emphasize that the principle applies, in particular, only to **religious** worship. One must of course grant that there is in Scripture a concept of life **in toto** as an act of "worship" (e.g., Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:15f; I Pet. 2:5), but "worship" in this sense is clearly a figure of speech, and such "acts" of "worship" are not governed by the Regulative Principle as we have defined it. The Regulative Principle, in other words, considered in its character as a regulatory principle of worship, applies only to **self-conscious** acts of worship. The Lord has seen fit to grant unto men rather extensive powers of discretion in the ordering of their lives, and they may exercise those powers freely, so long as they adorn their acts with a little "sanctified common sense," so long as they do not contradict or ignore the moral dictates and general rules of behavior laid down in Scripture, and so long as they do not attempt to modify, by addition or subtraction, the doctrines of Scripture or the patterns of worship enjoined therein.

6. The Circumstances of Worship—The Confession of Faith (I.VI) says that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, subservient, of course, to the Word of God. This qualification was not intended to grant to the Church a wide power of discretion with respect to the ordinances and elements of religious worship, as a careful reading of Chapter XXI will show conclusively. It was intended only to forestall an obvious and common objection to the Regulative Principle, namely, that it requires the impossible task of deducing an indefinite number of minute circumstances from the Scriptures.

Thornwell describes the position of Calvin and the Westminster divines in this connection as follows:⁴⁴

In public worship, indeed in all commanded external actions, there are two elements—a fixed and a variable. The fixed element, involving the essence of the thing, is beyond the discretion of the church. The variable, involving only the **circumstances** of the action, its inseparable accidents, may be changed, modified, or altered, according to the exigencies of the case.

The time and place of worship, for example, are commonly mentioned as examples of circumstances lying within the bounds of the discretionary power of the Church. The time and place of worship are not, it is said, a part of the essence of worship and may, therefore, be determined by the Church as it sees

fit. But even here the situation is not as simple as might appear at first sight. During much of the period covered by the Old Testament, for example, certain aspects of the worship prescribed by the Lord were limited geographically to the Temple in Jerusalem, and temporally to those times appointed by Him. Even in New Testament times, worship is required on the Lord's Day, so that in that respect at least, the temporal aspect of worship is not in any absolute sense subject to the discretionary power of the Church even in the present age. It appears, therefore, that there are a number of difficulties and ambiguities inherent in Thornwell's formulation of the matter and, as one might expect even from a consideration of these preliminary observations, there has been considerable controversy on the subject.

In spite of careful restrictions placed in the Confession to prevent misunderstanding, the concept of the Church having a limited degree of discretionary power with respect to the **circumstances** of worship has often been used as a subtle means of instituting new **forms** or **ordinances** of worship. All of this confusion arises at least in part from the fact that the term "circumstance" is unavoidably ambiguous. There are a number of different kinds of circumstances, some of which fall within the jurisdiction of the Church, and some of which do not. In addition to this complicating factor, one must contend with the often ignored but exceedingly important observation that the categories of "circumstance" and "essence" are by no means mutually exclusive. All of the complexity involved in the question of circumstances of worship is bewildering, to be sure, but it is a question that simply cannot be bypassed or dismissed as irrelevant. If we are to have a clear understanding of the relevance of the Regulative Principle for particular acts of worship, we must have a clear understanding of what the Confession intends by the term "circumstances" of worship, and of what relation obtains between them and the Regulative Principle of Worship. We offer the following as an attempt to clarify some of the issues involved.

Central to the discussion is the distinction between essential or substantial parts of worship and "mere" circumstances of worship. The distinction appears, for example, in Gillespie's treatment of the subject.⁴⁵ His discussion of the matters pertaining to the Regulative Principle is perhaps a bit laborious and may seem particularly so to those who are unaccustomed to seventeenth century English, but it is in many respects a "classical" treatment of the subject. Since Gillespie himself was a commissioner from the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland to the Westminster Assembly, it may be considered as a sort of first-hand analysis of the position of that Assembly on the question of the discretionary power of the Church. We shall, therefore, lean rather heavily on his comments.

There are, says Gillespie, three conditions which are "necessarily requisite, in such a thing as the Church hath power to prescribe by her laws."⁴⁶ The first such condition is:⁴⁷

It must be only a circumstance of Divine Worship, no substantial part of it, no sacred significant and efficacious Ceremony. For the order and decency left to the definition of the Church, as concerning the particulars of it, comprehendeth no more, but mere circumstances.

It is true that the Confession itself does not speak explicitly of a distinction between "substantial" and "circumstantial" parts of worship, but the distinction itself, as Gillespie's comments show, was very much a part of contemporary discussions of the subject, and it is undoubtedly this distinction which lies back of the comments in Chapter I of the Confession concerning "circumstances of worship." We cannot, therefore, understand what the Confession intends by the term "circumstance" unless it be contrasted with the category of "substance." The failure, in fact, of so many in recent days to attain to a correct apprehension of the teaching of the Confession with regard to the Regulative Principle of Worship derives, in almost every instance, from a failure to understand adequately the distinction between essential and circumstantial parts of worship. According to our Confession, the Church has limited powers of discretion with regard to the circumstantial, but none with regard to the essential. It is, therefore, of some importance that we be able to delineate the difference between a circumstance of worship and a substantial or essential part of worship.

Circumstances are defined by Thornwell as "those concomitants of an action without which it either cannot be done at all or cannot be done with decency and decorum."⁴⁸ The time and place of worship, for instance, may be seen as circumstances of worship, because one cannot worship God without doing so at a specific time, and yet the aspect of time does not, and need not, be considered in a definition of what constitutes an act of worship. A specific act of worship may be considered abstractly and examined in some detail quite apart from its temporal context. This is true even in the case of certain instances in the Old Testament where the time of worship was specifically prescribed by God.

An essential or substantial element of worship, on the other hand, is any action which has been invested, by divine or human prescription, with religious or spiritual significance. James Bannerman's observations on this particular point are characteristically helpful:⁴⁹

So soon as you attach a spiritual meaning, a sacred significance, to anything connected with worship, it becomes *eo ipso* a part of worship. It stands forthwith on a like footing with the typical ceremonies of the Old Testament, many of which were quite as insignificant in themselves as white surplice or a lighted candle.

Put very simply then, a substantial part of worship is an act or an aspect of an act which in the service of worship has religious or spiritual significance. Such acts or aspects of acts are, according to the Regulative Principle of Worship, beyond the discretionary power of the Church.

The distinction between circumstantial and substantial parts of worship has been formulated in a variety of ways. One reads, for example, of distinctions between essence and accident, substance and circumstance, matters *in sacris* and matters *circa sacra*, and so on. Bannerman's formulation of the distinction is worth quoting at some length:⁵⁰

There are circumstances of public worship, not properly or distinctively belonging to it as worship, but common to it with the proceedings of every civil or merely human society. What belongs to the public service of the Church as Divine worship, distinctively so called, is of Divine appointment, and is regulated by the positive command of Christ. What belongs to the public service of the Church, not as Divine worship properly and strictly so called, but as the circumstances common to it with any service or solemn transaction of human society, is not of express appointment by God, but is the dictate of nature, and left to be regulated by the law of nature . . . There is plainly a wide and real difference between those matters that may be necessary and proper *about* Church worship, and those other matters that may be necessary and proper *in* worship; or to adopt the old distinction, between matters *circa sacra* and matters *in sacris*. Church worship is in itself an express and positive appointment of God; and the various parts or elements of worship, including the rites and ceremonies that enter into it, are no less positive Divine appointments. But there are circumstances connected with a Divine solemnity no less than with human societies, that do not belong to its essence, and form no necessary part of it. There are circumstances of time and place and form, necessary for the order and decency of the service of the Church, as much as for the service or actions of any civil or voluntary society; and these, though connected with, are no portions of Divine worship.

The distinction between substantial and circumstantial parts of worship, or as Bannerman formulates it, between matters *in sacris* and matters *circa sacra*, is certainly a valid and useful one, but much unnecessary confusion has resulted from a failure to appreciate the fact that these two categories are not mutually exclusive. The recognition of this fact is implicit in what Bannerman says above. When, for example, he says that there are circumstances of public worship which *do not* properly or distinctively belong to it as worship, he implies that there are some circumstances of public worship which *do* properly and distinctively belong to it as worship. The same principle follows also from Bannerman's previous observation that "so soon as you attach a spiritual meaning, a sacred significance, to anything connected with worship, it becomes *eo ipso* a part of worship."⁵¹

Clearly, then, there are some circumstances of worship which are, to use Bannerman's terminology, *in sacris*. There are, in other words, some circumstances of worship which are essential or substantial parts of the act of worship itself. Over such circumstances the Church has absolutely no discretionary or prescriptive authority. The importance of this observation for the Psalmody question appears from a consideration of the question of whether the content

of worship-song is a substantial part of worship. We are quite willing to concede that, from one point of view at least, the verbal content of worship-song is circumstantial. The content of any verbal utterance is circumstantial to the act itself. But because the words of the songs sung in religious worship necessarily have spiritual and religious significance, they must also be considered to be substantial parts of worship, and do not therefore lie within the realm of the discretionary power of the Church. *The Church may neither prescribe, nor appoint, nor require in religious worship any acts, parts of acts, or circumstances of acts which bear religious or spiritual significance, without a clear warrant from the Word of God.*

The powers of discretion granted to the Church by chapter I, paragraph VI of the Confession are thus limited in two ways. They are limited first of all to the *conditions* or *circumstances* attending the service of worship, and they are limited secondly, as the Confession explicitly says, to only *some* such conditions. Conditions which are determinable from Scripture are, by virtue of their divine prescription, substantial parts of worship and are not therefore to be left to the determination of the Church. This is what Gillespie has in mind when he states the following as the second condition necessary for a matter to be within the prescriptive power of the Church:⁵²

That which the church may lawfully prescribe by her laws and ordinances, as a thing left to her determination, must be one of such things as were not determinable by Scripture, on that reason which Camiro hath given us, namely, because *Individua* are *Infinita*. We mean not in any wise to circumscribe the infinite power and wisdom of God: only we speak upon supposition of the bounds and limits which God did set to his written word, within which he would have it contained, and over which he thought fit that it should not exceed. The case being thus put, as it is, we say truly of those several and changeable circumstances, which are left to the determination of the church, that being almost infinite, they were not particularly determinable in Scripture; for the particular definition of those occurring circumstances, which were to be rightly ordered in the works of God's service, to the end of the world, and that even according to the exigency of every present occasion and different case, should have filled the whole world with books. But as for other things pertaining to God's worship, which are not to be reckoned among circumstances, they being in number neither many, nor in change various, were most easily and conveniently determinable.

Those circumstances, therefore, which the Church has power to determine at her own discretion are limited to those not prescribed in Scripture. Some circumstances of worship are prescribed in the Word of God and are thus beyond the discretionary power of the Church. The Church, for example, is required to worship publicly on the Lord's Day, but the time of meeting on that day is not prescribed in Scripture and may thus be determined by the Church as it sees fit.

The limitation of the Church's discretionary power to those circumstances

not determinable from Scripture has important consequences for the Psalmody question. Some advocates of the use of uninspired hymns in worship argue that all of the words spoken during the service of worship are circumstances of the various "elements" of worship. Such people would argue, for example, that preaching is a prescribed element of worship but that the specific content of the words uttered during the sermon is a circumstance of the act of preaching and may thus be determined by the minister as he see fit, subservient, of course, to the general dictates of Scripture concerning propriety and edification. The argument is then extended to singing. It is argued that singing is a prescribed element of worship but that the specific content of the words which are sung is a circumstance of the act of singing which therefore lies within the realm of the discretionary power of the Church.

The problem with such reasoning is that it assumes that the Church has the authority to determine *all* circumstances of worship, which is certainly not the case.⁵³ Such reasoning also fails to recognize the fact that the specific content of worship-song is determinable from Scripture, while the specific content of preaching is *not*. If there is a parallel to be drawn, it is between the reading of Scripture and the singing of Psalms, not between preaching and singing considered as mere abstractions. The reading of Scripture is certainly a prescribed element of worship, and yet the words which are read, even if they be circumstances of the act of reading, are restricted to those of the inspired canon. Which portion of *Scripture* is read lies within the power of the minister to determine, because it is not determinable from Scripture, but the collection from which he may choose is very strictly circumscribed.

The same is true, we would suggest, of praise in song. Singing as an act of worship is the musical counterpart of reading as an act of worship. The presence of the Psalter in the canon of Scripture demands this conclusion. In both of these cases the content of the utterance, even if it be circumstantial to the act itself, is limited to certain portions of Scripture. So it does the advocate of uninspired hymns no good to argue that the content of the songs sung in worship is a "mere" circumstance unless he can show that it is a circumstance not already prescribed in Scripture, a task which the presence of the Psalter in the canon of Scripture renders quite impossible.

There is another restriction on the prescriptive authority of the Church with regard to the circumstances of worship which, though rather obvious, may be mentioned for the sake of completeness. It concerns those circumstances of worship which have no connection at all with worship *per se* and the alteration of which has no effect on the act of worship itself. We must, as Thornwell says,⁵⁴

carefully distinguish between those circumstances which attend actions as *actions*—that is, without which the actions could not be—and those circumstances which, though not essential, are added as appendages. These last do not fall within the jurisdiction of the Church. She has no right to appoint them. They are circumstances in the sense that they do

not belong to the substance of the act. They are not circumstances in the sense that they so surround it that they cannot be separated from it.

One could imagine a host of separable and non-essential conditions which might be appended arbitrarily to services of religious worship. One could, for example, require that people wear a certain kind or color of clothing or that the architecture of the church building be of a certain type. Such requirements as these are certainly "circumstances" which are not determinable from Scripture, but they are separable circumstances and the Church has no authority to appoint them. The ecclesiastical discretion in the matter of circumstances granted by the Confession in chapter I, paragraph VI has in mind only those inseparable actions without which the act of worship as instituted would be impossible. Separable circumstances, those not attending acts of worship as acts of worship, do not lie within the bounds of the prescriptive authority of the Church. The circumstances which the Church may appoint, in other words, must be such that the worship of the Church could not be conducted in a decent and orderly fashion without their appointment.

It may be helpful if we highlight the previous considerations with a historical illustration of some of the issues involved. Around the period of the Westminster Assembly, the question of what constitutes an act or a substantial part of worship was hotly debated in a number of connections. There is much that we can learn from these controversies, because the basic questions which underlie them have continued to be matters of dispute down to our own day. Much of the debate, for example, that led to the expulsion of some 2,000 ministers from the Church of England in 1662 centered around the question of what constitutes an element or substantial part of worship. Part of the controversy involved the question of the right of the Church of England to impose forms of prayer on its members. Those in favor of the imposition of such liturgical forms based the justification of their views in part upon the claim that such forms are "only a circumstance of worship, but no part of it. Prayer is the worship of God; but that *this prayer* shall be used and no other is only a circumstance or accidentally part of God's worship, yet it is not asserted to be of the substance of it."⁵⁵

There are some significant parallels between this controversy over liturgical forms for prayer and the later one over Psalmody. Some advocates of the use of uninspired hymns have claimed, as we have said, that singing is a part of the worship of God, but that whether one particular song or another is used is only a circumstance of worship. The type of argument, most commonly used in support of the propriety of hymn books, is of precisely the same kind as that which was once urged in favor of the Prayer Book in the Church of England. The controversy in both cases hinges on the question of whether or not the words uttered are to be considered a part of the essence of worship. Owen's response to the advocates of the use of liturgical forms for prayer is therefore of some importance to us. Most of what he says applies directly to our own dis-

cussion on the content of song in worship. He begins by pointing to the Lord's Prayer as proof for his assertion that the words spoken in prayer constitute a substantial part of worship, and then proceeds to draw a parallel with the Prayer Book:⁵⁶

In the judgment of most men, not only prayer, and the matter of prayer, is appointed by our Saviour in the Lord's prayer, but we are commanded also to use the very words of it. I desire to know whether the precise use of these words be not a part of God's worship? It seems that it is; for that which is commanded by Christ to be used in the worship of God is a part of God's worship. The case is the same here. Prayer is commanded, and the use of these prayers is commanded; the latter distinctly, as such, as well as the former, is made a part of God's worship. Nor is there any ground for that distinction of the circumstantial or accidental part of God's worship, and worship substantially taken, or the substantial parts of it. The worship of God is either moral or instituted. The latter contains the peculiar ways and manner of exerting the former according to God's appointment. The actions whereby these are jointly discharged, or the inward moral principles of worship as exerted in and according to the outward institutions, have their circumstances attending them. These in themselves, nakedly considered, have in them neither good nor evil, nor are any circumstances in the worship of God, much less circumstantial parts of His worship, but only circumstances of those actions whereby it is performed. And whatever is instituted of God in and about those circumstances is a substantial part of His worship.

Owen's comments have, as we have said, a direct bearing on the question of exclusive Psalmody. There are many people of Reformed persuasion who profess to believe in the Regulative Principle of Worship and yet for some reason remain blind to its bearing on the question of Psalmody. Many of them would argue that the specific content of the songs sung in worship is not a part of the substance of worship and for that reason does not properly fall under the jurisdiction of the Regulative Principle.⁵⁷ But Owen's comments, modified slightly to fit the present case, should be decisive against such a position. Just as human prescription in the case of liturgical forms for prayer renders the content of prayer a substantial part of worship, so it is with uninspired hymns. Owen says quite properly, "That wherewith and whereby God is commanded to be worshipped, and without which all observation or performance of His public worship is forbidden, is itself made a part of worship."⁵⁸ This observation remains valid whether the reference is to a prayer book or a hymn book.

When in hymn-singing churches the minister announces a hymn number, he in effect says that at that time those particular words, to the exclusion of all others, are to be sung by the congregation, and in so doing he manifests their character as a substantial part of worship and brings them under the jurisdiction of the Regulative Principle. The conscience of the worshiper is bound every bit as much to the use of the hymnal in the one case as to the prayer book in the other. In neither case does the Church have the right to bind the

consciences of men to an external form. If the prescription in God's Word of a single prayer of our Lord renders the words of prayer a part of the substance of worship, what may be said of the presence in the canon of Scripture of a whole book of uninspired Psalms? Whether the specific content of worship-song be considered circumstantial or not is ultimately irrelevant to the Psalmody question. The categories of substance and circumstance are not, as we have seen, mutually exclusive. What is important, however, for us to see is that the content of worship-song is very much a part of the essence of worship and for that reason requires a clear warrant from Scripture.

It would seem appropriate to close our consideration of the question of circumstances of worship with a caution derived from John Owen's treatment of the subject. Considering the ambiguities involved in the terms, and the difficulties inevitably encountered in their application, it is not at all surprising that Owen was somewhat skeptical of the usefulness of the distinction between substance and circumstance in discussions of the principles of worship. Those who use such distinctions to validate hymn-singing should be very careful that they are not making distinctions where the Scriptures themselves do not make them. In the Scriptures as a whole, and in the Old Testament in particular, the overlap between these two categories is such as to qualify significantly the usefulness of the distinction. In this connection Owen offers the following observations:⁵⁹

All *making to ourselves* is forbidden, though what we so make may seem unto us to tend to the furtherance of the worship of God. It is said men may add nothing to the substance of the worship of God, but they may order, dispose, and appoint the things that belong to the manner and circumstances of it, and this is all that is done in the prescription of liturgies. Of circumstances in and about the worship of God we have spoken before and removed that pretense. Nor is it safe distinguishing in the things of God where Himself hath not distinguished. When He gave out the prohibitions mentioned under the Old Testament, He was appointing or had appointed His whole worship, and all that belonged unto it, in matter and manner, way and order, substance and circumstance.

That such was the case ought to be a sufficient warning to those who presumptuously take unto themselves the authority to prescribe the circumstances of worship without the least thought of whether or not the circumstances in question are determinable from Scripture, or whether or not they so inseparably bound to the substance of worship that prescription by the Church is essential to the well-ordered performance of that worship. The distinction between substance and circumstance in worship, and between various types of circumstances, though valid to a point, very often become, as Owen says, pretenses upon which to introduce unbiblical practices into the worship of God's Church. The people of God ought to be very wary about permitting alterations to accepted patterns of worship on the basis of such distinctions.

Our conclusions with respect to the question of the significance and impor-

tance of the distinction between circumstances and substantial parts of worship, may be summarized in a few words. We have concluded that the determination of whether or not a particular element or aspect of an element of worship needs a warrant from Scripture reduces first of all to the determination of whether the practice or aspect of the practice in question has spiritual or religious significance. If such is in fact the case, then a specific Scriptural warrant is required regardless of whether or not we consider it to be a substantial or circumstantial part of worship. If the practice or aspect of the practice in question be considered circumstantial rather than substantial, further inquiry must be made concerning the nature of the circumstance in question. The prescriptive powers of the Church in matters of worship are, as we have seen, severely restricted to those circumstances, and those circumstances alone, which are not determinable from Scripture and which are absolutely requisite for the well-ordered observance of His worship. The Church may prescribe nothing in worship unless she has no choice. She may do nothing in that regard unless she *has* to.

In connection with the ultimate reference of this treatise to the Psalmody question, we may therefore pose the following question: "Is it necessary for the well-ordered observance of the worship of God according to the dictates of Scripture for the Church to write her own hymns, when God Himself has supplied her with an altogether sufficient book of songs with which to sing His praise?" This question can be answered in the affirmative only upon the preposterous assumption that the hymns of uninspired men are better than the inspired hymns of God.

The consistent application of the principles examined in this chapter will permit only one conclusion. Uninspired hymns may not be sung to the glory of God in His instituted services of worship unless and until a clear warrant for such a practice can be derived from Scripture. As many and as varied as have been the attempts to produce such a warrant or to evade the logic of the principles involved, no advocate of an uninspired hymnody has ever succeeded in laying a foundation for his practice without first abolishing the Regulative Principle of Worship. The claim often uttered in this connection, that the specific content of worship-song is a mere circumstance to be determined by the Church at its own discretion, is an ignorant and foolish claim, unsupported and unsupportable, either by Scripture or our Reformed standards. It will remain such until it can be shown, on the one hand, that the words sung in worship are devoid of religious significance and, on the other hand, that uninspired men are able to write better and more appropriate hymns than the prophets of the Lord God.

Gillespie mentions a third restriction on the prescriptive power of the Church. It is rather simple but nonetheless important enough that it should never be neglected in a discussion of the subject at hand. He says,⁶⁰

If the Church prescribe anything lawfully, so that she prescribe no more

than she hath power given her to prescribe, her ordinance must be accompanied with some good reason and warrant, given for the satisfaction of tender consciences.

The Church may do nothing arbitrarily or thoughtlessly. Even in those areas where she has limited powers of discretion, she is still bound by the demands of the general principles of Scripture which govern *all* actions of men. All must be done in a loving and orderly way and for the edification and consolation of the people of God. "It becometh not the spouse of Christ endued with the Spirit of meekness, to command anything imperiously, and without a reason given."⁶¹ This restriction applies of course even in those areas where the Church has *no* powers of discretion, where she may only reflect the specific dictates of Scripture. The Regulative Principle is not a liturgical bludgeon used to hammer people into submission to a set of arbitrary patterns of worship. That it has been at times used in this way is not an argument against the principle *per se*, but only an illustration of the depravity of the human heart and its tendency to distort and misuse the good things of the Lord. The Regulative Principle is and ought to be the great joy and precious possession of every Christian, because its application tells him what is pleasing to his God.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

We shall conclude this chapter with a consideration of the Scriptural basis of the Regulative Principle. We have saved this topic for last, not because it is unimportant, but rather because it is *all* important. It is with the Scriptures that we would leave the reader in our consideration of this essential principle. As we have had occasion time and again to emphasize, the great glory and beauty of the Regulative Principle lies in its character as a directing sign, pointing us ever and always back to the Word of God.

We do not claim that the Regulative Principle as generally formulated is stated directly or explicitly in any single passage of Scripture. We do feel, however, that it can be derived from the Scriptures by good and necessary consequence and that it is an inseparable part of the fabric of Scripture. This, moreover, is not to be considered a weakness in the structure of the principle, for precisely the same thing may be said of a host of cardinal doctrines. As Warfield said of the doctrine of the Trinity, so it may be said of the Regulative Principle, that it "lies in the Scripture in solution; when it is crystalized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view."⁶²

Concerning the Biblical basis of the Regulative Principle, Cunningham makes the following helpful observations:⁶³

With regard to the Scriptural evidences of the truth of the principle, we do not allege that it is very direct, explicit, and overwhelming. It is not of a kind likely to satisfy the coarse, material, literalists, who can see nothing in the Bible but what is asserted in express terms. But it is we think, amply sufficient to convince those who, without any prejudice against it,

are ready to submit their minds to the fair impression of what Scripture seems to have intended to teach. The general principle of the unlawfulness of introducing into the government and worship of the Church anything which cannot be shown to have positive Scriptural sanction, can, we think, be deduced from the Word of God by good and necessary consequence.

There are a host of passages in both Testaments which have a direct bearing on the question of the principles which regulate, or ought to regulate, the religious worship of God. The Regulative Principle is inherent, for example, in the fact that the construction, function, and administration of both the Temple and Tabernacle were very strictly determined by Divine prescription. "And let them construct a sanctuary for me," said the Lord to Moses, "according to all that I am going to show you, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of its furniture, just so shall you construct it" (Ex. 25:8,9; cf. 25:40). So important was it that this pattern be followed precisely that the Lord filled the head craftsmen "with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship" (Ex. 31:3; cf. 28:3; 31:6; 35:30-35). All the details for the construction of the Temple which David delivered to Solomon were given to him by God (I Chron. 28:19). The description of all the details of the Tabernacle and its furniture given in Exodus 25-28 is in fact a beautiful picture of the Regulative Principle and its concern for even the minute details and circumstances of worship. God is no less now to be worshiped according to His own sufficient pattern than He was in the time of Moses.

A large proportion of God's Word is concerned with teaching, by way of precept and example, what worship is acceptable to God. Just as we are warned time and again not to presume to add to that Word (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18, 19; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20), so we must not presume to add to the worship established therein by God. The only worship that is acceptable to God is that which comes ultimately from His own hand. "And if you make an altar of stone for me," says the Lord, "you shall not build it out of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it" (Ex. 20:25).

Before surveying a few of the most important passages which have a direct bearing on the Regulative Principle, a few words need to be said about the differences between Old and New Testament patterns of worship. There seems to be very little appreciation in contemporary Reformed circles for the organic unity that exists between the two Testaments. A very common objection to the Regulative Principle is derived from supposed differences between the regulations of worship in the Old and New Testaments. The objection takes many forms. It is said for example that "Christ has fulfilled our worship" and in so doing has freed us from the "legalistic bondage" inherent in the Regulative Principle; that as Christ fulfilled the letter of the law, so He fulfilled all the minute prescriptions of Old Testament worship. The Regulative Principle, it is

said, passed away with the Temple ritual and the coming to light of our new-found freedom in Christ. To this we reply that Christ fulfilled the law but that He did not abolish it (Matt. 5:17). Our freedom from the bondage of the law lies in the very fact that through the Spirit we are enabled to obey it (Rom. 13:8-10; 7:12; 6:15-23; etc.). The termination of the Temple ritual and all of its minute prescriptions does not absolve us of the responsibility for heeding the Regulative Principle upon which they were founded, any more than the abrogation of certain aspects of the Jewish law absolves us of the responsibility for obeying the Decalogue which was *their* foundation. It is true, as Thornwell says,⁶⁴

Jewish bondage did not consist in the principle, that the positive revelation of God was the measure of duty—that was its light and its glory—but in the *nature of the things enjoined*. It was the minuteness and the technicality of the ritual, the cumbrous routine of service, the endless rites and ceremonies—these constituted the yoke from which Christ delivered His people. He did not emancipate us from the guidance and authority of God; He did not legitimate any species of will worship; but He prescribed a worship simple and unpretending, a worship in spirit and in truth. God's will is as much our law and our glory as it was to the Jews; but God's will now terminates upon easy and delightful services. Those who contend that all things must be done by a Divine warrant can be charged with putting a yoke upon the necks of Christian people only upon the supposition that the worship commanded in the Gospel is analogous to the worship of the Law.

The Regulative Principle is thus not to be seen as emanating from the structures of Old Testament liturgical practice. It is the one essential constituent of worship practice that is common to both dispensations. Its source is in the nature of the relationship that obtains between God and all men at all times, not in the passing ordinances of the Mosaic economy.

The importance of this observation arises from the fact that many people completely discount the relevance of the passages usually quoted from the Old Testament in support of the Regulative Principle, as if its validity must be established entirely from the New Testament Scriptures. The fact of the matter, however, is that worship is still worship, whether performed by Moses or by Paul, and is governed at all times and in all dispensations by the same basic principles.

That such is the case will hopefully become clearer after we have examined a few of the passages from Scripture which have a direct bearing on the question of the principles that govern acts of religious worship. Our survey of such passages cannot be exhaustive. We will consider here only a few of the more important ones, leaving the interested reader to consult the references for further material.⁶⁵

1. The Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6)—The Second Commandment has a direct bearing on the question of what worship is acceptable to the

Lord. It reads:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

It is not simply the grosser forms of idolatry that are condemned here. The making of images for use in worship is the very epitome of what Paul calls “will-worship” (Col. 2:23). It is the archetype of all of man’s attempts to worship God through the work of his own hands. Idolatry and the introduction of unwarranted practices into services of worship are the illegitimate children of the same father. The latter is but a more “sophisticated” version of the former. They both proceed on the assumption that the means of worship which God has seen fit to institute are inadequate. It goes almost without saying, then, that the condemnation of one involves the condemnation of the other. It is with this in mind that our standards describe the Second Commandment as forbidding “the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word.” (Shorter Catechism, Q. 51).

2. The Offering of Strange Fire (Leviticus 10:1-3)—The description of the death of Nadab and Abihu recorded in this passage is one of the most sobering examples of the wrath of God contained in the Scriptures. It illustrates in a very graphic way the jealousy with which the Lord guards the approach to His throne:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective fire-pans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, “It is what the Lord spoke saying, ‘By those who come near me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored.’ ” So Aaron, therefore, kept silent.

The offering is termed “strange fire” (נָרַת שָׁׂרֵךְ) simply because it was not offered according to the prescriptions of the Law, just as in Exodus 30:9 such ill-prepared incense is called “strange” incense. The sin of Nadab and Abihu was one of presumption, of making an offering not commanded by God. It was the Lord’s intention that only those acts prescribed by Him should be performed. On the surface of the matter, the actions of Nadab and Abihu may appear pious or commendable, but as the passage indicates, religious zeal is never commendable when it degenerates into a zealous disregard of God’s holiness.

3. Warnings Against False Worship (Deuteronomy 12:28-32)—This passage occurs in the midst of a list of statutes which the Israelites were ex-

pected to observe when they went in to possess the land:

Be careful to listen to all these words which I command you, in order that it may be well with you and your sons after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying "How do these nations serve their gods, that I may also do likewise?" You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.

This passage comes about as close to an explicit statement of the Regulative Principle as is to be found in the Scriptures. The Israelites are warned to be careful not to seek to worship the Lord after the manner of the nations round about them. The permissible manner of worship was clearly revealed by Jehovah, and they were warned not to depart from those prescriptions, either by addition or by subtraction, to follow after the heathen gods. "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it" (12:32). It is important to realize that, unlike other passages of a similar nature (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5; Rev. 22:18; etc.), this text deals explicitly with acts of religious worship.

4. Saul's Offering (I Samuel 13:8-14) — Saul had been waiting rather impatiently for Samuel at Gilgal, but when the prophet did not appear he took it upon himself to make the offering which Samuel was supposed to make when he came. Samuel immediately appears and chides Saul severely for acting on his own initiative. Saul's sin in this instance is not necessarily that of usurping the priestly office and offering sacrifices with his own hands. The cooperation of the priests is assumed in the phraseology used here, just as in the cases of David and Solomon (II Sam. 24:25; I Kings 3:4; 8:63). Rather, Saul's sin was in not waiting to offer the sacrifice at the appointed time (II Sam 10:8). Only those sacrifices prescribed by God were to be offered, and even those were to be offered only under the conditions and at the time specified by the Lord. In any case, Saul had failed to follow the divine prescription, and for his impatience and lack of faith the kingdom was to be taken from him (13:14).

5. The Death of Uzza (I Chronicles 13:9-14; 15:11-15; II Samuel 6:6f) — This episode is a part of the passage describing the removal of the Ark from Kirjath-jearim, where it had lain for some seventy years since the time of its return by the Philistines. When the Ark was nearly upset by the oxen, one of the men driving the cart put out his hand to steady it, whereupon "the anger of the Lord burned against Uzza, so He struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark; and he died there before the Lord" (I Chron. 13:10; cf. II Sam. 6:7). From a purely human point of view this seems like a rather sense-

less death, but the Ark was the visible pledge of the invisible presence of God in the midst of His people. To touch it was to defile its holiness, and this act was expressly forbidden, even to Levites (Num. 4:15). The heart of Uzza's transgression, however, lies in the fact that according to Numbers 4, the Ark was supposed to be moved only by means of the staves on the side of the ark, on the shoulders of the Levites, and not on a cart. Instead of following these instructions, they followed the example of the Philistines who some time earlier had sent the Ark back by cart (I Sam. 6:7f). The Lord's command as to how the Ark was to be moved excluded every other means. What was not commanded was forbidden, however much the circumstances may have suggested otherwise.

No other example of Scripture shows more clearly than this the folly of ignoring God's own instructions as to how He is to be approached. Seen from a limited point of view, Uzza's *intentions* were certainly "good." But "will-worship," even when offered with the best of intentions, is still sacrilege. It is worth noting that the Philistines had not incurred such severe punishment for touching the Ark. This shows that the Lord is especially jealous that *His own* people approach Him in a fitting manner. When the Ark was later brought to Jerusalem, David was exceedingly careful to see that it was moved "as Moses had commanded according to the word of the Lord" (I Chron. 15:15). David's charge to the Levites on that occasion ought to be burned on the hearts of all who seek to worship the Lord in an acceptable and fitting manner: "Because you did not carry it at the first, the Lord made an outburst on us, for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance" (15:13).

6. The Commandments of God and the Traditions of Men (Mark 7:7-13; cf. Matthew 15:6-9)—The focus of attention in this passage is on the conflict that inevitably follows any attempt to place the commandments of men on a par with the commandments of God. There is a sustained contrast between the commandments of God and the prescriptions or traditions of men (verses 7,8, 9,13). The discussion is not, to be sure, centered on religious worship in the strict sense of the term, but as the quote from Isaiah 29:13 (verse 7) shows, acts of religious worship are certainly included in the restrictions implicit in the passage. The traditions of men condemned here are exemplified by a series of ceremonial cleansings which are in their basic nature closely allied to acts of formal or cultic worship. There is nothing therefore to prohibit us from extending the condemnation here leveled at such rites to include all other religious rites and ceremonies which fall under the category of "traditions of men." In fact, the quote from Isaiah 29:13 would seem to require this. Seen in this way, the passage before us teaches very clearly that worship which is regulated by human prescription or tradition is vain worship and is not acceptable to God.

7. Worship in Spirit and Truth (John 4:20-24)—There is no other passage of Scripture that gets more at the heart of worship than this passage from the

Gospel of John. It occurs at the end of an extended dialogue between our Lord and a Samaritan woman. The portion of the dialogue which bears most directly on worship practice begins with a veiled question framed by the woman concerning the proper location of worship:

"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain; and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

In speaking here of the eschatological replacement of Jerusalem Temple worship, Jesus is resuming a theme already touched upon earlier (2:13-22). Jesus Himself was to take the place of the Temple as the dwelling place of God in the midst of His people. There is therefore a contrast in view here between the mode of worship sanctioned in the Old Testament economy and that inaugurated by Christ in the New. There are a number of important observations to be made concerning this contrast. It is to be noticed first of all that the differences involved in the contrast are divinely legislated differences brought about by the death of Christ. It was by God Himself, not by man, that the veil of the Temple was torn in two upon the death of our Lord (Matt. 27:51). One could hardly imagine a clearer indication of the fact that every change or modification in the manner of worship requires a divine sanction. The differences that exist between the patterns of worship in the Old and New Testaments are in themselves marvelous instances of the Regulative Principle at work, because all of the differences are divinely established.

We are not, however, to think in terms of an absolute contrast between Old and New Testament patterns of worship. The point of the phrase "an hour is coming and now is" (verse 23; cf. 5:25) is not that a *new* principle of worship has now been inaugurated, or is about to be inaugurated. The principle of the necessity of worship in spirit and truth, enunciated in verse 24 and alluded to in verse 23, is based on an inference from the character of God, from His spirituality, and is thus a perpetually valid and binding principle. So the point is not that a new principle of worship has been instituted, but rather that the same abiding principle which is at the heart of worship in both dispensations is at last to be realized in its fullness, specifically in the person of Jesus Christ in whose name and through whose Spirit all true worship is to take place. The Old Testament saints worshiped in spirit and truth, just as we do, but they did so only in a proleptic sense. The glorious progress which we see in worship practice as we pass from the Old to the New Testament is but the *unfolding* of this essential principle: "God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

The term "spirit" occurs twice in verse 24. The interpretation of the verse depends to a large extent on the meaning attached to the term in each instance. The phrase "God is spirit" indicates, not that God is a spirit among other spirits, but rather that His essential nature is spirit. Beyond that, however, the precise signification of the term is difficult to ascertain. It may, of course, have reference to an order of being set over against matter, spirituality as opposed to materiality. That, however, is probably not its main signification here. "Spirit" in the Old Testament generally has reference, not to spiritual as opposed to material being, but to spirit as life-giving, creative activity, as that which gives life to material beings. This certainly appears to be the most common emphasis in John's Gospel (e.g. 3:5-8; 6:63; 7:38f; 14:17-19), and it is probably the case here. Both the immediate and the wider contexts in John bear out this interpretation. The dialogue of which this passage is a part contrasts true and false water on the one hand, and true and false worship on the other. The two contrasts are tied together by the fact that the living water of which Jesus speaks in the first part of the dialogue is the same Spirit which is the source and foundation of the true worship of which He speaks in the second part. The Spirit which is the source of eternal life must also be the source of true worship. If we assume that the Spirit works only in and through His Word, it is a fair inference from this principle that all true worship must be founded upon the Holy Scriptures.

Verse 24 is commonly interpreted as saying that God, being spirit, is present everywhere and so may be worshiped anywhere. Hence the termination of Jerusalem Temple worship. But this cannot be the meaning here. The abrogation of a restricted Temple worship is not based on an inference from the omnipresence of God. God was just as much a "spiritual" being in the Old Testament economy as He is now. Our Lord's point here is in fact the exact opposite of the above interpretation. The point is not that because God is spirit He is present everywhere and may be worshiped everywhere, but rather that, because worship is dependent upon the Spirit of God who, like wind which "blows where it wishes" (3:28), bestows life on whom He wishes, it is restricted to those times, places and conditions which He in His sovereign good pleasure determines. Because God is spirit (in the sense of sovereign, life-giving activity), He manifests Himself among His people in a sovereign and ultimately mysterious way. This is a common theme in the Gospel of John (e.g., 1:13; 3:8; 3:28; 5:21; 6:44,63,65; 8:31-47; 10:11,14,22-31; 12:37-40; 15:5; 17:1-26), and it has, as we see here, some very important implications for worship practice. It is not true, the omnipresence of God notwithstanding, that God may be worshiped at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances, subject only to the whim of the worshiper. God is spirit, the author of life and the giver of grace in worship, and His presence among His people in that capacity is no more "automatic" now than it was in Old Testament times.

The meaning of the phrase "in spirit and truth" has been a matter of considerable debate. "Spirit" in this instance is taken by some as a reference to the human spirit (cf. Matt. 5:3; Luke 1:47; John 13:21; Acts 17:16; Rom. 1:9; 8:16; etc.), in which case the point being made is that the essence of true worship is internal, a matter of the heart or spirit, rather than one of external observances. Those who favor this interpretation usually set New Testament worship in rather stark fashion over against Old Testament worship, the New being characterized as "internal" and the Old being characterized, or rather stigmatized, as "external." Although there is an *element* of truth in such a description, it is often presented in a very unbalanced way, coupled with the insinuation that the Old Testament saints knew next to nothing about true worship.

It is simply not legitimate, however, to contrast Old Testament and New Testament patterns of worship in this way. The piety of the New Testament is patterned very closely after that of the Old Testament, and there is no substantial difference between the two Testaments with regard to the question of whether the essence of true worship is internal or whether it is external. To be sure, the worship of God in Old Testament times was restricted by a series of burdensome external observances, but there was all the while a full appreciation of the importance of the internal aspects of true worship. One has only to read the Psalms to see that this is true. There is in the New Testament an equally full appreciation of the importance of the external or formal aspects of worship. It is true that acceptable worship requires internal conformity to the Law of God, but the external or formal aspect of worship cannot be dismissed as of secondary importance or as irrelevant to the essence of true worship. It must not be forgotten that such things as eucharistic gatherings, baptismal rites, congregational Psalm-singing, and so on, all play a very important role in New Testament worship, and it should be kept in mind that the only glimpse which the Scriptures give us of worship in heaven is a worship that is very much involved with externals, with thrones and rites and ceremonies of all sorts.

We must not succumb in our exegesis to the tendency so prevalent today to internalize all spiritual matters until they are divorced completely from all connection with matters external and formal. For these reasons we are not inclined to see John 4:20-24 as a discourse on the importance of the internal aspect of worship, and for similar reasons we are not inclined to take "spirit" in the phrase "spirit and truth" as a reference to the human spirit in its character as the internal monitor of worship. We prefer rather to take it as a reference to the Holy Spirit as the source of worship, as in John 3:5; Romans 8:1,4,5,13; I Corinthians 14:2; etc., where "spirit" without the article clearly refers to the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Holy Spirit and truth are often conjoined in John's Gospel and Epistles (e.g., 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; I John 4:6; 5:7), together with the fact that the preposition "in" occurs only once with the two words, in John 4:24, thus uniting them in thought, points decidedly in this

direction.

With this interpretation, "spirit and truth" then becomes something of a hendiadys equivalent to "Spirit of truth." The reference to "truth" may point to a contrast between reality and fantasy, between type and anti-type, between truth and falsehood, and so on, or it may refer to Christ as the very embodiment of truth (cf. John 1:14; 14:6). It may even be that all of these are in view to some extent, but it seems more likely, especially if our observations concerning the meaning of "spirit" are correct, that "truth" here is a reference to God's revealed will in Scripture as the epitome, the source of truth (cf. John 16:13). The point, then, that Jesus is making in this passage is that true worship is such as is consonant with the character of God as life-giving spirit. As in salvation it is the Spirit of God who takes the initiative in the giving of life, so in worship it is the Spirit of God who through His Word takes the initiative in determining how and where and under what conditions God is to be worshiped. Acceptable worship must be consonant with the character of God as it is revealed to us in the Scriptures and must therefore be in conformity with that sufficient rule at every point. Only that worship which proceeds ultimately from the Spirit through His Word is pleasing to God.

8. Warnings against Will-worship (Colossians 2:20-23) — Paul here warns against submission to the decrees and commandments of men in matters relating to religious practice. The context makes it quite clear what Paul has in mind. The Colossians were apparently engaged in a wide range of unauthorized religious practices, characterized by a severe, legalistic asceticism, and even involving a form of angel worship (verses 18, 21, 22). All of these practices could in one way or another be subsumed under the category of religious worship, so worship is at the heart of the situation here condemned by Paul. He characterizes these unwarranted religious practices as "will-worship" (AV) or "self-made religion" (NASB). The term which Paul uses here for "will-worship" ($\epsilon\theta\epsilon\lambda\omega\theta\rho\eta\sigma\kappa\epsilon\zeta\alpha$) is a rather broad term, encompassing all forms of unwarranted or uncommanded worship.⁶⁶ Calvin defines the term as "fictitious modes of worship which men themselves devise or receive from others, and all precepts whatsoever which they presume to deliver at their own hand concerning the worship of God" (*Institutes*, IV. 10.8). Humanly devised religious rites, hiding under a cloak of piosity, often have, as Paul says, an appearance of wisdom, but it is only an appearance, and Paul condemns such worship as perishable and unacceptable to God.

Having thus examined the matter from both historical and theological points of view, we can only conclude that the Regulative Principle of Worship is of the essence of true religion. Those who are of Reformed persuasion and confession, of all people, ought to know this. Let all who seek to glorify God in all things remember well that the only glory which man can give to God is a reflected glory, a glory that comes ultimately from His own hand. This is true of the whole of our lives, but it is especially true when we approach the throne

of God in an attitude of self-conscious worship and adoration. John Owen gives us some splendid advice in this regard:⁶⁷

If we maintain, then, the glory of God, let us speak in His own language, or be forever silent. This is glorious in Him which He ascribes unto Himself. Our inventions, though never so splendid in our own eyes, are unto Him an abomination, a striving to pull Him down from His eternal excellency, to make Him altogether like unto us. God would never allow that the will of the creature should be the measure of His honour . . . God's prescription hath been the bottom of His acceptation of any duty ever since He had a creature to worship Him.

Without a due appreciation of this fact, God-honoring, Scripturally sanctioned worship is utterly impossible. But our churches have to a very large extent forgotten the importance of observations such as these. They have grown fat and lazy, and their services of worship are filled to overflowing with all manner of idolatry and human invention. The rule of convenience rather than the rule of Scripture reigns supreme, even in those churches that once proudly raised the banner of the Reformed faith. One can only pray that the Lord, in His infinite patience and through the work of His Spirit, would be pleased to call our Reformed churches back to that zeal for the purity of His worship which is their birthright and which was once their great joy.