

A Position Paper Concerning the Regulative Principle of Worship

A Report by the Theology Committee of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America (Formally Approved by the General Assembly March 8, 2001)

Introduction

We live in a day in which the concept of worship has taken on many different meanings among evangelical churches in America and around the world. The worship services of many so-called “seeker-sensitive” churches are designed to appeal to the unbeliever on his own terms, thus tending to give the worship services of those churches a very distinctive “entertainment” flair. The worship service of the typical charismatic church is long on music, loud, rhythm-driven music that is designed to stir the emotions, but short on the exposition of Scripture which should be the foundation of true religious emotions. Even many of the more conservative evangelical churches include activities in the worship service that make a Reformed believer who cherishes the regulative principle uncomfortable.

Is there a difference between the typical evangelical worship service, even those of a conservative nature, and the worship service of a scripturally ordered Reformed Baptist church? We believe there is. That difference is rooted not in methodology, but in theology. We believe that theology must be the driving force behind methodology. For instruction in that theology, we turn to that compendium of theology which, as Reformed Baptists, we believe best sets forth that faith once for all delivered to the saints, the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 (LBC). There we find a theology of worship commonly known as the regulative principle of worship. It is from that principle of worship, derived from the Scripture, that we deduce what is acceptable and unacceptable in the public worship of God in our churches. Central to the theology of worship set forth by the LBC is the belief that all true Christian worship is to be from the heart by faith. The regulative principle of worship delineates how we worship from the heart by faith.

As an association of churches holding to the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, the purpose of this position paper is to identify those parts of the confession that have a bearing upon the regulative principle of worship, to clarify the meaning of those statements and to answer questions concerning this principle through affirmations and denials of particular positions. Throughout, it is our desire to maintain the unity of the churches, as we believe that unity is best preserved when there is a clear understanding of what we believe on any given doctrine. It must always be remembered that while we are confessional churches, the final authority for faith and practice is always the Scripture. Many sermons have been preached in the member local churches and at the General Assembly of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America (ARBCA) giving exegetical foundation for the regulative principle of worship. Thus, this paper will not deal in exegesis, but in exposition and application of the regulative principle of worship. An annotated bibliography is supplied as a resource for further study on this issue.

The positions on worship addressed in this paper will fall under three primary categories, 1) the inventive principle, which is the Roman Catholic view, 2) the normative principle, i.e. what is not forbidden is permitted, and 3) the regulative principle, i.e. what is not commanded is forbidden. God, in His graciousness, has chosen to reveal to man in His word that which is pleasing to Him in worship. The regulative principle teaches that God has clearly revealed the elements of worship that will enable His

people to worship in spirit and in truth. It will be the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that all Protestant worship practices that are not governed by a clear adherence to the regulative principle fall under the normative principle. This paper will also differentiate between the elements of worship, which are governed by the regulative principle, and the circumstances of worship, which are not. Finally, this paper will seek to articulate principles that will be of assistance to those churches seeking to follow more closely the regulative principle of worship as set forth in the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.

As we begin this paper we would state that as Reformed Baptists, we believe that all of life is to be lived before God as an act of worship. This is the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 in the exhortation to “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service of worship.” A common theme among Reformed writers is that worship encompasses all of life. Recognizing that truth, however, we also note the unique place of the public worship of God when the church gathers together on the Lord’s Day. It is that public worship of God to which we seek to apply the regulative principle of worship. To that end we will seek to answer several questions.

1. *Identify each place in the Confession that might be relevant to the regulative principle.*

- A. LBC 1:1 — “The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.”

Commentary:

This first paragraph of the Confession identifies the Scripture as the only infallible rule for obedience for the Christian. Certainly the worship of God is a primary area of obedience and thus it is to the Scripture that we must turn for instruction in worship.

- B. LBC 1:6 — “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. . .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.”

Commentary:

This paragraph perhaps more than any other sets forth the regulative principle of worship when it states that “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for. . .faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added. . .” The elements of worship are clearly restricted to that which is revealed in Scripture. It is instructive to note that the LBC does not use the phrase “or by good and necessary consequence” as does the Westminster Confession of Faith, so as to clearly say, “necessarily contained in Scripture.” This paragraph also distinguishes between elements of worship and the circumstances of worship “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. . .” The circumstances of worship would include place, time of day, length of the service, pews verses chairs, printed order or not, hymnals verses sheets or overhead transparencies, air conditioning verses fans, types of musical instruments, etc.

- C. LBC 1:8, 9, 10 — “That the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner. . .” “The infallible rule of interpretation of Holy Scripture is the Scripture itself. . .” “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be finally determined. . .can be no other but the Holy Scripture. . .”

Commentary:

As Paragraph 8 states that worship must be in an acceptable manner, it infers that some worship is not acceptable. Acceptable worship is not to be determined by individual experience or preference. Rather this paragraph teaches that the Scripture is sufficiently clear to reveal that which is acceptable worship to God. Chapters 9 and 10 point us to the Scripture to settle matters of dispute in worship. Scripture alone has authority to settle differences in worship over inferences, extra-biblical traditions, historical practices and cultural innovations. All personal preferences and all experiences must be brought into subjection to the authoritative objective word of Scripture.

- D. LBC 2:2 — “God, having all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself, is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creature which he hath made nor deriving any glory from them. . .to Him is due from angels and men, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience, as creatures they owe unto the Creator, and whatever he is further pleased to require of them.”

Commentary:

This paragraph teaches that worship is due unto God because of His character. Our worship must flow from the fact that he is the all-glorious being. Worship is owed unto Him. Yet when the heart of the believer embraces Him as the all-glorious One, then it is a *glad* obedience, which is rendered.

- E. LBC 14:1 — “The grace of faith. . .is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by administration of baptism and the Lord’s supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.”

Commentary:

This paragraph mentions several of the elements of worship and states that the grace of faith is wrought by these elements. That which the Scripture sets forth as those regulated elements of worship will perform the function of working faith in the elect. Those practices for which there is no Scriptural warrant will not work faith in the elect.

- F. LBC 21:2 — “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.”

Commentary:

The doctrine of Christian liberty is a major theme in the writings of Reformed theologians as it pertains to worship. Concerning the doctrine of worship, though many would seek to use the doctrine of Christian liberty to broaden the scope of what is permitted in worship, the authors of the confession actually wrote this to restrict what was required in worship. Because Roman Catholicism had added so many doctrines and commandments of men it was necessary to assert that the consciences of men could not be bound by the doctrines and commandments of men. It was necessary to assert that only

that which was commanded in Scripture was required in worship and to submit to any other requirements was to betray true liberty of conscience. Applying this principle to our situation would assert that the elders of a church could not require of the people in worship more than God requires or expect less than God requires in His Word. Those who plan the worship service of a church must exercise caution in planning the service lest they violate the liberty of conscience of any worshipper. It is also necessary to state that no church or association of churches can require of another church more than God requires or expect less than God requires. Thus while one may expect that any church holding to the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith would carefully adhere to the elements of worship, faithfully including all of them and not adding to them, yet in the circumstances of worship we must respect the differences that may exist due to differing local situations.

G. LBC 22:1-7 — “. . .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, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures. . .”

Commentary:

Chapter 22 is the most thorough chapter in the Confession concerning the matter of the regulative principle of worship. Paragraph 1 again states that there is a principle that governs our worship of God and that it is a principle that is instituted by Him in His revealed will made known in His Word. It disallows any practice in worship that is based on human imagination or devices of men that are not found in the Word of God. Paragraph 5 carefully delineates the elements of worship, which are: 1) the reading of the Scriptures, 2) preaching and hearing the Word of God, 3) singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs unto the Lord, 4) prayer with thanksgiving for all things lawful, and 5) the administration of the sacraments. These are the non-negotiable elements of worship. They are to be observed in worship as commanded elements from God, not to be withheld from the church nor expanded by additions from “good and necessary consequence.”

Paragraph 2 speaks specifically of Christ, being the only mediator of worship. In reality this is a thread that runs through almost every chapter of the confession in one way or another but is stated most explicitly here. “Religious worship is to be given to God. . .and since the fall, not without a mediator, nor in the mediation of any other but Christ alone.” Obviously this eliminates much of Roman Catholic worship, which seeks to approach God through the mediation of Mary or the saints. Chapter 8, Paragraph 9 clearly states that the “office of mediator between God and man is proper only to Christ, who is the prophet, priest, and king of the church of God; and may not be either in whole, or any part thereof, transferred from him to any other.” Christ alone speaks as prophet to the church. Christ alone opens access to the Father. Christ alone leads His church in triumphant procession. One of the implications of this statement in the Confession is that the preaching of the Word of God must be explicitly Christian, i.e. it must focus on the work of Christ in bringing in the New Covenant in His blood. The centrality of preaching of Christ and his redemptive work is that which makes Reformed worship unique. Everything in the worship service must point toward and find its culmination in the exposition of Scripture concerning Christ and Him crucified. Even the preaching of the Proverbs would emphasize the necessity of the work of Christ to enable the New Testament believer to live according to those principles. Implied also is that the Old Testament Scriptures must be understood in light of the New Testament Scriptures. Thus whereas Messianic Judaism might reach back into the Old Covenant Scriptures and incorporate Old Covenant rituals in their worship, Reformed believers holding to the regulative principle would see those rituals as fulfilled in Christ and thus no longer applicable to, or permissible in New Covenant worship.

- H. LBC 26:7 — “To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his Word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power.”

Commentary:

This paragraph sets forth the manner in which the application of the regulative principle is to be structured in the church. It asserts the authority and independence of each local church. Even churches in an association are not under the authority of the association but are each under the authority of Christ. This allows for differences in understanding of the application of the regulative principle among cooperating churches. Each church has its own leaders, history, convictions, level of maturity, and state of reformation. On those matters where there is not clear instruction in Scripture, i.e. the circumstances of worship, one church must show deference to another. No church should seek to dictate to another how to structure the circumstances of worship. Yet it must also be understood that the authority of the local church is not absolute. It is still under the authority of Christ and His Word. It is, however, perfectly legitimate for an association such as the ARBCA to wrestle with these issues as an association and arrive at some conclusions as to what we collectively believe the Confession teaches.

- i. LBC 28:1-2 — “Baptism and the Lord’s supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church to the end of the world. . . These holy appointments are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called, according to the commission of Christ.”

Commentary:

Because baptism and the Lord’s supper are of positive and sovereign institution, they are non-negotiable elements of worship. These chapters give guidelines for how these sacraments are to be administered within the local church.

The above commentary on the LBC enables us to make the following affirmations and denials concerning the regulative principle of worship:

1. We affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that we live in a God-centered world, and that all of life is to be lived before God as an act of worship. We deny, however, that this statement fully and adequately defines all of man’s duty to God in worship. Both the Scriptures and the LBC clearly teach the place of public worship when the church gathers together on the Lord’s Day.
2. We affirm the clear implications of *sola scriptura* for the regulative principle of worship. The authority, infallibility, sufficiency, and perspicuity of Scripture inform the Christian as to what pleases God in worship. We deny the role of man’s preference as a standard in these matters. Worship is always disciplined by theology, never determined by personal taste. It is not a matter of applied sociology.
3. We affirm that God may be approached in worship only through the means of his appointment, namely the merit of his Son. We deny that there are multiple approaches to God, and that man might find acceptance with God through any one of them.
4. We affirm that the very elements of public worship are appointed and revealed, to which nothing can be added or subtracted *if God is to be pleased*. We deny that the circumstances of worship of God are so

ordered. Elements are matters commanded by God in particular and are non-negotiable; circumstances are matters common to human societies in general and are changeable. Elements are fundamental to worship; circumstances are functional elements that allow it to take place. The distinction between elements and circumstances is clear; circumstances must never assume the status of elements.

5. We affirm that God regulates his worship by insisting upon the non-negotiable elements of worship. We deny that it is ever right to admit into the public worship of God elements because he has not forbidden them. Worship is always a matter of what God commands, never a matter of what he has not condemned. Worship is always a matter of what we *must* do, never a matter of what we *may* do.
 6. We affirm that charity and liberty of conscience mandate a minimalist approach to worship. The Christian is free both from bondage to sin and the tyranny of men. He is free to serve and worship God. We deny the popular notion that love for brethren and liberty of conscience call for breadth and toleration in the public worship of God. Neither the church nor her officers can require of people in worship other than what God requires in his Word.
 7. We affirm that public worship is always a matter of edification, the means of which are ordained by God. We deny that public worship is ever a matter of entertainment, though in other contexts entertainment may be a legitimate pursuit.
 8. We affirm that preaching is an element of public worship and its central feature. We deny that a music service is worship if preaching is ancillary to what transpires, that is, something added to it.
 9. We affirm the authority of each local church to regulate its worship without the authoritarian intrusion of others. We deny that this authority is absolute and autonomous. As we allow for legitimate differences in ordering the elements of worship (and even more in the circumstances), it is still legitimate for this Association to determine what it collectively believes the Scriptures and the Confession do teach.
2. *How does the regulative principle relate to a uniquely reformed view of the Scriptures (i.e. authority, perspicuity, sufficiency, etc.)?*

It is important to state clearly that this is not a subsidiary question but an essential question. Reformed Christianity holds to a view of Scripture that is unique. Other expressions of Christianity may hold to the authority, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture, but unique to the Reformed faith is the doctrine of sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture. In addition, we adhere to the abiding validity of the moral law, embedded and embodied in the Ten Commandments. Calvin and others place a discussion of God's worship under the second commandment. The regulative principle is related to a particular view of Scripture. The regulative principle assumes the authority and sufficiency of Scripture to order instituted worship, while depending upon the perspicuity of Scripture to assure the good conscience of all believers engaged in worship.

3. *What are the various views on public worship? Do these alternate views endanger the confessional position on the regulative principle or do they merely reveal careless wording, ignorance, or inconsistency of thought?*

There are three basic and historical views regarding how God may be worshiped. Though there are variations of those three views within each view, yet they may be grouped together under the three.

They are 1) the *inventive* principle of worship. This is the view of Rome. It says that the church is free to establish the parameters of worship, hence the inventiveness of certain elements, like the mass, etc. The church may invent or create as it pleases. Authority resides in the church. Because Roman Catholicism recognizes the church and church tradition as an equal authority with the Bible, it is impossible to say that this is only careless wording or ignorance. It is most certainly a position that has been established with careful thought. This view cannot coexist with the regulative principle. It is antithetical to the regulative principle.

2) The *normative* principle. This view, held most notably by Lutheranism and Anglicanism states that you may have in worship whatever God has expressly commanded plus whatever is not expressly forbidden. Included under this view of worship would be many of the elements of worship found in higher church liturgy, the charismatic movement, modern day contemporary worship, seeker-sensitive worship, etc. Such elements would consist of liturgical ceremonies, drama, dance, performance-oriented music, etc. The statement “God doesn’t prohibit this practice,” justifies many of these practices. That statement is a key to the normative principle. Those churches that hold to such practices in worship often de-emphasize the role of the Word of God in worship. It is not uncommon in such services to hear very little reading of the Word of God and little, if any, exposition of the Scripture. Many of the sermons, rather than being expositions of the Scripture, are topical sermons directed toward “felt needs” of the individual. While one could in charity assume that there are those who have not studied this issue carefully and thus adopt the normative principle, or are inconsistent in their application of this principle, the key would be the response of those individuals when the clear teaching of Scripture is presented as it pertains to the regulative principle. Do they accept the teaching of Scripture in spite of established patterns or preferences or do they reject it? Unfortunately, because of emotional attachment to various worship forms and because of theological error, there are many who consciously reject the regulative principle in favor of the normative principle. Regardless of the reason for the adoption of the normative principle of worship, it is clearly not in agreement with the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 and thus to hold that position would endanger the confessional position.

3) The *regulative* principle of worship. The regulative principle emphasizes the instituted elements of worship as the priority. Scripture reading, significant exposition of Scripture, prayers, congregational singing, the sacraments, etc., mark the priority of worship according to the regulative principle. Worship according to the regulative principle examines the order, elements, priorities, and musical selections from a regulated biblical perspective. It does not reject an old hymn simply because it is old nor does it reject new hymns and songs simply because they are new. Reformed hymnology was “new” when it was instituted. Worship according to the regulative principle does not jump on the bandwagon of high church liturgy, exclusive Psalmody, contemporary music, or normative additions of any kind from the motive of personal tastes. It examines the order, elements, priorities, and musical selections from a regulated biblical perspective. God regulates his worship. Worship is prescribed and commanded, and the elements of his worship are revealed. Thus worship according to the regulative principle is the only acceptable worship for the churches of the ARBCA.

4. *What is the difference between what is essential (the elements) and what is circumstantial in public worship? What are those elements?*

The elements of public worship are those parts of worship that are essential to the worship itself, those acts commanded by God in His word. They are non-negotiable. The elements are what constitute

worship as worship. Those elements are clearly delineated in Chapter 22, Paragraphs 3-5 of the Confession. They are 1) reading of the Scriptures, 2) preaching and hearing the Word of God, 3) singing with grace in our hearts to the Lord, 4) prayer with thanksgiving for all things lawful, and 5) administration of the sacraments. These elements take place within the worship service itself and are directed toward God. Though the Confession does not list it as such, the taking of an offering might be considered an element, since the Apostle Paul commands it of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 16:2, “On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.” On the other hand it might be considered under the category of things commanded of believers generally (like brotherly love, etc.).

The circumstances of worship are those functional aspects that enable worship to take place. They are “common to human actions and societies.” They include place of meeting, time of day for the meeting, the choice of pews or chairs, electronic amplification of the voice, musical instruments used, length of service, the use of a bulletin or a hymnal, etc. In the nature of the case, such circumstances will vary from country to country, season to season, and place to place. All circumstances must serve the elements, and must never be permitted to assume the status of elements. It is necessary to exercise great caution in this regard. Some have used the idea of circumstances to validate unbiblical elements of worship such as drama, dance, etc. It is necessary to keep clear the distinction between circumstances and elements lest we introduce into our worship elements that go beyond what God has commanded.

5. *What principles must be used to determine what music is acceptable in public worship? What is the role of instrumentation in public worship? What can or should we say about music in worship other than congregational participation? What does the Confession teach or imply about participation or the participants? Why don't we sing only the psalms?*

A. One of the great privileges of the people of God is that we are invited to sing praises to our great and glorious God. God has commanded that we sing praises to him, because it is pleasing to Him and in being pleasing to Him brings great pleasure as well to us. The elements of public worship do not appear because they please the worshipers but are included because they please God and yet in coming into His presence and fulfilling that which is pleasing to Him, we experience fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. In determining what music is acceptable in worship, we must acknowledge that the words that we sing ought to be as biblical as the prayers that we pray and the words that we preach. As we study the psalms we generally note that they possess certain qualities: God-centeredness, dignity, biblical ideas, theme, order, resolution, etc. The hymns and songs we sing should follow that pattern. The Statement of Principle for Music in the Church, taken from the Christian Reformed Psalter Hymnal (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988, pp. 11-15) gives some very useful guidelines in this regard. It states the following:

- i. The music of the church should represent the full range of the revelation of God.
- ii. The service of music should contribute to the service of the Word.
- iii. The poetry of the songs should be good poetry; it should not have to rely upon the music to carry it. The music of the songs should be artistically defensible as good music; it should not have to rely upon the words to carry it.
- iv. The poetry of the songs should be true to the inspired Word. Such poetry at the same time must be vital—free from the defects of artificiality and sentimentality.
- v. The poetry should be genuinely expressive of religious experience, but should be in harmony with the whole counsel of God.

- vi.** The music should be suitable to the liturgical text to which it has been adapted.
- vii.** Music of the church. . .[should not] suggest places and occasions other than the church and worship. . .lest a secular association with the music interfere with the worshiper's service.
- viii.** The music of the church should be expressive of our Reformed tradition.

This same document begins with a principle and two sub-points:

Principle: The music of the church should be appropriate for worship.

1. The music of the church should be liturgical. In spirit, form, and content, it must be a positive expression of scriptural religious thought and feeling. It should serve the ministry of the Word.
 2. The music of the church should be beautiful. Its religious thought or spirit should be embodied appropriately in the poetry as poetry, in the music as music, and in the blending of these in song. It should satisfy the aesthetic laws of balance, unity, variety, harmony, design, rhythm, restraint, and fitness, which are the conditions of all art.
- B. The primary role of music in worship is for the congregation to express praise and worship to God. Consequently the music of worship should be primarily geared toward congregational participation. The Apostle Paul, in Colossians 3:16, commands that the members of the church "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." This would imply that the predominance of the music in the worship service should be of the nature of congregational participation. According to this text, the songs that are sung should have three elements, 1) giving of praise and thanksgiving to God, 2) teaching of theological truth, and 3) exhortation of one another. Hymns, both old and new, seem to fulfill this requirement. Simply because a hymn is new does not make it of lesser quality than an older hymn, nor does the fact that it is new make it of higher quality. A hymn, regardless of when written, should conform to the high musical standards fitting for the worship of God and the theological standards of Scripture. Though less traditional forms of music, if used judiciously, may be appropriate, great care and caution is urged to ensure that the congregation in its corporate praise conforms to the biblical parameters fitting for the worship of God. Thus it would be more appropriate to use them in conjunction with the fuller theological concepts embodied in the hymns and psalms. It is not our view that the regulative principle requires exclusive psalmody. The Scriptures record prayers, include sermons, reveal God's Word and will. But we do not thereby conclude that we must pray the very words of Scripture every time we pray, or just read the Scriptures without preaching. The prayers of the Bible are models for ours, and we must be careful to expound the word of God in preaching. The specific words of our prayers are our own, and the specific words of our sermons are of human composition. So it may be with the praises that we sing. The psalms should be a pattern for the songs that we sing in worship, i.e. the words that we sing ought to be as biblical as the psalms. As we study the psalms we generally note that they possess certain qualities: God-centeredness, dignity, biblical ideas, theme, order, resolution, etc. The words of the hymns and songs that we sing should possess those same qualities.
- C. The word "psalmos" means "played upon a stringed instrument," as in the Psalter of the Old Testament. The Psalms mention a wide variety of instruments, stringed, brass, percussion, etc. The Scripture does not specify what instruments are acceptable or not acceptable. Thus one must assume that an instrument is acceptable if it is played skillfully and in a manner fitting to worship.

It would be improper to use instruments in such a way that the worshipers mind is drawn to settings outside of worship because of the manner in which it is played. The usage of instruments is primarily designed to accompany the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Instrumentation is to be used in corporate worship primarily to enhance the singing of the congregation. If it overpowers the singing of the congregation, either in volume or in arrangement, then it is not functioning as intended by Scripture and should be altered. Likewise the music played by the instruments should produce the same sense in the emotions as that produced by the words of the hymn or psalm or spiritual song being sung so that the worshiper does not feel a disjunction.

- D. While congregational singing is to receive the emphasis in public worship, the regulative principle does not of necessity exclude the use of special music. Each church will have its own convictions regarding the suitability and frequency of special music. To prevent special music from becoming entertainment driven, the elders of the church should stress to those providing special music, that the purpose of special music is still that outlined in Colossians 3:16. Those who provide special music should be carefully and clearly instructed that the purpose is not entertainment but edification as commanded by the Apostle Paul. The elders of each individual church must assume the responsibility for such instruction and carefully monitor the situation so that the special music meets the same biblical criteria as congregational singing.

6. *How should we understand the regulative principle in relationship to liberty of conscience?*

This issue has already been discussed at some length under question 1.F., LBC 21:2. However, we would assert that liberty of conscience must be bounded by revelation concerning the instituted elements of Christian worship. The regulative principle does not allow non-commanded elements and practices in worship for the sake of one's perceived liberty of conscience. Christian liberty, in terms of the regulative principle, must be seen from two perspectives. Positively, Christian liberty in worship means freedom to worship God as He would be worshipped. Christian liberty in general is freedom from sin and freedom to please God. It is no different in worship. It does not give us freedom to worship as we please but as He pleases. Man enjoys his greatest liberty when he lives in obedience to the truth revealed in God's Word. Negatively, Christian liberty in worship means freedom from being forced to worship God according to human invention, in ways that are devised by men and not according to Scripture. Practically speaking, a church is not free to devise its own ways of worship, no matter how strong the cultural consensus may be. A church finds liberty in Christ, and liberty in worship is to be found in worshipping according to the commands laid down by Christ, the head of the church. Consequently, Christian charity is exercised toward the brethren when we do not institute patterns in worship that offend their consciences nor require that they participate in worship that is not in accordance with Scripture.

7. *How should ARBCA handle this issue?*

A. *When examining prospective churches?*

ARBCA must examine a church's view of the regulative principle by asking how worship takes place. Only those churches that self-consciously hold to the regulative principle of worship should be admitted to membership. If the regulative principle is not understood properly, time for instruction must be given. A teachable spirit would be required in such an instance. Questioning should be very clear and very frank so that there is clear understanding of the ARBCA position on

the regulative principle as outlined in this paper and our Confession of Faith so that there is neither confusion of terminology nor needless misunderstanding.

B. *If the pastor of a church within ARBCA questions this issue?*

If a pastor rejects the regulative principle and institutes another principle of worship, the membership committee should approach him for discussion and instruction. This approach must be done in a charitable spirit to determine if the language and practice are the result of ignorance and carelessness, or if something deeper is at stake. If the pastor is not willing to bring his practice and beliefs into line with the position of the ARBCA, then the membership committee should approach the elders of the church for discussion and instruction. If they are not willing to correct the issue, then the church's membership in ARBCA must be reevaluated. None of this should be done quickly, but time must be given for necessary discussion, instruction and corrective action to be taken.

C. *When a pastor of a church within ARBCA begins actively to teach or practice alternate views?*

This is similar to the situation in (b) except that it is obvious in this situation that the situation is not a result of ignorance or carelessness. This is a confessional issue and it must be addressed. Hopefully, however, his own elders will have raised the issue and perhaps sought the help of brethren in the Association. If he persists in teaching or practicing views contrary to the Confession, and his church refuses to properly address the issue, the church should be asked to resign its membership in ARBCA. If the church refuses to do so, then ARBCA has no choice but to remove the church from membership.

8. *What is at stake if the regulative principle is allowed to erode with the modern consensus?*

As an association of churches, we collectively and individually believe that *The London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* accurately reflects biblical faith. We are confessional because we believe our Confession is biblical. We adhere to a full subscriptionist position, having concluded that the LBC in its entirety consistently represents a biblical theology.

Our Confession is a Puritan document; therefore, the model for our churches is Puritan and not one of a number of competing contemporary ones. Different models abound, but we reject each of them as contrary to New Testament policy and polity. We eschew the following models: Roman, Lutheran, Anglican, high church liturgical, Brethren, seeker-friendly, charismatic, evangelical, etc. Essential to this Puritan model is the regulative principle of worship. To deviate from the Confession at this point and to adhere to another would be to embrace a different ethos, an altered emphasis, and most probably additional elements. The regulative principle of worship is a non-negotiable part of a Reformed Baptist theology and methodology. It is systemic to the Confession, not subsidiary.

We desire that the churches of the ARBCA worship in such a way that will fully carry out Jesus' statement that worship must be "in spirit and in truth." It is to that end that we have written this position paper. We urge the member churches of ARBCA to study the sections on worship found in the LBC in the near future so that together our worship may be acceptable in the sight of our glorious God.

Respectfully submitted,

The Theology Committee of the ARBCA

Rev. Don Lindblad – Chairman
Rev. Tom Lyon
Dr. Fred Malone
Rev. Fred Pugh
Dr. James Renihan
Dr. Mike Renihan

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is both annotated and select; it is not intended to be exhaustive and all-inclusive. The works are cited as representative of a Reformed and confessional position on the regulative principle of worship. Further, they are listed to assist those who wish to pursue the subject further, as well as to give the reader of this paper some understanding for how the Theology Committee arrived at its conclusions. All of these works were read or reviewed by at least one member of the Committee.

Bannerman, James. The Church of Christ. Vol. 1, Part III, Div. II, “Church Power Exercised in Regard to Ordinances.” Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960. pp. 322-91.

This material is valuable in making the connection between church government and the regulative principle. The author also demonstrates from Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8 that Christian charity and liberty of conscience mandate that the church not do anything, even something indifferent in itself, that would wound the conscience of another. True love for the brethren insists upon a minimalist approach to worship. This material is helpful in counteracting today’s false and misleading applications of love for one another. There is also a very fine treatment of the confessional distinction between the elements and the circumstances of worship.

Bogue, Carl W. The Scriptural Law of Worship. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988. Pamphlet.

This is a concise but insightful treatment of the historic position on the regulative principle. It also includes as an appendix William Cunningham’s important “Church Power in Relation to Worship.” Together they assert that the written Word of God regulates entirely all matters relating to the life and worship of the church.

Burroughs, Jeremiah. Gospel Worship. Ligonier, Pa: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990. Original edition 1648.

Fourteen sermons by a leading Puritan treat the issue in typical 17th Century fashion. This is a must read for anyone researching the subject.

Calvin, John. “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” in John Calvin’s Tracts and Treatises. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958. Vol. 1, pp. 121-234.

Calvin asserts that the Reformation began not to rid the church of numerous and grievous abuses, but to restore a biblical perspective in two areas: the worship of the church and the doctrine of salvation. For Calvin, that was the order in which reformation must take place: worship first, the

doctrine of grace second. Reformation in worship must precede reformation in the way of salvation or the latter will be severely retarded. The reader will note that this is the very opposite of today's emphasis and perhaps is a reason why reformation moves so slowly in our world. Recently, this has been reprinted separately as a pamphlet.

Davies, Horton. The Worship of the English Puritans. Ligonier, Pa: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997.

An eminent historian has published his doctoral dissertation. Horton claims that what gave the Puritans their strength was their bedrock biblicism—in worship too.

The Directory of the Publick Worship of God.

Found most often today bundled with the Westminster standards, and can be obtained through the edition supplied by the Banner of Truth. Since primary sources are always to be preferred over secondary, this is the place to begin.

Frame, John M. Worship in Spirit and in Truth. Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996.

Claiming to support the confessional “regulative principle of worship” as defined in the Westminster Confession, Frame actually redefines the principle to permit “normative principle” additions to worship. He begins with a good and standard explanation of the confessional “elements” of worship. Then he expands the idea of “normative applications,” which is legitimate for preaching and teaching, beyond the historic and confessional position of instituted worship. Justifying “normative applications” of prescribed elements of worship, Frame legitimizes drama as an application of preaching and dance as an application of praise. In reality, Frame has transformed the regulative principle into the normative principle via “normative application.”

Frame, John M. Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense. Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1997.

Frame follows Worship in Spirit and in Truth with Contemporary Worship Music. This is a thought provoking analysis of contemporary worship music (CWM), claiming that much CWM is as appropriate for Christian worship as traditional hymnology. He challenges opponents of CWM to be more open to its use in worship, accusing them of ignorance about CWM and believing that 1 Corinthians 9:22 and 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 teaches that Christian worship should be culturally sensitive. However, the former passage has to do with Paul's personal behavior in witnessing, not worship; the latter is an unbeliever's conversion because of God's Word fully prophesied, not because of culturally sensitive music. While Frame rightly challenges the reader to be open to new music in worship as long as its words and music are appropriate, he does not seem to realize the widespread abuse of CWM which effectively eliminates Western hymnology from a Western based culture. Further, though from a classical music background, he does not seem to understand the issue of Christian conscience concerning younger saints who once associated the rhythms and beat of some CWM with their former days of sin, or concerning older saints who wish to keep traditional hymnology as the language of worship. Frame's argument smacks too much of a musician's condescending attitude toward those who are less trained. His exegesis is poorly developed and will open the door, not only for CWM, but also for a critical attitude toward pastors

who hold to a more conservative traditional hymnology, even if they use some modern hymns and spiritual songs.

Gordon, T. David. "Public Worship in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition." An Unpublished Syllabus Supplement for Presbyterian and Reformed Denominational Standards, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Winter, 1998.

This work began as a series of Sunday school handouts. Believing that biblical worship is an uplifting and unifying experience, the author compiled this document. He arranges the material in three parts: foundational considerations that make Reformed worship distinct from its alternatives; specific questions raised; and a large appendix that includes a host of subsidiary concerns. Here is an excellent volume, possibly obtained through Dr. Jim Renihan.

Lachman, David. "Christian Liberty and Worship," in Worship in the Presence of God, ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman. Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992. pp. 91-101.

Gospel liberty is freedom from the bondage of sin and freedom to serve God, asserts Lachman. What is true in general of the Christian life is also true of public worship. Christian liberty in worship is not the freedom to serve God as we please, but as He pleases. Both sincerity of heart *and* harmony with God's revealed will are important considerations in worship. Lachman writes, "While positively, gospel liberty in worship is freedom to worship God as He would be worshipped, negatively, it is freedom from being forced to worship God in ways devised by human invention." The final pages also deal with the very practical distinction between what Christians do together in public worship, and what individual Christians might enjoy recreationally as legitimate parts of their lives. Here is a thought-provoking, biblical, and confessional treatment.

Owen, John. "A Brief Instruction in the Worship of God," Works of John Owen, vol. 15, pp. 447-530. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.

_____. "A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition," Works of John Owen, vol. 15, pp. 1-55. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.

_____, "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship," Works of John Owen, vol. 13, pp. 462-506. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967.

Here is Owen at his best, in a comprehensive and thorough treatment of the regulative principle. These three essays are classic and a must read.

Reymond, Robert G. O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980.

Worship is a subject hardly touched on in theological seminaries, says Reymond. Following time in the pastorate, in an environment where he was now preparing young men for the ministry, the author determined to share what he had learned about worship. He sought to teach his students ways and means of making corporate worship more acceptable to God, and at the same time more meaningful to the worshipers. Here is an eminently practical help for those preparing to lead the congregation in worship.

Waldron, Samuel E. The Regulative Principle of the Church. Grand Rapids: Wisdom

Publications, 1995. Pamphlet.

This is a sermon preached by Pastor Waldron, in which he maintains that the regulative principle of worship has implications for the whole of a biblical and faithful ecclesiology. Highly recommended and worth reading.

Williamson, G.I. Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes. Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1964.

Williamson has provided the church with a simply stated, amply illustrated, and theologically accurate declaration of our position. This could be read with profit alongside A.A. Hodge's, The Confession of Faith published by the Banner of Truth.

Young, William Young, "Second Commandment: The Principle That God Is to Be Worshipped Only in Ways Prescribed in Holy Scripture and That the Holy Scripture Prescribes the Whole Content of Worship, Taught by Scripture Itself," in Worship in the Presence of God, ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman. Greenville: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992. pp. 75-90.

The Puritans, along with subsequent generations of Reformed Christians, regularly placed discussion of the regulative principle in public worship within the context of the second commandment of the Decalogue. Young does a first-rate job of addressing the historic argument in contemporary language.