

Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

One of the key reformational doctrines¹ determinate of the health if not the being of a "Presbyterian" Church is the aptly named Regulative Principle of Worship.² This principle which was clearly championed from the beginning of the Scottish Reformation, and central to English Puritanism,³ was refined and

1. "I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his word." (John Calvin, "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, edited by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet. Edited and translated by Henry Beveridge [Edinburgh: 1844; Rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983] 1.128-129). "All wirschipping, honoring, or service inventit by the braine of man in the religioun of God, without his own express commandment, is Idolatrie." (John Knox, "A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry," *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing [Edinburgh: Printed for the Bannatyne Club, 1854; Rpt NY: AMS Press, 1966] 3, 34).

2. While it may have been used earlier, the term Regulative Principle of Worship apparently was coined from or at least popularized by usage in the 1946 report of the OPC, "Report of the Committee on Song in Worship Presented to the Thirteenth General Assembly, on the Teaching of Our Standards Respecting the Songs That May Be Sung in the Public Worship of God," specifically section 'A' by John Murray (*Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the General Assembly* [1946] 101-107). Research by Sherman Isbell supports Murray authorship. See Endnote A.

3. The regulative principle of worship was the established doctrine of Scottish Presbyterianism, and of the English Puritans. See Endnote B.

4. *Presbyterianism the Truly Primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ*, "The Worship of the Presbyterian Church" (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835) 64-65.

5. Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London, 1646) 96.

6. John B. Adger, "A Denial of Divine Right for Organs in Public Worship," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, 20.1 (January 1869) 85.

7. George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1993)

classically presented in the Westminster Standards, from whence it has been an integral doctrine of Presbyterianism ever since.

The Westminster Assembly determined: "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." (*Confession of Faith*, 21.1). The Princeton professor, Dr. Samuel Miller, gives a succinct statement of the principle when he writes that since the Scriptures are the "only infallible rule of faith and practice, no rite or ceremony ought to have a place in the public worship of God, which is not warranted in Scripture, either by direct precept or example, or by good and sufficient inference."⁴ A briefer statement still which sums up the Presbyterian principle of worship, is that in the worship of God, "Not to Command is to Forbid,"⁵ or "Whatever is not commanded is forbidden."⁶

As this brief definition can lead to misunderstanding, a necessarily corollary to this principle states 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." (*Confession of Faith*, 1.6). Defining these "circumstances," is part and parcel with the discussion of what authority the church has in ordering the worship of God. As for the church's power in this regard, George Gillespie gives three conditions:⁷

I direct my course straight to the dissecting of the true limits, within which the church's power of enacting laws about things pertaining to the worship of God

is bounded and confined, and which it may not overleap nor transgress. Three conditions I find necessarily requisite in such a thing as the church has power to prescribe by her laws: 1st 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, comprehends no more but mere circumstances.... 2nd 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 because *individua* are *infinita*.... 3rd If the church prescribe anything lawfully, so that she prescribe no more than she has power given her to prescribe, her ordinances must be accompanied with some good reason and warrant given for the satisfaction of tender consciences.”

Also, in his letter to “All in the Reformed Churches,” Gillespie defined circumstances this way: “...there is nothing which any way pertains to the worship of God left to the determination of human laws, beside the mere circumstances, which neither have any holiness in them, forasmuch as they have no other use and praise in sacred than they have in civil things, nor yet were particularly determinable in Scripture, because they are infinite.” (*EPC*, xli). James Henley Thornwell gives a more detailed definition:⁸

Circumstances are those concomitants of an action without which it either cannot be done at all, or cannot be done with decency and decorum. Public worship, for example, requires public assemblies, and in public assemblies people must appear in some costume and assume some posture.... Public assemblies, moreover, cannot be held without fixing the time and place of meeting; these are circumstances which the church is at liberty to regulate.... We must distinguish between those circumstances which attend actions as actions—that is, without which the actions cannot 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. A liturgy is a circumstance of this kind.... 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 separable accidents, may be changed, modified or altered, according to the exigencies of the case.

Gillespie’s third condition raises another principle which relates to the church’s power regarding worship, which is the doctrine of Christian Liberty or Liberty of Conscience. The Westminster divines state at Confession of Faith 20.2: “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 beside it, if matters of faith or worship.”⁹

The language of the Confession at these several points is reminiscent of both the writings of Gillespie, and of his Westminster colleague, Samuel Rutherford. In one of Rutherford’s works circulating in the Assembly during the early part of the discussion on Christian Liberty, and cited at the same time during debate on the subject of Excommunication, he writes (Rutherford, 109):¹⁰

281-284. Hereafter *EPC*. “This large volume is the most elaborate defense of the classic Puritan-Scottish Presbyterian view of the regulative principle, recently reprinted. Gillespie was an influential member of the Westminster Assembly.” John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996) 157. Hereafter, *Spirit and Truth*.

8. Cited from John L. Girardeau, D.D. LL.D., “The Discretionary Power of the Church,” *Sermons*, ed. by Rev. George A. Blackburn (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1907. Rpt. in *Life Work and Sermons of John L. Girardeau*, Sprinkle Publications, nd) 400-401. See also, “Church Boards and Presbyterianism,” *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) 246-247. On the nature of circumstances, see also: *The Works of John Owen*, v. 15, “Discourse Concerning Liturgies,” ed. William H. Goold (Rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966).

9. Regarding the long incorrect text, “contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship,” Dr. S. W. Carruthers notes: This double error is the most important in the whole Confession. It has obscured a distinction of great significance ... The divines’ argument is this: men are free in all things directly contrary to God’s word; but, in addition, if the question is one of faith or worship, they are free in matters not stated in the word. The distinction between matters civil and religious, and the great doctrine concerning things indifferent in the ecclesiastical world, are completely obscured by the change of a single letter and an alteration of punctuation.” S. W. Carruthers, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Being an account of the Preparation and Printing of its Seven Leading Editions, to which is appended a critical text of the Confession with notes thereon* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, [1937]) 127-128.

10. See the Minutes of the Assembly, 196-197. Alexander F. Mitchell and John Struthers, eds. *Minutes of the Sessions of the*

In actions or Religious means of Worship, and actions Morall, whatever is beside the Word of God, is against the Word of God; I say in Religious means, for there be means of Worship, or Circumstances Physicall, not Morall, not Religious, as whether the Pulpit be of stone or of timber, the Bell of this or this Mettall, the house of Worship stand thus or thus in Situation.

Our *Formalists* will have it in the power of rulers to Command in the matter of Worship, that which is beside the Word of God, and so is negatively Lawfull, though it be not Positively conform to Gods Word, nor Commanded or warranted by practice; which I grant is a witty way of *Romes* devising, to make entry for Religious humane Ceremonies.

Gillespie wrote the following a decade before the Assembly, which not only contains similar thoughts as the Confessional statements, but relates as well to the common usage, popularized later by men such as James Bannerman and William Cunningham, respecting the power of the civil magistrate *circa sacra* [about religion] as opposed to *in sacris* [in religion] (*EPC*, 288, 314, 316, 318):¹¹

The church is forbidden to add anything to the commandments of God which he has given unto us, concerning his worship and service (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6); therefore she may not lawfully prescribe anything in the works of divine worship, if it be not a mere circumstance belonging to that kind of things which were not determinable by Scripture.... These *praecognita* [*things foreseen*] being now made good, come we to speak more particularly of the power of princes to make laws and ordinances about things which concern the worship of God.... But in all the Scripture princes have neither a commendable example, nor any other warrant, for the making of any innovation in religion, or for the prescribing of sacred significant ceremonies of men's devising.... Now as

touching the other sort of things which we consider in the worship of God, namely, things merely circumstantial, and such as have the very same use and respect in civil which they have in sacred actions, we hold that whensoever it happens to be the duty and part of a prince to institute and enjoin any order or policy in these circumstances of God's worship, then he may only enjoin such an order as may stand with the observing and following of the rules of the word, whereunto we are tied in the use and practice of things which are in their general nature indifferent.

These lengthy citations and definitions are given because the regulative principle of worship is often misunderstood or mischaracterized when they are ignored. For instance when the doctrine regarding circumstances is ignored, one may see questions in reaction to the regulative principle such as, "If you believe in this regulative principle then why do you use pews in public worship, since they are not mentioned in Scripture?" As William Cunningham writes, just before alluding to Confession of Faith 1.6, "Those who dislike this principle, from whatever reason, usually try to run us into difficulties by putting a very stringent construction upon it, and thereby giving it an appearance of absurdity..."¹² Also, without any reference to historical theology, or to the theological milieu in which the language of the Westminster Standards were drafted, the meaning of the divines may be recast and the traditional/historical meaning divorced from their foundational statements by some postmodern deconstruction of their words. This leads to statements like, "I hold to the regulative principle of the Westminster Confession of Faith, but not to the Puritan understanding of that principle."

Whether they fully understand them or not, it is true that many do reject Presbyterian views of worship. Dr. Cunningham writes of those "latitudinarians" who simply find such a principle repugnant: "Of the views generally held by the Reformers on the subject of the organization of the Church, there are two which have been always very offensive to men of a loose and latitudinarian tendency—viz. the alleged unlawfulness of introducing into the worship and government of the Church anything which is not positively warranted by Scripture, and the permanent binding obligation of a particular form of Church government..." (*Reformers and the Regulative Principle*, 38). There is also an understandable rejection of Presbyterian principles by those of an Anglican, Lutheran or similar persuasion, who profess faith in a different rule of worship, "that

Westminster Assembly of Divines. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1874).

11. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh : T&T Clark, 1868. Rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960; and 1974) 154-155. William Cunningham, "Church Power," *Discussions on Church Principles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1863) 230.

12. William Cunningham, "The Reformers and the Regulative Principle," in *The Reformation of the Church: A collection of Reformed and Puritan documents on Church issues* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965; Rpt. 1987) 38-39. This is an extract from Cunningham's *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979 Rpt) 31-46.

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....” (*Reformers and the Regulative Principle*, 38). However, unhappily for Presbyterianism, criticism and opposition to her rule of worship has not been limited to those who subscribe to different confessions of faith, and this important doctrine has often come under fire from within her own walls. Such is the case in this day.

In particular, over the last several decades, two Presbyterian office holders have taken up the pen against the regulative principle of worship and their writings have received some currency and prominence amongst those looking for champions to overthrow this old cornerstone of Presbyterian orthodoxy. These are Professor John M. Frame, and Dean R. J. Gore. Though he claims to hold to “the basic idea of the regulative principle,” the former rejects the actual principle by redefining it away from what he believes are “the complicated Puritan amplifications of it,” while the latter challenges it directly and would “like to simply drop the regulative principle from Presbyterian theology.” (*Spirit and Truth*, 157). Since this doctrine is crucial to a healthy Presbyterianism, and as the works of these disputants are actually quite deficient to form any sufficient basis for questioning it, the following article surveys their writings and notes the key problems in their contentions with the regulative principle of worship.

In the first section dealing with the writings of John M. Frame, Dr. Frank J. Smith commences the survey by noting some of the professor’s early comments on worship from some seminary class notes from the 1970s. He then moves on to the professor’s published views on worship, observing some key problems with these, as well as noting and memorializing some of the criticisms made by others at the time of their publication. The second section begins with a rigorous critique of R. J. Gore’s doctoral dissertation, “The Pursuit of Plainness: Rethinking the Regulative Principle of Worship,” written by Dr. David C. Lachman, Dr. Smith’s co-editor of *Worship in the Presence of God*. Dr. Lachman exposes serious deficiencies in this paper, and concludes that it “completely fails to make a credible case against the Regulative Principle of Worship.” The survey concludes with a review of Dean Gore’s published work, *Covenantal Worship*, which, as the author, Dr. Smith, notes, retains many of the faults of the dissertation from which it sprang.

The Writings of John M. Frame Against The Regulative Principle of Worship

By Frank J. Smith, Ph.D., D.D.

History undoubtedly will record that the most influential opponent of Presbyterian worship within conservative Presbyterianism in the twentieth century was John McElphatrick Frame.

Born in 1939 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, John Frame graduated from Princeton University, received his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) in 1964, and pursued doctoral studies at Yale University. He never completed the dissertation at Yale, however, as in 1968 he was hired to teach at Westminster Seminary. In 1980, Professor Frame moved to California to help start Westminster’s branch campus in Escondido. After two decades in California, he was called in 2000 to be a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He was recently awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree by Belhaven College.

Because of his stature as a seminary theology professor, he has been able to develop and inculcate views that are far out of the mainstream of classical Reformed thought. Among the most distinctive of his views is the notion that “theology is application”—that is, even the very formulation of theological rubrics (categories) is somewhat arbitrary, and represents a human endeavor, rather than, ideally, reflecting the mind of God as revealed in Scripture.

Theology, of course, must be applied, or the result is dead orthodoxy. But theology has always been regarded as the queen of the sciences, and, as such, as objective in nature. But the professor’s reframing of the theological enterprise recasts it in a subjectivistic direction.

The implications of such are profound for theology as a whole, and it is evident that his views have profoundly affected the way in which he does theology. Indeed, Dr. Frame has promulgated his peculiar

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