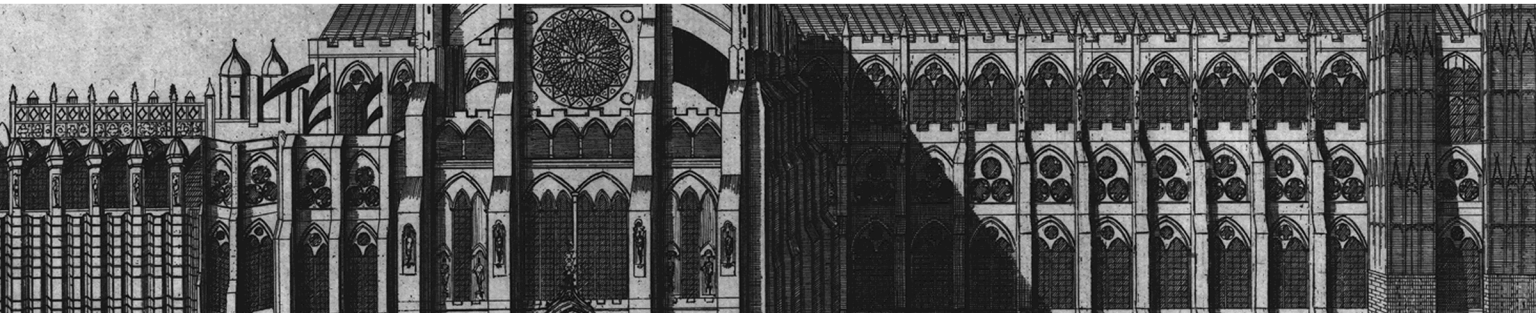




**C**ONFESSIONAL  
**P**RESBYTERIAN  
PRESSES

# THE CONFESSIONAL PRESBYTERIAN

A Journal for Discussion of Presbyterian Doctrine & Practice



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*Front Cover:* John M. Mason, D.D. (1770–1829), Presbyterian Minister and Educator. Graphite and charcoal on bristol, Copyright © 2006 by Lori Teibel.

*Back Cover:* "The West End of Westminster Abbey," taken from *Supplement to the Gentleman's Magazine, for the Year 1751* ([London: E. Cave, 1751]). The addition of the towers to the abbey were completed by 1745.

# The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature

## Part One (1946–1999)

By Frank J. Smith, Ph.D., D.D. with Chris Coldwell

Of all of the doctrines maintained historically by the Calvinistic branch of Christendom, perhaps none has been subject to as much controversy within that tradition as the regulative principle of worship.

Over the past decade or two, there have been increasing numbers of books, pamphlets and articles on the subject of worship within the Reformed community. Even before the recent plethora of material, ecclesiastical struggles spawned concern over the nature of worship. However, not all of the writings from purportedly Reformed men have held to this *sine qua non* of Reformed worship, viz., the regulative principle.

Before we take an historical overview of how the regulative principle of worship (sometimes abbreviated “RPW” in more recent literature) has fared over the past couple of generations within the Reformed world, we need to understand what is meant by the principle itself.

### I. THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

The phrase “regulative principle of worship” does not appear in the creeds and confessions of the Reformation and Post-Reformation era. However, this term, which may not have been used until the twentieth century, sums up the teaching of the Reformed church.<sup>1</sup> The principle is quite simple: whatever is commanded by God for worship is required, and whatever is not commanded is forbidden. This principle therefore goes contrary to the view of worship embraced by Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism, viz., that whatever is not forbidden in worship is allowed. Or, to put it another way, the Calvinistic perspective is that we are not only forbidden to employ in worship what is *proscribed*, but we are limited in worship to practice only according to what Scripture has *prescribed*. The regulative principle does not simply prescribe princi-

ples that may be expressed in a variety of ways. Rather, the regulative principle prescribes the actual practices or elements of worship.

The Calvinistic branch of the Reformation, in contrast to the Lutheran branch, maintained this stricter view. However, it was in the Post-Reformation development of the Puritan movement that the principle became more refined; and it was in the Westminster Standards that the principle came to its classic expression. Chapter 21 of the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The light of nature showeth 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.<sup>2</sup>

THE AUTHOR: Frank J. Smith is pastor of the Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and a contributing editor to *The Confessional Presbyterian*. The author thanks Mr. Coldwell for his assistance in researching many of the books and articles considered in this survey. Thanks also go to Wayne Sparkman, Tom Reid, John Muether, Sherman Isbell, and Dr. R. S. Clark for suggesting works for consideration or for help in obtaining copies of some of the more obscure items.

1. For some clues to the origin of the term “Regulative Principle of Worship,” see the Editor’s introduction to Frank J. Smith, Ph.D., D.D. and David C. Lachman, Ph.D., “Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 1 (2005) 116, 150. Hereafter “Reframing Presbyterian Worship.”

2. S. W. Carruthers, M.D., Ph.D., *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Being an account of the Preparation and Printing of its Seven*

Furthermore, the proper way to worship has implications with regard to Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. Chapter 20 of the Westminster Confession says that “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” (Carruthers, 127)

Other Reformed creeds and confessions also reflect the regulative principle. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord’s Day 35, answers Question 96 (“What is God’s will for us in the second commandment?”) this way: “That we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his Word.”<sup>3</sup>

But while this prescriptive principle had a solid creedal and confessional basis, and a strong attestation by countless theologians and churchmen throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its influence waned in the eighteenth century, and it largely lost its hold in much of the Reformed community by the early nineteenth century. The reasons for this development are multi-fold.

One could cite the petering out of Reformed piety and orthodoxy in general, particularly in Europe, but also in America. From the jeremiads of New England Puritans, as they mourned the pervasiveness of genuine faith in what was to be a “city set on a hill,” to the various secession movements out of the Church of Scotland, to the theological confusion and ecclesiastical turmoil and division in American Presbyterianism, the hollowness of what was once a solid doctrinal core echoed across

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*Leading Editions, to which is appended a critical text of the Confession with notes thereon* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, [1937]) 129.

3. *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1979) 48.

4. Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America, Changing Patterns Since 1787* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967) 30.

5. With few exceptions, the scope of this article is limited to an examination of the conservative branches of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches in the United States. In our estimation, liberals who reject *sola scriptura* as a general principle, are unlikely to adopt it with respect to worship. Moreover, when denominations have to debate the propriety of goddess worship, the regulative principle of worship must seem to that constituency to be a quaint, not to mention antiquated, notion. For the most part, the liberals who discuss the regulative principle do so merely as an historical curiosity, and not as a principle that should be followed.

both sides of the Atlantic. This twin blow—the cooling of fervor and the rise of heterodoxy—had a devastating and profound effect on the church’s worship.

Another factor was the rise of secularism—a movement which was given official blessing by American Presbyterians when they amended the Westminster Confession of Faith to tolerate pluralism. The result of this modification had a profound effect on how the church regarded the Second Commandment. Previously, the law of God was regarded as having universal application, including with regard to the civil magistrate. However, if how God wants to be worshipped was not universally applicable, then how could one claim that there was only one way to worship?

The several revival movements also had a detrimental effect on a traditional Presbyterian understanding of worship. This is true not only because of the emotionalistic approach to spiritual matters, but also because of the breakdown in denominational distinctives—the “least common denominator” phenomenon.

And yet another reason for the diminishing of the traditional Reformed perspective on worship was an increasing rationalism, which led to the diminution of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. As Julius Melton has noted, even Old School Presbyterians in the early nineteenth century did not appeal only to the Bible, but pointed to that which is “reasonable,” as justification for various worship practices.<sup>4</sup>

With the loss of the foundational principle came the loss of many of the distinctives of Presbyterian worship. By the end of the nineteenth century, practices such as Psalmody and *a cappella* singing were distant and fading memories for much of Presbyterianism. The Presbyterian Church was pulled in two somewhat disparate directions: toward an evangelicalism that drank deeply from the well of maudlin Romanticism; and toward a high church liturgical perspective which aped Anglicanism.

At the same time, full-blown liberalism was making serious inroads in mainline Presbyterianism in America, especially in the North. For conservative churchmen, making common cause with “Fundamentalists” across denominational lines seemed more important than concern over the details of worship, even though the co-belligerency with believers not of the Reformed faith would lead to a further dilution of doctrine.

Not until the intra-denominational reform movements of the twentieth century—movements which led to ecclesiastical separation—would there be a serious reconsideration among conservative Presbyterians in America of the doctrine of worship.<sup>5</sup>

II. THE 1940S—BEGINNING TO REDISCOVER  
REFORMED WORSHIP

From the mid-nineteenth century up through the 1940s, there was a serious decline in Calvinistic doctrine and thought. During these several decades, churches were few in number which upheld Calvinistic teaching in actuality rather than in name only. However, as conservatives awakened to the dangers of liberal theology, they also began to re-discover their theological roots. Among “Northern” Presbyterians, this theological renewal came to expression most especially in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).

*The OPC Debate*

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) was embroiled in the Modernist–Fundamentalist battle. The most prominent of the conservatives in the theological fight for the soul of the denomination was J. Gresham Machen.

Machen started his teaching career at Princeton Theological Seminary, but when the seminary’s governing structure was compromised by the liberals in charge of the denominational apparatus, he resigned in 1929 to help found Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In 1936, Machen and several others were forced out of the PCUSA itself, and he and his followers thereupon formed the Presbyterian Church of America, later renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

From its start, this new denomination earned a reputation for being doctrinally careful and precise. With a desire not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the OPC often formed General Assembly study committees on controversial matters, in order to try to discern God’s revealed will.

One of the early professors at Westminster Theological Seminary was John Murray. Raised in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Professor Murray held to a strict view of the Sabbath and of worship. Particularly, the Scotsman believed in and taught that only inspired songs should be sung in public worship, and that the congregational singing should be done without musical accompaniment.

In the 1940s, as the OPC began to consider the publication of its own hymnal, John Murray raised the question as to the propriety of singing uninspired hymns in public worship. Accordingly, the OPC General Assembly in 1944 appointed a committee to consider the matter. Sherman Isbell provides the background.<sup>6</sup>

The committee was created in consequence of a suggestion by John Murray. The previous year the General Assembly had elected a committee to present to the 1944 General Assembly a preliminary plan for a hymnal for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and Murray was one of the nine members of that committee. When the committee reported, Murray presented a minority report, challenging three recommendations of the committee. The committee was proposing “that any larger hymnal which the General Assembly undertakes to publish contain both metrical psalms and hymns,” “that the approximate composition of the musical portion of the larger hymnal be 85 per cent hymns and 15 per cent psalms,” and finally, “that the General Assembly elect a committee of nine to begin the preparation of the larger hymnal.” Murray noted that “there has been division of judgment within the Committee as to whether uninspired compositions may legitimately be sung.... Our subordinate Standards distinctly provide that God may not be worshipped in any way not prescribed in the holy Scripture. This General Assembly, therefore, is inescapably faced with the question whether the singing of uninspired hymns in the public worship of God is authorized by the holy Scripture.”

Murray urged “that this General Assembly elect a committee of seven to make a diligent study of the teaching of the Word of God and of our subordinate Standards regarding the question of the songs that may be sung in the public worship of God and to report its findings to the Twelfth General Assembly,” and that meantime no further steps be taken toward the preparation of a hymnal. These two recommendations by Murray were adopted, and the General Assembly elected Messrs. Edward J. Young, John Murray, Robert S. Marsden, R. B. Kuiper, John H. Skilton, Arthur W. Kuschke and William Young to serve on the study committee.

The thirteenth General Assembly (1946) was presented with “a partial report” from the study committee. Murray was responsible for the opening section “A,” which provides the fundamental statement of the regulative principle. Murray’s authorship is evident from the draft text and draft cover letter, both in Murray’s handwriting, which are preserved among his papers in the archives of the Montgomery Library at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. In his letter to the committee

6. John Murray, “Song in the Public Worship of God,” Preface by Sherman Isbell, 2001. <http://members.aol.com/RSICHURCH/song1.html>. All Internet references for this article were last accessed and checked on March 31, 2006.

members, Murray says, “This paper is being sent to you in the hope that study of it beforehand will be of some assistance in furthering and perhaps expediting our work at the next meeting of the Committee on March 10th.... I thought it necessary to enter into some detail in view of questions raised at our last meeting.” This statement of the Reformed regulative principle deserves recognition in the corpus of Murray’s writings. William Young observes: “Section A of the 1946 report is clearly the work of John Murray.... Section C is evidently based on parts of my report on the scripture proof of the regulative principle, except for the addition to C in the 1947 report, in which I did not concur.” Thus the bulk of the committee’s incomplete report in 1946 was composed by the two men who dissented from the committee’s majority report the following year.

7. “Murray’s handwritten draft provides at this point a supporting citation which was omitted in the committee report: ‘It may serve good purpose to quote from J. Henley Thornwell: “Circumstances are those concomitants of an action without which it cannot either be at all, or cannot be done with decency or decorum” (quoted from Girardeau, *Music in the Church*, p. 152).’ The passage is from *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871–1873), 4:246.” Isbell, *ibid.* The work by Girardeau which Murray cited, was *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond, Va.: Whittet & Shepperson, 1888).

8. “It is of interest to quote from George Gillespie in this connection: ‘Besides all this, there is nothing which any way pertaineth 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; but sacred, significant ceremonies, such as cross, kneeling, surplice, holidays, bishopping, etc., which have no use and praise except in religion only, and which, also, were most easily determinable (yet not determined) within those bounds which God did set to his written word, are such things as God never left to the determination of any human law’ (The Presbyterian’s Armoury, Vol. 1, p. xii).” Isbell, *ibid.* Murray was quoting from Gillespie’s *English Popish Ceremonies* (*The Presbyterian’s Armoury: The Works of George Gillespie*, edited by William M. Hetherington [Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846] 1.xii). See also George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, ed., Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, Tex.: Naphtali Press, 1993) xli.

9. “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” (Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the General Assembly [1946] 101–107).

10. “Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God to the Fourteenth General Assembly” (*Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the General Assembly* [1947] 51–66).

11. Robert S. Marsden, “Song in the Public Worship of God. A Study of Committee Reports,” *The Presbyterian Guardian* 17 (March 10, 1948) 72–74. Hereafter Marsden.

Isbell goes on to note that Murray’s original version of this restatement of the regulative principle indicates some of the works he consulted in two footnotes left out of the official report. Where the report examines circumstances of worship, Murray makes reference to a work by James Henley Thornwell, via John Girardeau,<sup>7</sup> and to one of the most important works on worship in the history of Presbyterianism, George Gillespie’s *Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*.<sup>8</sup>

What is clear from this recounting of the history of this report is that if there had been no John Murray in the OPC, the committee to study worship song would likely not have been formed. Nor would the OPC have had the man in her midst who crafted this classic statement of the regulative principle. As it was, the Northern Presbyterian Church from which the OPC sprung did not have a body of literature defending the regulative principle to which the committee could appeal; and apparently, judging from Murray’s cover letter, at least some of the committee members were not familiar with the doctrine. Thus Scotsmen acquainted with Scottish and Southern Presbyterian literature reintroduced the faithful remnant from the Northern Church to the historic regulative principle of Presbyterianism.

As noted, this affirmation of the regulative principle of worship was presented in a unified report to the 1946 General Assembly.<sup>9</sup> The next year, however, with regard to the content of worship song, the committee split into majority and minority reports,<sup>10</sup> and the two were considered as a whole at the 1948 meeting of the Assembly. In March of that year, prior to the meeting, a report on the committee’s work by Robert S. Marsden was published in *The Presbyterian Guardian*, which was a defense of the majority’s position on worship song, but repeated the finding of the 1946 report: “The committee began its work by considering the question of whether or not there was a regulative principle of worship. In examining this question, the committee found, first of all, that the Scriptures teach, and the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms enunciate such a principle.”<sup>11</sup>

The minority report, signed by Professor Murray and William Young, maintained that the content of worship song should be confined to inspired song. The majority report, headed by Marsden, held that “hymns” of human derivation could also be sung in public worship. The Murray-Young report criticized the majority report for abandoning the regulative principle that the whole committee had supported the previous year. Without a doubt, the majority position had not proven its case Biblically, per the requirement of the regulative