

DOES GOD  
CARE HOW WE  
WORSHIP?



L I G O N D U N C A N

Foreword by Mark Dever

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## FOREWORD

Over twenty years ago now, I was asked to speak to a gathering of pastors (largely Presbyterian) on worship. The setting was the Presbyterian Church in America's Convocation on Reformation and Revival. It took place in a decade marked by gathering strength for what would come to be known as the "young, restless, and Reformed" movement. In September of 1999, I had the privilege not only of speaking on this topic but of hearing others as well.

There was no clearer teaching at that convocation than that given by my friend Ligon Duncan, a professor of theology at the Reformed Theological Seminary. Over twenty years later, I still regularly refer to my notes from Ligon's wise teaching. Here are just some of the jewels Ligon shared with us in those days.

- The regulative principle frees us from bondage to the whims of men.
- The doctrine of worship is a subset of the doctrine of the church.
- There is a god we want and a God who is, and the two are not the same.

- The basic problem of humanity is not atheism, it is idolatry.
- Adding to God's Word is like taking away from it.

The pages that follow will further clarify and explain these points.

I urged him to publish. Just a few years later, Ligon and Phil Ryken published a festschrift for the late James Montgomery Boice. Its first two chapters were Ligon's teaching that I had so treasured—cleaned up, more fully and systematically organized, but with all the jewels of wisdom and prudence that had first struck me. In these pages, we find the historic Reformed understanding of the Bible's teaching on how we approach God, freshly considered and laid out in a clear, introductory fashion.

When too many Christians today are wandering around in the darkness of self-imposed ignorance, how brilliant a discovery it is that God's Word sheds plenty of light on our regular times together in corporate worship. Read and profit.

Mark Dever  
Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church  
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PART ONE

DOES GOD CARE HOW  
WE WORSHIP?





## THE BIBLE AS THE KEY TO REFORMING WORSHIP

If a renewal of Christian worship is to be undertaken, on what principle will it be founded? If we are to live and worship together *solī deo gloria*, then what shall be the basis and pattern? The only answer for the evangelical Christian is *sola scriptura*. God's Word itself must supply the principles and patterns and content of Christian worship. True Christian worship is by the book. It is according to Scripture. The Bible alone ultimately directs the form and content of Christian worship.

This is a Reformational emphasis, which came to fruition especially in the Reformed branch of the great Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century (in contrast to the Lutheran and Radical Reformation traditions and in direct contradiction of the Roman Catholic tradition). It is found in Calvin and other first-generation Reformed theologians. It is found in John Knox and the Scottish tradition. It is found in the Puritan tradition of the Church of England, from the days of Elizabeth I to the Commonwealth and thereafter in English Nonconformity. It is firmly established in the Baptist confessions and in the Congregational creeds.

This strong and special emphasis on the corporate worship of God being founded positively on the directions of Scripture came to be known as the regulative principle. It is an extension

of the Reformational axiom of *sola scriptura*. As the Bible is the final authority in faith and life, so it is also the final authority in how we corporately worship—but in a distinct and special way. Whereas all of life is to be lived in accordance with Scripture, Scripture does not speak discreetly to every specific component of our lives. There are many situations in which we must rely upon general biblical principles and then attempt to think Christianly without specific guidance in various circumstances.

The Reformers thought the matter of corporate worship was just a little bit different from this. They taught that God had given full attention to this matter in his word because it is one of central significance in the Christian life and in his eternal purposes. Therefore, we are to exercise a special kind of care when it comes to this activity—a care distinct from that which we employ anywhere else in the Christian life. He told us what to do and how to do it, in such a way that the prime aspects of worship are a matter of following divine direction; and thus the decisions that remain to be made by us—thinking in accordance with the general principles of Scripture and sanctified common sense, in the absence of positive scriptural warrant—are relatively minor. It is not difficult to find this axiom being articulated, in various ways, from the earliest days of the Reformed tradition to our own time—and in all the representative branches of the Reformed community.

For instance, Calvin said: “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word.”<sup>1</sup> The Continental Reformed tradition, reflected in the Belgic Confession (article 32) and the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 96), asserts the same. The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 and the Philadelphia (Baptist) Confession of 1742 both say: “The

1. John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (repr., Audubon, NJ: Old Paths, 1994), 7.

acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (22.1). They also assert that “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. Nevertheless, we acknowledge . . . that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God . . . 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” (1.6). The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order (1658), the Congregationalist emendation of the Westminster Confession (1647), affirms the same principles.

More recently, Anglican David Peterson defines worship as “an engagement with [God] *on the terms that he proposes* and in the way that he alone makes possible.”<sup>2</sup> Even more specifically, Hughes Old, who does not employ the term *regulative principle*, nevertheless offers a description of this fundamental Reformed corporate worship principle that would have satisfied the Westminster Assembly:

Most things we do in worship we do because God has commanded us to do them. It is because of this that we preach the gospel, we praise God in psalms and hymns, we serve God in prayer, we baptize in the name of Christ. Some things we do

2. David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 20 (emphasis added).

in worship not so much because they are specifically taught in Scripture but because they are in accordance with Scripture. What is meant by that is that some of the things we do in worship we do because they are demanded by scriptural principles. For example we baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit because this is specifically directed by Scripture. It is on the basis of scriptural principles that before the baptism we offer the Baptismal Invocation asking the Holy Spirit to fulfill inwardly what is promised in the outward sign. The basic acts of worship we perform because they are clearly commanded in Scripture. The ways and means of doing them we try to order according to scriptural principles. When something is not specifically commanded, prescribed, or directed or when there is no scriptural example to guide us in how we are to perform some particular aspect of worship we should try nevertheless to be guided by scriptural principles.<sup>3</sup>

What is being argued here is that there must be scriptural warrant for all we do. That warrant may come in the form of explicit directives, implicit requirements, the general principles of Scripture, positive commands, examples, and things derived from good and necessary consequences. These formulations of the Reformed approach to worship also acknowledge that lesser things about corporate worship may be decided in the absence of a specific biblical command but in accordance with faithful biblical Christian thinking under the influence of scriptural principles and sanctified reason and general revelation (e.g., whether to use bulletins, what time the services are to begin, how long they are to last, where to meet, what the ministers and congregation will wear, whether to use hymnals, how the singing is to be

3. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed according to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 171.

led, and the like). But the first things—the central elements, the principle parts, the essentials—have a positive warrant. The incidentals and accidentals will be guided by scriptural principles.

In order to sharpen this principle and make it more perspicuous and useful, Reformed theologians speak about the substance of corporate worship (the content of its prescribed parts or elements), the elements of worship (its components or specific parts), the forms of worship (the way in which these elements of worship are carried out), and the circumstances of worship (incidental matters that of necessity demand a decision but that are not specifically commanded in the Word). Reformed theologians argue that the whole substance of worship must be biblical. Not that only words from the Bible can be used, but that all that is done and said in worship is in accordance with sound biblical theology. The content of each component must convey God's truth as revealed in his Word. They also assert that God specifically commanded the elements he desired in worship (reading the Word, preaching the Word, singing, prayer, administration of the sacraments, oaths and vows, etc.). To and from these, we may neither add nor take away. As for the form of the elements, there will be some variations: different prayers will be prayed, different songs sung, different Scriptures read and preached, the components of worship rearranged from time to time, the occasional elements (like the sacraments, oaths, and vows) performed at various chosen times, and the like. There will be, of necessity, some human discretion exercised in these matters. So here, Christian common sense under the direction of general scriptural principles, patterns, and proportions must make a determination. Finally, as to circumstances—whether we sit or stand, have pews or chairs, meet in a church building or storefront, sing from a hymnal or from memory, what time on the Lord's Day services are to be held, and more—these things must be

decided upon in the absence of specific biblical direction, and hence they must be done (as with the case of the forms above) in accordance with “the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word.”<sup>4</sup>

Through the faithful implementation of this regulative principle, the various Reformed churches effected a renovation of Christianity, established a discipleship program unparalleled in Christian history, created a culture that survives to this day (albeit in a diminished scope and quality), and rejuvenated the apostolic norms of corporate worship. This chapter is a call for its deliberate reinstitution in the evangelical church as an indispensable axiom for and prerequisite to corporate worship as God intends it to be. This is a call issued by Dr. Boice when he said: “We must worship on the basis of the biblical revelation . . . [and] according to the doctrines of the Bible.”<sup>5</sup> The key benefit of the regulative principle is that it helps to assure that God—not man—is the supreme authority for how corporate worship is to be conducted, by assuring that the Bible, God’s own special revelation (and not our own opinions, tastes, likes, and theories), is the prime factor in our conduct of and approach to corporate worship.

## IS THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OUTMODDED?

The regulative principle, however, strikes many evangelicals as outmoded. They see it as one historical expression of worship, but are not convinced that it is necessary or even applicable today. Of the more intelligent critics of this historic

4. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6; Baptist Confession of Faith 1.6.

5. James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Recovering the Doctrines That Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 188.