

How Then Should We Worship?

*The Regulative Principle and Required Parts
of the Church's Corporate Worship*

Sam Waldron



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I have taught seminary courses on worship for over two decades only to encounter resistance to the idea that God regulates how corporate worship should be done. Even those most committed to biblical and doctrinal accuracy suddenly become relativists when discussing public worship. Enter Sam Waldron! How should we worship on a Sunday? Dr. Waldron's answer is scriptural, sensible, systematic, and (sometimes) strong. Is there a case for a regulative principle of worship? Read this book and find out.

**Derek W.H. Thomas, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church,
Columbia SC, Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological
Seminary, Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries**

In the milieu of the worship wars that have taken place over the past three or four decades, a scriptural voice of sanctified reasoning calls out to the church today from Dr. Sam Waldron. With a masterly grasp of the Holy Scriptures and a keen understanding of the religious landscape, the reader is given a balanced and full-orbed prescription for worship from both the Old and New Testaments. It must be carefully noted that the Triune God does not want worship of any sort or any kind! Instead, He wants worship that is acceptable (see Hebrews 12:28–29). I heartily commend How Then Should We Worship?, which will thoroughly instruct us in how to worship God acceptably.

Earl M. Blackburn, Senior Pastor, Heritage Baptist Church, Shreveport, Louisiana, USA

Why do we care so much about how the church worships? Sam Waldron answers that question providing a strong defense of historic Reformed worship, its regulative principle, its authorized elements, and related issues. He writes for a Reformed Baptist audience, yet his argument is important for all serious disciples of Christ. We care, he answers, because it makes a difference if Scripture fills the elements of worship: if substantial portions are read; if whole books of the Bible are preached; if there is a full diet of Bible-filled prayer; if psalms are sung; if the Lord's Supper is administered as a covenant meal. We care because it makes a difference if services are reverent rather than irreverent; God-centered rather than man-centered; gospel-structured rather than unstructured and random; Spirit-dependent rather than market driven; historically grounded rather than contemptuous of the past. It makes all the difference in the world if worship is conducted "according to Scripture" rather than "according to preference." This is a work that deserves careful consideration from all those who wish their form of worship to be more, rather than less, pleasing to God.

Dr. Terry L. Johnson, Senior Minister, Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, GA

I highly commend your reading of Dr. Sam Waldron's new book: How Then Should We Worship? With the biblical and exciting rediscovery of "the Doctrines of Grace" in the last sixty years, sola scriptura requires that we re-examine more of the Bible's truths. One of these truths is the modern debate about "the regulative principle of worship." Is that principle biblical? If biblical, is it for all of life or especially for the worship and government of the church? Does the Bible make such a distinction or not? Even "reformed" people disagree between themselves (i. e., Frame, Gore vs. Waldron, Duncan).

Believing in the sufficiency of sola scriptura in all matters of faith and practice, Dr. Waldron brings a clarity to "the regulative principle of the church" which includes "the regulative principle of worship." Worship debates have been raging for the past sixty years. Part of this is because biblical hermeneutics have been erroneous on certain texts as to their context and grammar. Dr. Waldron seeks to address such errors in an irenic and pastoral way. His applications go as far as the "Amen," liturgical issues, the role of women in worship, worship music, and the difference between the circumstances of worship and the parts (elements) of worship.

All in all, I would want to use this text in a seminary-level course yet for local church teaching as well. It is very readable and thorough. You will be well instructed, challenged, perhaps corrected, perhaps affirmed by this book. But you will have to read it to find out! As Dr. Waldron might ask: "Are you open to that?" This is a very needed work today for clarity between positions, for the hope of greater unity in Christ's local church, and for a more irenic and civil discussion between parties involved ... To God's glory alone.

Pastor Fred A. Malone, Author of *The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, Professor of Pastoral Theology, CBTS, IRBS



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Introduction to the Regulative Principle



— Chapter 1 —

What is the Point?

How Then Should We Worship?

THE RISE OF THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT AND THE RELATED contemporary worship movement unavoidably raises the question for every local church and eldership, *How Then Should We Worship?* This problem is particularly acute for those who have come more or less to espouse the Reformed faith and understanding of Christianity. Does this new (to us) and more deeply biblical (we believe) understanding of Christianity make any difference as to how we should worship? Unquestionably, many of those who have become a part of churches or denominations that are more strictly or comprehensively Reformed in their views have opted for what most would call a more conservative and traditional worship. But does a distinctively Reformed view of the Christian faith require a distinctively Reformed worship? The proposition is appealing and, indeed, seems irrefutable: *Yes, a distinctively Reformed theology requires a distinctively Reformed worship!* Can we really think that an understanding of Scripture that has

revamped our understanding of Christianity will not revamp our understanding of worship?

But if Reformed theology requires Reformed worship, what does that mean? Does it simply mean a more conservative and more traditional (non-Charismatic and non-contemporary) approach to worship? And what does that mean? Are there not other approaches to worship that may be viewed as conservative and traditional that are not truly Reformed? I think there are. Terry Johnson in his instructive work entitled, *Worshipping with Calvin*, points out that there are several varieties of traditional and (what might be called) conservative worship that are actually centered on things that mark them as anything but Reformed. He mentions the revivalist-evangelistic model and the Bible-teaching model in the Evangelical tradition.¹ Lutheran and Roman Catholic worship might also claim to be traditional and conservative, but these are patently non-Reformed approaches.

The Regulative Principle of the Church

What is a truly Reformed worship? A reactionary preference for conservative and traditional worship (whatever that may mean to us) is not sufficient. The time has come to say that it is not enough for those who have come to (and now hold to) the Reformed faith to react into a conservative and traditional worship — whatever that may mean in the tradition with which they are familiar. It is time to answer the question, *How Then Should We Worship?* according to the biblical, authentic, and distinctive insights of the Reformed tradition. A biblical and Reformed theology must lead to a distinctively biblical and Reformed worship.

This being the case it is clear that if worship is to be truly reformed and *Reformed* we must do more than simply dust off

the Westminster Assembly's *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*. We must do more than read old, Puritan and Reformed treatments of worship. Don't get me wrong. I think we must pay attention to the venerable advice and historical wisdom of that Reformed tradition which in so many other respects we have found to be wise and biblical. It would be foolish not to! I will begin my treatment proper of how we should worship by taking a good long look at what we may learn from both the early and Reformation church. But as we shall see, the fundamental insight of the Reformed tradition is that worship must be ordered according to *sola scriptura*. Fundamentally, its insight is that the worship of the church must be constructed according to the principle of Scripture alone. To be specific, this means that Reformed worship must be governed by *sola scriptura* functioning as *the regulative principle*. This means that my orientation and focus in this book will be on Scripture and what it has to say about the church's worship. This means — and it is important to say it — that I will approach the Scriptures with the same assumption that the Reformed tradition did. I mean the assumption that the Bible does intend to provide us with an adequate blueprint for the church and its worship. If we doubt this, we will never take the time to look as closely as we should at what it may teach us about the church's corporate worship.

Implicit in the historical articulation of the regulative principle is an important distinction between the church and the rest of human life. I will argue that it is not right, biblical, or Reformed to say that in all of life we should live according to the regulative principle.² As stated in Westminster confessional tradition, the regulative principle is not a rule for all of human life. Here it is as given in chapter 21, paragraph 1 of the Westminster:

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 imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

Substitute living for worshipping in this paragraph and you will see that the regulative principle is not for all of life, but simply for the church's worship! Is it really true and right to say that "the acceptable way of *living before* the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that *we may not live* 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"? Such a rule would be impossible to live by and, as we will see, is certainly not scriptural. Without the distinction between the church and the rest of life, Mark Driscoll's ridicule of the regulative principle would be correct!³

The regulative principle of worship, as it is often called, is actually in the Reformed tradition the regulative principle of the church and its corporate worship. (This is, I think, and as I will argue, clearly implicit in the tradition. It is also, I think, something that must become explicit in our teaching on the subject today.) Thus, I will write in this volume of *the regulative principle of the church*. I do not mean to be novel. I simply believe this implication of the tradition needs to be made explicit in the context of the modern debate over worship. The church is holy, and thus its formal assemblies are holy, and for this reason governed by God in a special and distinctive way. Scripture alone in its special application to the church governs the church's worship in a way and with a specificity that it does not govern the rest of human life. When this special function of Scripture as the regulative principle of the church is properly appreciated, then it guides us to a biblical pattern of worship to which

nothing substantial should be added and from which nothing should be subtracted *because that pattern is divinely established!*

Required Parts of Worship

Both logically and historically this biblical insight of the Reformed tradition leads to the conclusion that there are certain required parts or elements of worship that the church is required to practice in the way required in the Bible. Thus, it also follows that from these prescribed parts or elements of worship nothing may be subtracted. (The circumstances of the church's corporate worship may be altered, but not the parts or elements themselves.) But this raises the question, Does the Bible actually specify such parts of worship? The second part of this book argues that it does, gives the biblical evidence for this, specifies what those parts of worship are, and describes what that practically requires of the church.

Conclusion

I do not want to conclude this summary of the main points of this volume without pointing out that its emphasis on *sola scriptura* is the unavoidable outgrowth of another of the five *solas*. That *sola* is theologically the most basic. It is *sola deo gloria*. It is because worship is for God and about God and, indeed, filled with the special presence of God that it must be ordered by God. This means that the focus of those seeking to order worship *sola deo gloria* must not be on human tradition or human invention or human pragmatism, but must be on Scripture alone — *sola scriptura*.

To say that worship is for God is or should be “a no-brainer.” As Terry Johnson says, “This all sounds perfectly obvious, one might say. What else would worship services be designed for

except to express devotion to God? Regrettably, it is not obvious to all or even most.”⁴

Because this is true, and it is not obvious to all that worship is for God, let me simply offer a snippet of the massive, biblical teaching that should impress us with the truth of this. 1 Peter 2:4–5 affirms: “And coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The Apostle Peter makes several facts evident here relevant to the fact that worship is for God. First, he makes clear that the *fundamental identity* of the church is a spiritual house or temple. The primary business of a temple is worship. Second, he makes clear that the *fundamental description* of the church is that it is a holy priesthood. Indisputably, the main purpose of priests is to lead the worship offered to God. Third, he makes clear that the *fundamental work* of this spiritual house and holy priesthood is to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Again, the whole direction of the church’s worship is to bring something to God as worship. Fourth, Peter makes plain that the *fundamental concern* regarding these sacrifices is, not that they be pleasing to men but that they be “acceptable to God.” Once more it is plain that worship is to be directed toward God and is for God!

Let me quote Terry Johnson once more:

Why practice historic Reformed worship? Because its public assembly is directed to God. There, praise is offered to him, confession is made to him, petitions are presented to him, he addresses his Word to us, he meets with us at his table, and we enjoy his fellowship. Is not God-centeredness in the worship of the assembly of the saints the teaching of the Bible? We “draw near” to God in worship (James 4:8–10; Hebrews 4:15–16;

10:19-23). We ascribe glory to his name (1 Chron. 16:29; Ps. 96:7; 29:2). It is before him we bow down and kneel (Ps. 95:6-7). We come before him with joyful songs (Ps. 100:2). We sing for joy “to the Lord” (Ps. 95:1-2; 96:1-2). We “give thanks to the Lord” (Ps. 106:1). We could go on and on with examples of the Godward focus of worship. Everything in proper worship is God-centered and God-directed.”⁵

What is the point of this book? Its point is that the church’s worship is God-centered, because the church itself is God-dominated. Its point is that because the church itself is God-dominated, the church must be God-regulated. Its point is that because the church is God-regulated, it is controlled by *sola scriptura* functioning as *the regulative principle of the church*. Its point is that because of the regulative principle of the church, the parts of the church’s worship are prescribed and regulated by Scripture alone.