

DIVERSITY IN PUBLIC WORSHIP: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

by

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## ABSTRACT

While Scripture is clear that God desires and even commands us to worship Him, there are various interpretations within Reformed churches and other denominational circles on how we ought to worship. There are few matters that drive more emotional debate and division among Christian brothers and sisters than the topic of music in worship. That worship should be a central activity of our lives and will certainly be our primary activity in heaven is commonly accepted, but there appears to be confusion regarding the specific role of music and congregational singing in public worship.

This thesis will carefully examine the Puritan and Reformers' understanding of the regulative principle and how the modern church should interpret and apply it in public worship. The primary thrust will be to demonstrate how a biblical understanding of the regulative principle allows for diversity in the singing of psalms, hymns, and new songs in the public worship of the church. We will first examine what the Bible teaches about music and public worship and then we will review the development and various applications of the regulative principle during the Reformation and its influence across Reformed denominations. This will include a review of hymnody, psalmody, and spiritual songs used for congregational singing.

To my beloved wife, Erin, who has lovingly and sacrificially supported  
my studies, ministry, and work. You are one of God's greatest  
blessings to our children and me.

Love you always

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Growing up attending Southern Baptist churches, I am no stranger to congregational singing. From my earliest memories of preschool and elementary I remember being taught hymns from the Baptist Hymnal and participating in Sunday morning worship services and other special services during Christmas and Easter. As I grew older I continued to participate in children's choir, youth choir, and enjoyed participating in the youth and adult drama and musical productions. Hymns were the dominant selection of songs used during public worship, but there was also a mix of "contemporary" songs. Various instruments were used in the orchestra, including guitars, drums and the piano and organ. Musicians of all ages were encouraged to participate. In the youth group there was a small group of college and high school students who volunteered to lead music on Wednesday nights, Sunday nights, and at events throughout the year. It was during my teenage years when a passion and desire in my heart grew for music and worship and I have served in full-time and bi-vocational positions leading music ever since.

Believing that God has called me to joyfully serve him and his church by leading his people in God-centered worship, I have sought to better understand what the Bible teaches about this vital and complex subject. While Scripture is clear that God desires and even commands us to worship Him, there are various interpretations within Reformed churches and other denominational circles on how we ought to worship. That worship should be a central activity of our lives and will certainly be our primary activity in heaven is commonly

accepted, but there appears to be confusion and disagreement regarding the specific role of music in public worship.

This thesis will carefully examine the Puritan and Reformers' understanding of the regulative principle and how the modern church should interpret and apply it in public worship. The primary thrust will be to demonstrate how a biblical understanding of the regulative principle allows for diversity in the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in the public worship of the church. We will first examine what the Bible teaches about music and public worship and then we will review the development and various applications of the regulative principle during the Reformation and its influence across Reformed denominations. This will include a review of hymnody, psalmody, and spiritual songs used for congregational singing.

### Definition

Before we begin our review of the regulative principle and consider how the modern church should interpret and apply this biblical principle to public worship, we must first define and clarify what “worship” is and how this complex subject will be handled throughout this thesis. In my experience within the local church, the term “worship” is often synonymous with “music” or refers to the section in the service before the sermon is preached on Sundays or during other congregational gatherings. However, worship is not synonymous with music. Music is just one means among many in which believers can worship God. For example, we can also worship God through prayer, giving of tithes and offerings, hearing and reading God’s word, and in our daily service to God and others.

In its most basic sense, worship can be defined as our response to God for who He is and what He has done. As John Frame has stated, “worship is the priestly labor of

acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.”<sup>1</sup> It is active and participatory and it is in response to how God has revealed himself to us, primarily through his Word. Our focus in worship is on God, not ourselves. God is the initiator and we respond to him in reverence and awe and honor and thanksgiving. We worship the Lord by faith in our hearts through the Holy Spirit and in the truth of who he is and what he has done. As Martin Luther said:

God cannot be worshiped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due him. This cannot be done by works but only by faith of the heart. Not by the doing of works but by believing do we glorify God and acknowledge that he is truthful. Therefore faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all commandments, for he who fulfills the First Commandment has no difficulty in fulfilling all the rest.<sup>2</sup>

God created us to worship him and it is our duty and joy to give him all honor and glory due his name.

In Scripture, the Greek and Hebrew terms translated as “worship” refer to a “labor” or “service,”<sup>3</sup> as well as “bowing” or “bending the knee” to someone.<sup>4</sup> The English term comes from the Old English word *weorthscipe*, which literally means “worthship” and signifies attributing worth or respect to someone.<sup>5</sup> The language of worship used throughout Scripture reflects physical postures such as bowing, bending, falling down, as well as acts of service

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1997), 12.

<sup>2</sup> “*The Freedom of the Christian*” in *Readings in the History of Christian Theology. Vol. 2: From the Reformation to the Present*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Abodah* in Hebrew; *Latreia* in Greek.

<sup>4</sup> *Shachah* in Hebrew; *Proskuneo* in Greek.

<sup>5</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 33.

and offerings. As Marva Dawn explains, “these words convey a profound sense of humble and loving adoration along with appropriate gestures.”<sup>6</sup> The worship of Almighty God is certainly not passive. These few examples can help us expand our one-dimensional image of the term “worship.”

For the believer, worship should be a whole-life pursuit of glorifying and praising God in all things (Eph. 5:20; Col. 3:17).<sup>7</sup> The author of Hebrews stresses this when he says, “Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God” (Heb. 13:15). The glory of God is paramount in our worship and in all things we do in life. As Paul states in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” God alone is worthy of our worship and praise. In response to God’s character and majesty, Paul could not help but to break into doxology at the end of Romans 11. “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

While worship is certainly a necessary and critical element in our personal fellowship with God,<sup>8</sup> this paper will focus primarily on what will be referred to as corporate or public worship. Public worship can be described as the worship of God’s people as they gather to honor God during prayers, songs, the sacraments, the reading of Scripture, and the preaching of God’s Word. D.A. Carson defines corporate worship as worship “which is offered up in

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<sup>6</sup> Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all Bible references in this paper are to the English Standard Version (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See John M. Frame’s comments on “worship in the broad sense” in his book *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 9-10.

the context of the body of believers.”<sup>9</sup> Throughout both the Old and New Testament we see numerous examples of God’s people gathering to worship Him, which we will explore in the next chapter. The corporate worship of the church is a tangible and visible expression of God’s desire to gather unto himself people from every tribe, nation, and tongue to proclaim the excellencies of Christ.<sup>10</sup> The particular scope of public worship that will be dealt with in this paper is congregational singing.

### Purpose

As our focus in this paper will be on congregational singing during the public worship of God, it is critical to take a moment to understand the overall purpose of worship in the context of the gathered body of believers. Simply stated, our goal in worship is to honor and glorify God. We gather primarily to magnify the name of Christ and praise him for who he is and what he has done. As Paul teaches in Ephesians 1:1-14, and as we see in the book of Revelation, God’s sovereign work of the redemption of his children is ultimately for the praise of his glorious grace. In his book on worship, John Frame reminds us that when we meet with God’s people, “our time of worship is not merely a preliminary to something else; rather, it is the whole point of our existence as the body of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> God desires for his children to worship him and seeks worshipers who will worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). In the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, we learn that the

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<sup>9</sup> D.A. Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 44.

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Pet. 2:9; Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:9-10, 7:9-10.

<sup>11</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 11.

chief end of man is to “glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>12</sup> This finds its expression both in our personal communion with God and as we gather with the church to magnify the Lord above all things and to delight in him. It is in public worship the body is encouraged and built up (1 Cor. 14:26).

Worship is not primarily about us. God is both the subject and the object in worship.<sup>13</sup> While God certainly blesses us with his presence in public worship and his Spirit encourages us through his Word and through the fellowship of believers, our preoccupation during public gatherings should be on God. He is the one to whom all praise is due. He is the one has “called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9), and so our worship must be centered on God and the redeeming work of Christ. Since worship is a central activity in heaven (Rev. 4:8-11; 5:9-14; 7:9-17; 11:15-18; 15:2-4; 19:1-10), it must be central in the life of church on earth.<sup>14</sup> We were created to worship God. It is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Christian duty.<sup>15</sup>

As children of God, we have much to be thankful for and our public gatherings provide believers an opportunity to express our humble gratitude of praise to God. One element of public worship in particular we will explore further is congregational singing. Congregational singing is one essential and biblical way in which during public worship we

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<sup>12</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 287.

<sup>13</sup> Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 180.

<sup>14</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 99.

<sup>15</sup> D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 21.

can give melody to our offering of praise to God. To put it another way, “in congregational song worshipers give voice to their beliefs and theology.”<sup>16</sup> As we review what the Scripture teaches about worship and music, we will find that praising God is not an optional activity.

### Literature Review

Since the time of the Reformation much has been written regarding the broad topic of worship and its important role in the life of the church and the believer. In our own day and age there have been many contributions by theologians considering the modern worship wars that have occurred as some of the church has evolved in its approach to be more culturally relevant and appealing. Although there has already been a great deal said about this topic, it appears most of the arguments have been to support one position to the exclusion of another. In other words, some argue for a traditional style only and an approach to public worship that includes hymns, choirs, organ and piano, while others argue exclusively for new and contemporary music that include guitars and drums and praise teams as more effective and relevant forms for the church today. There are even some in the Reformed Presbyterian churches who argue for exclusive psalmody and prohibit the use of instruments. What seems to have preoccupied the conversations in the worship wars are simply preferences that are cast in the light of good and bad or right and wrong. Instead of focusing on what the Bible teaches and what we can learn from church history, we promote our own preferences and make worship more about us than about God.

The goal in this paper is to show how a biblical understanding of the regulative principle allows for diversity in congregational singing. This view suggests hymns and psalms can be sung, as well as new hymns and modern songs in congregational worship.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 161.

Churches also have the freedom to use guitars or organs or praise teams or choirs or to sing *a capella*. This diversity in music, as we will see, does not violate the regulative principle of worship and is consistent with examples and principles found in the Bible. Our brief review of literature here will highlight books related to or within Reformed theology that deal with the theology of worship, including the regulative principle of worship, as well as how that theology informs views on music and its role in public worship. The resources listed below are a good place to start for those seeking a deeper understanding of this broad topic from a Reformed perspective and theological conviction.

James F. White's *Introduction to Christian Worship* provides insights into the development and practice of public worship, highlighting key contributions by Luther and Calvin and discusses topics such as congregational singing, the use of instruments in worship, and the service of the word. In his study of Christian worship, White sees no better way to discover the heart of Christianity than by seeking to understand what Christians do when they gather to worship.<sup>17</sup> While his book is more academic in nature, White seeks to encourage those in the church with worship leadership responsibilities to consider all the historical and biblical factors when making pastoral decisions. Historically he focuses primarily on the first four centuries of the church to understand its practices and concepts. However, he also reflects on the contributions and developments during the Protestant Reformation of Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans, particularly noting the importance of preaching and the centrality of Scripture in worship, as well as diversity in congregational singing that includes psalms and hymns.

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<sup>17</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 13.

Similar to White's contribution to this literature, Robert E. Webber in *Worship Old & New* seeks to help readers better understand public worship by reviewing worship in the Old and New Testaments, as well as historical developments during ancient, medieval and the Reformation times. This review then helps Webber present a theology of worship that is influenced by biblical roots and historical developments yet applies to our modern time. Webber believes that the old forms of worship have not lost their value for worship today. Although he states that "forms must be contextualized to meet the cultural situation of each worshiping congregation," Webber does not believe the modern worship of our churches should be significantly different than worship in ages past.<sup>18</sup>

In comparing the worship of the Old and New Testaments and its influence on early Christian worship, Webber argues that the content of our worship is Jesus Christ, the structure should contain the Word and sacraments, including prayers, hymns, doxologies, benedictions, and responses, and the context of worship is the church.<sup>19</sup> Webber also helps connect the reformation of theology during the Protestant Reformation to the reformation of worship. While there were some differences among the reformers, Webber suggests they were unified in their desire to restore biblical principles of worship that had been practiced by the early church and the classical liturgies. Exploring the setting of worship, Webber provides a helpful review of music's role in public worship as evidenced in Scripture, as well as important developments of psalmody and hymnody during the Reformation and following.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 56.

In summary, Webber argues that “the church has a rich depository of music from which to draw on for worship renewal.”<sup>20</sup>

Some helpful contributions in the discussion of congregational singing and the regulative principle of worship include *The Worship of the English Puritans* by Horton Davies, *A Quest for Godliness* by J. I. Packer, and *Covenantal Worship* by R. J. Gore. Davies’ historical review of the English Puritans and Reformed worship provide helpful insights into the theological convictions of Calvin and Luther and their influence, primarily Calvin’s on the Puritans formulation of the regulative principle and approach to music in public and private worship. Calvin was their spiritual leader in that they embraced his commitment to the all-sufficiency of Scripture and the doctrine of original sin.<sup>21</sup> Their insistence of the Word of God as the primary principle of the Reformation provided the foundation upon which they sought to restore English worship to the “simplicity, purity and spirituality of the primitive Church.”<sup>22</sup> While Calvin and Luther were aligned in their desire to return to a primitive simplicity in worship, Davies argues that the real difference in their reforms in worship is due to Luther’s allowance of elements in public worship that are not specifically condemned by Scripture, whereas Calvin included only what was specifically ordained and commanded by God in Scripture. The Puritans, who accepted Calvin’s view, searched the Scriptures to understand the worship God demands from his people and adopted a pattern of worship ordinances from the New Testament and the early church. Finally, Davies surveys the Puritans’ approach to music in public worship and highlights their efforts

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>21</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

in “restoring the right of the common people to join in the praise of God.”<sup>23</sup> One of Puritans’ contributions to music in public worship was turning the psalms into metre. Many versions of the psalter were utilized by the Puritans through the years and psalm-singing increased in popularity. Davies also provides insight into Isaac Watts’ development of psalmody in that he sought to accommodate psalms to Christian worship by introducing hymns. These hymns helped reinvigorate congregational singing during the early eighteenth century and Davies refers to them as “the finest flowers of Puritan piety.”<sup>24</sup>

J. I. Packer continues the review of English Puritans in his book, *A Quest for Godliness*. Packer describes the historical background of the Puritans and then carefully considers their perspective and theological convictions of the Bible and the Gospel and how their doctrine informed their view of Christian life and ministry. A particularly helpful chapter, and one that is directly related to this thesis, is on the Puritans’ approach to worship. After establishing Puritanism as “at heart a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness,”<sup>25</sup> Packer demonstrates how the Puritans’ God-centeredness and submission to God’s Word shaped their view of worship and its central place in the church and in their daily lives. While Packer briefly acknowledges the controversies surrounding worship that divided Puritans from each other and with Anglicans, he focuses more on the Puritans’ understanding of the nature of worship and the principles for its practice. Additionally, Packer argues that the Puritans’ understanding of the regulative principle followed Calvin’s in that “direct biblical warrant, in the form or precept or precedent, is

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>25</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 28.

required to sanction every substantive item included in the public worship of God.”<sup>26</sup>

However, Packer agrees with Davies in that they believe the Puritans took this principle a step further in practice than Calvin in that they rejected weekly Communion, the practice of confirmation, non-biblical ceremonies in worship, kneeling in public worship, and all set prayers.<sup>27</sup> Their concern was simply to obey God’s authoritative word and this influenced the Puritans’ desire for worship that is simple and scriptural.

Another helpful resource for understanding the regulative principle of worship is *Covenantal Worship* by R. J. Gore Jr. Gore investigates the Puritans’ formulation of the regulative principle and argues that it was an exaggeration of the worship practice of Calvin and extended beyond the bounds established in Scripture. A covenantal principle of worship is then proposed by Gore that includes elements clearly commanded in Scripture and those things that can be deduced from Scripture and governed by general principle and Christian prudence, as well as the freedom to worship in any manner warranted by the Scriptures. In other words, Gore proposes a principle that says, “whatever is consistent with the Scriptures is acceptable in worship.”<sup>28</sup> This is clearly a departure from the Puritans’ conviction that whatever is not commanded is forbidden. Gore concludes that the regulative principle should result in a “rich diversity of praise offered up to the glory of God.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>28</sup> R. J. Gore Jr., *Covenantal Worship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 140.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 162.

Other recent contributions to the discussion of the regulative principle of worship come from John Frame in his book *Worship in Spirit and Truth*.<sup>30</sup> Although Frame disagrees with some of the terminology used by Gore in his definition of the regulative principle, he is aligned with Gore in saying the regulative principle may limit what we do in worship but it also “allows for different sorts of application, and therefore a significant area of liberty.”<sup>31</sup> According to Frame’s view, we must follow God’s commands in Scripture as our rule of worship but we have room for creativity and diversity in executing those applications of God’s commandments. More specifically, Frame sets the stage in his review of the regulative principle from what the Bible teaches to show how different styles of music and songs should be allowed in public worship.<sup>32</sup> He also deals briefly with some controversies surrounding music, including exclusive psalmody, instruments, choirs, soloists, instrumental music, as well as physical expression in worship. As Frame sees music in worship as “one of God’s best tools for getting the word into our hearts,”<sup>33</sup> he encourages godly wisdom be used in the selection of songs so that others are encouraged and God is pleased.

At the apparent increase in the amount of confusion about the nature, purpose, and practice of worship among Reformed Christian, D. G. Hart and John R. Muether offer their thoughts on returning to the basics of Reformed worship in *With Reverence and Awe*. The authors’ purpose in writing is to help church leaders and members understand the appropriate and biblical ways they can worship God in public worship. From the outset they argue that

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<sup>30</sup> See also Frame, “Some Questions About the Regulative Principle” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 357-366.

<sup>31</sup> Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> See also Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense*.

<sup>33</sup> Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 120.

good theology produces good worship. In other words, “worship inevitably follows from theological conviction.”<sup>34</sup> Hart and Muether address worship in the context of the gathered body and the doctrine of the Sabbath and how it informs our worship practice. Then they consider the “how” of worship in examining the regulative principle, the distinctions between elements and circumstances, and then tackle the subject of music and congregational singing and encourage godly discernment in “distinguishing the good from the bad, the true from the false, and biblical worship from blasphemy.”<sup>35</sup>

Similar to Frame’s view, Hart and Muether argue the regulative principle of worship is worshiping God as he commanded in Scripture and ensuring there is biblical support for whatever we do in worship. While Frame does not subscribe to a specific list of elements of worship and its circumstances (he finds no scriptural warrant for dividing worship into independent elements requiring independent justification from Scripture), Hart and Muether accept the Reformed and Presbyterian traditional distinctions and argue that it helps to clarify the regulative principle. They point to texts in the New Testament that they believe provide clear guidance on proper elements of worship as evidenced by apostolic teaching or example. Additionally, the authors recognize circumstances of worship (such as what time the service should begin and how long it should last), should be considered and decided upon carefully on the basis of prudence and godly wisdom.

Additional insights into the Old and New Testament patterns and elements of worship can be found in Chapell’s book, *Christ-Centered Worship*. Chapell shows how Scripture provides examples of how the gospel shapes our liturgy and how this can be seen in the

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<sup>34</sup> D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19.

liturgies of the Reformers and Puritans. In exploring Luther's liturgy, Chapell emphasized Luther's desire for the worship service to be a participatory experience, which resulted in the worship service being in the vernacular and not limited to Latin only, as well as the return of congregational singing.<sup>36</sup> Chapell goes on to demonstrate how the commitment to the priesthood of believers is also evident in Calvin's theology of worship. Calvin was committed to worship in the vernacular and is evidenced through Bible translation, prayer, and worship in the French language.<sup>37</sup> Like Luther, Calvin encouraged God's people to sing in public worship. Chapell also spends time reviewing the Westminster Assembly's contribution to Protestant worship, as seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Directory for Public Worship.<sup>38</sup> He characterizes their liturgy as one that is distinctly Reformed in that it includes the twofold division for Word and sacrament, committed to worship in the vernacular, concern for the regulative principle of worship, congregational participation, and the primacy of Scripture.<sup>39</sup>

Another relevant and practical book in the discussion of music and public worship is *Singing and Making Music* by Paul S. Jones. Jones' approach is to simply interact biblically with the issues and people involved in the music of public worship and show how Scripture informs practices. While practical in nature and addressing a wide variety of topics, Jones helps his readers navigate these issues through a biblical and Reformed framework. For Jones, our evaluation of what it is good and appropriate in public worship must be conformed

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<sup>36</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 36.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 59.

to scriptural principle.<sup>40</sup> He strives to demonstrate biblical support for diversity in music for public worship, including the use of instruments and a variety of songs such as psalms and hymns and new songs. Jones encourages his readers to sing with understanding of the heart and the mind songs that are “biblically derived, artistically conceived, theologically sound, and exegetically purposeful.”<sup>41</sup>

Finally, an additional thoughtful resource that contributes much to the varied discussion of worship is *Give Praise to God*, edited by Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan. This rich collection of essays by several contributors surveys the biblical foundation for worship, which includes a thorough review of the regulative principle. Additionally, there are essays included that cover the various elements of public worship and offer distinct and helpful insights into psalmody and hymnody. Other helpful contributions in *Give Praise to God* related to this thesis include Needham’s review of worship through the ages, with particular focus on worship in the reformed traditions, as well as Old’s review of Calvin’s theology of worship. While this collection serves to honor and celebrate the legacy of Dr. James Montgomery Boice, it brings a fresh and renewed focus from a Reformed perspective on the important topics related to the worship of God. Setting the stage in the introduction Ryken powerfully states that “all of our worship is dedicated to the greater glory of God, who alone is the chief end of all our praise.”<sup>42</sup> Here is a quick synopsis of some of the key essays that played a role in this thesis.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 283.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan, ed., *Give Praise to God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 12.

In his essay “Does God Care How We Worship?” Duncan uses numerous examples from Scripture to lay the foundation for how we ought to approach God in worship. After establishing the authority of God’s word and its sufficiency for supplying the principles, patterns, and content for our public worship, Duncan explores the regulative principle of worship. While the Bible is the ultimate authority in faith and life, Duncan argues it is also applies to public worship “in a distinct and special way.”<sup>43</sup> Although Scripture does not specifically address every detail and component of our lives, it does provide direction and guidance on the prime aspects of worship and in matters without a positive scriptural warrant we are to make decisions in accordance with the general principles of Scripture using godly wisdom.<sup>44</sup> After diving further into the various elements, forms, and circumstances of worship, Duncan demonstrates how following the regulative principle can help assure that God is central in our worship. The next essay that follows is “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship” and here Duncan goes further to show how the regulative principle aims to aid the church in ensuring everything is grounded in Scripture. He concludes by proposing the motto, “Read the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible” to characterize the Reformed approach to worship.<sup>45</sup>

Derek W. H. Thomas writes an essay in *Give Praise to God* to respond to recent criticism of the regulative principle, specifically from authors such as Packer and Davies, as

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<sup>43</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, “Does God Care How We Worship?”, in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 65.

well as Frame and Gore. Some of these criticisms Thomas engages with include the impact of culture on worship, the Puritans' alleged departure from Calvin's original intent for the regulative principle, biblical authority and legalism, the regulative principle for worship versus all of life, as well as exclusive psalmody. Throughout, Thomas argues that the regulative principle does not produce uniformity of worship practice, but rather it "provides breadth within a basic conformity."<sup>46</sup> Thomas stresses how the regulative principle helps protect and maintain Christian liberty. He believes we are at the mercy of tyranny and folly "if we are not at liberty to corporately worship God in ways other than that which he has revealed."<sup>47</sup>

In the section dealing with elements of biblical worship, there are two essays that help address the role of hymnody and psalmody by Paul S. Jones and Terry L. Johnson, respectively. Closely tied to his book *Singing and Making Music*, Jones seeks here to demonstrate biblical support by example and inference the vital role that hymns serve in Christian worship. As Jones believes that congregational singing should be "to the glory of God and for the instruction and edification of his saints"<sup>48</sup> he argues that singing hymns and psalms, as well as new songs, are biblical and necessary. While Jones focuses primarily on hymnody, Johnson tackles psalmody head on and argues that the psalms should not only be read in public worship but should be sung. Johnson suggests that psalm singing is a powerful

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<sup>46</sup> Derek W. H. Thomas, "The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 89.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>48</sup> Paul S. Jones, "Hymnody in a Post-Hymnody World" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 223.

tool of sanctification and is “the primary virtue of the psalms.”<sup>49</sup> The act of singing helps drive God’s word deeper into our souls. He also demonstrates how psalm singing is biblical, historical, beneficial, satisfying, and unique.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Terry L. Johnson, “Restoring Psalm Singing to our Worship” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 274.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 278-279.

## CHAPTER 2

### WORSHIP AND MUSIC IN THE BIBLE

What does the Bible teach us about worship and music? Does Scripture provide a pattern for public worship that includes music and congregational singing? How do principles of Old Testament worship inform our worship today under the new covenant? Throughout Scripture we see numerous examples of music and singing as important elements in the public worship of God. Before we dive into the Puritan and Reformers' understanding of the regulative principle and its application for public worship, we must first explore what God's inherent Word teaches. To quote Philip Graham Ryken:

The Bible is our only ultimate authority for worship, as it is for everything else. Scripture alone determines how we are to please God in our worship. *Sola scriptura.* All of our worship is dedicated to the greater glory of God, who alone is the chief end of all our praise. *Soli deo gloria!*<sup>1</sup>

We will first look at the Old Testament and then turn our attention to the New Testament. This will not be an exhaustive review, but rather will help set the foundation on which we can then understand the theological contributions of the Reformers and English Puritans regarding music and congregational singing in public worship.

#### Old Testament

As we examine the Old Testament regarding public worship and music, we come to understand that much of the ritual of Israel's worship of God focused on the sacrificial

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan, ed., *Give Praise to God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 12.

system given through the Mosaic law. At the center of worship for the Jews in the Old Testament was the tabernacle or the temple, where they offered praise, prayers, and sacrifice to God.<sup>2</sup> In Exodus 25-28 Moses records detailed instructions given by God to the people of Israel to build a tabernacle in which he would dwell among them. God was very specific and in Exodus 31 we see that even “the craftsmen who supervised the construction were chosen by God and filled with the Holy Spirit to perform their task.”<sup>3</sup> While the tabernacle was built to be portable during Israel’s time in the wilderness, God later commanded that a permanent temple be built by David’s son Solomon (1 Chron. 28). This is where the Jews would offer their sacrificial worship, prayers, singing of praise, swearing of oaths, and teaching.<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament, God provides an acceptable way for his chosen people to approach him in worship. This pattern of worship God establishes with Israel in the Mosaic law includes four main features. The first was the establishment of the Sabbath day. The Sabbath was the seventh day following six days of work. God commanded his people to rest on the Sabbath and to keep it holy (Exod. 20:8-9; Lev. 23:3). The Jews used this day to offer sacrifices to God and remember God’s act of creation and redemption (Exod. 20:11; 31:12-17; Deut. 5:12-15).

Secondly, three annual feasts were held in which the people of Israel would gather at God’s sanctuary and offer sacrifices as a thanksgiving for his provision (Exod. 23:14-17; 34:23; Deut. 16:16). It was also during these times the people gathered “to seek and

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<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, *A Taste of Heaven* (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2006), 23-24.

<sup>3</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 20.

<sup>4</sup> See 1 Kings 8:22-53; Isa. 56:7; 1 Chron. 15:16-22; 25:1-31; Matt. 21:13; 26:55; Luke 2:41-52; Acts 3:11; 5:21.

acknowledge reconciliation and fellowship with him, and to eat and drink together as an expression of joy.”<sup>5</sup> The Passover was held on the fourteenth day of the first month each year as a memorial of God’s deliverance of his people from Egypt (Exod. 12; Lev. 23:5-8; Num. 28:16-25; Deut. 16:1-8). The second feast was called the Feast of Weeks. This feast was held fifty days after Passover to mark the end of the grain harvest (Exod. 23:16; 34:22; Lev. 23:15-22; Num. 28:26-31; Deut. 16:9-12). The third feast was called the Feast of Booths, also known as Tabernacles. This feast was held at the conclusion of the agricultural year in the seventh month. This feast served to remind the people of Israel of how God provided for them and led them through the wilderness (Lev. 23:39-43; Num. 29:12-38; Deut. 16:13-15).

Thirdly, the Day of Atonement was held on the tenth day of the seventh month. Leviticus 16 explains in detail how on this day the high priest would take the blood of sacrificial animals inside the veil into the innermost room of the sanctuary to atone for the sins of Israel. A scapegoat would then be sent out into the wilderness as a sign to the people that their sins were taken away. This was an annual reminder of God’s provision to atone for the sins of man. “And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins” (Lev. 16:34). The priests who conducted the sacrifices and entered the sanctuary to make atonement for the people also received the people’s offerings and thanksgiving sacrifices (2 Chron. 31:2-10), made petitions for them (2 Chron. 30:27), instructed them in the law (Deut. 33:10), and charged them to live for God with his blessing (Lev. 9:22-23; Num. 6:22-26).

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<sup>5</sup> J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 100.

Lastly, the regular sacrificial system required daily and monthly burnt offerings and personal sacrifices (Num. 28:1-15) and the blood of the sacrifice would be poured out on the altar to make atonement. As Leviticus 17:11 states, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” Rituals of personal purification and devotion were also part of this God-given pattern.<sup>6</sup>

As we examine Jewish worship, it is clear that the singing of songs emerged quickly in Israel’s history<sup>7</sup> and is a common element throughout the Old Testament. In Exodus 15:1-18 we see a powerful moment of spontaneous worship when Moses and the people of Israel sing a song to the Lord immediately following their deliverance by God from the hand of the Egyptians. This beginning of this victory song celebrates their deliverance by God and salvation:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name.<sup>8</sup>

Their response was one of awe and belief in the Lord and they responded by lifting their voices together in song to praise the God of their salvation. Later in that same chapter, Aaron’s sister, Miriam, sang a song with a tambourine in her hand and was accompanied by all the women who joined in singing and dancing (Exod. 15:20-21).

Other examples of singing and playing instruments include a song of thanksgiving by Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 after God had given her a son, the song of Deborah in Judges 5

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>7</sup> Sproul, 153.

<sup>8</sup> Exod. 15:1-3.

following the death of the king of Canaan, the choirs appointed by Nehemiah to celebrate the dedication of the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 12, and the prayer of Habakkuk 3.

A brief reference to playing stringed instruments “at the house of the Lord” is found in Isaiah 38:20. Additionally, in 1 Chronicles 23 David gathered the leaders of Israel and the priests and the Levites to divide them for temple service. Of the 38,000 males over the age of 30, David assigned 4,000 to offer praises to the Lord with instruments David made for praise (1 Chron. 23:1-5). Of these 4,000 musicians, 288 were described as being skillful and trained in singing to the Lord (1 Chron. 25:7). While characterizing the worship of Israel, R. C. Sproul points out a strong element of auditory perception (in addition to the other senses of sight, taste, smell, and touch):

The orchestration of instruments, such as the cymbals and the harp, and singing were part of the experience of worship, not to mention the hearing of the word read. There was an element of olfactory sense – the incense that was used to symbolize the sweet fragrance and aroma of the prayers of the people of God that rose before Him. Worship involved the whole person, including the senses.<sup>9</sup>

Within the Old Testament, the book of Psalms provides perhaps the most examples (which would simply be too exhaustive to list here) of worship offered to God through singing and the playing of instruments (Ps. 33:2; 92:1-4; 95:1-2; 96:1-4; 98:5-6; 111:1; 146:1-2; 147:1; 150:1-6). As Paul S. Jones points out, the calls to worship through singing and the playing of instruments in the Psalms are also visible in the ascriptions (Ps. 4-6; 54-55; 61; 66-67; 76).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>10</sup> Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 25.

## New Testament

Within the New Testament, we learn of the new covenant in which the priesthood, sacrifice, and intercession of Christ supersede the entire Mosaic system in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> Jesus is the one who brings the ultimate sacrifice to God, namely himself, and acts as our Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:11-28). We discover in the New Testament that the temple was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Mark 14:58, 15:29, 38; John 2:19-21), and the church becomes the temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22). In Matthew 12:8 we also learn that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and in Acts 20:7 and Revelation 1:10 we see evidence of Christian worship being held on the first day of the week, which was the day of Jesus' resurrection.

In his evaluation of worship in the New Testament, John Frame helps us see the parallel in the way the church worships, as the new Israel in Christ, to the Old Testament, “in that every ordinance of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on Paul’s teaching in the book of Galatians, Calvin said that “we have in Christ a perfect disclosure of all those things which were foreshadowed in the Mosaic ceremonies.”<sup>13</sup> Christ has accomplished the redemption of his chosen people, which is what the ordinances in the Old Testament pointed. Worship in the New Testament can also be understood in the broad sense, as “a life of obedience to God’s word, a sacrifice of ourselves to his purposes.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Heb. 7-10; Matt. 28:19; 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Gal. 2:3-5; 6:12-16; 1 Cor. 5:7-8; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16; Mark 7:19; 1 Tim. 4:3-4; Luke 13:10-16; 14:1-6.

<sup>12</sup> Frame, 29.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.19.3.

<sup>14</sup> Frame, 30.

Frame immediately adds, “All of life is our priestly service, our homage to the greatness of our covenant Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

While there is no single concise statement on worship found in the New Testament, we do see evidence of the people of God gathering together for prayer, teaching, observing the sacrament, church discipline, receiving of gifts for those in need, and fellowship with one another.<sup>16</sup> The Holy Spirit was an active participant, as we see both blessings and supernatural events that took place. While the exact term “worship service” that we are familiar with in our own time cannot be found as such in our English translations of the New Testament, it is clear that the church met regularly together to honor God and for building up of one another (1 Cor. 14:26; Heb. 10:24-25). However, the New Testament does use a variety of terms for worship like *latreia* (service or worship), *proskunein* (falling down), *proskuneseis* (homage), *latreuseis* (worship), and *prosekunesan* (worshipped).<sup>17</sup> Other words that play an important role in understanding public worship of the New Testament include *thusia* and *prophora* (both translated as sacrifice or offering), *threskeia* (religious service or cult), *sebein* (to worship), *homologein* (confess sin, to declare publically, and for the praise of God).<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, in 1 Corinthians we find Paul’s teachings to the early church regarding matters of public worship. Although his writing on this subject appears scattered throughout

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> See Acts 1:6, 14; 2:42-47; 4:23-31; 5:42; 11:26; 13:2; 14:27; 15:6, 30; 20:7-38; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 11:18-34; 14:1-40; 16:1-2, 20; 1 Peter 3:21.

<sup>17</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 34.

the letter (10:16-17, 21; 11:17-34; 12:7-11; 14:1-19, 22-40) and not presented in a systematic order, we can learn what elements may have been included as believers gathered together, as well as particular matters of concern for Paul. Regarding content, 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 highlight activities such as the instruction of the word or revelation or prophecy, a tongue or an interpretation, a hymn and giving thanks, prayer, and the Lord's Supper. One primary concern of Paul was that of orderly worship (14:26-40). If their worship was to be for the glory of God and for the building up of the body of believers, the various elements “should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). While this can be applied broadly, Paul specifically was addressing spiritual gifts (14:5, 26-33), as well as the Lord's Supper (11:20-21). This focus on an ordered approach to worship can also be seen in the development of the role of the office of ministry in the worship of the church captured in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9).

As we turn our attention to focus on specific evidence in the New Testament of music and congregational singing in worship, there are two primary passages we should review. The first is Ephesians 5:17-21, where Paul is addressing the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding region:

Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

As believers are filled with the Spirit, their joy in God and fellowship with one another finds its expression in song and praise and thanksgiving. We will review this in further detail later, but at this point it is important to highlight the language used by Paul likely refers to different

types of songs (including Old Testament psalms and New Testament hymns) that could also be accompanied by musical instruments.

The second primary passage is Colossians 3:16-17, where Paul encourages the believers saying:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Similar to Ephesians 5:17-21, Paul encourages the believers to sing songs with thankfulness in their hearts to God. Also, the language used by Paul again here of “singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” can be interpreted as referring to both voice and instruments.<sup>19</sup> While the different categories of song in this verse are not easy to distinguish, they do indicate a variety and richness of singing to be enjoyed and used in public worship. This passage also has a horizontal element, like Ephesians 5:19, in that as the body of believers gather they are to encourage one another in their singing and teaching as they glorify God.

Other passages in the New Testament may suggest some hymns had been developed by the early church, which could have been known and used by the church before they were incorporated in to the gospel accounts.<sup>20</sup> These examples include the Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55, the Benedictus in Luke 1:68-79, the Gloria in Excelsis in Luke 2:14, the Nunc Dimitiss in Luke 2:29-32, other Christological hymns found in John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, as well as psalms and doxologies such as those included in the book

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 36.

of Revelation.<sup>21</sup> Paul also references singing in 1 Corinthians 14:15, saying, “I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.” This is in the context of Paul expressing his desire for both a spiritual benefit as well as growth in understanding. Singing was certainly a part of Paul’s life outside of public worship too, as Acts 16:25 mentions Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns to God while in prison. There is also a reference to Jesus singing with his disciples before going to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30).

### Summary

Principles of worship may be drawn from both the Old and the New Testament. While the Old Testament forms have been fulfilled in Christ that does not mean we should abandon every element of their public worship. God still demands to be worshiped, but the forms have changed in light of Christ. John Calvin states:

Thus, God’s constancy shines forth in the fact that he taught the same doctrine to all ages, and has continued to require the same worship of his name that he enjoined from the beginning. In the fact that he has changed the outward form and manner, he does not show himself subject to change. Rather, he has accommodated himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable.<sup>22</sup>

For example, we no longer sacrifice animals as offerings to God for our sins because Jesus Christ is our ultimate sacrifice in the atonement to satisfy the wrath of God and pardon our sins. However, activities such as prayer, singing, teaching, and hearing God’s word, just to name a few, can and should still be used by the church today. As we have seen above, there is evidence of those aspects within the New Testament, as well as in the public worship of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>22</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.11.13.

the early church during the postapostolic period.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, however, we cannot find any explicit mandate for the arrangement and ordering of these elements.<sup>24</sup>

Our brief review has provided more than sufficient evidence that singing was an activity of the church. In fact, the command to sing is the most frequently repeated command found in Scripture.<sup>25</sup> It is also evident in the examples reviewed that there was variety in the type of songs used by God's people to worship him. We also know from the book of Revelation that singing will be one of our primary activities around the throne of God. Music is a gift of God to be used in expression of our praise to him for who he is and all that he has done. This point is most likely not where divisions among the church start. Rather, *how* we use music in public worship is where things tend to get controversial.

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<sup>23</sup> Nick R. Needham, "Worship through the Ages," in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 376-380.

<sup>24</sup> D.A. Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 51.

<sup>25</sup> Terry L. Johnson, "Restoring Psalm Singing to Our Worship" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 271.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

One important topic that was given attention during the Reformation related to *how* the church is to worship God. Does God care how we worship him? Is there an acceptable way of worshiping him we can learn from Scripture? Does God's word direct the form and content of worship? These kind of questions were asked in light of the conviction that Scripture is the final authority in faith and life, including how we worship corporately, and can been seen as a natural extension of *sola scriptura*.<sup>1</sup> As we have seen above, Scripture provides plenty of evidence that God does care about how we worship. During the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the emphasis on worshiping God in an acceptable way, according to the instructions and commandments God alone provides in Scripture, came to be known as the Regulative Principle.<sup>2</sup> While some critics of the regulative principle have argued it was an innovation of the Puritans,<sup>3</sup> this principle can be found in Calvin and other Reformed theologians, as well as in the English Puritan tradition and in the Baptist confessions and Congregational creeds.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, "Does God Care How We Worship?" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>3</sup> D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> Duncan, 21.

### Formulation

In order to understand the definition and development of the regulative principle, we must first remember the context in which it was formulated.<sup>5</sup> It was against the medieval Catholic abuses and additions to the Christian faith that the Reformers sought to return to the beliefs and practices of the early church.<sup>6</sup> Their concerns about church doctrine and practices were a direct reflection on their view of the role and authority of God's word. As McGrath helps us understand, "the early reformers believed the medieval church had become corrupted and its doctrine distorted through a departure from Scripture. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Calvin felt it was very important to purify the worship of the people of God from the errors that had crept in during the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup> The Reformers were convinced in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture and sought to be reformed according to the word of God in life and thought. It was this deep conviction that helped fuel their desire to see the church worship God in accordance with Scripture.

The definition of the regulative principle differs slightly based on which theological camp or denomination is addressing the matter. For the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, including the English Puritans, the regulative principle can be understood as

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word "formulated" intentionally here since, although we will find evidence and support of this principle in Scripture, it was during the Reformation period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when this principle was captured most clearly.

<sup>6</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Rayburn, "Worship in the Reformed Church." *Presbyterian* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 18.

“whatever Scripture does not command is forbidden.”<sup>9</sup> However, the Roman Catholics and Lutherans emphasize “whatever is not forbidden is permitted.”<sup>10</sup> In the former, an explicit biblical command is required for anything we would include in public worship. In the latter, worship practices should be Scriptural (not contradicting the Bible) but do not require an explicit command. As we will see further below, how the regulative principle is defined will have a significant impact on how it is applied. To help better understand the regulative principle and its biblical warrant, we will review its teaching and support by the Westminster Standards, as well as the various perspectives and theological convictions of Luther, Calvin, and the English Puritans.

### Westminster Standards

The Westminster Assembly applied its doctrine of biblical authority to worship and its application can be seen in its adoption of the regulative principle.<sup>11</sup> This is how the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) defines the regulative principle:

But the 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 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>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 38.

<sup>10</sup> John M. Frame, “Some Questions About the Regulative Principle” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 357.

<sup>11</sup> John Allen Delivuk, “Biblical Authority and the Proof of the Regulative Principle of Worship in The Westminster Confession” *Westminster Theological Journal* 58, no. 2 (Fall 1996), 252.

<sup>12</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 21.1.

This is the traditional understanding of the regulative principle, and its assertion that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by God's word can also be found in other traditions, such as article 32 in the Belgic Confession and question 96 of the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>13</sup>

As to what is "prescribed in the holy Scripture" for public worship, the WCF provides further direction. In 21.3 the WCF states that "prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men. . ." This prayer is to be made in the name of Jesus Christ and offered "according to His will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance" in a tongue understood by those gathered.<sup>14</sup>

Additional elements are described in 21.5 of the WCF:

The reading of scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and consonable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner.<sup>15</sup>

The confession also states that "a lawful oath is a part of religious worship."<sup>16</sup> These voluntary vows and oaths are to be made unto God alone and must not be contradictory to God's word.

As to the place and importance of these worship elements, the WCF asserts that:

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<sup>13</sup> Duncan, 21.

<sup>14</sup> WCF, 21.3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 21.5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22.

Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now under the gospel either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so, more solemnly, in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calleth thereunto.<sup>17</sup>

Not leaving any doubt as to the when of public worship, the confession is clear that a special time has been “set apart for the worship of God” and the church is to gather on the Lord’s Day, which is recognized as the first day of the week in honor of the resurrection of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The authors of the WCF acknowledge that God’s word provides all things necessary concerning “His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life,” either through explicit commands or “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”<sup>19</sup> The role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in helping us understand God’s Word:

Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and 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.<sup>20</sup>

This is an important section to highlight from the WCF as the authors confess their dependence on the Holy Spirit for wisdom and guidance to navigate matters that are not explicitly addressed in Scripture.

The Larger Catechism of the WCF also provides additional instruction regarding worship and uses the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 as the primary foundation. On

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21.6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1.6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

the matter of worship, the authors use the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:2) to clarify the Christian’s duty to God. God is zealous for his own worship and this passion for his glory is clearly displayed in this passage. John Calvin explains this commandment makes clear “we are not to transfer to another what belongs to him.”<sup>21</sup> In the answer to Question 104 as to what duties are required to rightly observe the first commandment, we learn the duties include “the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly.”<sup>22</sup> Some of the ways in which we worship and give glory to God include “rejoicing in him, being zealous for him, calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks to him . . . being careful in all things to please him.”<sup>23</sup> Here we see the kinds of behaviors and activities we can employ in worshipping God, as well as the careful approach to worship in order to please him.

We also see in the second commandment God’s concern for how we are to worship him (Exod. 20:4-6). This is addressed in question 108 of The Larger Catechism regarding the duties required to keep the second commandment:

The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowed unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.8.16.

<sup>22</sup> WCF, The Larger Catechism, 186.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 187

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 191-193.

The Assembly clearly defines what they believe to be acceptable religious worship and they also teach the second commandment forbids “all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself. . . .”<sup>25</sup>

The Assembly was so concerned about worshiping God according to his word they even published a directory for public worship in 1645 (two years before the WCF was approved by the General Assembly) that could be used to help promote uniformity in religion and divine worship in England, Scotland, and Ireland.<sup>26</sup> It appears this directory was intended to help produce a more uniform pattern in worship, not to legislate the order of worship.<sup>27</sup> This is also argued by R. J. Gore, saying the directory is a “book of recommendations, not a service-book in the traditional sense” and that it “does not actually provide orders of worship, but rather suggests the possible actions and orders to be adapted to local custom and current needs.”<sup>28</sup> The directory provided a list of primary elements to be included in public worship like prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching, and singing of a psalm, and even addressed how other practices and activities such as fasting, visiting the sick, marriage ceremonies, and the burial of the dead should be handled.

While their commitment to “hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance,” the authors acknowledged “other things” were presented according to Christian

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>26</sup> WCF, *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, 373.

<sup>27</sup> Derek Thomas, “The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 83.

<sup>28</sup> R. J. Gore Jr., “Reviewing the Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship” *Presbyterian* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 37.

prudence, “agreeable to the general rules of the word of God.”<sup>29</sup> We will also see similar acknowledgements of using sanctified wisdom and godly discernment in the matters of public worship in the works of the reformers and English Puritans.

### Reformers: Calvin & Luther

For the reformers, of which we will primarily look at John Calvin and Martin Luther, their conviction regarding public worship was that all that is done and said must be in accordance with sound biblical theology. Everything, including doctrine, polity, and worship must be evaluated in light of Scripture. Luther and Calvin were aligned in their condemnation of the abuses within the medieval church, as well as in their desire to return to a “primitive simplicity in Christian worship.”<sup>30</sup> Submission to God’s word was the essence of the Reformation cry, *sola Scriptura*. Their desire was for the content to convey God’s truth as revealed in his word. The reformers taught that God had given full attention to the matter of public worship in his word because it is one of central importance in the Christian life and in God’s eternal purposes.<sup>31</sup> In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin argues that in Paul’s letter to the Colossians we learn that “we are not to seek from men the doctrine of the true worship of God, for the Lord has faithfully and fully instructed us how he is to be worshiped.”<sup>32</sup> As we evaluate the Reformer’s understanding of the regulative

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<sup>29</sup> WCF, The Directory for the Public Worship of God, 374.

<sup>30</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 13.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, 4.10.8.

principle of worship, we must first start with two foundational beliefs they shared which provide context for and motivation for their approach to regulate worship.

One key foundational belief shared by Luther and Calvin is that as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve, our human nature is corrupt and we are prone to idolatry. Instead of naturally recognizing God for who he is and responding in humility and praise, our hearts have a tendency to create God in our own image and worship creation rather than the Creator. Luther said that “we are inclined to it by nature; and coming to us by inheritance, it seems pleasant.”<sup>33</sup> This natural response to the fallen condition of man is also seen in Calvin, when he said that “man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to elaborate, “Man’s mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as God.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, if we are incapable of doing works untainted by corruption, how can we be able to devise worship that is pleasing to God solely on the basis of our own wisdom or desires?<sup>36</sup> This state of depravity is seen clearly in Romans 1:18-25:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts

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<sup>33</sup> Duncan, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship”, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, 1.11.8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 83.

were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Throughout Scripture we see numerous examples of man's tendency to idolatry and God's clear rejection of false worship. Paul teaches in Romans that the entire human race is in rebellion against God. One example among many others can be found in Exodus 32-34, where Moses describes the story of the golden calf. Here we see the people of Israel rebel against the moral law's commands regarding the worship of God. After their deliverance by God from the land of Egypt, the people became impatient while Moses was on the mountain and they demanded a physical representation be made of God. Aaron took the gold rings from the people, created a golden calf, and then built an altar before it so that the people could offer burnt offerings and peace offerings during a feast to the Lord. However, God was not pleased and his judgment was swift and severe (Exod. 32:27-28).

Another foundational belief shared by Luther and Calvin was the liberty of the Christian. Again, this conviction of the freedom of the believer is founded on *sola Scriptura*. By holding that Scripture is sufficient and authoritative over every area of life, our “conscience is kept free from the legalism that would impose human-originated rules in place of divine law.”<sup>37</sup> For Calvin, understanding “the mode in which God is duly worshiped” was one of the primary reasons given for why the reformation of the church was necessary.<sup>38</sup> The importance of the role of conscience is also captured in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it in matter of

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas, 78.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 76.

faith or worship.”<sup>39</sup> Regarding the freedom of the Christian in relation to church constitutions Calvin said “it is the duty of Christian people to keep the ordinances that have been established according to this rule with a free conscience. . . .”<sup>40</sup> To worship as God has commanded, therefore, means we are free from churches that impose elements of public worship that have no biblical warrant. Worshiping God according to Scripture helps protect the believer’s conscience and liberty.

With this context in mind, we can better understand why the reformers promoted the regulative principle of worship. Their goal was not to reject everything in tradition, but to evaluate everything in light of the Scripture.<sup>41</sup> While the exact term was not necessarily used in their writings, the general principle is evident. In his book, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin said, “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship.”<sup>42</sup> In his *Institutes*, Calvin said of the second commandment, “now he declares more openly what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be honored, lest we dare attribute anything carnal to him,” immediately adding, “and he makes us conform to his lawful worship, that is, a spiritual worship established by himself.”<sup>43</sup> Calvin later goes on to say, “a part of the reverence that is paid to him consists simply in worshiping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of

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<sup>39</sup> WCF, 20.2.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, 4.10.31.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Horton, *In the Face of God* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 208.

<sup>42</sup> John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (repr. Audubon, N.J.: Old Paths, 1994), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.17.

our own.”<sup>44</sup> According to his approach, we are not free to choose anything that is not commanded in Scripture. Another way to say this is a biblical command is required for anything we may do in public worship. Calvin describes at least two advantages regulating worship:

First, it tends greatly to establish [God’s] authority that we do not follow our own pleasure but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions.<sup>45</sup>

However, Luther’s approach appears to differ slightly. Luther believed that we may do anything in worship except what Scripture forbids. He allowed traditional elements that were not contrary to Scripture. This was the fundamental disagreement between Luther and Calvin regarding worship.<sup>46</sup> This disagreement, as J. I. Packer contends, “related to the interpretation and contents of Holy Scripture” and not whether Scripture was authoritative and sufficient.<sup>47</sup> Luther did not see the Bible as a directory of worship and allowed elements that were not inconsistent with the Bible’s teaching, whereas Calvin would only accept in worship specifically what the Bible warranted. Recognizing this difference will help us understand later how their approach to congregational singing varied and its lasting influence on churches today.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.10.23.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Davies, 16.

<sup>47</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 246.

### English Puritans

In reformation history, the English Puritans can be characterized as a group of radical Protestants in England during the time of Queen Elizabeth, who sought to model the Church of England's worship and governance according to the pure word of God.<sup>48</sup> Their approach to public worship was a revolt against the doctrine and worship practices of the Roman church. The Puritans considered the state church oppressive, in that it tried to impose ceremonies on them and force them to worship in ways they considered unscriptural.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the Anglicans, the Puritans believed the entire Bible was authoritative for doctrine, as well as every area of life. Recognizing Calvin as the father of their religion, and therefore embracing Calvin's theology of *sola scriptura* and the doctrine of original sin, the Puritans "pleaded for a type of worship which was in its entirety modeled upon the Word of God."<sup>50</sup> Like Calvin, the Puritans believed God had already provided in the Bible everything needed to understand how he is to be worshipped.

While Calvin allowed a certain accommodation in non-essential matters, it appears the English Puritans held to a stricter standard and did not allow any such compromises. For the seventeenth-century Puritans, the medium is the message, and the mode of worship can in no way be considered secondary.<sup>51</sup> Direct biblical warrant was required for every item and detail included in public worship. In 1605, William Bradshaw wrote that the absolutely perfect word of God contained in the Bible is the sole authority for religious matters,

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<sup>48</sup> Davies, 1-2.

<sup>49</sup> Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Davies, 7-9.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas, 79.

including the worship and service of God, and that “whatsoever done in the same service and worship cannot be justified by the said word, is unlawful.”<sup>52</sup> To support their belief, the Puritans provided Scriptural warrant from both the Old Testament and New Testament. Only that which is directly commanded by God is a legitimate element of worship. The Word of God was the standard used to judge acceptable worship. They were zealous to worship God in only the manner in which he commanded and they also sought to re-establish simplicity and purity in public worship.<sup>53</sup>

#### Elements and Circumstances

As we have seen, what is being argued in the regulative principle is that there must be scriptural warrant for all that is to be done in public worship. Ligon Duncan suggests this 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.”<sup>54</sup> As we have seen in our review of what Scripture says regarding worship and music, not every specific topic and matter regarding public worship are addressed. Therefore, important to our review and application of the regulative principle of worship is to understand the distinction between the elements and the circumstances of worship, as well as the substance and forms. These are terms used by Reformed theologians and understanding them will help clarify that the purpose of the regulative principle in worship is not uniformity, but rather to provide a pattern of worship that is acceptable to

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<sup>52</sup> Davies, 50.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>54</sup> Duncan, “Does God Care How We Worship?”, 23.

God. Regarding the elements and circumstances of worship, D.G. Hart and John R. Muether argue:

Far from loosening the strength of the regulative principle, this distinction between worship’s elements (the “what”) and circumstances (the “how”) clarifies the regulative principle. The Bible tightly regulates what happens in public worship, while at the same time allowing for variety in the circumstances that affect the way churches practice the elements of Reformed worship.<sup>55</sup>

While defining these terms has not proven easy through the years, the definitions below provide a starting point for our review.

The *substance* of public worship refers to the content of its prescribed parts.<sup>56</sup> The content must convey the truth of who God, his character and his acts, as revealed in the Word of God. The *elements* of worship are the components or specific parts of public worship, or in other words they are the “what” of worship. These primary elements are what God specifically commands in worship, including prayer, reading and preaching God’s Word, singing, and administering the sacraments.<sup>57</sup> In other words, these elements are the “essentials” in public worship, in that they have direct warrant from Scripture. The *forms* refer to the “how” of worship, the manner in which the elements are executed or performed. Examples of forms include the different songs sung (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs), prayers offered (prayed by the pastor, prayed by the congregation, from Scripture directly or not), and the arranging of various elements. *Circumstances* have been referred to as incidental

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<sup>55</sup> Hart & Muether, 86.

<sup>56</sup> Duncan, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 108.

matters that require decisions to be made, but not commanded in Scripture.<sup>58</sup> These can include, among others, decisions on whether to use chairs or pews, to sit or stand, to use a hymnal during singing, how long the service should be and what time it should start. These are circumstantial matters that must be addressed by church leaders to help facilitate public worship that is glorifying to God and edifying to his people.

While we have learned that the primary goal of the regulative principle is to help us worship God as he desires, we must recognize the Bible is not specific about every detail that must be sorted out regarding public worship. As John Frame says, “much of what the Scripture says about worship is between the lines.”<sup>59</sup> What time should the service start? How many songs should be sung during a service? What kind of songs should be sung? How long should the service last? Even the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) recognize these circumstantial matters concerning the worship of God that must employ Christian prudence “according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”<sup>60</sup> This acknowledgment of freedom and diversity in public worship is also present in the preface to The Directory for the Public Worship of God where the authors state, “Wherein our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavored to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Duncan, 23.

<sup>59</sup> John M. Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle.” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 54, (1992): 360.

<sup>60</sup> WCF, 1.6

<sup>61</sup> WCF, The Directory for the Public Worship of God, 374.

Although we can find examples of primary elements of worship commanded in Scripture, the various means and circumstances must be determined according to biblical principles. We must use godly discernment and wisdom, with illuminating help from the Holy Spirit, to help us navigate through the “other things” that cannot be ignored. Adhering to the regulative principle does not lock us in to one way of worshiping God, as in form, but rather provides a “basic conformity” in identifying the primary elements to help ensure we worship God according to his commands. As Ligon Duncan highlights:

Reformed worship does not produce a cookie-cutter pattern. Following the Westminster Directory of Public Worship’s guidelines does not eliminate diversity or different cultural expressions in the forms and circumstances of corporate worship.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, we should expect to see diversity of forms and circumstances across the worshipping community, even among those who subscribe to the regulative principle of worship.

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<sup>62</sup> Duncan, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship”, 72.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

Throughout this paper we have learned that God desires for his children to worship him and that how we worship him matters. As we explored the Old Testament and New Testament, we discovered that music is one means by which to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for who he is and what he has done. In reviewing the reformed formulation of the regulative principle of worship, we also learned that singing is one of the primary elements to be included in public worship. While it is not difficult to find passages throughout Scripture to support the act of singing as a basic element of public worship, we often find ourselves debating the forms and circumstances of music as if they were the “first things” on which to divide. That we ought to sing to God in worship is clear in Scripture, but what we ought to sing lies at the center of the worship wars through the years.

One of the fruits of the Reformation during the sixteenth century was the return of congregational singing in public worship. In Nick Needham’s review of worship in the reformed traditions, he argues that “one of the most basic thrusts of the Reformation was to make worship an act of the whole congregation.”<sup>1</sup> Departing from the worship practices of the Roman church where the primary participant was the priest, the Reformers encouraged vocal participation by the people. Seeking to communicate the gospel effectively and help

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<sup>1</sup> Nick R. Needham, “Worship through the Ages” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 396.

facilitate congregation participation, the Reformers also sought to get rid of the Latin liturgy and Vulgate Bible.<sup>2</sup> Luther translated the liturgy into German and even wrote several hymns, of which some were published in the first Lutheran hymnbook in 1524.<sup>3</sup> Calvin was also committed to congregational singing and published a songbook in French in 1539 that contained seventeen psalms, the Apostles Creed, Simeon's song from Luke 2:29-32, and the Ten Commandments, all set to music.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by Calvin, the Puritans confined themselves to psalmody and this commitment can be seen in the Westminster Assembly's Directory for the Public Worship of God.<sup>5</sup>

Our task now turns to reviewing various positions on psalmody and hymnody, which find their roots in the Reformation and have been a source of debate and division still active in our own time. While the intent here is to not provide an exhaustive review of these debates, our goal is to understand how a biblical view of the regulative principle of worship allows for diversity in congregational singing in public worship.

### Psalmody

Psalmody is the practice of singing canonical psalms in the worship of God. These psalms can be defined as a song that develops a theme over multiple lines and stanzas, using

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Trueman, *Reformation: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Wales, Great Britain: Bryntirion Press, 2000. Reprint, Ross-shire, Scotland: 2012), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Needham, 398.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 400-401.

<sup>5</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 162-165.

minimal repetition.<sup>6</sup> Psalms, as found in the Old Testament, contain praises and prayers to God, confessions, songs of lament and complaint, cries for God's justice, and songs of thanksgiving. While the book of Psalms in the Old Testament can be referred to as a psalter, the word psalter also refers to a volume or collection of psalms translated by men to aide the church in public worship. Psalm songs are rooted in the canonical book of Psalms in the Old Testament and have been a resource for public worship, as well as private and family worship, since they were written. The psalter provides the people of God with the verbal images, names, and terminology with which to understand God and how we are to relate to him.<sup>7</sup> Psalms help us "articulate our wonder and marvel at what God has done."<sup>8</sup> According to Robert E. Webber, we can find evidence of a responsorial psalm used in liturgy during the fourth and fifth centuries, which developed in form over time and saw its most rapid spread in popularity during the Reformation, primarily under the influence of John Calvin.<sup>9</sup>

One of John Calvin's contributions to music in the church was the restoration of psalm singing.<sup>10</sup> As Calvin was committed to only including in public worship that which Scripture sanctions, he gave priority to the psalms for congregational singing. In the preface to the 1542 Genevan liturgy, Calvin argued:

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<sup>6</sup> Terry L. Johnson, "Restoring Psalm Singing to Our Worship" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 281.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>8</sup> James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 159.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 179-181.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 181.

Now, what Augustine says is true, namely, that no one can sing anything worthy of God which he has not received from him. Therefore, even after have carefully searched everywhere, we shall not find better or more appropriate songs to this end than the songs of David, inspired by the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, when we sing them, we are assured that God puts the words in our mouth, as if he himself were singing through us to exalt his glory.<sup>11</sup>

Additionally, Calvin believed Psalm-singing edified the congregation and stirred the people's heart and affections to worship God. He said:

Furthermore it is a thing most expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers by which one prays to God or sings His praises so that the hearts of all may be aroused and stimulated to make similar prayers and to render similar praises to God with a common love.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin also believed that the psalms contained a breadth of experiences in which the Christian could relate. He characterized the psalms as "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul" in which "there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."<sup>13</sup>

While Calvin believed no other songs could exceed the beauty and richness of the Psalms, it does not appear that Calvin held to exclusive psalmody.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Calvin's first psalter he published in 1539 included musical versions of the Apostles Creed, Simeon's song from Luke 2:29-32, and the Ten Commandments, in addition to several psalms.<sup>15</sup> Under the

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<sup>11</sup> John Calvin as quoted by Needham, 401.

<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, as quoted by Charles A. Packer, "A Matter of Divine Necessity: The History, Use, and Meaning of the Psalter in Early Puritan New England" *International Congregational Journal* 11, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 74.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin as quoted by Johnson, 264.

<sup>14</sup> Exclusive psalmody is the practice of singing only the biblical psalms in public worship.

<sup>15</sup> Needham, 400-401.

influence of Calvin, there was an outburst of metrical psalmody.<sup>16</sup> Although Calvin favored the use of the psalms in public worship, it does not appear he objected to the use of hymns. This is significant in our review of the regulative principle of worship, which Calvin helped articulate and apply, for it appears evident that diversity in congregational singing was acceptable to Calvin. His preference for primarily singing psalms in public worship was just that, a preference, and not limited by a strict biblical mandate regarding public worship or as a consequence of following the regulative principle of worship. Regarding Calvin's preference for psalmody, Hughes Oliphant Old suggests:

In defending his preference for psalmody Calvin appeals not to Scripture but to John Chrysostom and Augustine. This being the case one can be sure that Calvin had no objection if in other churches hymns and other than psalms were sung. His use of exclusive psalmody was a matter of preference.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, when Calvin was banned from Geneva and traveled to Strasbourg, it was there he produced a French liturgy and French translations of several psalms and other hymns to be sung by the exiled French community.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Calvin referred to “the singing together of hymns” in his *Institutes* on a section regarding establishing an order of true decorum in worship that took away confusion and dissension.<sup>19</sup> On a related note, Calvin opposed the use of musical instruments in worship since he could not find a positive

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<sup>16</sup> Davies, 162.

<sup>17</sup> Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 190.

<sup>18</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity vol. 2: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 66.

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.10.29.

command in the New Testament for using instruments.<sup>20</sup> The pattern of singing the psalms without any instrumental accompaniment became the norm in the Reformed churches during the Reformation and exist to this day in the Reformed Presbyterian denomination.

The Puritans, on the other hand, embraced the position of exclusive psalmody at least until the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Under the influence of Calvin's teaching, the Puritans were committed to worshiping God according to Scripture and they believed singing in public worship was confined to the canonical psalms. Scriptural mandate to sing the psalms exclusively had been given, the Puritans believed, in Ephesians 5:18-19, Colossians 3:6, and James 5:13. However, these New Testament references are interpreted by theologians on both sides of the exclusive psalmody debate in support of their respective positions.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the Puritans produced numerous psalters for use in public worship. One of the most significant developments and contributions by the Puritans regarding psalmody included their efforts in turning psalms into metre so they could be sung by the congregation and easier to memorize.<sup>23</sup> This approach to publishing collections of psalms in vernacular poetry based on the canonical Psalms included the practice of paraphrasing, while striving to maintain the intent of the original text. Perhaps the best-known psalm book produced during the Reformation is *The Genevan Psalter*, published in 1562. This psalter had a great indirect influence upon the worship of

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<sup>20</sup> Needham, 400-401.

<sup>21</sup> Davies, 162.

<sup>22</sup> Paul S. Jones, "Hymnody in a Post-Hymnody World" in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 223.

<sup>23</sup> Davies, 162.

the Puritans both in England and in Scotland, where metrical psalmody was for long the sole medium of praise.<sup>24</sup> The psalter was used by the Puritans in public worship, including during the Lord’s Supper, and also during family devotions and private spiritual practices in the home. As the practice of daily prayer emphasized the rhythm of life, the recitation or singing of psalms brought this function into focus.<sup>25</sup>

As we consider the subject of exclusive psalmody in the context of this thesis, we should review where the Westminster Confession of Faith stands on this topic. Does the WCF endorse exclusive psalmody? Chapter 21 of the Confession only mentions the word “psalms” and not hymns or spiritual songs when it says, “singing of psalms with grace in the heart” regarding religious worship.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, one might immediately conclude the Westminster Divines taught exclusive psalmody. However, it is possible that the Confession used the word in a wider sense and was not limited to the Psalms of the Old Testament.<sup>27</sup> Besides this, we have learned in our review of the regulative principle of worship that song is an element in public worship, however the content of songs does not appear to be limited in Scripture and so we can deduce it by good and necessary consequence and employing godly discernment and Christian prudence.

Contained in The Directory for the Public Worship of God by the Westminster Divines there are references to the singing of a psalm after the reading of Scripture and

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>25</sup> Charles A. Packer, 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 92.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, *Singing and Making Music*, 101.

before the prayer prior to the sermon, as well as after the sermon is preached. Additionally, at the end of the Directory there is a section dedicated to the topic “Of Singing of Psalms” to remind Christians of their duty to praise God publically and privately in the family, by singing psalms. In order to encourage participation by all, the Directory encourages the use of a psalm book for every one who can read, and for those who cannot read the minister or another appointed individual is to read the psalm, line by line, before singing.<sup>28</sup> While it is evident the Westminster Divines promoted congregational singing during public and private worship, is it as clear the songs to be sung are limited to the canonical psalms? Nowhere in the WCF or the Directory is the word “psalms” capitalized to refer to the book of Psalms in the Old Testament, nor does it refer to the Psalter. The “psalm book” could as easily refer to a collection of metrical songs as it could a collection of hymns or other songs.

John Frame, who rejects exclusive psalmody, effectively summarizes the argument for exclusive psalmody in this way:

All elements of worship must be prescribed by Scripture. Song is an element of worship. Scripture prescribes the singing of psalms. It does not prescribe the singing of any other songs in worship. Therefore, song in worship is limited to the Psalms.<sup>29</sup>

Some of those who support exclusive psalmody argue their position from the silence of the New Testament. Derek W. H. Thomas characterizes this argument as a “hermeneutical platform” which states that “unless the New Testament specifically warrants it, we are not at liberty to introduce it.”<sup>30</sup> Thomas helps us understand that this particular argument fails to

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<sup>28</sup> WCF, The Directory for the Public Worship of God, 393.

<sup>29</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 123.

<sup>30</sup> Derek Thomas, “The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 91.

recognize the regulative principle of worship is based on what is warranted by God in the whole of Scripture, not merely what is included in the New Testament. Additionally, it could be that those who require an imperative statement in Scripture that songs beyond the canonical psalms can be sung in public worship understand the regulative principle in a different sense.<sup>31</sup>

One defender of the exclusive psalmody position, Michael Bushell, has stated:

Since the Psalms are clearly prescribed in Scripture for worship, the burden of proof, insofar as Scripture is concerned, rests squarely on the shoulders of those who would introduce the singing of uninspired hymns into the worship of God.<sup>32</sup>

Challenging this assertion, Stephen Pribble suggests that nowhere in Scripture can we find the technical term for the book of Psalms (*mizmor*) used in the commands to sing psalms to God; rather, Scripture uniformly uses terms (*zimrah*, *zamir*, and *tehillah*) meaning “praise” in a more general sense.<sup>33</sup> Other defenses of exclusive psalmody argue that the terms used in both Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18 refer exclusively to inspired songs, all of which are contained in the book of Psalms. On the other hand, those who reject exclusive psalmody suggest the terms “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” refer to a variety of different types of songs which can include canonical psalms but do not exclude hymns and other spiritual songs. While there are general commands to sing praise to God, there is no command to sing the Psalms specifically. As our review of music in Scripture has already shown, songs

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<sup>31</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, (1975): 232.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Pribble, “The Regulative Principle and Singing in Worship” available from <http://www.all-of-grace.org/pub/pribble/hymnsing.html>; Internet; accessed 05 September 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

besides the canonical Psalms are sung in worship to God. In addition to other helpful resources, both sides of this argument are well documented in the majority and minority reports of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.<sup>34</sup> Another point that cannot be ignored is there are numerous examples throughout Scripture to “sing and new song” to the Lord and there are examples in both the Old Testament and New where the people sang new songs of praise and deliverance. In fact, in the book of Revelation we see plenty of evidence of new songs being sung to God.

### Hymnody

Hymnody is the practice of singing hymns, which can be defined as songs of praise to God. In a narrower sense, most hymns are metrical poetry set to melodies.<sup>35</sup> In the New Testament we see evidence of songs and hymns (John 1:14; Philippians 2:6-11; Luke 1:28-29, 42-45, 46-55, 68-79, 2:14, 29-32; Revelation 4-5). Hymns are also referred to as a “generalized literary form of religious expression” and are similar in form and content found in the book of Psalms.<sup>36</sup> There are hymns of praise, thanksgiving, proclamation, contrition, invocation, oblation, and other types as well, which are usually addressed to God and frequently recite God’s acts.<sup>37</sup> Hymns have been the primary music of the church. During the ancient church period music became more highly developed and many hymns were

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<sup>34</sup> Available from <http://www.opc.org/GA/song.html>; Internet; accessed 05 September 2015.

<sup>35</sup> White, 114.

<sup>36</sup> C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 43.

<sup>37</sup> White, 159.

written to help spread teaching.<sup>38</sup> The rise of hymnody during this period can be attributed to Ambrose, bishop of Milam, who wrote music based on four scales that became known as the Ambrosian chant, which later turned into the Gregorian chant two centuries later when Gregory the Great added more scales.<sup>39</sup> While music developments continued during the medieval church period and many more hymns had been written, there was a shift in who could participate in singing. As a result of the Council of Constance in 1415, laymen were forbidden to sing publicly in the church.<sup>40</sup> During the Reformation, however, congregational singing during public worship was restored.

While John Calvin has been credited for the restoration of psalm singing, Martin Luther is recognized for his influence on music in worship and for his contributions of chorale music and hymnody in general.<sup>41</sup> Luther wrote many hymns and even compiled and edited several hymn collections.<sup>42</sup> He encouraged the use of instruments, hymn and psalm singing, harmonization, and improvisation. Luther believed music was a gift of God and can be used as a vehicle for teaching others about God and the Gospel. He believed music is the handmaiden of theology.<sup>43</sup> Luther once declared, “Music and notes, which are wonderful gifts and creations of God, do help gain a better understanding of the text, especially when

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<sup>38</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 179.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, *Singing and Making Music*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, 277.

sung by a congregation and when sung earnestly.”<sup>44</sup> One of his motivations of writing hymns and producing hymnbooks was to help teach the youth of his day. In the forward to a hymnal by Johann Walter, his friend and musical collaborator, Luther wrote:

Therefore, I too, with the help of others, have brought together some sacred songs in order to make a good beginning and to give an incentive to those who can better carry on the Gospel and bring it to the people...And these songs were arranged in four parts for no other reason than that I wanted to attract the youth (who should and must be trained in music and other fine arts) away from love songs and carnal pieces and to give them something wholesome to learn instead...It is unfortunate that everyone else forgets to teach and train the poor young people; we must not be responsible for this too.<sup>45</sup>

Luther believed that one’s faith could be strengthened by singing songs in public worship. This idea has biblical support as Colossians 3:16 makes clear: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” In other words, the way in which believers are to let the word of Christ dwell richly in their midst is by teaching and admonishing one another by singing in their hearts to God. They are encouraged and strengthened in faith through singing songs that are focused on who God is and what he has done. Hymns can serve as praise, prayer, and proclamation of God-centered truth in the context of worship. In congregational song, worshipers give voice to their beliefs and theology.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Martin Luther as quoted by Jones, “Hymnody in a Post-Hymnody World,” in *Give Praise to God*, 238.

<sup>45</sup> Jones, *Singing and Making Music*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 161.

Important to any review of hymnody are the significant contributions by Isaac Watts in the early eighteenth century. Far from being opposed to the practice of singing psalms, Watts sought to improve psalmody by making the songs more understandable and to make them more evangelical. His goal was to write hymns that reflected the devotion and encouragement of the Psalms combined with the New Testament fulfillment and joy of the resurrection.<sup>47</sup> Watts believed the canonical psalms should be “translated in such a manner as we have reason to believe David would have composed them if he had lived in our day.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, Watts wanted to create songs that helped the singer speak like a Christian. He wanted to make Christ’s fulfillment of the psalm texts evident. In order to do this he paraphrased the Psalms, which was a radical departure from the other psalters of his day. Horton Davies gives credit to Watts for his work *Psalms of David* for reviving the praises of God among his contemporaries and making possible the production of Christian hymns.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Davies argues that the works of Watts “are the finest flowers of Puritan piety.”<sup>50</sup>

Just as we briefly explored the position of exclusive psalmody, we should also review inclusive hymnody in our discussion of hymns. Since exclusive psalmody refers to the position of those who argue that only canonical psalms may be sung in public worship, then inclusive hymnody can be understood as “hymnody that makes room for the practice of psalm singing.”<sup>51</sup> This would also apply to the concept of inclusive psalmody, which would

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<sup>47</sup> Webber, 181.

<sup>48</sup> Isaac Watts as quoted by Davies, 176

<sup>49</sup> Davies, 178.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>51</sup> Johnson, 278.

allow the practice of hymn singing. Although there are probably far more churches who sing hymns and other songs than there are those dedicated to exclusive psalmody, the point of arguing for inclusive hymnody is to persuade hymn-singing churches to include psalms in their congregational singing. Just as we cannot deny that psalm singing is biblical and beneficial, there are simply too many examples of hymn singing throughout Scripture and church history to ignore or not encourage its use in public worship in our day as well.

### Spiritual Songs

In our review of congregational singing we have looked deeper into the historical background and development of psalms and hymns and their place in the public worship of the church through the centuries. We should also take a moment to review the “spiritual songs” (odes) that are referenced specifically in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19. As we have learned, there are various interpretations by theologians and scholars across Reformed and other denominations regarding whether Paul intended to recognize three distinct and separate categories of songs or whether they are simply used synonymously. The Greek word for “spiritual” is *pneumatikos* and potentially qualifies the term for “songs” as being taught or led by the Holy Spirit.<sup>52</sup> Considering the number of interpretations on their meaning and relevance, it seems the different categories of song in this verse are not easy to distinguish.

Those who champion the exclusive psalmody position argue these terms refer specifically to the canonical psalms, which are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore are the only songs appropriate and acceptable for public worship. However, those who reject

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<sup>52</sup> David F. Detwiler, “Church music and Colossians 3:16” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158: 362.

that position suggest these terms all refer to songs of praise to be offered to God in worship. If Paul only had in mind the canonical psalms, why didn't he just use one term that his audience would rightfully understand as the psalter? Surely Paul's use of these terms was comprehensive, to include all lawful song used in worship, and not restrictive. As Wesley Isenberg writes, "the very use of diverse terminology such as this suggests that the early church encouraged a creative variety of musical and poetic expression in worship."<sup>53</sup>

With all the various examples of songs in both the Old Testament and New Testament, it should be reasonably affirmed that there was a variety and richness that characterized the songs of the church. Congregational singing ought to stir our hearts and minds to worship God for who he is and what he has done. The songs we sing ought to be God-centered and saturated with the truth of the gospel. These songs can be diverse in expression, whether they are psalms or God-centered hymns and new songs, or whether they utilize choirs or bands or no instruments at all. This diversity in congregational song and music should continue in our churches today.

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<sup>53</sup> As quoted by Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music*, 100.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Obviously not all that could be said about public worship, the regulative principle, and congregational singing is contained within this study. There certainly is no shortage of books, articles, blogs, journals, and sermons on these important topics by many talented and theologically trained men and women. In our brief review of this subject, however, we have learned much. Scripture teaches that God has created us to worship and glorify him above all things. Left to ourselves in our sinful state, we do not worship God as we should. God has given us his all-sufficient Word so that we may know him and worship him as he desires. God also has given us the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts and leads us to worship God. Our worship is mediated through the person of Jesus and inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> While Scripture does not address every single question or matter of detail related to public worship, God does provide instructions and a pattern for how we are to worship him. As David Peterson insists, “The worship of the living and true God is essentially an engagement with him on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible.”<sup>2</sup> His word directs and informs our worship.

As the intent of this review has been to better understand what Scripture teaches about worship and music and how the regulative principle understood biblically allows for

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<sup>1</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, Rev ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 199.

<sup>2</sup> David Peterson as quoted by Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 70.

diversity in congregational singing, there are some who will not be persuaded. Often it seems there are as many different opinions of music and worship as there are stars in the skies. The sheer number of denominations across Protestantism is evidence of this. Although there are many points of disagreement related to worship and music, some are a matter of preference and some a matter of biblical principle. The challenge is recognizing the difference and submitting to God's authority and rule for all matters of life and faith.

### Diversity in Congregational Singing

The Old Testament and New Testament provide more than sufficient evidence that singing was an activity of God's people and the church. We also know from the book of Revelation that singing will be one of our primary activities around the throne of God. Music is a gift of God to be used in humble and joyful expression of our praise to him for who he is and all that he has done. In our review of the regulative principle we have learned how this biblical principle applies to music. God has commanded his people to sing praise to him and the examples in Scripture of the different kinds of songs used give us a pattern to follow.

Singing is an important element of worship as seen in Scripture, so we should not argue about whether or not singing should be included in public worship. However, the kind of songs to sing, and whether we stand or sit or how many songs we include in a service or whether we use a hymnal or psalter or project lyrics on a screen, are circumstantial matters of worship that are to be determined using good discernment, prudence, and godly wisdom. John Frame states it this way, "Where specifics are lacking, we must apply the generalities

by means of our sanctified wisdom, within the general principles of the word.”<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, as Derek Thomas has observed during his review of the regulative principle, “Adherence to the regulative principle . . . does not bring about uniformity of worship practice—it did not in the seventeenth century any more than it does today.”<sup>4</sup> We have to make judgments on the basis on what is proper or fitting in our own culture and context.

This is consistent with what Calvin argued in his *Institutes*:

Lastly, because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.<sup>5</sup>

To follow the regulative principle of worship means to ensure the elements of worship are grounded in Scripture and that the circumstances, such as song selection, are in accordance with Scripture. All of this must be done to glorify God and to build up the church.

The regulative principle, understood biblically, allows for a variety of songs to be utilized in public worship. This variety should include a healthy balance of hymns, psalms, and other songs – new and old. However, that does not mean just any song should be included. Our songs must not be chosen solely based on their popularity or effectiveness in making a connection with the congregation, rather our primary filter must be whether the lyrics accurately reflect biblical truth. The music we use in public worship is secondary to

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1996), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Thomas, “The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 83.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.10.30.

the message our songs convey. As Ligon Duncan says, we are to “sing the Bible” meaning that “our singing ought to be biblical, shot through with the language, categories, and theology of the Bible.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say our singing “ought to reflect the themes and proportion of the Bible, as well as its substance and weightiness.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, we must carefully and prayerfully give consideration to the content of our songs.

God is the object of our worship and so our songs must be centered on him. It is not about us, it is about him – and so our songs must place more emphasis on the objective (who God is and what he is done) than on the subjective (how I feel). God is worthy of all of our praise and adoration and so our songs must confess him as Lord and magnify him above all things. Our songs should also be Christ-centered, in that they celebrate what God has done for us primarily through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of what worship means in his complete act of sacrifice to God on the cross.<sup>8</sup> As Gore states simply, “In worship we rehearse the gospel story.”<sup>9</sup> Singing to God is a natural and joy-filled response to God for the finished work of Christ. Luther recognized this natural response of worship by the believer when he wrote:

For faith does not rest and declare a holiday; it bursts into action, speaks and preaches of this promise and grace of God, so that other people may also may come up and partake of it. Yes, his great delight impels him [David] to compose beautiful and

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<sup>6</sup> J. Ligon Duncan, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 80.

<sup>9</sup> R. J. Gore Jr., *Covenantal Worship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002), 159.

sweet psalms and to sing lovely and joyous songs, both to praise and to thank God in his happiness and to serve his fellowmen by stimulating and teaching them.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout Scripture we see the great lengths that God goes through to redeem his people so they will worship him. In our songs, we cannot ignore the dynamics of the gospel if we are to worship God rightly. As Bryan Chapell writes:

Right worship of God requires recognition of the glories of his nature; and true recognition of God's glory always causes awareness of human need that can only be met by God's provision. True recognition of God's character and ours creates an interplay of doxology and dependence – of honor and humility – which are the defining marks of Christian worship.<sup>11</sup>

In all our worship and in the songs we sing, the good news that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead should be central.<sup>12</sup>

### Unity in Purpose

No matter how we may differ in our view of congregational singing in light of the regulative principle, we must be unified in the purpose of worship. Ultimately, our goal in worship is to honor and glorify God. We gather in public worship primarily to magnify the name of Christ and praise him for who he is and what he has done. It is the central activity of our lives and is the ultimate purpose for our being. Our chief end, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us, is to “glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther as quoted by Robin A. Leaver, “Luther on Music” *Lutheran Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 128.

<sup>11</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Frame, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 287.

While God certainly blesses us with his presence in public worship and his Spirit encourages us through his Word and through the fellowship of believers, our preoccupation during public gatherings should be on God. He is the one to whom all praise is due. He is the one who has “called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9) and “predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace” (Eph. 1:5-6), and so our worship must be centered on God and the redeeming work of Christ. Worship is the primary and eternal activity of a redeemed people.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen in our review of music and singing in the Bible, “songs were the response of Spirit-filled people to God’s salvation.”<sup>15</sup> As children of God, we have much to be thankful for and the public gatherings of the church provide believers an opportunity to express humble gratitude of praise to God. Congregational singing is one important and biblical way in which during public worship we can give melody to our offering of praise to God.

While our focus in congregational singing is primarily on God, we must also recognize the horizontal aspect of worship and the congregational unity and edification that is highlighted during public worship in general and congregational singing in particular. Early Christian worship was marked by deep mutual concern and genuine participation by the gathered body.<sup>16</sup> Congregational singing engages everyone, men and women, young and old, and affirms the unity of the body of Christ. It is an activity that everyone does together.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert G. Rayburn, “Worship in the Reformed Church.” *Presbyterian* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 32.

<sup>15</sup> Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2006), 103.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 275.

While prayer, observing the sacraments, and listening to the Word of God preached are certainly activities that the congregation engages in together, congregational singing is unique in that it gives voice to the unity of the church. As Edmund Clowney states:

We need to remember that the grace that unites us to the Lord unites us to all who have been made members of his body. Above all, we must prize the blessing of corporate worship. The church of the Lord, gathered for worship, marks the pinnacle of our fellowship with the Lord and with one another.<sup>17</sup>

Believers gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ, each with their own victories and struggles in life and diversity in background, to lift up one voice to glorify God and encourage one another in song. It is our privilege and responsibility as we assemble week by week to bring to God an offering of praise.<sup>18</sup> The unity and diversity of the church brought together in a unique way through song is also noted by John Chrysostom:

The psalm which occurred just now in the office blended all voices together, and caused one single fully harmonious chant to arise; young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all song one melody. . . . All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and of expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the Church.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps it is this kind of unity that Paul had in mind when he prayed for the Christians in Rome, saying:

May the God of endurance grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Rom. 15:5-7).

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<sup>17</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, “Corporate Worship: A Means of Grace” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Milne, 307.

<sup>19</sup> As quoted by Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 176.

Paul is convinced that our unity in Christ and our worship of him is all for the glory of God. This same preoccupation for God's glory above all things is also seen in Paul's letter to the church in Corinth: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). All things are to bring glory to God alone. Therefore, let our singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs be to the praise of God's glory.

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