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JOHN CALVIN, THE PURITANS, AND JOHN FRAME:
WORSHIP THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS AMONG
REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE ADHERENTS

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JOHN CALVIN, THE PURITANS, AND JOHN FRAME: WORSHIP THEOLOGY
AND PRAXIS AMONG REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE ADHERENTS

Howard Thomas Ohman

Read and Approved by:

Matthew D. Westerholm (Faculty Supervisor)

R. Scott Connell

Date _____

For the glory of God and
the health of the church

I dedicate this thesis to my wife, daughters and sons: Dawnie Ohman, Brandon and
Madeline Storz, Tyler Ohman, and Mackenzie Ohman

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PREFACE

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Howie Ohman

Fountain Inn, South Carolina

May 2022

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Worship regulation was at the core of the Reformation. Worship regulation began because of the excess and egregious errors of the Roman Catholic church. Liturgical practice, after centuries of authoritarian practice, had left little for the congregation to do except observe.

In medieval worship a congregation would passively observe the liturgy, comprehend little that was said, and pray privately.¹ Congregational singing had long been neglected in favor of the *Schola Cantorum*, the group of singers and teachers entrusted with the training of boys and men as church musicians.² The Lord's Supper had been reduced by half, for only the bread was issued to worshippers, and then as infrequently as once a year.³ Priests largely did not teach the Scriptures, but instead played a significant role in the perpetuation of the superstitious mystery of their actions.⁴ Behind a roodscreen, the priest would mutter prayers⁵ in an increasingly unfamiliar

¹ John Witvliet and Nathan Bierma, "Liturgy," in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 417.

² Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 20-21.

³ Witvliet and Bierma, "Liturgy," 414.

⁴ Old states, "About the year 800, Alamar of Metz, one of Charlemagnes' bishops, wrote a commentary on the liturgy which gave an allegorical meaning to every gesture, every movement, every act of the liturgy. More and more the faithful understood the liturgy as a sacred drama to be watched with awe. The allegorical explanations which began to multiply from this time on had the effect of inspiring even more ceremonials which could be interpreted and read by the spectators. Even though the worshippers might not understand the liturgical language, they could understand the visual ceremonies." Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 125.

⁵ Witvliet and Bierma, "Liturgy," 410. This mode of praying would later become a concern for Calvin as he addressed this troubling pattern for congregants in Geneva.

tongue,⁶ creating long spells of unintelligibility,⁷ a whisper that “differs in no way at all from magical incantations.”⁸ Priests thus increased the superstitious impact of the miracle of the bread becoming the sacred Host.⁹ Catholic worship clearly needed reform. Additionally, ceremonies and rites created by priests and laced with salvific import were tyrannically imposed upon congregants.¹⁰ This was fuel for Calvin’s fiery opposition to the Catholic church.¹¹ For the Roman Catholic church, with absolute authority, there was little concern for a scriptural basis for these rites.

The Reformation’s liturgical focus was to return worship response and participation to the people. The Reformation’s theological focus was to return authority to the Scriptures. Calvin articulated his opposition against Rome forcefully in the preface to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹² For the Reformers, scriptural authority was

⁶ Old states, “By the time of Charlemagne (742-814), the power of Christendom had moved North across the Alps. Islam had begun to eclipse the influence of the Christian East but the barbarian tribes of France and Germany were infusing fresh vigor into the Christian faith. Although for these Northerners Latin was a foreign language, they wanted their religion to be Roman just as they wanted to make their barbarian empire Roman, and so they maintained Latin, the Roman language, in their worship. It gave their worship a mystique of learning and culture. Not understanding the liturgical language, the use of ceremonies, symbols, vestments, pictures, and images began to be more and more important.” Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, 125.

⁷ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690* (1970; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 140.

⁸ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Casey Carmichael (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2020), 17.

⁹ Davies states that for this era, “[seeing] the sacred Host became the principal, if not the exclusive, concern of worshippers in the High Middle Ages. In the cities the people ran from one church to another in the hope of witnessing the miracle often.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 140.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 4.10.6.

¹¹ Calvin says, “Our false bishops, therefore, burden our consciences with new laws on the pretext that they have been appointed by the Lord spiritual lawgivers, as a consequence of which the government of the church has been entrusted to them. Accordingly, they contend that whatever they command and prescribe must of necessity be observed by Christian people. Anyone who violates it they hold guilty of double disobedience, because he is a rebel against God and the church.” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.6.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* xxvii. Calvin says, “It was a father who pronounced it rashness, in an obscure question, to decide in either way without clear and evident authority from Scripture. They forgot this landmark when they enacted so many constitutions, so many canons, and so many dogmatical decisions, without sanction from the word of God.”

significant because the Scriptures were considered the sole authority above church tradition and practice. This became known as *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone). A fundamental principle in *sola Scriptura* is not only that Scripture itself is the final authority of faith and practice, but also that Scripture is sufficient in all matters of faith and practice. Consequently, this tenet from the Reformers had an impact on liturgical practice.¹³ This thorough application of Scripture in worship praxis became known as the regulative principle. Thus, *sola Scriptura* was the foundation in the creation of the regulative principle, its origins based in the ethos of the Reformation itself.¹⁴ The application of scriptural principles to worship praxis extends past the Westminster Assembly and continues to influence Reformed churches today.¹⁵

The original purpose of the regulative principle was to make the Scriptures the ultimate authority in worship practice. In its goal of regulating the worship practices of the church, the regulative principle makes key distinctions between “elements,” “circumstances,” and the “forms” of worship. These three terms are the *ultima ratio* (the final argument) of the regulative principle. There has been much debate over these three terms over the centuries, starting with the Reformation era through the Puritan era of the seventeenth century and continuing through today.

Defining and applying these three terms consistently and evenly has been problematic in the worship of the church. For Calvin and for the Puritans in attendance at

¹³ R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 247. Clark states, “The first stage of the reformation of worship established the formal principle of the Reformation: *sola scriptura*. The Reformed churches applied the Scripture principle most thoroughly to the practice of worship.”

¹⁴ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 229. Clark comments, “Calvin, Ursinus, and the Westminster divines after them understood that the Reformed principle of worship is *sola scriptura* applied to the act of corporate worship.”

¹⁵ J. Ligon Duncan III, “Does God Care How We Worship?,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 21. Duncan says, “This strong and special emphasis on the corporate worship of God being founded positively on the directions of Scripture came to be known as the regulative principle. It is an extension of the Reformational axiom of *sola scriptura*.”

the Westminster Assembly in 1649,¹⁶ the difference was not so much in the definitions of the three terms, for much of the same language was shared regarding the regulative principle. Because of the varied interpretations and debates of the terms—elements, forms, and circumstances—attention is diverted from the sufficiency and meaning of Scripture itself to the regulative principle contained in the Westminster documents. Ironically, one of the tenets of the Westminster Assembly was the preservation of Scripture’s authority. The danger of diverting attention away from Scripture existed in the era of the Westminster Assembly and has continued into the twenty-first century.¹⁷ Authority rests in Scripture alone because of its divine origin. Documents of human origin must always take a subordinate role, even if the purpose of their creation was the preservation of scriptural authority.

This study attempts to discover the differences within the church regarding the application of the regulative principle in worship theology and praxis. How do fellow believers, who all hold to the authority of Scripture, come to disparate views in the application of the regulative principle? Are there inconsistencies in theological understanding or merely inconsistencies in the application of the regulative principle? This thesis will explore and examine those differences between John Calvin, the Puritans, and contemporary theologian John Frame considering common commitments to the sufficiency of Scripture.

¹⁶ John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (1973; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 29-30. This was the end date of the last plenary session of the Westminster Assembly that met from July 1, 1643, to February 22, 1649. However, members of the Assembly met occasionally after that to examine and license candidates to the ministry until 1652.

¹⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans: Their Origins and Successors; Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences, 1959-1978* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 209. Lloyd-Jones states, “Another danger which Calvinism without Methodism is prone to is that Confessions of Faith, instead of being subordinate standards, tend to be the primary and supreme standard, replacing the Bible in that position. . . . Officially we say these Confessions are the ‘subordinate standard’; the Bible comes first then these. But there is always a danger that the Calvinist may reverse the order.”

The regulative principle makes key distinctions between elements, forms, and the circumstances of worship. This thesis examines worship theology and praxis between three distinct views of the regulative principle: (1) the original Reformers' view as articulated by Calvin, (2) the narrow view of the Puritans as codified by the Westminster Assembly, and (3) a broad view as espoused by modern-day theologian John Frame.

This thesis traces the contours of Calvin's regulative principle to the Puritans' regulative principle of worship before culminating with Frame's application of the regulative principle. This tracing invites a host of related questions: What theological commitments were sustained from Calvin to the Puritans? Conversely, what theological commitments were not sustained from Calvin to the Puritans, and why? How does the theology of John Frame fit into this picture? Does Frame follow closely the path of the Puritans or does Frame's understanding of the regulative principle follow Calvin?

Working backwards chronologically, John Frame's controversial application of the regulative principle cannot be understood without understanding the Puritan codification at the Westminster Assembly. Subsequently, the Puritans' codification of the regulative principle cannot be understood without understanding Calvin's foundation of this principle. Moreover, this thesis examines and compares the regulative principle of worship between a person in a particular historical setting (John Calvin) with a group in another historical setting (the Puritans). This kind of comparison (person-to-group) inherently comes with distinct challenges. Yet the historical narrative demands this type of comparison where the regulative principle is concerned. This thesis will answer these questions and synthesize subsequent answers for coherent analysis as it relates to the regulative principle of worship.

Thesis

The contemporary discussion concerning the regulative principle needs a fresh examination of how the sufficiency of Scripture guides the church's theology and

worship praxis. From John Calvin to the Puritans to John Frame, the regulative principle has been understood and applied in disparate ways. This thesis will argue that when the sufficiency of Scripture is mistaken for the specificity of Scripture, principles become rigid commands, and restrictive conclusions ensue. Such was the historical sequence from Calvin in the mid-sixteenth century to the Puritans almost a century later. Calvin also argued for worship practices that were “expressly set down in Scripture,” yet balanced that conviction with his concern for unity and practiced accommodation in matters of *adiaphora* (indifferent things).

The Puritans applied Calvin’s scriptural edicts with rigidity and neglected Calvin’s balance. This thesis claims that Calvin’s full impact on the principle of regulation cannot be critically evaluated unless there is reconciliation between Calvin’s “expressly set down in Scripture” edict and his principle of accommodation. Calvin’s worship theology is commonly recognized in his polemical edicts. Lesser known is Calvin’s principle of accommodation. Both emphases accurately reveal the full import of Calvin’s impact. Omitting either perspective leaves Calvin’s views on worship regulation unbalanced and misconstrued.

This thesis presents a taxonomy of views among regulative principle adherents, exploring strengths and weaknesses and showing how a balance of biblical principles and biblical freedom provides a necessary framework for worship praxis in the church.

Scope and Delimitations

This thesis makes claims concerning Calvin and the Puritans. The Puritans, as a group, emerged out of the Church of England in 1567. They emerged because the Church of England retained an excess of Rome’s corrupt practices and errant theology. As frustration increased, so did the desire to eradicate theological error and liturgical excess.

This desire for a full Reformation reached its culmination in the Westminster Assembly.¹⁸ Ironically, though Puritans themselves were known for precision,¹⁹ defining Puritanism precisely today remains elusive. This was because the Puritans were more amorphous, with various groups within Puritanism, but also because Puritan interests changed from one decade to another, beginning in the 1570s.²⁰ Therefore, the Puritans are delimited in this thesis to their characteristics and identity at the time of the Assembly.

Familiarity with the Literature

Bruce Gordon's *Calvin* is a preeminent, authoritative, and comprehensive biography of Calvin's life.²¹ Providing rationale and context into Calvin's acerbic personality and prodigious intellect, Gordon gives historical context to Calvin: husband, student, Reformed leader, preacher, continental collaborator, networker, theologian, author, and humanist. Carlos Eire's work, *War on Idolatry: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*, traces the issue of idolatry as central to the Reformation.²² Eire explains Calvin's identifiable convictions: his denial of compromise, his spiritual worship, and his iconoclasm. Richard A. Muller explores and examines the theology of Calvin and its theological influence in history in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*.²³ Muller debunks much of the "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" thinking that has been the accepted rule of thought for many following Calvin's death.

¹⁸ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643-1653*, Studies on the Westminster Assembly (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 11.

¹⁹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 71.

²⁰ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 255.

²¹ Gordon, *Calvin*.

²² Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²³ Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Muller gives perspective to Calvin's influence as a Reformer and his use of the scholastic method. He makes the case that Calvin was not the sole arbiter of Reformed confessional identity in his own lifetime, and he ought not to be arbitrarily selected as the arbiter of what was Reformed in the generations following his death.

John D. Witvliet's *Worship Seeking Understanding* devotes three chapters to historical studies, of which two are devoted solely to Calvin.²⁴ Negatively, Witvliet identifies four liturgical sins that Calvin warned against: disobedience, hypocrisy, superstition, and idolatry. Positively, Calvin is replete with spatial and sensory metaphors that frame the essence of worship. Herman Selderhuis provides readers with a comprehensive view of Calvin in *The Calvin Handbook*.²⁵ Selderhuis serves as contributing author and editor of this multi-authored work that examines Calvin from a diversity of perspectives. *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts* is W. David O. Taylor's contribution to Calvin's world.²⁶ Taylor's focus is on Calvin's understanding of materiality and the doctrine of creation. Taylor gives a surprising but balanced view of Calvin's strengths and weaknesses concerning the liturgical arts.

Calvin's Ladder, by Julie Canlis, highlights the motivations behind Calvin's acerbic, though warranted, writing on idolatry.²⁷ Worship is the ascent of the soul, a window into Trinitarian *koinonia* where the individual is allowed to engage in participation with God. This is spiritual communion with God, highlighted by material "ladders" that God ordains to help the individual ascend as Christ ascends. God comes

²⁴ John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

²⁵ Herman J. Selderhuis, ed., *The Calvin Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

²⁶ W. David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

²⁷ Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

down to us so that we might go up to him. Canlis explains that this could unlawfully elevate the worshiper's status and exalt humanity, and Calvin's needed corrective for this error was the transcendence of God.

The historical period in England between Calvin and the Puritans is detailed in Leslie Williams' *Emblem of Faith Untouched: A Short Life of Thomas Cranmer*.²⁸ Cranmer's life gives us the context from which the Puritans sprang several decades later, and from which emerges their strong motivations. While the Puritans' focus on preaching is an undeniable historical reality, Chad Van Dixhoorn's *God's Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643-1653*²⁹ provides a rationale that combines pragmatic concerns and theological conviction. The number of available preachers and quality of preaching was at an all-time low in the years immediately preceding the Assembly. Van Dixhoorn gives historical context to the dearth of preaching during that era in England and how the Assembly initiated measures to correct this weakness.

Bryan D. Spink's *Sacrament, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines* gives background behind England and Scotland's interconnected history, providing historical context to the Westminster Assembly.³⁰ *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* is Robert Letham's informative contribution to this thesis.³¹ Providing rich detail about the Assembly itself, its people, debates, and theological climate, Letham also highlights an under-represented aspect of the Assembly: its predominate English character. Horton Davies' initial foray, *The Worship of the English*

²⁸ Leslie Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched: A Short Life of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

²⁹ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*.

³⁰ Bryan D. Spinks, *Sacraments, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental Theology and Liturgy in England and Scotland, 1603-1662* (London: Routledge Taylor and France, 2002).

³¹ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009).

Puritans, followed by his comprehensive opus, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690*, traces origins and developments of all ecclesial institutions within England.³² Davies chronicles developments within architecture, music, art, and theology. John Leith's *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* presents the Westminster Confession as normative and authoritative theology.³³ Leith gives another account of the background and character of the Assembly and puts the Confession in its historical, political, cultural, and theological contexts.

Bridging the gap between the historic Reformed ecclesial concerns and present-day ecclesial realities, R. Scott Clark's *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* bemoans the loss of a distinctive Reformed identity.³⁴ This loss of identity has occurred because the Reformed churches have been affected deeply by two alien impulses: the quest for illegitimate religious certainty (QIRC) and the quest for illegitimate religious experience (QIRE). These alien and distinct impulses, Clark maintains, have come from a church that has neglected Calvin and the Puritans in the regulative principle of worship. T. David Gordon's essay, "Some Answers about the Regulative Principle," maintains that Frame presents a straw man argument and has entirely misunderstood the primary impulses of the regulative principle.³⁵ Terry L. Johnson's *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* is another advocate for a return to the Puritan standard of the regulative principle.³⁶ Johnson warns against evangelical syncretism and insists that

³² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*; Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*.

³³ John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (1973; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008).

³⁴ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*.

³⁵ T. David Gordon, "Some Answers about the Regulative Principle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (1993): 321-29.

³⁶ Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: EP Books, 2014).

Reformed churches cannot have Reformed theology without traditional Reformed worship. Contrastingly, John Frame's *Worship in Spirit and Truth* and *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* provide rationale for his broad interpretation of the regulative principle.³⁷ Frame makes connections from Calvin and the Puritans to present-day liturgical realities that present a broad understanding of "circumstances" in worship praxis. *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* articulates R. J. Gore's contribution to the conversation concerning worship praxis.³⁸ Connecting the Westminster Assembly's work with Calvin's writing on *adiaphora* (indifferent things), Gore attempts to balance biblical and pastoral concerns with the conclusion that the regulative principle is unworkable.³⁹

Void in the Literature

The three views of Calvin, the Puritans, and John Frame turn on the definitions of "circumstances," "prescribed," "warranted," and "commanded." The second and third views claim Calvin as their spiritual progenitor, yet they each express contradictory expressions of the regulative principle. This thesis will show the inconsistencies of each view's conclusions from their employed hermeneutic. There are subtle dangers of the narrow application of the regulative principle. Additionally, with surprising inconsistency, too few mention John Calvin's application of the regulative principle. This project contends that faulty conclusions are often a result of unwarranted hermeneutical hierarchies. As legalists restrict behavior and suppress authentic spiritual life, so too does

³⁷ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996); John M. Frame *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997).

³⁸ R. J. Gore Jr., *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

³⁹ R. J. Gore Jr., "Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Critics," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 2 (2005): 377.

the narrowly applied regulative principle. This error leads to unproductive disputes and conflicts within the church, needlessly stunting her witness to a dying culture.

Outline of Chapters

The following chapters support this thesis, presenting a taxonomy of views of regulative principle adherents.

Chapter Two: Calvin and the Inception of the Regulative Principle

The foundation of the regulative principle begins with Calvin. Chapter 2 explores Calvin's influence within the Reformation following Luther while carrying the mantle of Zwingli's fight against idolatry. It was an era that saw a nascent church break from Rome's dominant tyranny⁴⁰ during the Middle Ages and Medieval era. As it unfolded, the Reformation was tenuous, and its success was far from guaranteed. As a prolific writer and communicator with other leaders around the continent, Calvin enjoyed a unique perspective from which to understand and influence the Reformed church during its first decades. Calvin considered issues through the lens of what would be harmful and what would be beneficial to the church.⁴¹

Numerous threats jeopardized the success of Reformation efforts. Breaking away from Rome without a titular head of these reformational efforts, such as the pope with Roman Catholicism, required monumental effort to ward off the threat of factionalism. The belief in the authority of Scripture aligned all those within the Reformation, but the authority of Scripture did not always align worship praxis within the Reformation. Regional accommodations, theological differences, intertwined church-state

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.6.

⁴¹ Graham Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket? Reflection on the Historical Development of the Regulative Principle in Worship," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 7.

relationships, and differing convictions all played a role in creating a diverse worship praxis among the churches of the Reformation. As a result, Calvin's regulative principle of worship is both complex and nuanced.

Calvin's view on worship regulation stems from his comprehensive theology. The second section of chapter 2 identifies three distinct yet connected theological thrusts that form the boundaries of Calvin's concern for worship regulation. These theological thrusts form the foundation of Calvin's regulative principle.

In the last section, chapter 2 explores Calvin's distinct application of the regulative principle. This exploration begins with the primacy of the Word—an expression of the Reformation's value, *sola Scriptura*. Calvin and the Puritans travel virtually the same path when articulating the heart of the regulative principle, yet their paths diverge when addressing Calvin's principle of accommodation and his treatment of *adiaphora* (indifferent things). The Puritans applied Calvin's principles with a rigidity that Calvin himself did not display. This chapter will advance the claim that the Puritans' application of the regulative principle showed a significant narrowing of Calvin's understanding of *adiaphora* and neglected Calvin's principle of accommodation.⁴²

Chapter Three: The Puritan Codification of the Regulative Principle

The Puritans' articulation of the regulative principle of worship via the Westminster Assembly is the *locus classicus* of worship regulation. Four distinct documents from the Westminster Assembly contributed to the regulative principle: the

⁴² Calvin states, "But as in external discipline and ceremonies, he has not been pleased to prescribe every particular that we ought to observe (he foresaw that this depended on the nature of the times, and that one form would not suit all ages), in them we must have recourse to the general rules which he has given, employing them to test whatever the necessity of the Church may require to be enjoined for order and decency. Lastly, as he has not delivered any express command, because things of this nature are not necessary to salvation, and, for the edification of the Church, *should be accommodated* [emphasis added] to the varying circumstances of each age and nation, it will be proper, as the interest of the Church may require, to change and abrogate the old, as well as to introduce new forms." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

Publick Directory of Worship, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. The regulative principle contributed positively to the church by establishing the church's foundation for worship practice and limiting the church's authority for prescribing ceremonies and rites to Scripture alone. Scripture-supported worship praxis was a significant Puritan corrective for the church.

Yet these Puritan correctives, as codified at the Westminster Assembly and laden with good intentions, were guilty of going beyond Scripture. While the Puritans took seriously Calvin's concern that true worship should not be identified with externals, the Westminster Assembly felt it had to be more precise in proscribing improper ceremonies.⁴³ This tendency to be "more precise" became characteristic of the Puritans, as they insisted on an explicit biblical sanction for every ordinance of worship and almost every detail of worship, displaying their desire to faithfully follow the New Testament.⁴⁴ The Puritans sustained, even exceeded, Calvin's commitment to scriptural fidelity. Yet the Puritans mistook scriptural sufficiency for specificity in worship practice and displayed increasingly hardened positions, largely due to the political and ecclesiastical realities of their time.⁴⁵ Ultimately, this resulted in narrowing the conditions favorable to label worship practices as *adiaphora*.

Even before the Assembly convened, Reformed theology was, as a movement, already on a path toward fastidious refinement of theological definitions and positions.⁴⁶ It preferred an exact theology, requiring abstract words and logical formulations.⁴⁷ Now,

⁴³ Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket?," 26.

⁴⁴ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 256.

⁴⁵ Keith links Queen Elizabeth's imposition of the Book of Common Prayer with the hardening of the Puritans' position: "In short, the intransigence of the Anglican Establishment forced the Puritans into an elaboration of the Regulative Principle *beyond* [emphasis added] what Calvin would have envisaged." Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket?," 17.

⁴⁶ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 66.

⁴⁷ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 71.

with *sola Scriptura* as liturgical criterion,⁴⁸ the Puritans went on a quest to turn intermittent hints of liturgical direction in the New Testament into inviolable edicts.⁴⁹ The corrective efforts of the Westminster Assembly were stringent, scrupulous, and dogmatic, displaying an obduracy with which the Puritans claimed the sanction of the entire New Testament.⁵⁰ This thesis argues that in these Puritan iconoclastic tendencies, they distanced themselves from Calvin's principle of accommodation.⁵¹ The Puritans narrowed Calvin's category of *adiaphora*, displaying a significant discontinuity from his application of the regulative principle. This chapter explores the three major motivations behind the Puritans' convictions along with the unique historical circumstances that shaped their emergence. This chapter will advance the claim that these motivations were the primary shaping force of the Westminster formulations of the regulative principle.

Chapter Four: John Frame's Broad View of the Regulative Principle

All adherents to the regulative principle of this thesis support the basic tenets of Calvin's worship regulation. John Frame is a modern-day Reformed theologian who reaffirms his commitment to the regulative principle.⁵² However, it is clear from the outset that his language and terms are crucial to this discussion. Frame affirms that "worship must be scriptural (i.e., consistent with Scripture) and, indeed, limited by

⁴⁸ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 259.

⁴⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 258.

⁵⁰ Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948; repr. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 110.

⁵¹ Gore states, "Calvin used both leavened and unleavened bread in communion. He accommodated himself to the Genevan practice of using unleavened bread during his first stay." Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 76. See also pages 65-70. This thesis will treat Calvin's principle of accommodation and *adiaphora* as intrinsically linked.

⁵² Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (Fall 1992): 357-66.

Scripture.”⁵³ At first glance, this would seem to be evidence of the affirmation of the narrow view which uses the abbreviated “whatever is not commanded is forbidden” designation. Yet Frame contends that in Westminster’s formulation, “commanded” is not used, nor is “prescribed” or “warranted.” Indeed, these are, for Frame, questions that need answers. Frame believes that there is little distinction between worship and life with the regulative principle. Hence, Frame’s category of circumstances is large and gives much latitude in the application of the regulative principle.

Contrastingly, many believe that Frame has distorted the intention of the regulative principle and his application is unbiblical, unreasonable, non-Reformed, and even deceptive.⁵⁴ Many believe his application of circumstances stretches the limits of what the regulative principle actually regulates.⁵⁵ For many, Frame’s *Worship in Spirit and Truth* is the epitome of what the Puritans were against and has put a stain upon the Reformed community’s long-held views of worship.⁵⁶

Yet others contend that Frame has faithfully applied Calvin’s regulative principle, albeit with different and much broader conclusions.⁵⁷ Frame believes the believer’s entire life should be regulated by Scripture, and the regulative principle of worship is a restatement of this broader principle. Accordingly, chapter 4 will explore Frame’s application of the regulative principle and continuities and discontinuities with both Calvin and the Puritans. Chapter 4 will include a taxonomy of views that have

⁵³ Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle,” 357.

⁵⁴ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 240.

⁵⁵ Terry L. Johnson, “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” in *The Worship of God: Reformed Concepts of Biblical Worship* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005), 19-20.

⁵⁶ Gordon, “The Westminster Assembly’s Unworkable and Unscriptural View,” 353. Gordon contends that Frame displays an “unwillingness to discuss the historic principle within the arena in which it was historically developed.”

⁵⁷ Jeffrey Meyers states, “John Frame’s *Worship in Spirit and Truth* . . . is helpful in so far as he provides a biblical critique of a strict use of the traditional regulative principle of worship.” Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 408.

engaged with him either in support or in opposition to his views. Finally, this chapter concludes by evaluating whether Frame’s critics’ objections stem from philosophical misalignment with the regulative principle or from a difference in a preferred worship aesthetic.

Chapter Five: The Regulative Principle and Hierarchy

The final chapter will analyze and synthesize each view for modern application in the church today via hierarchy. When arbitrary priorities are imposed artificially on scriptural texts, the result is unwarranted hierarchies that impact worship praxis. Chapter 5 explores critical questions: Does the regulative principle have a crucial place in the modern church, or is it an antiquated tool with an expiration date after almost four hundred years? This thesis contends that when a human-originated principle, whose reforming intention was solely Scripture, becomes as authoritative as divine Scripture, then a step has been taken down an unnecessarily restrictive path. The modern-day Reformed community can become over-scrupulous when semantic meanings are mined for minutia. The danger is that this diligence is applied to a human, rather than a divine, document. Human documents, such as the Westminster Confession—however noble and worthy of admiration—will always carry with it two extant realities: (1) they are of fallible human origin, not divine origin and, (2) they will always be susceptible to the era from which they sprang, which speaks to their limitation.

Analysis of the regulative principle itself can also lead to much confusion. Letham mentions that “when denominations in practice adhere to their own interpretation of the Assembly’s theology and, indeed, add other elements unknown to the divines, inevitable questions follow.”⁵⁸ For example, whose regulative principle is under consideration? Is it Calvin’s, the Westminster divines’, or the subsequent three hundred

⁵⁸ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 8.

fifty years' worth of historical interpretation of the regulative principle? How does one honor 350 years of ecclesial insight while avoiding the danger of elevating this insight to the status of holy Scripture? Ironically, these questions have a similar thrust as those of the Reformers over five hundred years ago. Does tradition carry as much authority as Scripture? The Reformers' answer was *sola Scriptura*.

As this thesis discovers the original intent of Calvin's words, as well as the Westminster divines', there are still larger issues to consider. Is it possible that the Westminster divines were in error in any part of their articulation of worship? Is it possible that Calvin was in error? The Reformed conviction of *sola Scriptura* demands that these possibilities must be considered. Nautical destinations from the same starting point can be thwarted when the departed courses differ by scant degrees. Does the Reformed church worship milieu of today represent the arrival of a course that was launched almost five hundred years ago by Calvin and almost four hundred years ago by the Puritans at the Westminster Assembly? These questions are not to disparage, because the church's worship regulation today is built upon the foundation laid by the divines at the Assembly. But what if the Puritans' compass was off by a few degrees? What if Calvin was off by even less, but still misguided?

This is where Frame's answers have the most value. Not because he is immune to error, but because Frame has courageously questioned Calvin and the Westminster divines for scriptural accuracy, a direction that the Reformed community today rarely travels. Calvin's scriptural interpretations in worship regulation are accepted as fact, and there is significant pressure to accept Calvin's hermeneutic *in toto*, lest one be considered part of the liturgically "loose" adherents of the normative principle. Moreover, when denominational minister ordinations include full adherence to the Westminster

standards,⁵⁹ these human documents give the regulative principle creedal status.⁶⁰ When the debate reaches the stage of the minutiae surrounding the variant readings between a comma or a semicolon in a human document, the church is in danger.⁶¹ This chapter concludes by drawing implications from the error of unwarranted hierarchies.

The church's motto should echo the humanist motto: "Back to the original sources." Otherwise, great pinnacles of theological enterprise, such as the Westminster Assembly, could assume primary roles instead of subordinate roles. When commitment to the regulative principle becomes the criterion by which the contemporary Reformed church ensures theological adherence, the church is in dangerous territory of departing from *sola Scriptura*.

⁵⁹ John M. Frame, *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 260.

⁶⁰ Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket?," 28.

⁶¹ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 34.

CHAPTER 2

JOHN CALVIN AND THE INCEPTION OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Introduction

While Henry Ford did not actually invent the automobile, he popularized it and made such an indelible impression on the public's consciousness of the automobile that when one thinks of the beginning of the automobile, Henry Ford comes to the forefront. Similarly, while John Calvin did not invent the regulative principle, he wrote about worship extensively as the center of the church, and because the regulative principle is an extension of Calvin's theology of worship, much material is germane.

Calvin's influence behind the regulative principle is partially due to his proclivity in writing. Calvin produced and printed over one hundred thousand words every year from 1550-1563.¹ It was fortuitous that he lived in Geneva, since it was an important center in the printing industry. During the 1550s, Calvin's writings accounted for nearly one-fourth of Geneva's publishing efforts.² Calvin was influential in many other ways: his liturgical praxis, ecclesiastical boundaries, and theological acumen dominate the landscape when it comes to the inception of the regulative principle. As Graham Keith notes, "John Calvin did not originate the Regulative Principle It was already an important theme with Zwingli and with his successor at Zurich, Bullinger. There can, however, be no doubt that Calvin was the Reformer who put this Principle on

¹ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 288.

² Raymond A. Mentzer, "Calvin and France," in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 80.

a sound theological footing.”³ Because of these reasons, Calvin’s dominant influence was behind the inception of the regulative principle.

Consequently, this chapter will endeavor to demonstrate how the regulative principle ostensibly begins with Calvin. This will be demonstrated by three areas of focus. First, this chapter will begin with an overview of Calvin’s influence: (1) his place in the Reformation and (2) his continuing influence around the theme of the regulative principle. Second, the chapter will turn its attention to Calvin’s theology of worship—the foundation of the regulative principle—as expressed by Calvin’s emphases on God’s honor and glory, Christianity’s ecclesiastical center, and communion with God. Third, the regulative principle will be examined through the lens of Calvin’s liturgical application and counsel. Here, the material will focus on the Word’s primacy before examining Calvin’s writing on the regulative principle. Finally, this section will be concluded by observing Calvin’s style of accommodation and Puritan discontinuities with Calvin in worship praxis.

Calvin’s Historical Context and Influence

While the codification of the regulative principle belongs to the divines at the Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), the genesis of this principle belongs to the events and figures of the Reformation more than a century earlier. If it is germane to say that the Puritans of the Westminster Assembly “birthed” the regulative principle, certainly the conception of this principle began with the Reformers who dared to conceive of a break with Rome and of a church that follows the scriptural admonitions and patterns that

³ Graham Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket? Reflection on the Historical Development of the Regulative Principle in Worship,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 11.

identifies it as truly Christian. These seminal thoughts about the church and its worship are found in the writings of many Reformers, especially John Calvin.

John Calvin, son of Gerard Cauvin, was born in Noyon, France in 1509 and died in Geneva, Switzerland in 1564. Calvin began his theological studies at College des Capettes in Noyon before he moved to Paris to study for priesthood at College do la Marche. Eventually, Calvin settled at the more prestigious College de Montaigu at the end of 1523. He had a hard, cruel, and disciplined life there in an educational setting where Erasmus and Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, also received training.⁴ Calvin moved to Orleans in 1528 and switched his focus to study law where long hours of study and rigorous legal training left its imprint.⁵ In 1533 Calvin experienced a sudden shift from obstinacy to teachableness and was converted.⁶ Calvin lived in an era of humanistic ideals but also an age “when events moved quickly and information very slowly. Their actions and thoughts were profoundly shaped by a world over which they had little control.”⁷

The Reformation was a turbulent and chaotic time in its opposition to Rome. Rome’s powerful and prevailing influence over the entire European continent was pervasive for hundreds of years. Corruption, theological error, and the doctrine of papal infallibility contributed to an oppressive environment. Scripture had been usurped, for tradition and ceremonial rites were being venerated for their inherent value. Reformation efforts focused on this egregious error. Carlos Eire writes, “Protestantism claimed that the medieval Church had fallen into idolatry . . . opposed to the worship revealed by God in

⁴ Gordon, *Calvin*, 6-7.

⁵ Gordon states that studying law “sharpened his mind to interpret texts and for precise arguments based on humanist methods; it provided him with a thorough grasp of subjects, ranging from marriage and property to crime. He was taught to frame legislation, write constitutions and offer legal opinions, all of which would loom large in his Genevan career.” Gordon, *Calvin*, 22.

⁶ Gordon, *Calvin*, 22.

⁷ Gordon, *Calvin*, x.

scripture [The] Church had set itself up as an idol, substituting its own decrees for those of God.”⁸ Reformers drew a sharp distinction between “good” and “evil,” or “true” and “false” worship, and Rome was considered Baal. As Calvin says,

Now then let the papists, in order to extenuate their vices as much as possible, deny, if they can, that the state of religion is as much vitiated and corrupted with them as it was in the kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam. They have a grosser idolatry, and in doctrine are not one whit more pure; rather, perhaps, they are even still more impure.⁹

Calvin unleashed his rhetorical tirades towards the one opponent that he believed deserved it and grounded his comparison with the abuses of Israel in the Old Testament.¹⁰ While Protestantism pulled in one direction against a common enemy, their lack of theological consensus prevented them from exhibiting a unified approach. Historian J. Marius J. Lange Van Ravenswaay writes, “The Reformers were all unified that the Catholic church was the false religion. Yet, this holy war against ‘false religion’ was far from unified. Differences of opinion on theology and reforming policy led to struggles within Protestantism itself, pointing to divisions that would plague the Reformation for years to come.”¹¹

Some of these differences consisted of complementary but different theological focuses. Luther’s Reformation efforts centered around justification and the mercy of God, while Zwingli’s centered on an uncompromising transcendentalism.¹² For Luther, the

⁸ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 54.

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 696.

¹⁰ Van Ravenswaay states, “Calvin used the same argument against his opponents time and again. Believers had to . . . make a choice between God and Baal. The Catholic Church was the sixteenth-century Baal.” J. Marius J. Lange Van Ravenswaay, “Calvin and His Opponents,” trans. Judith J. Guder, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 157.

¹¹ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 55.

¹² Eire, *War against the Idols*, 86. Eire states, “Until Calvin emerged as the new leader of the war against idolatry, Zwingli remained the principal interpreter of ‘true religion,’ and his uncompromising transcendentalism continued to function as the heart of a rapidly growing body of iconoclasts.”

alternative to faith is works, represented by the Judaistic heresy. For Zwingli, the alternative to faith is every kind of idolatry, represented by pagan doctrine.¹³ Calvin followed Zwingli in picking up the theme of idolatry and emerged as a leader in opposing idolatry.¹⁴ He saw himself as a prophet of the church, and he brooked no rivals.¹⁵ Calvin's Reformation efforts aimed at reestablishing the correct worship and veneration of God.¹⁶ He gave considerable weight to false worship in his writings and was relentless in writing polemics against this Roman error—his prolific writings throughout the sixteenth-century bearing witness to this datum.¹⁷

Calvin was an influential figure of the Reformation and made a substantial contribution to the political, ecclesiastical, and social changes in the western world.¹⁸ Yet he was far from the only significant figure of the Reformation. He was one of several influential Reformers that followed the contours of the first Protestant leaders. Calvin was one among many influential theologians of his generation along with, for example,

¹³ Locher further explains, "For Zwingli and his followers, no less than for Luther and his, the Reformation was above all a religious movement that included concrete social changes. The main difference is that, for the Zwinglians, the Reformation decision consisted not so much in finding a just God, but rather in turning away from idolatry to the true God." Gottfried Wilhelm Locher, "Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives," in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, vol. 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 34.

¹⁴ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 86.

¹⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, vii.

¹⁶ Christopher Strohm, "The Law and Canon Law," trans. Randi H. Lundell, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 399.

¹⁷ Calvin states, "I mean the unspeakable idolatry present in the Mass. They pretend that bread is clothed with divinity, and raise it aloft to be adored as God. Once elevated, all worship it. This is so loaded with outrage and so shameful that no one could really believe it without seeing it for themselves. . . . A little crust of bread, I say, is displayed, adored, and prayed to as God. Finally, they believe that this little crust is God. No pagan ever believed this about his statues!" Jean Calvin, *God or Baal: Two Letters on the Reformation of Worship and Pastoral Service*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 33.

¹⁸ Herman J. Selderhuis, "Calvin Images: Images and Self-Image," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 5. Historian Stephan Ehrenpreis adds, "The age of Calvin was the time of the Reformation and humanism. In his role as lawyer, humanist, and reformer of the church, Calvin embodied both intellectual movements." Stefan Ehrenpreis, "Education and Pedagogy," trans. Randi H. Lundell, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 428.

Peter Martyr Vermigli, John a Lasco, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger.¹⁹ Calvin was part of a diverse tradition that emphasized opposition to Rome, scriptural authority over ecclesiastical traditions, and doctrinal preaching. Calvin made a significant contribution to the efforts of the Reformation, along with several others such as Peter Martyr, John a Lasco, Martin Bucer, and Heinrich Bullinger.²⁰ His main contribution was as a second-generation codifier of the Reformation,²¹ leaving a legacy for Reformed generations to come and further refining Zwingli's theology of idolatry.²²

Calvin's influence also existed because of his skill at writing. Exposed to the classics and educated during a period of humanistic ideals, Calvin exhibited considerable skill in writing.²³ Calvin's writing output, as already mentioned, was prolific. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* could be considered the epitome of Calvin's entire writing output. The 1536 version of *Institutes* was originally conceived as catechetical in nature, but by 1539 it became a book of instruction for ministers. Calvin, Gordon explains, was "a man who rarely, if ever, changed his mind on a topic, yet continuously and restlessly reformulated and rewrote his thoughts in pursuit of greater clarity and

¹⁹ Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Reformed Orthodoxy," in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 476. Theologian Richard A. Muller clarifies, "Specifically, Calvin's work ought to be understood as a development of a Reformed tradition that began with such Reformers as Zwingli, Bucer, and Oecolampadius and, as such, represent one contribution, albeit a significant one, among others made by thinkers of Calvin's generation (e.g., Bullinger, Vermigli, Viret, Musculus, Hyperius, a Lasco) toward the confessional and dogmatic codification of a tradition." Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 41.

²⁰ Trueman, "Calvin and Reformed Orthodoxy," 476. Trueman adds, "Indeed, it is arguable that the single most dominant theological figure in the Reformed tradition was actually Augustine, and that much of Reformed theology represents a distinctive form of Protestant dialogue with his thought rather than that of Calvin or any other sixteenth-century figure."

²¹ Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 36.

²² Eire, *War against the Idols*, 206. Eire states, "Calvin further refines the theology of idolatry that had already been developed by Zwingli. Though Calvin's predecessors had also placed the blame for idolatry in human beings rather than in the material world, they had focused on this problem in isolation from the doctrine of the Fall."

²³ Gordon states, "Calvin loved to write and took delight in crafting elegant prose. His Latin was largely Ciceronian in style and wonderfully clear . . . [To] read Calvin is to be in the hand of a master of language." Gordon, *Calvin*, 148.

insight.”²⁴ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* would be revised again in 1543, 1550, and finally in 1559, expanded and considerably larger. Calvin wrote commentaries, sermons, treatises, and letters to address specific pressing issues. Between 1532 and 1564, Calvin had published 329 editions for 119 titles. He was unique among the Reformers with many titles in multiple editions and languages. Of all of Calvin’s sermons, 874 are still in existence, along with many letters of personal correspondence, to which this chapter now turns.²⁵

While born in France, Calvin lived the majority of his adult life in Switzerland and was truly a continental theologian. He had extensive networks of correspondence, extending across Europe, and was constantly in dialogue with others.²⁶ Calvin’s personal correspondence afforded him a unique “birds-eye” perspective of the entire Reformation, contributing to his influence within the broader Reformation community throughout Europe.²⁷

As part of his larger influence, Calvin’s reach also extends to worship practice. Reformation efforts put congregational singing in the forefront after hundreds of years of neglect. Calvin was instrumental, following Luther’s lead, of putting congregational song in the vernacular of a particular congregation. In 1539 Calvin published in Strasbourg the *Aulcuns psaumes et cantiques mis en chant*, including twelve psalms by Marot, a famous court poet, and at least five by Calvin himself.²⁸ This was the first Reformed Psalter with eighteen psalms and three songs of praise including the Cantic of Simeon, the

²⁴ Gordon, *Calvin*, 3.

²⁵ Paul Fields, “Calvin’s Works—Old and New,” in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 8-15.

²⁶ Gordon, *Calvin*, ix.

²⁷ Gordon states, “The constant exchange of ideas and information was the very life blood of the Reformation, and he came to see himself working with partners and linked churches. Most prominent were Philip Melanchthon and Heinrich Bullinger, but there were a host of others.” Gordon, *Calvin*, ix.

²⁸ Olivier Millet, “Art and Literature,” trans. Randi H. Lundell, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 422.

Decalogue, and the Creed.²⁹ Calvin hoped that worship would bring vibrancy to the services by “kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray.”³⁰

Calvin led the Reformed church towards a significant new identity in worship praxis by (1) singing whole or large portions of individual psalms rather than the versicles used in the medieval mass, (2) using metrical reworkings of the text rather than the psalms themselves, (3) using vernacular rather than Latin, (4) singing of psalms by the whole congregation (not just the *Schola Cantorum*) and, (5) using psalms outside the liturgy (as opposed to strict medieval prohibitions against using liturgical music outside of the church sanctuaries).³¹ By the time the Genevan Psalter of 1562 was published, in which Calvin played a key role, this Psalter contained 152 texts (150 psalms, the ten commandments, and the Song of Simeon—all set to 125 different tunes). This was popular, and in two years 27,400 copies were published.³² Calvin’s influence in worship praxis was profound in the sixteenth century, and his influence reaches beyond the sixteenth century into the present century.³³

Calvin’s Continuing Influence

Since Calvin’s birth over five hundred years ago, Reformed churches that observe the regulative principle today still look to Calvin as the bedrock of the principle. Undoubtedly, since the regulative principle was codified by the Westminster divines, the documents they produced have received most of the attention. But Calvin is not far

²⁹ Matthieu Arnold, “Strasbourg,” trans. Judith J. Guder, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 40.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.20.32.

³¹ John Witvliet and Nathan Bierma, “Liturgy,” in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 414.

³² Mentzer, “Calvin and France,” 81.

³³ Mentzer, “Calvin and France,” 81. Mentzer adds, “The effect of Calvin’s project to make available psalms in poetic French translation and incorporate them into the Reformed liturgy was profound. Their meticulous integration into Reformed worship transformed ordinary people’s participation in the life of worship and defined perhaps more than any other element the collective meaning of being Reformed. Calvin himself took pleasure and encouraged its use in the liturgy.”

behind, and his foundational statements are never far from the consciousness of those Reformed churches that adhere to the regulative principle.³⁴ Scripture-regulated worship is supported historically by reaching back to the Westminster Assembly and further with Calvin.³⁵ Abraham Kuyper, writing in 1911, references Calvin routinely when articulating his vision for scriptural and Reformed worship.³⁶ R. J. Gore, in his book on the regulative principle, spends two full chapters on Calvin and his application of the regulative principle.³⁷ Calvin is one of the key supporters of scripture-regulated worship when church and ministry leaders desire historical worship with roots anchored in the beginnings of the Reformed tradition.³⁸ Calvin’s influence undoubtedly extends to present-day churches who seek to conform their worship to the regulative principle.

With historical nuances set in perspective, it is prudent, accurate, and reasonable to claim that Calvin is behind the inception of the regulative principle. His influence extended from the Reformation through the Puritan influence of the seventeenth century and into the present-day church. This chapter now turns to the *locus classicus* of the regulative principle—the theology of Calvin.

³⁴ Johnson explains this connection with Calvin: “After Calvin, all subsequent developments in the tradition of Reformed Protestantism reflect his practice in worship, even if forms were altered in response to local circumstances.” Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin: Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism* (Grand Rapids: EP Books, 2014), 12.

³⁵ Thomas claims Calvin as well: “Calvin too believed that nothing should be done in Christian worship unless the New Testament authorized it (the regulative principle). So he followed Zwingli in rejecting most of the ritual of medieval Catholic worship—images, candles, priestly robes, and so on.” Derek W. H. Thomas, “The Regulative Principle: Responding to Recent Criticism,” in *Give Praise to God*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 400.

³⁶ Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. Harry Boonstra, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 59-61.

³⁷ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 53-89.

³⁸ Johnson states, “His liturgical work, much like his theological work, honors the catholic tradition while synthesizing all that preceded him in the work of the Reformers.” Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin*, 12. Clark connects Calvin to Ursinus and the Westminster divines with their common commitment to *sola Scriptura* and the regulative principle. R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 229.

Calvin's Theology of Worship: The Foundation of the Regulative Principle

Calvin's concern for worship regulation originates in his theology. Calvin's adherence to the Word of God was paramount for him in relation to the church and its worship praxis. What Calvin believes should be important to the church, indeed, important for all of life, stems from his view of Scripture and God. Calvin's theology is identifiable and consistent in his formal catechesis, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and his book commentaries, treatises, and letters, and worship is a predominate theme in them all.

For Calvin, the Word revealed three major thrusts in worship theology. First, worship must reflect God's glory and honor. Second, worship must be placed at the ecclesial center of the church. Lastly, worship must reflect a spiritual communion with God. These three major thrusts were the motivations behind Calvin's theology of worship and will be explored more fully in this chapter.

The three major thrusts in Calvin's theology also give substantial explanation for Calvin's polemical approach towards idolatry, excessive ceremonialism, and superstitious rites because these errors jeopardize true worship. Calvin's three major thrusts of theology are also the underlying motivation behind Calvin's suspicion of external forms³⁹ and materiality in general.⁴⁰ Calvin "was naturally suspicious of what is visible and externally locatable"⁴¹ and of people who give elevated importance to the outward signs divorced from Scripture. He consistently warns against "anyone who

³⁹ John Calvin, *Isaiah 1-16, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 41.

⁴⁰ W. David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 2. Taylor states, "Calvin's ambivalence toward the liturgical arts is undergirded by a persistently negative view of materiality and that the fate of the former hinges, as it were, on the fate of the latter."

⁴¹ Bryan D. Spinks, *Sacraments, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental Theology and Liturgy in England and Scotland, 1603-1662* (London: Routledge Taylor and France Group, 2002), 173.

detaches the signs from the Word and who gazes at them ‘as if they were the causes of our mercies.’”⁴² External forms, such as the Lord’s Supper, the “visible Word,” must be connected to the Word of God.⁴³

Scriptural fidelity was a hallmark principle in Calvin’s regulative principle of worship.⁴⁴ Inherent within scriptural fidelity is the recognition that God’s authority is mediated through Scripture. God alone determines via Scripture what is right doctrine, worship, and polity. Consequently, faithfulness to God requires adherence to Scripture. Calvin’s adherence to the Word of God was paramount for him in relation to the church and its worship praxis.

Fidelity to Scripture, for Calvin, also meant employing the principle of contextualization in the regulation of worship.⁴⁵ Calvin advocated that specific scriptural passages be considered “relatively” so that each passage could be related to another passage. In opposition to this was an error he called an “absolute.” This is the error the Anabaptists made in considering Jesus’ prescription, “Do not swear at all” (Matt 5:34). The Anabaptists considered that a prohibition against all oath-taking. Calvin considered this “syllable-snatching” an example of an “absolute” interpretation.⁴⁶ Gore explains, “An ‘absolute’ interpretation of a given passage would take the meaning of the passage as it appears, with its full force, with little regard for harmonizing it with the overall teaching

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.14.

⁴³ Jean Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper,” in *Theological Treatises*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 22 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 142.

⁴⁴ Calvin states, “Therefore let our whole doctrine, custom of administering the sacraments, and method of governing the church be examined. In these three matters we will not be found to have changed from that ancient form anything that we did not try to restore to the right norm of God’s Word.” John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Casey Carmichael (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2020), 24.

⁴⁵ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 59. Gore states, “The principle of contextualization means that Calvin is not interested in a bare exegesis of the passage, but seeks to determine the circumstances and occasion of the text in order to gain insight into its true intent.”

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.23.

of Scripture.”⁴⁷ For Calvin, the original intention of the writer of a particular book of Scripture is of exceptional importance.⁴⁸ Calvin’s hermeneutic was identifiable and consistent in regulating worship, and he consistently elevated the Word of God as God’s sole determiner of acceptable worship. Scriptural fidelity was a determinative force forming the contours of worship regulation.

Another significant force that shaped Calvin’s regulative principle of worship was the Roman Catholic church, specifically its errors in theology and worship praxis.⁴⁹ Calvin and the Reformers were charting a new course for a nascent church that had to overcome the sheer inertia of institutional control, corrupt practices, and theological error. Calvin vociferously opposed such institutional authoritarianism. He writes, “Such, moreover, are what are called today in the papacy ‘ecclesiastical constitutions,’ which are thrust upon men as true and necessary worship of God. And as these are innumerable, so innumerable are the traps to catch and ensnare souls.”⁵⁰ These were the ceremonies “thrust upon men” that became an intolerable burden.⁵¹ Calvin considered these excessive ceremonies pernicious and impious.⁵² The errors of Rome never receded to the

⁴⁷ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 60.

⁴⁸ Victor E. D’Assonville, “Exegesis and *Doctrina*,” in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 380. D’Assonville states, “In Calvin’s thinking, the key to arriving at the intention of the original writer is found in the consistent grammatical analysis of the text in the original language, within its narrow and broad scriptural context, taking the genre of the specific part of the text into consideration, as well as the historical setting.”

⁴⁹ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 54. Eire comments, “The externalized cult of medieval Catholicism was attacked as a human institution that was opposed to the worship revealed by God in Scripture.”

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.6.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.26. Calvin asks, “Why then, they ask, did Christ say that the intolerable burdens, imposed by Scribes and Pharisees, were to be borne? (Mt. 23:3) Nay, rather, why did he say in another place that we were to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees? (Mt. 16:6) meaning by leaven . . . whatever of human doctrine is mingled with the pure word of God.”

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.9. Calvin states, “The constitutions which they call ecclesiastical, and by which the Pope, with his adherents, burdens the Church, we hold to be pernicious and impious, while our opponents defend them as sacred and salutary. Now there are two kinds of them, some relating to ceremonies and rites, and others more especially to discipline.”

background; they were always in the foreground of Reformation efforts.

Beyond the errors of Rome itself, distinguishing among the issues of importance and *adiaphora* (indifferent things) among the people of the Reformation was a daunting challenge.⁵³ Calvin was navigating a course where some Reformers underreacted to Rome's errors and some overreacted, exhibiting hostility and schismatic tendencies toward each another for not moving far enough from Rome.⁵⁴ Reformed efforts were constantly in danger of fracturing due to disunity, doctrinal disagreements, and worship praxis.⁵⁵ Rome's errors shaped Calvin's regulative principle of worship along with the varied response to Rome's errors among churches of the Reformation. The principles of worship were informed by these extant realities, which leads to the third force that exerted pressure in formation of Calvin's regulative principle of worship: the danger that the Reformation itself may not survive.

Calvin feared that the Reformation may not survive its numerous threats. Subsequently, Calvin's writing on worship regulation cannot be understood apart from the era in which he lived. From Calvin's vantage point, the emperor and Rome posed significant dangers to the Reformation as many within the Reformation spoke of wars and visions of the end.⁵⁶ Living in an era close in proximity to the year that the Reformation began, the amount of institutional inertia from Roman Catholic leaders and

⁵³ Keith states, "At the same time there were at the other extreme some who wished to do away entirely with all ecclesiastical rules for which no definite Scripture warrant could be given." Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket?," 6.

⁵⁴ Gordon, *Calvin*, 190. Gordon explains, "Nicodemites were people that Calvin accused of dissembling, though privately aligning with the cause of Reformation. This was a form of conduct that had to be eradicated, according to Calvin." On the other end of the spectrum was tension among groups who left Rome. Gordon writes, "Division between Lutherans and Zwinglians lasted over two decades during Calvin's life and Calvin was constantly looking to solve the impasse" (54).

⁵⁵ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 55.

⁵⁶ Gordon, *Calvin*, 164. Gordon comments, "He had proved himself a shrewd observer, and he had few doubts about the dangers posed by the emperor and Rome. Charles had arrived in Speyer with the Protestant princes on their knees before him: everyone spoke of war and visions of the end. The Reformation was in grave danger."

religious suspicion within the Reformation itself was formidable.⁵⁷ Calvin lived in an era where national leaders believed that empires would perish if there were internal disagreements with more than one religion.⁵⁸ There was no guarantee that the Reformation would be successful and every reason to consider each threat injurious to the cause.

The turbulence and chaos that resulted from Luther's first break from Rome in 1517 unleashed decades of turmoil and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Violence was not uncommon to settle disputes. Violence, even against clergy, was not infrequent in late-medieval and sixteenth-century Europe.⁵⁹ In France, where the "one law, one faith, one king" motto made for a strong centralized, powerful state resistant to religious change,⁶⁰ Calvin realized that Reformation efforts in France would need a different approach than was taken in Germany and Switzerland. Regardless of country, Reformation efforts required tremendous courage and conviction to overcome centuries of institutional inertia.⁶¹ Additionally, the intertwining of national and religious goals led to turmoil and questions of authority. These threats informed Calvin's principle of accommodation and his consideration of *adiaphora*. These threats became a force that exerted pressure in forming Calvin's regulative principle of worship.

Worship praxis was another potential threat to the survival of Reformation efforts. Calvin realized that squabbling over minor details of worship would endanger the

⁵⁷ Andreas Muhling, "Calvin and the Swiss Federation," trans. Judith J. Guder, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 70. Muhling writes, "The suspicion of heresy from within existing authorities who were confessionally of a different orientation was a constant for Reformed churches in Switzerland."

⁵⁸ Maarten Stolk, "Calvin and Rome," trans. Gerritt W. Sheeres, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 108.

⁵⁹ Gordon, *Calvin*, 139.

⁶⁰ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 167.

⁶¹ Gordon states, "The new Protestant churches, whether Lutheran or Zwinglian, faced the daunting prospect of appeasing their political masters, dealing with rapidly changing populations and negotiating relationships with established popular and religious practices." Gordon, *Calvin*, 123.

unity of a nascent church. Calvin realized through personal experience that the inability to make some accommodation in a fallen world leads only to failure and destruction.⁶²

Calvin explains his principle of accommodation:

Lastly, as he has not delivered any express command, because things of this nature are not necessary to salvation, and, for the edification of the Church, should be accommodated to the varying circumstances of each age and nation, it will be proper, as the interest of the Church may require, to change and abrogate the old, as well as to introduce new forms. I confess, indeed, that we are not to innovate rashly or incessantly, or for trivial causes. Charity is the best judge of what tends to hurt or to edify: if we allow her to be guide, all things will be safe.⁶³

Calvin recognized that for the Reformation to survive, it was madness to quarrel over external practices.⁶⁴ Bruce Gordon explains,

Calvin's inclination was to treat the externals of worship with a charitable spirit, tempered against excessive tolerance of the "stupid obstinacy" of people unable to part from familiar practices. There was much in the English liturgy he found distasteful; it had not been sufficiently purged of superstitious language, a point he had made to Protector Somerset and Cranmer. But there was more at stake than a minor squabble. What had been begun in England was in ruins, and it fell to the community in Frankfurt to build God's Church again. This required no less than the exercise of the true freedom of the Church; the freedom which permits latitude in external matters without a return to popery.⁶⁵

Calvin's principle of accommodation, charity, and the urgency of unity were identifiable in his articulation of the regulative principle. Calvin did not consider accommodation as contrary to the pursuit of scriptural fidelity in worship praxis, but recognized that God "has not been pleased to prescribe every particular that we ought to observe (he foresaw that this depended on the nature of the times, and that one form would not suit all ages),

⁶² Gordon, *Calvin*, 152. Gordon states, "Calvin's experiences in Strasbourg and at the German religious colloquies impressed upon him the need for solidarity and the resolution of internal conflicts" (155).

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

⁶⁴ Gordon, *Calvin*, 260.

⁶⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, 260-61.

in them we must have recourse to the general rules which he has given.”⁶⁶ Thus, Calvin’s principle of accommodation significantly shaped his regulative principle of worship. His principle of accommodation would become one of the ways in which the Puritans did not follow in their spiritual father’s footsteps. Instead, they would neglect this aspect in favor of their own desire for specificity.

Thus, Calvin’s regulative principle of worship was shaped by three distinct forces: (1) the Reformation church’s endangered status, (2) the fear of Rome’s errors, and (3) the conviction for scriptural fidelity in worship. Worship theology, for Calvin, was centered around three theological thrusts: God’s honor and glory, the ecclesiastical center of the church, and communion with God. This chapter now explores these three theological thrusts.

God’s Honor and Glory

Worship regulation for Calvin is about God’s honor and glory.⁶⁷ The glory of God is central to Calvin’s theology. Glory is not only due to God, but even the smallest amount of glory must not be given to another, which would be sacrilege.⁶⁸ For Calvin, God’s glory is exclusive and reserved for him alone. Since all forms of idolatry threaten the glory that is due God, idolatry must be confronted, refuted, and declared unreasonable.⁶⁹ Idolatry must be identified and confronted because God’s glory and

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

⁶⁷ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 24. Calvin declares, “We preach the glory of God far more magnificently than it used to be preached before us. We labor sincerely so that the virtues in which it shines may become more and more known. We exalt His benefits toward us with as many praises as possible. Hence people are stirred up to revere His majesty, to display to Him the reverence worthy of His greatness, to be truly grateful from the heart, and to confess His praises.”

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.12.3. Calvin says, “Let it suffice to remember, that whatever offices of piety are bestowed anywhere else than on God alone, are of the nature of sacrilege.”

⁶⁹ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 231. Eire says, “The intended audience of the treatise is a new phenomenon too. The *Inventory* aims to convince the educated, those who take pride in their thinking abilities, the culture, urbane men and women of the Renaissance. Though theological from top to bottom, Calvin’s attack on idolatry as something ‘unreasonable’ is a product of the humanist tradition, and it

honor were at stake.

Calvin attacks idolatry not only for the diminishment of God’s glory but also because it involves a form of theft.⁷⁰ What was rightfully God’s becomes the property of something else. As Calvin says, “And because God wills not to be worshipped superstitiously, whatever is bestowed upon idols is so much robbed from him.”⁷¹ This was one of many reasons for Calvin’s unrelenting polemic against Rome. Eire writes, “Calvin’s attack on Roman Catholic ‘idolatry’ is a condemnation of the improper mixing of spiritual and material in worship—an affirmation of the principle *finitum non est capax infiniti*. It is also an indictment of man’s attempt to domesticate God and to rob him of his glory—an affirmation of the principle *soli Deo gloria*.”⁷² For Calvin, this theft occurs when images are used in worship: “The reason why God holds images so much in abhorrence is shown clearly by this, that He cannot endure that the worship due to Himself should be stolen from Him and given to them.”⁷³ Calvin attacks idolatry because it hijacks the glory of God.⁷⁴ Idolatry is an affront to God because it attempts to steal from God the glory that is rightfully his, and his alone, and give this glory to the creature.⁷⁵

indicates that the Reformation succeeded in part because of its affinity with certain aspects of the intellectual climate of the sixteenth century.”

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.2.1. Calvin states, “On the other hand, man cannot arrogate any thing, however minute, to himself, without robbing God of his honour, and through rash confidence subjecting himself to a fall.”

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.9.

⁷² Eire, *War against the Idols*, 197-98.

⁷³ John Calvin, *Psalms 93-119, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 291.

⁷⁴ Calvin says, “For they have prostrated themselves, and bent the knee before relics as before God, lighting torches and tapers as a sign of homage, putting confidence in them, and running to them as if they possessed a divine power and grace. If idolatry is just to transfer the honor of God to others, can we deny that this is idolatry?” John Calvin, “Inventory of Relics,” Monergism, accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.monergism.com/inventory-relics>.

⁷⁵ Wim Janse, “The Sacraments,” trans. Gerritt W. Sheeres, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 347.

Calvin hated idolatry because substitutes for God draw man's attention back down to earthly, material, created things. Idolatry is not only the improper mixing of the spiritual and material in worship, but it also puts materiality on display as the focus of man's affections.⁷⁶ Thus, creation usurps God's unique role and is called to divine tasks, a weight that creation simply cannot bear, and indeed, was not intended to bear. Materiality is exalted above the Creator, a fixation on the wrong object of worship.⁷⁷ It is an insult to God, as idolatry is the "most sinister parody of man's relationship with God and the boldest affront on the divine majesty."⁷⁸ This is one of the many reasons Calvin accused Rome of egregious error.⁷⁹ Worship for Calvin is ascending above the material world. This is worship that is spiritual and ascends to communion with God. God's honor and glory are paramount for Calvin in his theology of worship. This is the underlying motivation behind Calvin's prolific attacks on idolatry throughout his life. Calvin believed that worship should reflect God's glory, making worship the center of ecclesial life.

Ecclesiastical Center

Worship is not only about God's honor and glory, but it is also the ecclesiastical center of the church. God commands his church to worship him: "The Lord

⁷⁶ Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket?," 4-5. Keith states, "*A wrong context of worship, therefore, as in the presence of images or under ceremonies prescribed by men as essential for salvation [emphasis original], brought dangers. Not only did this context conceal from the worshippers the true source of salvation; but it induced the worshipper to take what was due to God alone and to give it to something other than God, usually something material.*"

⁷⁷ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 132. Witvliet says, "Note that superstition here is not pagan reliance on a wooden god. It is a sin of the mind or spirit. It is misplaced attention in regard to its object of contemplations; it is the failure to attend to the spiritual significance of a physical action Calvin's concern was for what we might call 'intellectual idolatry,' the mingling of ideas about God in the mind" (131-32).

⁷⁸ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 216.

⁷⁹ Eire writes, "The Catholic cult was attacked as improperly directed. Instead of worshipping God the creator, the medieval Church worshiped the creature; not only because it set up its own prescriptions against God's, but also because it directed the worshiper's attention to the material world." Eire, *War against the Idols*, 54-55.

wills alone to be pre-eminent among his people. For the same reason he commands us to worship and adore him with true and zealous godliness.”⁸⁰ The issue of the church’s worship was so central for Calvin that he devoted an entire treatise in 1543, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, to address this pressing issue.⁸¹ Worship was the ecclesiastical center for the church because it was the external expression of true knowledge, the rule of his Word.⁸² For Calvin, the church must be centered on the pure and true worship of God, which was being abandoned and perverted by excessive ceremonialism and superstitious rites, leading to idolatry.⁸³ The Reformers, committed to the doctrine of original sin and humanity’s propensity for idolatry, gained a reputation for putting myopic attention on minor issues.⁸⁴ Increasingly, for Calvin who was raised in the Catholic church in addition to his seminary education, returning to the pure and true worship of the church was intensely personal. “For Calvin the core of Christianity was the proper worship of God. The decision that he could not live with false religion had been the defining moment of his life; exile had been his deliverance from idolatry.”⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.8.16.

⁸¹ Calvin explains, “[That] doctrine concerning the spiritual worship of God, which had vanished from the memory of the people, had to be urged. Our books and sermons bear clear witness that we have done both of these things until now and still do them.” Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 29.

⁸² Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 63.

⁸³ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 198. Eire says, “Calvin speaks about the nature of worship and about the seriousness of the sin of idolatry in his 1543 treatise, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, where he concentrates on the significance of worship for the Christian religion. Calvin’s argument, as indicated by the title of the treatise, is the Church had reached such a corrupt state that its reform could wait no longer. The most significant aspect of corruption singled out by Calvin is the perversion of worship, and it is in explaining this issue that he set forth the basis for his attack on idolatry.”

⁸⁴ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 199. Eire elaborates, “The Catholics accused the Protestants of raising disputes that were of little significance, needlessly causing a schism. Calvin responds by saying, on the contrary, that disputes over points of worship should be given precedence over all other aspects of religion.”

⁸⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, 195.

Idolatry reveals the core truth of Calvin's concerns; worship is fundamental to a person's relationship with God and central to the concerns of the church.⁸⁶

Communion with God

Communion with God was a third key motivation for Calvin in his theology of worship.⁸⁷ Communion with God, in the mind of Calvin, supersedes even God's transcendence. Julie Canlis believes that "[we] must view Calvin's insistence on transcendence against the background of medieval piety and its domestication of God, oriented as it was away from communion and toward manipulation."⁸⁸ For Calvin, transcendence is the pathway towards communion with God. Transcendence is necessary for the higher goal of communion. "Calvin's fight for God's transcendence is not due to some abstract Nominalist principle but for the purpose of communion. God's transcendence is not God's imprisonment over (and thus out of) the world, but rather his freedom to be present to the world."⁸⁹ This communion with God happened with Adam via direct communication, but the only way to recover this communion with God since the fall was through the death of Christ.⁹⁰ Canlis continues,

Calvin reacts against medieval theologies of grace because they prohibit this specific anthropology. Instead of taking creaturely (dependent) anthropology as opportunity for participation, medieval theologians took it as weakness in us and invented capacities that we do not have (II.5.9). *Calvin views our anthropology as*

⁸⁶ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 196. Eire explains, "As the corruption of man's proper relationship with God, the problem of idolatry assumes a key position in the thought of Calvin. In fact, Calvin's attack on idolatry is an attack on the corruption of all religion, it is an involved defense of the truth of the Gospel against its antithesis. The significance of this defense cannot be underestimated, since it lays bare many of the central points of Calvin's theology. In studying Calvin's attack on idolatry, one is able to look at what Calvin believed to be most important in religion by seeing how vigorously he attacked its perversion."

⁸⁷ Calvin states, "The proper condition of creatures is to keep close to God." John Calvin, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians and Ephesians, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 136.

⁸⁸ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 67.

⁸⁹ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 67-68.

⁹⁰ John Calvin, *Genesis 1-23, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 100.

*occasion for constant communion.*⁹¹

Communion with God is the reason behind Calvin's "ascent language"⁹² and "ladder" metaphor.⁹³ For Calvin, material symbols were preparations for us to ascend towards Christ and experience communion with God.⁹⁴ In the incarnation, God descended towards us so that believers could ascend to God and experience communion with him. This is why idolatry was so perniciously evil in Calvin's mind because "idols allowed access to God without God, transformation without communion. They did not compromise his transcendence so much as his pledge of immanence."⁹⁵ Communion with God involves participation in his life, his essence. Calvin explains, "This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he had made us sons of God with him; that, but his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us."⁹⁶ This ascent/descent language is crucial to understanding Calvin's ultimate goal in worship: communion with God.⁹⁷ Calvin's understanding of communion with God undergirds his theology of worship. It gives rationality to his strong stance against Rome's egregious errors of

⁹¹ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 63; emphasis original.

⁹² Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 62.

⁹³ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 143; Calvin, *Genesis 1-23*, 101. Calvin elaborates, "I call them vehicles and ladders, because symbols of this kind were by no means ordained that the faithful might shut up God in a tabernacle as in a prison, or might attach him to earthly elements; but that, being assisted by congruous and apt means, they might themselves rise towards heaven."

⁹⁴ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 134.

⁹⁵ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 69; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.26. Calvin explains, "Thus when he said to the apostles, 'It is expedient that I go up to the Father, because the Father is greater than I,' he does not attribute to himself merely a secondary deity so that he is inferior to the Father with respect to eternal essence; but because endowed with heavenly glory he gathers believers into participation in the Father . . . and certainly for this reason Christ descended to us, to bear us up to the Father, and at the same time to bear us up to himself, inasmuch as he is one with the Father."

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.2.

⁹⁷ Canlis states, "Calvin brilliantly synthesizes the two movements of ascent and descent into one primary activity: the ongoing story of God himself with us. God has come as man to stand in for us (*descent*), and yet as man he also leads us back to the Father (*ascent*)."⁹⁷ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 3.

ceremonialism and external rites because they hinder believers from encountering true, spiritual worship. Calvin's theology of worship gives rationality to his suspicious view of external aids in worship, because of humanity's tendency to cling to earthly symbols which hinders the ascent towards communion with God.⁹⁸

Calvin was a precise thinker and theologian. Calvin's theology of worship must be understood before understanding his views in liturgical worship praxis. Calvin's theology of worship, and therefore his worship praxis, was undergirded by three major foundations: God's honor and glory, worship (the center of ecclesial life), and communion with God. These were three major pillars of Calvin's concern for worship theology in the emerging, albeit embryonic, Reformed church of the sixteenth century. This chapter now turns its attention to the liturgical expression of Calvin's theology of worship.

Calvin's Liturgical Emphases: The Application of the Regulative Principle

Understanding Calvin's theology of worship is critical to understanding his liturgical praxis. Calvin's concern for God's glory in worship, the centrality of worship for ecclesial life, and communion with God provide rationality for Calvin's choices and written counsel as a pastor and theologian in an emerging Reformed church. Calvin's regulative principle of worship must be understood within his era of human and church history. Calvin lived in a unique era of world history, and his experience with the church reflects that history. He answered questions unique to that era and subsequently, Calvin's regulative principle of worship must be understood considering that era's history. As a result, Calvin's regulative principle of worship was shaped by three identifiable and

⁹⁸ Jean Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas F. Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 234.

related forces that exerted pressure on worship regulation: (1) the primacy of the Word of God, (2) the fear of Rome's errors, and (3) the Reformation church's endangered status.

The Primacy of the Word of God

Calvin linked God's authority with Scripture's authority.⁹⁹ The preservation of God's authority presents itself as a preservation of God's glory—a major pillar in Calvin's theology. If the glory of God is exclusive to God, then God's authority is also exclusive to him. God alone has the highest authority, and he communicates perfectly through Scripture, which becomes our sole source for determining true worship.¹⁰⁰ For Calvin, the authority of God and the authority of Scripture are inseparable.¹⁰¹ God has revealed himself as the Savior by the light of his Word.¹⁰² Scripture settles all questions and describes the truth in detail. The truth includes nature, which can lead us to God, though only Scripture reveals him.¹⁰³ Scripture is important and primary for humanity because it is the only trustworthy source that reveals God, for "if we aspire in earnest to a genuine contemplation of God—we must go, I say, to the word, where the character of God, drawn from his works is described accurately . . . by the standard of eternal

⁹⁹ Calvin states, "We hear that God claims this one prerogative as his very own—to rule us by the authority and laws of his Word." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.7.

¹⁰⁰ Calvin states, "God being the only lawgiver, it is unlawful for men to assume that honour to themselves, it will be proper to keep in mind the two reasons for which God claims this solely for himself. The one reason is, that his will is to us the perfect rule of all righteousness and holiness, and that thus in the knowledge of it we have a perfect rule of life. The other reason is, that when the right and proper method of worshipping him is in question, he whom we ought to obey, and on whose will we ought to depend, alone has authority over our souls. When these two reasons are attended to, it will be easy to decide what human constitutions are contrary to the word of the Lord." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.8

¹⁰¹ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 128.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.6.1; Peter Opitz, "Scripture," trans. Rebecca A. Giselbrecht, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 242. Opitz says, "For Calvin, true knowledge of God as cognition of God from his Word comprises and includes the recognition of Scripture as God's Word. Then faith in the authenticity of Scripture cannot have any other fundamental character than faith in the truth and reliability of the divine promise encountered within it."

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.6.1.

truth.”¹⁰⁴ Calvin had the highest regard for Scripture because he had the highest regard for God. Scripture was all-sufficient and included all things necessary for salvation and worship.¹⁰⁵ Only then could knowledge about God, his church, and worship praxis be discovered and implemented. Calvin elaborates that since “He forbids new forms of worship to be established for Him beyond His Word, confirms that He is seriously offended by this audacity, and threatens no light penalty, it is agreed that the correction we have applied was forced by great necessity.”¹⁰⁶ For Calvin, worship regulation is built upon the foundation of the primacy of the Word.¹⁰⁷

The Fear of Rome’s Errors

In contrast to Calvin, the Roman Catholic church did not share this concern for Scripture. For Calvin, Rome deserved his polemical attacks for the egregious errors they proposed, practiced, authoritatively imposed, and defended as scriptural. This denigrated Scripture and God himself.¹⁰⁸ Calvin’s assessment was that error was piled upon error; lack of teaching and doctrine leads to treating the sacraments superstitiously and giving them salvific importance. A focus on showy, ceremonial, external acts blinds people to true repentance and leaves them attached to earthly things.

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.6.3.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 30.

¹⁰⁷ Opitz, “Scripture,” 237. Opitz says, “It is therefore clear: knowledge of the creator God through the mirror of Scripture is anchored in the divine Word through which God has made himself known in the history of his revelation by addressing himself to his chosen people.”

¹⁰⁸ Calvin states, “First, they have already done this wrong: the spectacle of the ceremonies is shown to the people, the meaning and truth of which is kept silent. For there is no other use of the sacraments than when what represents the symbol to the eyes is explained from the Word of God. Therefore, since the people have nothing there but empty forms that feed the eyes, they hear no doctrine that may direct them to the true purpose, and cling closely to the external work itself. Hence that very destructive superstition: they act like the sacraments alone are sufficient for salvation, and caring nothing about repentance, faith, or even Christ Himself, they take the symbols as the reality.” Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 17.

For Calvin, the solution was self-evident. Preaching must take a central place in the Reforming church.¹⁰⁹ Teaching was a paramount corrective to Rome's wayward and destructive ways. This was an issue of obedience for Calvin. Preaching was necessary for the church because conforming to Scripture had been abandoned. Rome's errors, in this regard, were twofold: (1) the spiritual value of visible ceremonies is negated when unaccompanied by teaching and explanation, and (2) church claims of absolute authority circumvent any legitimate objection to a rite's scriptural fidelity, and objections were considered an attack against church authority.

Church authority was one of the defining issues of the Reformation. Rome's display of papal tyranny was merciless toward people as they kept adding to the requirements for the people to be considered faithful and loyal to the church. Since obeying Rome was tantamount to obeying Christ, Rome put everyone under a religious obligation and attached salvific significance to these added ordinances. Calvin warns, "In these ordinances, however, we must always attend to the exception, that they must not be thought necessary to salvation, nor lay the conscience under a religious obligation; they must not be compared to the worship of God, nor substituted for piety."¹¹⁰ Calvin believed church authority is derived from the Scriptures and, as such, is derivative, not primary. The church is not free to impose its own laws.¹¹¹ Like Luther, Calvin believed the liberty of the Christian was at stake, and the church must not bind the consciences of

¹⁰⁹ Stolk explains Calvin's thought: "The Word of God is to be preached to all, purely and clearly. There was no room for wrongs such as the worship of images, the Mass, the church hierarchy, and the veneration of the saints." Stolk, "Calvin and Rome," 105, 108. Stolk goes on to say, "Calvin believed that the true church could be recognized by the pure preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, which Christ instituted. . . . Wherever Word and sacraments were not administered purely one could not speak of a true church."

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.27.

¹¹¹ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 66. Gore says, "Calvin argues that the authority of the Lord is such that only he has the right to mandate worship. To make a human requirement binding, even as a divine requirement is binding, is to violate the authority of God and unjustly to bind the conscience."

the faithful with arbitrary human laws.¹¹² The Roman abuses in authority, for Calvin, were undeniable and incontrovertible. Calvin believed they represented a “tyranny of human traditions” that were being “haughtily obtruded upon us in the name of the Church.”¹¹³ The background of many of Calvin’s statements of worship regulation reflect his concern for Rome’s abuse of power. These concerns over church authority only grew during Calvin’s lifetime and in the seventeenth century of the Puritans.

Along with this dominant element of church authority, Calvin’s era became more volatile because of abuse, gross negligence, moral decay among the priesthood, excessive ceremonies, theological error, and overall corruption. It required strong polemics to counteract the significant advantages of the established church’s authority structure, and Calvin was more than ready to engage his adversary:

Moreover . . . they regard it as immeasurably *more wicked* to allow the year to pass without auricular confession, than to have spent it in the greatest iniquity: to have infected their tongue with a slight tasting of flesh on Friday, than to have daily polluted the whole body with whoredom: to have put their hand to honest labour on a day consecrated to some one or other of their saintlings, than to have constantly employed all their members in the greatest crimes: for a priest to be united to one in lawful wedlock, than to be engaged in a thousand adulteries: to have failed in performing a votive pilgrimage, than to have broken faith in every promise: not to have expended profusely on the monstrous, superfluous, and useless luxury of churches, than to have denied the poor in their greatest necessities . . . they nevertheless studiously and anxiously *urge strict obedience to their own ordinances*, as if the whole power of piety was contained in them . . . they would sooner see the whole law of God subverted than one iota of what they call the precepts of the Church infringed.¹¹⁴

This account gives rationality to Calvin’s description of Rome’s errors as absurd,¹¹⁵

¹¹² Gordon, *Calvin*, 61.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* 4.10.18; Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 67. Gore says, “No ceremony, then, regardless of its roots in antiquity, is acceptable if it is imposed on the free conscience of believers as though it were a law of God. Such burdens are overwhelming.”

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.10; emphasis added.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 29.

monstrous¹¹⁶ abominations¹¹⁷ that are full of impositions that invoke vulgar and tyrannical rigour¹¹⁸ by Pharisees¹¹⁹ and torturers of conscience.¹²⁰ Bruce Gordon terms Calvin an “outstanding hater,” and one of the targets of his scorn was the Roman Catholic church and the abuse of church authority.¹²¹

The reason that worship must only be regulated by the Word of God, for Calvin, is that it reflects on God himself. God’s authority is communicated via Scripture, and he alone has the right to determine what worship he requires of his people. Communion with God was a major thrust in Calvin’s theology, and worship praxis, by definition, centers around the physical activities of God’s people. Therefore, in Calvin’s mind, the external actions of worship were always dangerous for people because they had a propensity to attach themselves to external actions and not Christ.¹²² This would prevent the church from experiencing true and spiritual worship: communion with God. Given the danger of these physical actions in worship, Calvin believed in worship regulation.

The Reformation Church’s Endangered Status

Worship regulation, for Calvin, was a firm theological and ecclesial commitment. Worship was the center of the church. Theologically, Calvin used all his acumen to combat Rome, the opponents of true religion. Additionally, Calvin was also connected to many new Reformed congregations on the continent, with all the challenges

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.16.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.12.1.

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 51.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.26

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.23.

¹²¹ Gordon, *Calvin*, vii.

¹²² Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 235-36.

of implementing new forms of church government and liturgical practice drastically different from their recent past. The new culture of the Reformed church now consisted of congregational singing, robust preaching, church discipline, and consistent observance of, and full participation in, the Lord's Supper. Calvin desired a unified church committed to the authority of Scripture in church government and worship.

Calvin was adamant about the necessity of scriptural adherence in worship practice, yet he applied the regulative principle with surprising flexibility and nuance.¹²³ Calvin writes,

We should refer the entire use and purpose of observances to the upbuilding of the church. If the church requires it, we may not only without any offense allow something to be changed but permit any observances previously in use among us to be abandoned. This present age offers proof of the fact that it may be a fitting thing to set aside, as may be opportune in the circumstances, certain rites that in other circumstances are not impious and indecorous. For (such was the blindness and ignorance of former times) churches have heretofore stuck fast in ceremonies with corrupt opinion and stubborn intent. Consequently, they can scarcely be sufficiently cleansed of frightful superstitions without removing many ceremonies probably established of old with good reason and not notably impious of themselves.¹²⁴

Calvin has a paradigm for rites and ceremonies that are not “impious of themselves” but depend on circumstances for fittingness. Calvin advised John Knox to adopt this approach when dealing with the English monarchy: “Moderate our rigour . . . [Certain] things should be tolerated, even if you do not quite approve of them.”¹²⁵ Calvin was constantly concerned with the big picture of Reformation efforts.¹²⁶ Calvin's flexible worship advice came from his belief that “there was room for differences of theology and method as long as it was among those whose primary commitment was to the Word of

¹²³ Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?,” 11.

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.32.

¹²⁵ John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes*, vol. 4, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 184.

¹²⁶ Gordon states, “Calvin's international work grew from his abiding belief that the visible churches had to be unified in doctrine, not in outward forms.” Gordon, *Calvin*, 275.

God. This was his application of the concept of friendship to church unity. The churches were not to be identical but bound together by common cause and reciprocal obligations.”¹²⁷

Calvin believed these differences were under the umbrella of freedom and, by extension, *adiaphora* (indifferent things). “The third part of Christian freedom is that we are bound before God by no religious obligation to outward things of themselves indifferent (*adiaphora*); but are permitted sometimes to use them or omit them.”¹²⁸ This is Calvin’s introduction of the concept of *adiaphora*. Calvin accommodated these “indifferent” things with flexibility as he applied the regulative principle.

Calvin’s statements on worship are numerous and forceful. God desires “to be accounted the sole lawgiver of his own worship”¹²⁹ and to be the “sole legislator.”¹³⁰ Accordingly, “all aspects of the worship of his majesty, and whatever was necessary to salvation . . . in these the Master alone is to be heard.”¹³¹ The church’s submission to Scripture’s authority in liturgical practice demonstrated the church’s submission to God himself. Calvin, reassuring a nascent church that the inward realities of worship do not lead to the omission of all outward expressions of obedience, said, “To be sure, this is a certain and by no means false way of worshiping God, which we know He approves of, just as He has commanded in His Word. These are the only sacrifices of the Christian church, which have God as witness.”¹³² Worship elements, according to Calvin, must have a prescription from the Word: “Therefore, the rule that distinguishes pure worship of

¹²⁷ Gordon, *Calvin*, 104-5.

¹²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.19.7.

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.24.

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.23.

¹³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

¹³² Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 25.

God from its corrupted form is universal: we must not mix in what has seemed good to us but must observe what He requires who alone has the authority to command. Therefore, if we want Him to approve our worship, we must carefully keep this law that He enforces with utmost severity.”¹³³

True worship is by the rule of his Word,¹³⁴ of necessary obligation.¹³⁵ God rejects any mode of worship that it is not sanctioned by the command of God¹³⁶ and forbids any new worship unsanctioned by his Word.¹³⁷ Calvin believes that God’s pure worship has been flagitiously extravagant and profaned.¹³⁸ Furthermore, “God disapproves of all worship that has been established beyond His Word. . . . Whatever is added to His Word is a lie, especially in regard to mere will-worship . . . which is emptiness. Once the judge has made a pronouncement, there is no longer any time for dispute.”¹³⁹ These are a distillation of Calvin’s statements of worship, statements that have been cited over the centuries as the precursor to the regulative principle’s codification by the Westminster Assembly over a century later.

Calvin’s writing on worship regulation principles is straightforward, firm, and uncompromising. One might conclude, as many have done, that Calvin’s view of worship regulation aligns perfectly with the Puritans over a century later. After all, the Puritans claim Calvin as their spiritual forbear. However, Calvin’s writing on liturgical praxis is

¹³³ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 7.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 63.

¹³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.8.

¹³⁶ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 10.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 63. Calvin continues, “I deny, therefore, that any worship of God is legitimate, save that which is required according to his will.” John Calvin, “John Calvin Tracts and Letters: On the True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church,” GodRules.net, accessed February 7, 2022, http://www.godrules.net/library/calvin/142calvin_c6.htm.

¹³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.11.16, 1.12.3.

¹³⁹ Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 8.

more complicated and nuanced. For example, while Calvin is well-known for his polemics and vehemence, this chapter now shifts to a lesser known, and somewhat surprising, aspect of Calvin's life and writing: his principle of accommodation, *adiaphora*, and concern for unity among the Reformed churches. This accommodating emphasis brings the regulative principle into full view in light of Calvin's theology, his worship praxis, and discontinuities among his progenitors—the Westminster Assembly divines.

Accommodation and *Adiaphora*

Calvin never wavered from his commitment to a European Reformed church that was free from idolatry and driven by scriptural ideals. Calvin, with his wide range of correspondence among many Reformers, was uniquely positioned to survey the ecclesial landscape for potential dangers to the Reformed efforts. One of these dangers was in worship practice. With many differing local church expressions of the regulative principle in action, would these differences be acceptable within the wider Reformed community? Would the Reformers be capable of articulating diversity and scriptural fidelity within the community of the faithful? This section illustrates with Calvin's principle of accommodation and his treatment of *adiaphora* examples of discontinuity in worship praxis between Calvin and those that considered him their theological father—the Westminster Assembly.

Calvin viewed his Christian life as a pilgrimage.¹⁴⁰ Certainly, part of this perspective was theological, but Calvin's personal life experiences contributed to this view. Calvin was raised in France but spent most of his adult life in two cities in Switzerland—Strasbourg and Geneva. Meeting other influential Reformers during his life exposed him to some approaches that were successful and others that were not. He was

¹⁴⁰ Gordon, *Calvin*, 36.

committed to carrying out reform and eradicating idolatry on a continental scale.¹⁴¹

Calvin learned from his experiences of personal danger, exile, and expulsion.

Establishing new churches and new worship practices based upon scriptural models required overcoming massive political pressure, social upheaval, and ecclesial conflict.

Overcoming ecclesial conflict was a defining theme of Calvin's life. All Reformers found common cause against the evils of Rome, yet multiple solutions to counteract this danger left Protestantism divided internally. Theological differences and policy differences created tension among its members, and this dynamic would plague the Reformation for years to come.¹⁴² Protestant participants contentiously debated church polity, theology around the Lord's Supper, and worship theology. These Reformers often failed to reach agreement. Surprisingly, Calvin was a strong proponent for unity among the Protestant churches.¹⁴³ In 1543 Calvin wrote *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, a work that reminded Protestants of their unified convictions.¹⁴⁴ In 1544, Calvin still hoped for reconciliation with the Lutherans.¹⁴⁵ Calvin was influenced by Martin Bucer in Strasbourg, an influential Reformer in the 1530s who pursued unity among the Reformed churches.¹⁴⁶ Although Calvin disagreed with Bucer on several issues throughout his lifetime, Calvin respected and praised him as an influential leader in the efforts of the Reformation. Calvin had seen Bucer unify the Reformed cause, prompting

¹⁴¹ Gordon, *Calvin*, 167.

¹⁴² Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 55.

¹⁴³ Gordon, *Calvin*, 161. Gordon writes, "When he entered the gates of Geneva in 1541 Calvin saw himself as part of the wider European Reformation, a member of the Protestant fraternity. . . . [They] stood united in their commitment to the Word of God. What remained to be achieved was to make that unity real among the Protestant churches."

¹⁴⁴ Gordon, *Calvin*, 164.

¹⁴⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, 164; Herman J. Selderhuis, "Calvin and Wittenberg," trans. Henry J. Baron, in Selderhuis, *The Calvin Handbook*, 62. Selderhuis writes, "Calvin gave here essentially the same advice that he had given to the refugee congregation in Wesel, which in 1553 was forced by the city council to conform to the Lutheran confession. Accommodation and preservation of church unity, in this case the unity with the Lutherans, was better than the departure of the Reformed congregation."

¹⁴⁶ Gordon, *Calvin*, 105.

Calvin to persuade those Protestant churches—which had succumbed to infighting—to come together. “He wanted to move the Swiss, and in particular Zurich, out of their isolation and make them part of the wider Reformation movement. The only way to bring this about, he had recognized, was to be flexible for the sake of unity.”¹⁴⁷ Calvin envisioned a unified Reformed church committed to and shaped by the primacy of the Word. Yet significant theological differences developed between the cities of Zurich—under Zwingli’s influence followed by Bullinger—and Geneva and Strasbourg—under Calvin and Bucer, respectively. Bullinger and Calvin attempted to resolve their differences when they both signed the Consensus Tigurinus, twenty-four articles of agreement between Zurich and Geneva.¹⁴⁸ While this agreement was ultimately not adopted by other churches, Calvin worked tirelessly for the prospect of unity. Uniformity was not the goal, but a common commitment to scriptural ideals in polity, theology, and worship.¹⁴⁹ Unity among the Reformed churches was a significant motivation for Calvin and necessitated a display of charity and discernment. Establishing essential things for worship praxis apart from *adiaphora* was complicated and required nuance.

Calvin’s experiences in Strasbourg and at the German religious colloquies impressed upon him the need for solidarity and the resolution of internal conflicts.¹⁵⁰ For the new Reformed church to survive, they must show they can overcome minor differences among themselves. This meant developing discernment skills on issues

¹⁴⁷ Gordon, *Calvin*, 179.

¹⁴⁸ Gordon, *Calvin*, 179.

¹⁴⁹ Hazlett, “Calvin and the British Isles,” 124. Hazlett says, “A normative, monolithic system or church was neither envisaged nor in place—rather diversity of creeds, church polities, liturgies, and other ‘things indifferent.’”

¹⁵⁰ Gordon, *Calvin*, 155; Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 36. Muller says, “There was no one form of Christian community. As long as God’s commandments are obeyed and Christians live together in love the external forms of community could vary according to necessity. This was Calvin’s long-held view of accommodation.”

critical to the gospel and those that were not.¹⁵¹ The Puritans lost Calvin's perspective and did not continue his accommodation practices. Calvin's flexible application of the regulative principle via accommodation marks the Puritans' discontinuity from Calvin.

Before addressing further Puritan discontinuities with Calvin, this thesis does not claim that the relationship between Calvin and the Puritans is predominantly defined by discontinuities, but holds that Puritan continuities with Calvin are numerous and substantial. Certainly, this thesis makes no claim in support of the "Calvin against the Calvinists" point of view.¹⁵² Further, the taxonomy of views represented by Puritan discontinuities and continuities with Calvin are beyond the scope of this thesis.¹⁵³ These issues are complex.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, this thesis is centered around the regulative principle, and the prevalence of Puritan discontinuities with Calvin is historically identifiable. However, the scope of the discontinuities between Calvin and the Puritans is delimited to worship praxis in this thesis.

Calvin discontinuities: Lord's Table issues. Calvin's view of accommodation is noticeable in the Lord's Table. Nearly a century after Calvin's writing, the Westminster

¹⁵¹ Stolk states, "Another limitation was added to the critical function of this distinction, namely, the distinction between the *necessaria* and the *adiaphora*. . . . According to Calvin, matters that did not touch the core of the gospel should never disturb the unity of the church. However, which articles of faith belonged to the core of the *doctrina* Calvin never quite explained. At any rate, the unity of the church was never to be broken because of small differences in doctrine or ceremonies. The *doctrina Christi* was to be central." Stolk, "Scripture," 105.

¹⁵² Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, in *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 25; Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition*, 38-39. Additionally, Muller is persuasive in his claim that the scholastic and Aristotelian influence in Calvin's thought and writings are overstated.

¹⁵³ Letham states, "Certainly, it is not denied that there are definite discontinuities between the sixteenth-century Reformers and their successors a century later. Inevitably, there is historical development, involving new pastoral and theological contexts, with the need to defend the doctrine of the Reformation against new opposition, and to teach it in an orderly and systematic fashion to the church and its minister. Equally inevitably, particular intellectual and philosophical tools were used for that purpose, as they are in any time or place. However, to label a theologian as a scholastic simply because he used Aristotelian causal analysis has little meaning, for everyone did so, Calvin included." Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 103-4.

¹⁵⁴ Muller, *After Calvin*, 87.

Assembly would spend a tense eighteen of seventy-five sessions on discussion of the Lord's Table. They did not follow Calvin's approach or demeanor in accommodation.

Calvin writes,

But as for the outward ceremony of the action—whether or not the believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each; whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white—it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the church's discretion. However, it is certain that the practice of the ancient church was for all to take it in their hands.¹⁵⁵

Calvin displays a certainty of his own interpretation in this passage, yet flexibly applies the regulative principle with the circumstances around the Lord's Table. This flexibility is noticeably absent with the two Puritan factions that Horton Davies describes:

The Independent communicants receive the elements sitting in their pews. . . . It was the custom of the Independents to receive the elements together, presumably to symbolize their unity. . . . The Scottish Presbyterians, however, receive them at the Table, which was long enough to admit many communicants. The Scottish Presbyterians held tenaciously to this method of reception because they believed it was an accurate attempt to reproduce the circumstances of the Last Supper, whilst it had symbolical value as a declaration that the Lord's Supper was a Feast, at which the Lord was Host and the communicants the guests, rather than a Sacrifice. The point was debated hotly at the Westminster Assembly, but the Scottish Commissioners could not persuade the Assembly to make this manner of reception obligatory.¹⁵⁶

The term "obligatory" is revealing in this historical account. The Scottish factions were attempting to persuade the Independents to make this format mandatory. *Prima facie* conclusions may be held that Calvin's principle of accommodation was followed because the Westminster Assembly did eventually come to an agreement. Yet this reality remains understated: each faction within the Assembly wanted to make their particular observance pattern in the Lord's Supper the prevailing custom. Calvin's

¹⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.43.

¹⁵⁶ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690* (1970; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 135, 214.

example of indifferent things is noticeably absent. Each faction believed its custom was superior and “debated hotly” for its inclusion in the Directory. Because agreement on a particular custom could not be reached, no specific custom was chosen, so by default “no custom” prevailed, leaving the churches free to choose their own. Ironically, this result would have been favorable to Calvin, though neither faction followed Calvin’s principle of accommodation.

Discontinuities with Calvin occur in other aspects of the Lord’s Supper. One of these discontinuities was the type of bread used in the ceremony. The Roman rite used unleavened wafers, and because the Puritans avoided any Roman practice, they concluded that the New Testament prescribed a “common loaf” of leavened bread. The paradigm for pure worship praxis led the Puritans to exaggerate the requirements of Scripture.¹⁵⁷ They erred in their eagerness to avoid any forms of worship that were not warranted by Scripture. In their haste to distance themselves from Rome (a characteristic that will be explored in chapter 3), they found evidence that was not there. Davies states,

Its Biblical criterion was too rigidly applied. The dominant principle in Puritan worship is that only the worship prescribed by God in his Word is acceptable to the Divine Majesty. . . . The characteristic Puritan reverence for the Scriptures . . . was carried to the point of Bibliolatry. This meant that for every detail of worship Biblical sanction or silence was required. Moreover it also meant that the Pauline Epistles . . . were carefully scanned for liturgical directions. Such occasional hints were erected into principles.¹⁵⁸

Any small aspect of the Roman ceremony was unacceptable to the Puritans. In this they departed from Calvin and his declaration, “it makes no difference.”¹⁵⁹ Other discontinuities with Calvin that occurred within Puritanism about the Lord’s Supper also

¹⁵⁷ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 100.

¹⁵⁸ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 258.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.43.

included time of day,¹⁶⁰ frequency of observance,¹⁶¹ the insistence for a sermon to precede the Lord's Supper,¹⁶² communion given to the sick,¹⁶³ and the prevailing sense of centrality of the Lord's Supper.¹⁶⁴ The Puritans did not consider these issues "indifferent things" and did not follow Calvin's example.

A third discontinuity between Calvin and the Puritans was kneeling for prayer. Calvin comments, "I say that it is so of men, that it is also of God. It is of God, in respect that it is part of that comeliness, the care and keeping whereof is commended unto us by the Apostles."¹⁶⁵ Yet some of the Puritans objected to kneeling, especially when receiving the elements of the Lord's Supper, because it appeared supportive of the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation. In the Roman rite, the bread was elevated by the priest and people knelt to receive it and worship the bread, believing it to be the body of the Lord. Eventually this led to the Black Rubric,¹⁶⁶ added specifically to assuage the consciences of objectors to kneeling, that it was not giving any support to the Roman Catholic doctrine.¹⁶⁷ In spite of the common concern for separation from Catholicism, Puritans departed from Calvin since "one of the dignified and significant ceremonies which Calvin approved of was kneeling for prayer."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 205. Davies says that "the Baptists in a number of their congregations insisted upon the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the evening, thus following the original time of the institution by our Lord."

¹⁶¹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 257.

¹⁶² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 260.

¹⁶³ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 43.

¹⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

¹⁶⁶ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A Livingstone, eds., s.v. "black rubric," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁶⁷ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 67.

¹⁶⁸ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 39.

Calvin discontinuities: other worship practices. Vestments were another point of discontinuity between Calvin and the Puritans. Calvin's thought is clear and unambiguous: "Today we seem to many to be unreasonable because we stir up discussion over the unrestricted eating of meat, use of holidays and of vestments, and similar vain frivolities (as it seems to them)."¹⁶⁹ Decades later, the Puritans objected so strenuously to the authoritative imposition of vestments that it earned its own name, the "Vestiarian Controversy."¹⁷⁰ Additionally, Puritan objections towards vestments concerned more than just authority, but their associations with Rome.¹⁷¹ Davies says that "in this and other respects the Puritans were so afraid of superstitious abuse of a custom, that rather than erect it with safeguards, they avoided it altogether."¹⁷² Nevertheless, the Puritan position on vestments was decidedly different than Calvin's.

The Puritans abandoned other practices that Calvin advocated. Confirmation was yet another rite.¹⁷³ Calvin supported confirmation because it afforded the church the opportunity to catechize the youth.¹⁷⁴ For the newly Reformed churches, Calvin felt the value of confirmation could be recast scripturally without Roman connotations.¹⁷⁵

¹⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* 3.19.7.

¹⁷⁰ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 73.

¹⁷¹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 262. Davies says, "Other Puritan arguments used against the vestments were their association with the now discredited Roman Catholic faith, that they were garments of priests who believe in the sacrifice of the Mass and in Transubstantiation, and not at all suitable for a faith which asserted the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and that they were symbols of pomp and grandeur wholly unsuitable for the disciples of a humble Christ. Furthermore, they were out of step with the Continental Reformed churches in the matter of vestments."

¹⁷² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 41.

¹⁷³ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 82-83.

¹⁷⁴ Calvin states, "We should like to see that rite everywhere restored, by which the young people are presented to God, after giving forth the confession of their faith." John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, vol. 3 (1858; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 288.

¹⁷⁵ Calvin states, "This laying on of hands which is done simply by way of blessing, I commend and would like to see it restored to its pure use today." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.19.4.

Contrastingly, the Puritans objected to confirmation as not warranted in Scripture and viewed it as virtually the creation of a third sacrament.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, the Puritans abandoned the rite of confirmation.

A third difference with Calvin in liturgical practice was exclusive psalmody. While Calvin considered the Psalms the primary text for congregational song, he also included other passages of Scripture in song. “Calvin’s 1542 Genevan liturgy contained thirty-nine psalms, the Nunc dimittis, and musical versions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed.”¹⁷⁷ The Puritans allowed only the Psalm texts in congregational song, and *The Directory for Publick Worship* (1644) only uses psalms.¹⁷⁸ The Puritans did not follow Calvin’s example in exclusive psalmody and instead, adopted a narrower position.

Prayer books, with set liturgies and set prayers, caused conflict among the Puritan factions. Many Puritans found these helpful but other Puritans believed they quenched the leading of the Holy Spirit and staunchly defended extemporary prayer. Such was the milieu of the divines at Westminster as they convened in 1643. Once these prayer books, with their similarity to Roman practice and doctrine, were made legally binding, this pushed the Puritans towards rejection of set forms in general.¹⁷⁹

Calvin would have never supported these contentious debates for or against set prayers and a fixed liturgy. These were indifferent things.¹⁸⁰ In this practice, the Puritans

¹⁷⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 267. Davies says, “The Puritans objected to Confirmation as virtually the creation of a third sacrament, which since it required a bishop for its administration, seemed to reduce the significance of the other two sacraments, which required no bishop for their administration.”

¹⁷⁷ Nick R. Needham, “Worship Through the Ages,” in Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan, *Give Praise to God*, 476.

¹⁷⁸ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 82-83.

¹⁷⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 59.

¹⁸⁰ Williston Walker, *John Calvin: The Organiser of Reformed Protestantism, 1509-1564* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 224. Walker says, “As between a fixed liturgy and free prayer he evidently had none of the scruples which later controversy was to develop among his spiritual disciples in

departed from Calvin. Puritans were followed chronologically by extreme Separatists, some who opposed any other book brought into a worship service other than a Bible.¹⁸¹ Calvin advocated for or considered “indifferent” the rite of absolution,¹⁸² the rite of confirmation,¹⁸³ the rite of confession,¹⁸⁴ the use of grandparents at infant baptism,¹⁸⁵ the use of the Apostles Creed,¹⁸⁶ the ring in marriage,¹⁸⁷ and the observance of days.¹⁸⁸ All these the Puritans removed from liturgical practice because they felt these practices were not prescribed by Scripture and therefore violated the regulative principle of worship.

Calvin discontinuities: hermeneutics. Differences between Calvin and the Puritans are also identifiable in their scriptural hermeneutics. While both Calvin and the Puritans were firmly committed to the Bible as the ultimate authority, they interpreted several passages of Scripture differently. Calvin was driven by a hermeneutic that emphasized authorial intent¹⁸⁹ and the general meaning of Scripture.¹⁹⁰ The Puritans, comparatively, had a myopic view of Scripture with no principle of accommodation.

England, Scotland, and America; and his Genevan form of worship, at least was a happy combination of both.”

¹⁸¹ John Smyth, *The Differences of the Churches of the Separation*, in *The Works of John Smyth*, vol. 1, ed. W. T. Whitley (Cambridge: University Press, 1915), 81.

¹⁸² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 257.

¹⁸³ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 257.

¹⁸⁴ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 257.

¹⁸⁵ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 82-83.

¹⁸⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 273.

¹⁸⁷ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 39.

¹⁸⁸ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 79.

¹⁸⁹ D’Assonville says that authorial intent is “found in the consistent grammatical analysis of the text in the original language, within its narrow and broad scriptural context, taking the genre of the specific part of the text into consideration, as well as the historical setting.” D’Assonville, “Exegesis and *Doctrina*,” 380.

¹⁹⁰ Donald K. McKim, “Calvin’s View of Scripture,” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 49. McKim says, “His studies in legal exegesis showed him that the intent of the author is more important than the etymology of words.”

Adiaphora, for the Puritans, was a very narrow category. Increasingly, the rubric of direct warrant or command was necessary for the Puritans to approve any rite or ceremony.¹⁹¹ At its worst, this resulted in “text-hunting,”¹⁹² “atomistic handling of individual texts,”¹⁹³ being “over-scrupulous,”¹⁹⁴ and needing “explicitly Biblical sanction.”¹⁹⁵ Calvin warned of the times “when consciences have once ensnared themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of.”¹⁹⁶ The Puritans asked for precision from the Scriptures where precision was not intended.¹⁹⁷

The Puritans and Calvin had similar convictions about the primacy of the Word yet substantial differences in applying the regulative principle. There were significant discontinuities between Calvin and the Puritans, and they were most identifiable in worship practice. The Puritan paradigm of worship had categories of only “true” and “false” worship. Every worship practice must have direct biblical warrant.¹⁹⁸ The Puritans had no category for faithful believers who did not reach the same precise conclusions in worship praxis as they did. For the Puritans believed that “God is a jealous God and has prescribed all that is necessary for the adequate honouring of himself in public worship in

¹⁹¹ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 247.

¹⁹² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 71.

¹⁹³ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 97.

¹⁹⁴ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 76.

¹⁹⁵ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 256.

¹⁹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.19.7.

¹⁹⁷ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 260. Davies says, “Text scrutinizing went to ludicrous extremes on occasion, however. It was argued that marriage, not being a sacrament, did not require the services of a minister for its solemnization, since it was not included in the list of pastoral duties in II Timothy 4:2ff. A text became a pretext when Matthew 11:28, ‘Come unto me, all ye that are wearie & laden, and I will ease you,’ was taken as proof that the only appropriate posture at the Lord’s table was sitting, as witnessing to the rest that Christ promised to his disciples. Of equal perversity and ingenuity was Cartwright’s argument for stability of position in worship (over against the mobility of the one presiding over Anglican worship who moves from prayer desk to lectern to pulpit to altar) drawn from Acts 1:15: ‘Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples.’ The most extreme example was the denial of the right to have responses in public prayers because the flesh of the repetitive cuckoo was forbidden in Leviticus.”

¹⁹⁸ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 5.

the Scriptures. To depart from them in the smallest practice is to disobey God and therefore to make all innovations futile.”¹⁹⁹ This created a culture of clear bifurcation of right and wrong for the Puritans.²⁰⁰ This mindset was beneficial when the only opponent was Rome but harmed efforts to unite the Reformation in Europe. The Puritans were narrower in their application of the regulative principle than Calvin himself, for “the extreme Puritans . . . were more scrupulous in carrying out Calvin’s doctrines to their logical conclusion than the logical Reformer himself.”²⁰¹

Clearly, there were discontinuities between Calvin and the Puritans that followed him.²⁰² The Puritan paradigm for pure worship praxis led to exaggerate the requirements of Scripture,²⁰³ and they applied the regulative principle without a sense of Calvin’s principle of accommodation. Minor issues mattered, and as result, the Puritans’ category of circumstances²⁰⁴ was significantly smaller than Calvin’s.²⁰⁵ Ironically, their common loathing for the Catholic church became another point of discontinuity, for “in

¹⁹⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 74.

²⁰⁰ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 50. Davies says, “In their apologia their first position was inevitably the all-sufficiency and perfection of the Scriptures for the ordering of worship . . . having stated their thesis in such bold terms, they proceed to justify it by quotations from the Scriptures. It is their invariable practice to find a warrant in Holy Writ for every postulate they make. Thus, believing themselves bound to the Word of God, they do not assert a mere opinion, or a reasonable conviction, but the declared will of God.”

²⁰¹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 50.

²⁰² Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?,” 21. Keith says, “Whereas Calvin would have embraced . . . ceremonies inculcating reverence and practices promoting good order under his understanding of what lay within the discretion of church leaders under 1 Corinthians 14:40, there was a tendency among the later Puritans to restrict this to issues of order like the time and place for church meetings. In short, very little freedom was left to these leaders by this understanding of the Regulative Principle.”

²⁰³ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 100.

²⁰⁴ The Westminster Confession states that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 1.6.

²⁰⁵ Gore explains, “The Puritan definition of circumstances was very narrow—that much is clear. But it was all too difficult to apply in practice, not only at the time of the Westminster Assembly but over the last 350 years as well. Hence, my conclusion . . . was that it was not only difficult, but even difficult to the point of being ‘unworkable.’” R. J. Gore, Jr., “Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Critics,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 2 (2005): 377.

their fear and detestation of the Roman Church, they did not give sufficient heed to the customs of the primitive church, or to the conclusions of the Reformed Church on the Continent. In fact, in their eager haste to run away from their corruptions of Rome, they far outdistanced their leader, Calvin.”²⁰⁶ Calvin held to a bedrock commitment of scriptural fidelity but believed in moderation and that “forms of worship need to be accommodated to the condition and tastes of the people.”²⁰⁷ The Puritans largely discarded this value.

The regulative principle, generally speaking, originates with Calvin. Calvin’s inception of the regulative principle is a claim this chapter has demonstrated by examining Calvin’s historical influence in the Reformation, Calvin’s theology of worship, and Calvin’s worship praxis.

²⁰⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 256.

²⁰⁷ Gordon, *Calvin*, 254.

CHAPTER 3
THE PURITAN CODIFICATION OF
THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Introduction

The term, “regulative principle” has its birthplace in the Westminster Assembly of the seventeenth century. Yet the term itself is a relatively recent construct.¹ The original term might be better understood as “regulating worship” according to the Word of God. Over three centuries have elapsed since the Assembly at Westminster produced its documents that include portions regulating worship. What the modern era classifies as the “regulative principle of worship” can only be understood in the context of who wrote it, how they wrote it down, where they wrote it, and what occasion prompted its writing. These questions will be explored, and answers will be offered in this chapter.

Much like sound biblical exegesis, the concept of “context is king” reigns supreme in understanding a historical document. For the regulative principle came from a group of people with a distinct set of values in a particular time in the history of the church.² While the regulative principle was originally conceived by Calvin, the regulative principle was birthed by the Puritans. The Puritans occupied a distinct time in history, in a particular place in the world, in countries where the political and theological climates were unique to their time.

¹ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002). Gore states that “though the concept is quite old, the precise origin of the term ‘regulative principle of worship’ is not known. While there are references to ‘regulating’ worship, I have found no explicit reference to the regulative principle of worship until the twentieth century.”

² John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (1973; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 21. Leith says that that “historical study must provide help not only for understanding what the Confession says, but also for determining how what it actually says was elicited, shaped, and conditioned by its particular place in history.”

This chapter aims to establish the link between the historical context of the Westminster Assembly and the regulative principle by exploring how these unique forces of history shaped the regulative principle that emerged from it.³ This link is critical for proper understanding, assessment, and insight. Without historical context, the work of the Westminster Assembly might be viewed only as a theological statement of faith, instead of documents that reflect a unique confluence of economic, social, political, and ecclesial forces.⁴

Three preliminary historical observations from these forces can be highlighted. First, the Puritans' formulation of the regulative principle was written almost a century after Calvin died. A century's worth of changing political climates and fluctuating ecclesial conditions led to different questions and other pressing concerns for the Puritans. While there are substantial similarities between Calvin and the Puritans, any comparison that involves the passage of time will inevitably elicit differences between two entities. These differences play a primary role in the development of the regulative principle. Secondly, Calvin's sphere of influence was the entire continent of Europe⁵ and reflects his travel and pilgrimage existence. As a result, he enjoyed a unique perspective as a second-generation Reformer in Europe following Luther. For the Puritans, their emergence is linked within the scope of the Church of England. Consequently, their influence is limited to England, Scotland, and Ireland. Lastly, comparing one person with a group such as the Puritans presents unique challenges because the group was not a monolithic group but a group of sub-groups, each group vying for its "voice" during the Assembly. Nevertheless, the Puritans were a group held together by many common areas

³ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 23.

⁴ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 20. Leith explains that "the language of the Confession is logical, technical, and abstract. . . . [The] style of the Confession and Catechisms tempted the reader to exempt this theology from the ambiguities and the relativities of all historical enterprises."

⁵ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), ix.

of doctrine and worship praxis, yet, unquestionably, its bond was strongest when they shared common enemies.⁶

The regulative principle, as codified by the Puritans, will be presented from a historical perspective in this chapter in two distinct sections. First, the origins of the Church of England provide context about the emergence of the Puritans and how they identified themselves as “the godly.”⁷ The second section of this chapter will focus on the historical development of the regulative principle itself. This focus will highlight the unique circumstances that motivated Parliament to convene the Westminster Assembly. It will also reveal the documents that were created during the Assembly’s meetings from 1643 to 1652 that sourced the regulative principle.

The Puritans were not one monolithic group, reacting as one to the various issues on the table, but a gathering that “was characterized not only by a-tug-of-war between major ecclesiological options but also by intramural contests within these developing traditions.”⁸ Yet these intramural contests within developing traditions were unified by significant beliefs and values, all adherents within an “international Calvinism” that birthed the regulative principle of worship.⁹ Their differing applications and disputes are instructive to the modern reader, for “the conflicts of today’s church were already present and were already disturbing the church at the time of the Westminster Assembly.”¹⁰ Understanding the Puritan milieu is crucial to decoding this

⁶ Van Dixhoorn, “Unity and Disunity at the Westminster Assembly (1643-1649): A Commemorative Essay,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* (1997-) 79, no. 2 (2001): 111.

⁷ Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643-1653*, Studies on the Westminster Assembly, ed. John R. Bower and Chad Van Dixhoorn (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 12.

⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 13.

⁹ Bryan D. Spinks, *Sacraments, Ceremonies and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental Theology and Liturgy in England and Scotland, 1603-1662* (London: Routledge Taylor and France Group, 2002), xii.

¹⁰ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 21.

riddle, for understanding the regulative principle of worship is impossible without understanding the Puritans.

The Historical Context of the Regulative Principle

As an event, the Westminster Assembly was a significant achievement in a turbulent time in history—the product of economic, social, and political forces, as well as the product of the internal theological life of the church.¹¹ Historian John Leith posits that the Westminster Assembly should be viewed as the culmination of considerable theological output.¹² Consequently, understanding this theological era requires an awareness of the Puritans.¹³

The regulative principle of worship was codified by the divines at the Westminster Assembly that met from 1643 to 1652. During this time, four documents were produced—the Directory of Publick Worship (1644), the Confession of Faith (1647), the Shorter Catechism (1647), and the Longer Catechism (1647). Statements on worship are found in all four documents, and collectively they constitute the regulative principle of worship.

If understanding the regulative principle requires understanding the Puritans, then understanding the Puritans requires an understanding of the inception of the Church of England. Thus, the material of this next section will focus on the Church of England and the origin and rise of Puritanism, both of which contributed significantly to the landscape that paved the way for the Westminster Assembly. These historical artifacts

¹¹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 23.

¹² Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 12. Leith explains, “The Westminster Confession was one of the final documents of the great period of theological activity that began on October 31, 1517, with Luther’s ninety-five theses. . . . In a very real sense the Westminster Confession was the product of one hundred and twenty-five years of theological work.”

¹³ Leith writes, “The major issues had been decided. The language of theology had been sharpened in lengthy debates and in treatises over many years and in many places. . . . Here we have the theological climax of a very great theological era.” Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 38.

will be shared along with specific theological, national, and political events that created the climate that preceded the Assembly at Westminster.

The Origin of the Puritans and the Church of England

This section addresses the early contours of the beginning of the Church of England and the factors that influenced its contentious start. From its inception during the separation from Rome, the question of its identity came under intense scrutiny. The stakes were high. “Toleration was a shocking thought in the sixteenth century. Both Protestants and Catholics believed in only one form of truth, and that one truth must be preserved at any price. The competition was vicious, not only for the power it brought the victor, but also because salvation was at stake.”¹⁴ Would the Church of England follow the path of the continental Reformers or would it continue on a distinctly Roman path, albeit without papal authority? Through it all, a symbiotic relationship between the church and state cemented early Puritans’ perspective of authority, already tainted by centuries of abusive Roman authority.

When Henry VIII ascended the throne of England in 1509, there was one church, and it was Roman Catholic. From 800 to 1500, the “Holy Roman Empire” referred to the new empire based on the territory gained by the Romans in the original Roman conquests and held together by the pope. The influence of the Catholic church was enormous; it spanned many centuries and was the pervasive religious influence in every European nation. When Henry VIII was unsuccessful in his attempt to secure papal approval for his divorce from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, he led the church to break away from Rome, effectively creating the Church of England. When the Act of Supremacy was passed by Parliament in 1534, the king was given the right to correct,

¹⁴ Leslie Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched: A Short Life of Thomas Cranmer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 48.

redress, and repress all heresies and errors.¹⁵ The Church came under royal, not papal control.¹⁶ This blending of state and church authority resulted in unusual circumstances and future repercussions for both entities.

As Martin Luther and his reform initiatives played out on the continent, the winds of reform were blowing into England as well. Henry VIII's decision to pull away from Rome brought more encouragement and courage to people who longed for further reform. Among these people, hopes were high that Henry VIII would share Luther's vision. But before long, it became evident that the king would not support the cause of theological reform.¹⁷ He was a mercurial leader who would appear to support reform efforts in one direction then deceptively support the reform's opposition, simply to keep the scales balanced and each side uneasy.¹⁸ With enormous power as monarch of the nation and the head of the Church of England, few individuals dared to oppose Henry VIII and risk their political career to oppose him. Consequently, reform for England looked different from the Reformation on the continent.

One of the rare individuals who opposed Henry VIII (albeit respectfully) and escaped his wrath was Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer was a moderating influence upon Henry VIII's excesses and continued to enjoy unique royal access throughout his reign.¹⁹ Cranmer was appointed by Henry VIII as the Archbishop of Canterbury and played a key role in nudging the Church of England toward further reform while balancing frequent

¹⁵ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 12.

¹⁶ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 12.

¹⁷ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 74.

¹⁸ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 48-49. Williams writes, "Henry VIII soon made it clear that although he was not a Catholic in jurisdiction, he held otherwise 'orthodox' Roman views. In England, Henry's desire to reform the church was specific and limited. . . . In England, the term 'heretic' specifically meant anyone who didn't agree with Henry."

¹⁹ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 68. Williams explains, "His belief in royal supremacy, the taproot of his conviction, helped Cranmer to survive Henry's reign."

national crises.²⁰ Cranmer was a calming and spiritual influence in turbulent times, and even his opponents praised his character and demeanor.²¹ Cranmer, over the course of his career, moved from a traditional belief in transubstantiation to the Reformed position—that Christ’s presence was in the hearts of the believers who received communion.²²

One of Cranmer’s significant milestones was the creation of the Book of Common Prayer in 1549, with a subsequent revision in 1552. This allowed the people to participate in the liturgy in their own language to facilitate understanding. While it did not go far enough in its reforms for the non-conformists—from whom the Puritans emerged—it was initially created with the expectation that it would function for a short time and to introduce the English people to evangelical ideas.²³ Cranmer was firmly committed to the Scripture’s ultimate authority and was instrumental in helping Henry VIII bring an early version of the Bible, the “Great Bible,” into the hands of the English people in their own language. Cranmer was even commissioned by Henry VIII to write the preface.²⁴

Henry VIII died in 1547, succeeded by his son. Edward VI was nine years old when he ascended the throne and was a Protestant. Reformers made some gains during his reign, and Thomas Cranmer continued to be an influential figure in church affairs, moderating between conservatives who wanted to remain ceremonial like Rome and

²⁰ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 49. Williams writes, “Cranmer, who had been swayed by the reforms he’d seen in Germany, took a slow but steady, drip-by-drip approach to reforming the English church under an absolute monarch. He realized that any reformation could take place only in subtle moves.”

²¹ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 87.

²² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 12. Letham writes, “Cranmer . . . had as his ultimate aim the alignment of the Church of England with the Reformed churches on the continent.”

²³ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 108, 120. Williams writes, “The new prayer book simplified clerical vestments, replaced stone altars with wooden tables, and got rid of the chancel screens. Other changes included expunging the Agnus Dei, using ordinary bread instead of unleavened bread, placing the communion table in the main part of the church and not in the east end, and having the priest stand at the north side of the table.”

²⁴ Williams, *Emblem of Faith Untouched*, 76.

reformers who felt the Reformation had not been completed.²⁵ Edward VI reigned less than seven years before his unexpected death at age sixteen. The only heir left was Mary, who ascended the throne in 1553. Mary's reign violently swung towards Rome, and persecution and death were prevalent. Cranmer was burned at the stake during Mary's reign for being a heretic, and thousands of theologians fled to the continent.²⁶ When Mary died, Elizabeth I assumed the throne in 1558. Elizabeth was firmly Protestant, and many who had left for the continent returned home. During her reign, the king's role was changed to supreme governor, instead of supreme head. Her reign initially gave Puritans hope for more scriptural conformity in worship.²⁷ However, Elizabeth I was no reformer at heart. She loved ceremonies and pomp and imposed strict penalties upon clergy who departed from the prescribed liturgy.²⁸ Elizabeth's royal authority, combined with magisterial motivation for order and peace between the divided Knoxians and Coxians, led to an authoritarian climate.²⁹ This power structure, and its inherent authority, became one of the focal points of those who dissented.³⁰

The Church of England is a direct descendant of Roman Catholicism, and with it, models of authoritarian leadership. Over many centuries, the strong authoritative examples from this tradition inevitably became a genetic predisposition that was passed on from Romanism to Anglicanism, even amidst other reasons for breaking away, as in the case of the Church of England. With Henry VIII becoming the head of the Church of

²⁵ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 12.

²⁶ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 13.

²⁷ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690* (1970; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 45.

²⁸ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 45.

²⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 45.

³⁰ Letham states, "The underlying problem was that the Elizabethan Settlement, while Protestant, was still tied to a medieval church structure that continued to enforce the canon law from times under Roman jurisdiction, unless it contradicted the royal authority." Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 15.

England, it further enmeshed the nation's goals and objectives with the church's goals and objectives. With the exception of Edward VI, monarchs during the early years of the Church of England maximized or exceeded their authority, no matter their Catholic or Protestant loyalties. Royal authority combined with ecclesiastical authority made life difficult for anyone who dared to oppose the stated agenda. Death, persecution, deprivations, and the loss of vocation were all possible outcomes for those who opposed authority. Excessive authority became a significant bone of contention for the Puritans.³¹ With church and state authority structures and purposes so intertwined, opposition was heresy, and heresy was treasonous.

This abuse of power was especially egregious with Charles I who suspended Parliament from 1629-1640. In 1640, the Convocation of the Church of England enacted a series of canons asserting the divine right of kings to rule both in civil society and the church. This usurped long-established Parliament rights and provoked widespread opposition. This divine right was to be read by every preacher on some Sunday in every quarter. This became known as the "et cetera" oath.³² Refusal risked the loss of ecclesiastical promotions. This kingly power also extended to calling and dissolving councils. To violate this was a treasonable offense; thus, establishing Presbyterian churches was treason.³³ Imposing special "holy days" for kingly inauguration and the power to levy taxes on personal property were all "divine" rights. These decisions were especially onerous for a group that wished to follow the dictates of their own consciences

³¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 18. Letham writes, "The chief point at issue for the Puritans was whether the church has the right to bind consciences with anything other than the declarations of the Bible. . . . For the Puritans, worship and church polity—as well as matters of salvation—were to be drawn from the teaching of Scripture, either expressed or implicit. For their opponents, the ancient practice of the church and the customs of the nations were of comparable authority. Moreover, their opponents developed a theory that the constitution of the Church of England was by divine right—*ius divinum*—and so to question it was more than an error; it was outright heresy."

³² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 25.

³³ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 25.

and the Word of God. As these decisions were imposed with their royal and ecclesiastical authority, pressure mounted for the Puritans. The soil of dissent was being tilled for ecclesial and national conflict. “Not only were the political and the religious so inextricably intertwined that ‘secular’ was a meaningless category, but the religious issues alone had the strength to generate the passion needed for armed uprising against the king.”³⁴ The origin of the Puritans is linked to this abuse of power.

The Rise of the Puritans in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

Despite Cranmer’s reform efforts, there was a vocal minority that believed he did not go far enough. This vocal minority expressed their dissent at the lack of reform within the Church of England and coalesced under a shared set of convictions.³⁵ This next section will present a taxonomy of views that covers the start of these “dissenters” and their unique identity and values.³⁶ These values incurred persecution and contributed to an inculcation of the group’s personality traits, traits that in time would come to both benefit and injure, respectively.

As the Church of England began with Henry VIII’s initiative, there were early indicators that there was a rift in this Protestant solidarity. There was disagreement whether to adhere to Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper or Zwingli’s memorial position. There were those who were loyal to Cranmer, his example of martyrdom, and his Book of Common Prayer; these were the “Coxians,” named after Richard Cox. There

³⁴ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 26.

³⁵ Davies writes, “The certainty of man’s depravity, the absolute trustworthiness of God combined with his sovereign power to effect His will against all obstacles, the unmistakable obligation of His commandments, the certainty and clarity of the pattern of His purpose for all aspects of human life in the world of Scripture, all drove the Puritan toward an ethics of challenge, not stoic acceptance, toward fight rather than flight.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 66-67.

³⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 44. Davies considers this a moniker that all Puritans shared originally. As the decades progressed in the late sixteenth century, Puritans who were “patient” worked for reform while remaining within the Church of England. “Impatient” Puritans would eventually organize themselves independent of the church.

were those who were loyal to Calvin and his vision of worship as expressed in the prayer book of Geneva; these were the “Knoxians,” led by John Knox in Scotland.³⁷ In the 1570’s, the controversy with the “Admonitioners” was over liturgy. These were exiles back in England after fleeing the persecution under Mary. There was great hope that these exiles, after exposure to the continental churches, would take over the Church of England. But it was the imposition of clergy attire where the term “Puritan” first came into existence.³⁸

These controversies illustrated the fact that there were two fundamental issues at stake: the issue of scriptural fidelity and the issue of authority, with its imposition on the people.³⁹ The controversy over vestments alerted Puritans to heightened vigilance towards the center of their objections, namely, the Book of Common Prayer and the episcopacy. Parliament became the focus of this vigilance.⁴⁰ In every decade of the late sixteenth century, the connotations of the term “Puritan” shifted somewhat as it was sometimes derogatory, sometimes merely descriptive, and occasionally worn as a badge of honor, depending on who was using the term and how it was used. This makes the task of defining Puritanism very elusive.⁴¹ The Puritans called themselves “the godly.” They viewed themselves as adhering to the Word of God with utmost faithfulness and believed every area of life was to be shaped by the words of Scripture. Thus, preaching became the

³⁷ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 41-42.

³⁸ Davies states, “The term ‘Puritan’ came into use during the Vestiarian Controversy late in 1567 It is much likelier that the term was used by less iconoclastic Protestants who wanted to ‘reform the reformation’ or by those who criticized the pretensions of such purists or precisionists. Unquestionably the entire movement was characterized by a concern that the Reformation should proceed according to the norm of the ‘pure’ word of God further than it had already done in England; the impurity of the Church of England was seen in its retention of the vestments of Catholicism along with some Catholic ceremonies.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 41.

³⁹ Davies states, “No amount of episcopal insistence that the vestments were to be worn for the sake of decency, comeliness, and good order blinded the Puritans to the fact that the vestments, theoretically *adiaphora* and of their nature indifferent, were made essential requisites of Anglican worship.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 262.

⁴⁰ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 48-49.

⁴¹ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 12.

primary focus of God's path of transformation. "In other words, for the Anglican the sacramental was the primary mode of Christ's presence, but for the Puritan the primary mode of Christ's presence was kerygmatic."⁴² Preaching became the dominant expression of what it meant to be Puritan.

The Anglicans' chief means of grace were the sacraments and the summary expression of this with its attendant rites, vestments, and liturgies. Their piety centered around awed wonder at the condescension of the God-man and amazement at the humility and mystery around the incarnation, a continuation of the mysticism of medieval England. They felt free to use the custom of the ancient church, provided that Scripture did not veto the customs.⁴³ Consequently, the requirements for ministers centered around their sacramental duties and minimized the attention given to preaching. After decades of minimizing preaching, this became a problem that erupted into a crisis by the time the Westminster Assembly convened. There was a "want of preaching."⁴⁴ Ministers would read other's sermons and this practice, for the Puritans, drifted towards a form of stage acting. There is one account of a parishioner that went eight years without hearing a sermon in his church.⁴⁵

These became serious issues for the Puritans. For them, preaching was the primary means of God extending grace and required the utmost sincerity and preparation. "Puritans were also greatly concerned that officially prescribed homilies, produced during a shortage of educated Protestant clergy, would oust sermons. This was why they berated the clergy of the Church of England as 'dumb dogs' who could read the Book of

⁴² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 64.

⁴³ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 68.

⁴⁴ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 17.

⁴⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 18.

Common Prayer and the homilies, but who could not preach.”⁴⁶ The Puritans felt that the Anglicans had egregiously abandoned the preaching that was required by Scripture and replaced it with man-made ceremonies that were not only in error but ludicrous.⁴⁷ These divisions between Anglicans and Puritans grew larger as the decades marched on and revealed the contrast between Anglican and Puritan perceptions about themselves.⁴⁸

The rise of the Puritans as a group came out of the milieu of the Church of England. If the Church of England had committed itself to the same reforms as many on the main continent had, perhaps the Puritans never would have emerged. Yet the Church of England’s history reflects a conflicted identity and is the major reason why the Puritans felt that the English Reformation was incomplete and needed to continue its quest towards full reformation.⁴⁹

The Context of the Westminster Assembly

At the start of the Westminster Assembly, the political climate in England was volatile and tumultuous due to a civil war that resulted in rival governments. At the same time, ecclesial tension existed within the Church of England between Anglicans and Puritans. While the Puritans were the dominant group within the constituency of the Assembly, there were differing opinions among them about the extent of the needed

⁴⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 263.

⁴⁷ John Foxe’s account in 1563 of a minister’s actions during these ceremonies illustrates: “What Democritus or Calphurnius could abstaine from laughter, beholding only the fashion of their masse, from the beginnunge to the latter end, with suche turning, returning, halfe turning and hole turning, such kissing, blessing, crowching, becking, crossing, knocking, ducking, washing, rinsing, lyfting, touching, fingering, whispering, stoping, dipping, bowing, licking, wiping, sleping, shifting with a hundred things mo. What wise man, I saye, seing such toyish gaudes can keepe from laughter?” John Foxe and George Townsend, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe: A New and Complete Edition; With a Preliminary Dissertation, by the Rev. George Townsend*, ed. Stephen Reed Cattley (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1837).

⁴⁸ Davies explains these contrasting self-portraits: “Ultimately the difference of style between the Anglican and the Puritan was the difference between life as a pilgrimage toward the shining towers of heaven glimpsed mystically as the clouds part, and life as fighting the good fight of faith, with the courage of obedience, empowered by the sword of the Spirit.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 69.

⁴⁹ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 11.

reform within the Church of England. These differing opinions contributed to tension within the national church and threatened ecclesial unity. Summarily, this explosive time in England's social and religious history fractured the nation and significantly impacted puritanism and the convening of the Assembly.⁵⁰

This section illustrates the historical context of the Westminster Assembly, and how the documents it produced shaped the scope of worship regulation. The historical context of worship regulation is dominated by two distinct but conjoined realities—national factors surrounding England itself and theological factors within Puritanism's emerging maturity as a movement. Both political and theological factors contributed to the unique climate surrounding the Westminster Assembly and will be explored in the next section.

Westminster Assembly: National Factors

While there are numerous factors that contributed to the national and political scene around the time of the Assembly, these factors can be grouped into three distinct categories. The first category is England itself as a nation torn apart by civil war. This national crisis affected the tone and scope of the Assembly. The second category is Scotland; although a separate kingdom at the time, it shared common Reformed convictions with English Puritans and subsequently was drawn into the whirlwind of England's civil war. The third category is the specific goals that Parliament had for the Assembly at Westminster. Parliament's motivations play a significant role in the Assembly. All three categories are interrelated and prevalent within the national context surrounding the Assembly at Westminster.

The nation of England. England's civil war erupted because of several threatening conditions. When Charles I ascended the throne in 1625, he did not have the

⁵⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 32.

same political skills nor theological upbringing of his father, James I.⁵¹ Charles I was sympathetic to the High-Church party of incense and appointed militant high churchmen to senior positions, such as William Laud to the archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Laudians held dear the episcopacy leadership, the sacraments, and ritual. This upset the Calvinist consensus of the Church of England which, up to 1630, had dominated for several decades. Laud required absolute submission to the king, even in ecclesial rituals within the Church of England. Laud purposed to divide the Calvinist camp, curb preaching, and drive the Puritans out of England altogether.⁵² Puritans felt that Charles I had abdicated his role to preserve the true Reformed religion in England.⁵³

When Charles I suspended Parliament from 1629 to 1640, he accelerated the tension and turmoil that many felt along civil and religious lines. This decision pushed Parliament's sympathies towards the Puritans and eventual alignment. This alignment resulted in two factions—essentially, Parliament and the King—and the tension eventually culminated in a physical response.⁵⁴ This trouble erupted into civil war in 1642, and the primary factor was religious in nature. Letham explains that “recent historical scholarship has brought back to center stage the recognition that religion was the largest single factor in these wars. The Assembly was at the heart of the questions of the day; it had a vital place in English history at that decisive time.”⁵⁵ These circumstances place the convening of the Assembly at Westminster at a critical juncture

⁵¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 1. Letham writes, “It is with the accession of Charles I and the rise of Laud that these measures began to be implemented in earnest and the crisis erupted.”

⁵² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 19.

⁵³ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 27.

⁵⁴ Historian Justo Gonzalez comments that “both sides began building up their armies. Charles found his greatest support among the nobility, while Parliament found its support among those who most suffered in recent times.” Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 158.

⁵⁵ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 1.

in England's trajectory as a nation while reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between civil and ecclesial authorities.

Parliament's relationship with the kingdom of Scotland. The second national factor that contributed to the climate at the Assembly was the kingdom of Scotland. While similarities existed between the two countries at the time, the Assembly was distinctly an English body.⁵⁶ Scotland was a separate kingdom from England until the Act of Union in 1707 and decidedly Presbyterian in its church government structure. The church was thriving even while there were no viable political structures, though the church was compromised at the local level by rival clans and families.

Soon after the Westminster Assembly convened in July 1643, the English Parliament realized that they would need help from Scotland in its war with Charles I. The Scottish commissioners came to London to negotiate with Parliament, and as a result, the Solemn League and Covenant was signed by Parliament and Scotland in October 1643.⁵⁷ This treaty shifted priorities for Parliament on Assembly tasks. Initially, Assembly tasks "did not include radical reform of church government. Parliament simply requested advice on ecclesiastical affairs. Only when Parliament was forced to negotiate with the Scots for assistance in the war against the king did the new allies, as a price for their help, request that the brief be extended to include church government as a priority."⁵⁸ Parliament was concerned for the reformation of the church, but political survival, which necessitated the need for a military alliance, pushed them further towards this end.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 41. Note, Letham clarifies that the Scottish commissioners were invited by Parliament to sit in on the debates and take part, but they were not official members; they were not voting members of the Assembly.

⁵⁷ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 159.

⁵⁸ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 30.

⁵⁹ The Solemn League and Covenant committed both parties "(1) to endeavour the extirpation

The treaty put the English Parliament and the kingdom of Scotland on a shared course of church reform.⁶⁰ Parliament's conviction lay in the fact that the unity of a society inheres in its religion and church.⁶¹ Contrastingly, some felt that Parliament's motivation for this treaty was primarily political—a marriage of convenience.⁶² Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish commissioners at the Westminster Assembly, would later remark in a letter dated November 21, 1644, "The English were for a civill League, we for a religious Covenant."⁶³ Be that as it may, Parliament, via the Assembly, could now turn its attention to church government.⁶⁴ The newly-enlarged scope had challenging consequences for the Assembly. The new priorities changed the program of the Assembly for the remainder of its existence.

The goals of Parliament. The third national factor that contributed to the climate at the Assembly was Parliament's goals. The Assembly was convened by Parliament, for the purposes of Parliament. As civil war erupted in England, Parliament saw the need to convene an Assembly of divines to address some specific aims. Historian Chad Van Dixhoorn explains, "Parliament summoned the assembly with the hope that it

of Popery, prelacy . . . superstition, heresy . . . profaneness; (2) to endeavour the preservation of the reformed religion in Scotland, . . . the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline and government, according to the Word of God and the example of the best reformed Churches; (3) and to endeavour to bring the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of Church government, directory for worship and catechising, that we, and our posterity after us, may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us." Samuel Rawson Gardiner, ed., *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution, 1625-1662* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1958), 268-269.

⁶⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 63.

⁶¹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 59.

⁶² Spinks, *Sacraments*, 113.

⁶³ Robert Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, vol. 2, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1841), 90.

⁶⁴ Leith states, "The Solemn League and Covenant meant that the Assembly would devote a major proportion of its time to church government and worship. In these areas members of the Assembly had their deepest differences." Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 27.

would address England's ecclesiastical problems, offering not cosmetic corrections but renewed hope and vigor to a church plagued with deep structural problems."⁶⁵

Parliament's purposes were shaped by its dire circumstances: the episcopacy no longer existed, state institutions were in turmoil, and their country was at war with itself.⁶⁶ It was a time with little certainty and extreme turmoil at all levels.⁶⁷ Previously, the "Root and Branch petition" had called for the abolition of the episcopacy of the Church of England. Letham explains that "after considering only ecclesiastical pruning, the Commons legislated the abolition of Episcopacy."⁶⁸ This led to the unusual position that, by the time that Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly, there was no legal basis for the Church of England.⁶⁹ The Assembly at Westminster convened at Parliament's discretion with Parliamentary goals.

As stated earlier, Parliament summoned the assembly with the hope that it would address England's ecclesiastical problems, plagued with deep structural issues.⁷⁰ This elevated the value to reach a unified agreement. Parliament desired consensus from the leaders within the Church of England, making it clear that "from the outset, the Westminster Assembly had a need, for both theological and political reasons, to make its

⁶⁵ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 35.

⁶⁶ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 175.

⁶⁷ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 175. Letham indicates that the Puritans' theological focus helped them during this national crisis. "The Assembly's stress on God's decree was greatly needed at a time of threatening instability, such as England was in during the 1640s. Nothing was certain. The institutions of state were in turmoil, the country was at war with itself, and no legal church existed. The foundations were shaken to their core."

⁶⁸ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 28.

⁶⁹ Spinks comments, "Initial proposals for a moderate reform of episcopacy in England gave way to its abolition, and the Long Parliament called an assembly of divines to settle the government and liturgy of the Church of England. The intention of this latter was to clarify the doctrine of the now non-episcopal English Church, and to bring it nearer to the standards of the Church of Scotland and other Reformed churches abroad." Spinks, *Sacraments*, 113.

⁷⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 35.

standards such that all its members could agree with them.”⁷¹

The Assembly was dominated by three distinct groups of Puritans at the time of the Assembly: Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Independents. Anglicans and Presbyterians believed in the necessity of a Protestant national church in England,⁷² and they were the dominant majority of constituents at the Assembly. The regulative principle of worship reflects the nature of the Assembly, and the Assembly was created to achieve the widest possible measure of agreement.⁷³ As a result, the documents that were created by the Assembly should be seen as compromise documents.⁷⁴ This can be observed on occasion in the choice of language used to articulate these values. One example of this pressure to come to consensus comes in the rubrics of the Directory of Publick Worship (1644), the first Westminster document published, where the rubrics allow for the greatest amount of agreement.⁷⁵ This is seen again when, in the section on preaching, the Directory advocates a certain methodological approach and states that “this . . . is not to be prescribed to every man, nor upon every occasion, but is recommended upon the experience of the benefit that hath accrued by it.”⁷⁶ The Assembly and its constituents were united by Reformed convictions but were concurrently challenged by the diversity in worship praxis by these same constituents. This diversity had a resulting impact upon

⁷¹ Van Dixhoorn, “Unity and Disunity at the Westminster Assembly,” 79.

⁷² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 61.

⁷³ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 117.

⁷⁴ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 111. Letham states, “The Assembly documents need to be understood as *compromise documents* [emphasis original]. Compromise is inevitable in a group of 150 people.”

⁷⁵ Van Dixhoorn explains, “In the first place, the directory is not always clear . . . about whether it is giving directives as suggestions, or directives as commands. Sometimes the directory says a minister may do something, or in other places it says he shall. Practices are variously termed ‘necessary’ or ‘requisite’ but also ‘expedient,’ ‘convenient,’ or ‘sufficient.’ A deliberate attempt was made to express differing degrees of confidence for different practices featured in the directory.” Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 89.

⁷⁶ John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, vol. 13, ed. J. R. Pitman (London: J. F. Dove, 1824), 278.

the language of the Assembly's documents.

Another goal of Parliament was to improve the quality of preaching and ministers throughout the church. There was a clerical vacuum, both in quality and quantity.⁷⁷ The pulpit quality had dropped to extremely low levels, due to Archbishop William Laud's convictions about elevating ceremonial rites above preaching, as well as his authoritative leadership style. The Assembly's task was to address this pulpit deficiency. Letham adds that "in addition to this, the assembly established (with Parliament's blessing) a national system of examinations, a filter through which all preachers had to pass. It was an attempt to address perceived weaknesses in English preaching by means of sifting through England's preachers."⁷⁸ While the Assembly's task was to solve the problem of preaching, this task was assigned to the Assembly by Parliament. Moreover, Parliament perceived that solving the problem of preaching within the Church of England would significantly help England as a whole. As this was a shared goal, both entities believed there should be a close connection between each other.⁷⁹

Dire national and ecclesial circumstances intensified the pressure for agreement and further enmeshed the purposes of the church and the state. Yet the intersection of civil and ecclesiastical authority was by no means an abnormal relationship. Both civil and church entities were conditioned to a relationship that was intertwined.⁸⁰ Political and religious issues were so inextricably intertwined that

⁷⁷ Van Dixhoorn reveals the extent of the Assembly's work: "The Westminster Assembly, summoned by the Long Parliament (1640-1653) in an attempt to reform the Church of England, was obsessed with pulpit reform. The gathering not only conducted thousands of examinations of preachers (expending more sessions scrutinizing men than drafting documents!) but it also had a lot to say about preaching and the importance of the pulpit in the texts that it eventually produced." Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 1.

⁷⁸ Van Dixhoorn, *God's Ambassadors*, 1.

⁷⁹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 313.

⁸⁰ Van Dixhoorn explains, "In a nominally Christian society like England, as in all Constantinian church-state arrangements, the welfare of the polis was tethered to the well-being of the ecclesia. Or to put it the other way around, when a tide of ignorance or immorality affected the church, it invariably affected the state. This meant that the governments of both institutions felt an obligation to

“secular” was a meaningless category.⁸¹ The Assembly reflects the Parliamentary nature of its inception and the accompanying national interests that come with it. This was a significant contribution to the climate surrounding the Westminster Assembly.

Westminster Assembly: Theological Factors

While England’s civil war, Scotland, and Parliament were factors that played an enormous role in the political climate surrounding the Westminster Assembly, there were also significant theological factors. The Westminster divines were trying to avoid distinct theological dangers while hoping that, after over a century of minority status, oppression, and persecution, the church would finally be set upon a solid, Reformed trajectory. Van Dixhoorn states that “the Westminster Assembly proved to be the answer to an almost century-old puritan dream for further reformation in the Church of England.”⁸² Yet the Assembly divines were realistic, and there was a strong sense of awareness as a movement. Leith summarizes the Assembly’s objectives:

The Assembly was the beneficiary of almost 125 years of Protestant theology. It was aware of this heritage. On the one hand, it was determined to avoid innovation in theology. It did not cherish novelty [T]his reformation was a purification, not a change of the Reformed faith. The conservation of the theological work of the past century, not originality, was to be the hallmark of the Assembly.⁸³

While many issues were debated within the timeframe of the Assembly’s meetings, the theological dangers at the onset of these meetings could be grouped into concerns over the limits of church authority and sectarian concerns. This thesis now turns to consider the two categories of theological factors that surrounded the Westminster Assembly.

cooperate in reform, or at least to inform the other of its duties. The intertwining of church and state gave ministers of church and state a degree of freedom to intermeddle with each other’s affairs, but it did not mean that the two parties enjoyed an equal authority and influence.”

⁸¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 26.

⁸² Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 11.

⁸³ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 37.

The issue of authority. Of all the issues that had contributed to the Puritans' dissatisfaction with the Church of England, many of them were linked to issues of authority. The Puritans resented the imposition of set forms, liturgy, vestments, baptismal rites, Lord's Supper practices, and other ceremonies upon ministers, churches, and parishioners. This resentment kept growing as risk for non-compliance kept getting stricter. To be sure, the Puritans reacted to the lack of biblical support for these worship practices, but the lingering issue was the issue of authority.⁸⁴

The authority issue complicated the relationship between church and state.⁸⁵ This uncertainty about the Church of England was seen in the debates that revealed the different sub-groups within the Puritans at the Assembly. Even though there was substantial disagreement about worship praxis, most of them still believed in one state church. Being a citizen of England meant being part of the Church of England. John Leith adds that "any distinction between the individual man and society was unnecessary if not impossible in the 1640's. The Christian man and the Holy Commonwealth were part of one understanding of the purposes of God in world history."⁸⁶ Their destinies were enmeshed in one future reality. Yet the future was determined by those who held authority. The issue of authority played a significant role in the theological climate surrounding the Westminster Assembly.

⁸⁴ Letham explains the Assembly's objections to this authority: "We see why the Assembly produced a directory of worship giving freedom to individual ministers to conduct worship services within the boundaries of the regulative principle of Scripture. It was the binding legal requirement, imposed by the crown, with penalties attached, that was the real nub of the problem with the liturgy for Puritan minds. . . . The standard practice of the Reformed churches had been to have a liturgy with set prayers; the problem for the divines was the rigid imposition and the repressive, punitive sanctions for failure to comply." Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 303-4.

⁸⁵ Letham states that "while the Assembly recognized a distinction between the government of the church and the government of the nation, it nevertheless equally maintained that there is to be a close connection between them. This was a burning issue, with huge uncertainty about the future pressing hard." Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 313.

⁸⁶ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 102.

Sectarian concerns. Sectarian concerns were also on the minds of the Westminster Assembly divines. As the Protestant reformation gained momentum and maturity over the course of over one hundred years, several theological views and groups were seen as dangerous by the Puritans, for “in the minds of the godly, London was slowly, or not so slowly, being overrun by schismatic and often heretical teachers.”⁸⁷ The proliferation of sects endangered everything upon which the Reformed faith in England was based: church, theology, and society.⁸⁸

The rise of antinomianism in England, which claimed that Christ has so fulfilled the law of God on behalf of the elect that it no longer had relevance for sanctification, threatened Reformation efforts. The refutation of antinomianism was one of the primary concerns of the Assembly.⁸⁹ For a country like England with its close connection between church and state, this was a dangerous philosophy. Van Dixhoorn explains that “once the war began . . . a myriad of religious fanatics and self-appointed preachers began to feature more prominently in London and elsewhere, and the Westminster Assembly’s members diverted their attention to address the problems of sectarian preaching.”⁹⁰ The chaos of a nation’s civil war resulted in many threats to a unified Reformed vision, and sectarianism was significant. These sectarian concerns, along with issues of authority, were the theological factors that contributed to the climate surrounding the Westminster Assembly.

⁸⁷ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 34.

⁸⁸ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 61.

⁸⁹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 80.

⁹⁰ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 172.

The Development of the Regulative Principle

The regulative principle was codified by the Puritans during turbulent national and theological crises.⁹¹ This chapter now launches the second major section that reveals the reasons and events surrounding the development of the regulative principle itself. Where the first section focused on the historical background before the regulative principle was codified, including the origin of the Puritans and the national and theological factors that dominated England as the Assembly was convened, this section turns its focus to the occasion that birthed the regulative principle and its original motivation before discussing the documents that contain the regulative principle.

The Occasion of the Regulative Principle

The occasion that birthed the regulative principle of worship was the Westminster Assembly that met from 1643 to 1652. Understanding the context of the Westminster Assembly yields insights into the created documents of the Assembly from which the regulative principle was articulated. In this section, exploration of the Westminster Assembly is divided into three distinct areas. The first area of exploration is the nature of this Assembly—its inception, goals, and origins. The second area is centered around the people of the Assembly. The demographics, education, and background of its constituents will unearth some valuable insights into the people of the Assembly. Lastly, this section will focus on the debates of the Assembly. Exploring the debates will uncover motivations and priorities of the Assembly’s constituents that shaped worship regulation. In summary, the nature, people, and debates of the Assembly will provide the context to help understand the regulative principle.

⁹¹ Needham describes the Westminster Confession as “forged in the furnace of conflict.” Nick Needham, “Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns, and Musical Instruments,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, vol. 2, ed. J. Ligon Duncan and W. Duncan Rankin (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 228.

The nature of the Westminster Assembly. The meetings of the Westminster Assembly began in July 1643. Its initial mandate was a theological mandate, and its first task, via Parliament, was to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith, the doctrinal foundation of the Church of England.⁹² The Thirty-Nine Articles of 1562 were Calvinistic documents of Augustinian heritage that Parliament felt needed revision and expansion. While some scholars feel this was just “busy work,” “marking time,” and “trifling,” Letham argues that they were significant steps because they saved time later when other theological issues were debated.⁹³ Moreover, the first task placed upon the Assembly divines signifies the importance that Parliament gave to this task.⁹⁴ Significant time was spent on Article Eight, which pertained to the three historic church creeds, and Article Eleven, which was on justification. Unsurprisingly, the evolving nature of political realities soon made this no longer a priority.⁹⁵

Once the Solemn League and Oath was signed with Scotland in October 1643, Parliament ordered suspension of the revisions to begin work on a directory of worship and issues of church government. Then Parliament requested the Assembly to produce a new confession and catechisms. These new documents had in view the church in all three kingdoms.⁹⁶ The divines of the Westminster Assembly subsequently directed their attention to producing a directory for worship.

The Westminster Assembly had seventy-five meetings from July 1, 1643, until being disbanded in 1652. Only sixty-nine of 119 were present when the divines first met

⁹² Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 79.

⁹³ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, ed. Ethelbert Dudley Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 34-35.

⁹⁴ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 37.

⁹⁵ Letham concludes that “in the end, the settlement of the question of article 8 was put off until the Assembly had finished the revisions of all thirty-nine articles. This never happened.” Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 156.

⁹⁶ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 37.

in 1643, due mostly to the threats of the king. They continued to meet during the civil war and even beyond the execution of Charles I in 1649. An overview of all the meetings of the Westminster Assembly reveals the priorities and concerns of its constituents. Letham comments that “only 26 percent of the plenary sessions and 19 percent of the committees had church government as their main focus, whereas 36 percent of the plenary sessions were devoted to theological issues, as well as 31 percent of committees.”⁹⁷ Nonetheless, the real consensus of the Assembly was in the area of theology.⁹⁸ In sum, the Westminster Assembly met over seventy-five times until 1652, when it was disbanded following Cromwell’s dramatic ending of the Long Parliament. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper occupied eighteen out of the seventy-five sittings of the Committee.⁹⁹

The nature of the Assembly is such that it behooves restating its inception. The Westminster Assembly was a civil advisory committee convened at the request of Parliament. It was a Parliamentary body, though very few of its members held Parliamentary views.¹⁰⁰ It was not a church court. The Westminster Assembly was an advisory committee on ecclesiastical affairs with no authority of its own. Its dissolution was at the discretion of Parliament.¹⁰¹ This was a fact made even more volatile because Charles I mocked this synod, and his disapproval of the Westminster Assembly made

⁹⁷ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 106.

⁹⁸ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 27.

⁹⁹ Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 135.

¹⁰⁰ Van Dixhoorn continues, “The shape and main tasks of the assembly were directed by the two houses of Parliament, . . . and the assembly meeting at Westminster Abbey was required to submit all of its reports and discuss all of its substantial disagreements with the men meeting across the street at Westminster Palace.” Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 3-4.

¹⁰¹ Van Dixhoorn clarifies that “in the case of the Assembly, its whole operation was at the behest of Parliament. There was agreement on the role of the civil authority; the question at the time was whether the king or Parliament was the legitimate ruler.” Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 32.

participation in this synod risky.¹⁰² The nature of the Westminster Assembly reveals a time of volatility, change, and uncertainty about the future. Given the civil war and the abolition of the episcopacy, there was a sense of urgency and importance to this synod. The next section turns its attention toward the people of the Westminster Assembly.

The people of the Westminster Assembly. The divines at the Westminster Assembly were chosen by Parliament to represent the counties, universities, and Parliament itself. There were 121 divines, and most were English subjects, though “the House of Lords and the House of Commons added thirty of their own number as observers to the gathering.”¹⁰³ There were four Scottish commissioners invited by Parliament to take part in the discussions though they were not voting members. There were some Episcopalians, a few Independents, a few more Erastians, but most were Presbyterian, with diverse viewpoints on the civil war.¹⁰⁴ As a general rule, they were men of great learning—scholars, pastors, authors, and theologians.¹⁰⁵

The reforms on worship were (1) to reform the worship, discipline, and government of the Church of England, (2) to promote church unity among the churches in England, Scotland, and the Continent, and (3) to clarify the doctrine and revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England.¹⁰⁶ Letham summarizes that “in short, the

¹⁰² Davies states, “Assembly members were being offered the first chance to make the Church of England more Reformed since the time of Edward VI. And yet, given the reality of a strong antireform party and its success in recent decades, the assembly’s task was not simply to steer English Christians in a more Reformed direction. Rather, it was to first stop the movement of the churches and cathedrals of England—already moving at a brisk trot toward Laudian liturgical conformity—and then reverse the direction completely.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 33.

¹⁰³ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 45.

¹⁰⁵ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 33. Van Dixhoorn continues, “Education findings are no less significant . . . Eighty-five percent of the divines appointed had both bachelor’s and master’s degrees . . . The fact that almost all of them came from the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge is also important in this sense . . . In both schools Calvin’s Institutes was a standard text . . . It was distinctly and comprehensively Calvinistic.” Van Dixhoorn, “Unity and Disunity at the Westminster Assembly,” 79.

¹⁰⁶ Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), *The Westminster Confession: The Confession of Faith*,

Assembly, within limits, was inclusive rather than exclusive. It sought to reach the widest measure of agreement possible, within acceptable limits of doctrine and practice.”¹⁰⁷

There was already agreement on major issues since they were all Reformed and the majority were Puritans. Letham continues, “Reformed theology was a relatively broad stream, and differences among those swimming in it were recognized and accepted.”¹⁰⁸

Yet these differences, though minor, were fiercely contested.¹⁰⁹ The divines reflected a diversity within the Reformed tradition with strongly held views on worship praxis. For the Puritans, compromise was unthinkable and antithetical to a life of faithfulness to God. These divines were battle-tested and refined by hardship and persecution to contend earnestly for their convictions. This disposition would be reflected in the specificity of details with which they waged debate, especially the Lord’s Supper.

The debates of the Westminster Assembly. Exploring the major debates will reveal the priorities and disposition of Assembly participants. They were prepared to battle over the smallest of details, as the following material will attest. Yet the synod resulted in consensus, and agreement among the Puritan coalition was achieved. Second, most scholars align with the view that disagreement over theological issues was relatively minor.¹¹⁰ There was already significant theological alignment; their differences paled in

the Larger and Shorter Catechism, the Directory for the Public Worship of God, with Associated Historical Documents (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), xix-xxi.

¹⁰⁷ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 117.

¹⁰⁸ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 84.

¹⁰⁹ Van Dixhoorn reveals the nature of these Assembly participants: “The Westminster Assembly contained many hot Protestants, and the assembly itself arguably constitutes an important chapter in the history of the puritan movement. Indeed, even to meet at the assembly was to defy the direct command of the king. It is also the case, however, that the assembly embodied the diversity that obtained among the godly The membership of the assembly, selected by both houses of Parliament, was also self-selecting, in that men chose whether or not to attend. Nonetheless, the choice of the assembly’s members was not dictated by a single parliamentary vision.” Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 15-16.

¹¹⁰ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 38. Leith states, “The theological debates were about fine points. Members of the Assembly did argue whether the atonement was accomplished by Christ’s passive obedience on the cross which cancelled man’s guilt or whether the atonement also included Christ’s active obedience which was imputed to man as positive righteousness.”

comparison to the theology that unified them.¹¹¹ Yet broad theological unity was not a guarantee of quick and easy agreement. After many decades of opposing the errors of the Church of England, it was simply easier for the Puritans to define what they were against than affirming, with specificity, what they were for. Davies confirms that “while there was substantial agreement in the Puritan coalition on the *delenda*, there was considerable disagreement on the *agenda*.”¹¹² While these were “intramural contests,” issues over liturgy, soteriology, and the sacraments were vigorously debated.¹¹³

Debate topics, while expectedly numerous during seventy-five meetings spanning nine years, are perhaps best grouped according to theological or liturgical issues. The debates themselves were centered on issues like polity, the order of salvation—supralapsarianism or infralapsarianism, Amyraldianism, and hypothetical universalism—the Lord’s Supper, and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.¹¹⁴ These issues reveal the priorities of Assembly participants.¹¹⁵ Yet debate subjects reveal only a partial narrative. Full insight is achieved by knowledge of debate dynamics. Certainly, the disposition of the factions of the Puritan coalition is displayed throughout the duration of the Assembly, especially the Independents.

The Independent faction was a minority unafraid to voice opposition. They earned a reputation for stalling progress toward agreement. Robert Baillie, one of the four Scottish commissioners, considered the Independents the “great retarders.”¹¹⁶ Baillie’s patience was so severely tested by such sustained, detailed argument that he considered

¹¹¹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 103.

¹¹² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 410.

¹¹³ Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 13.

¹¹⁴ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 114-16.

¹¹⁵ Historian Bryan Spinks states that “although the Assembly achieved its task, it did so amongst debates which showed sharp disagreements not just over polity, but also over sacraments, soteriology, ecclesiology and liturgy.” Spinks, *Sacraments*, 113.

¹¹⁶ Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, 191.

Trent the only event that exceeded such a response.¹¹⁷ The Independents, though a substantial minority, were fearless and vocal as they shared their perspective on the issues at hand, and this delayed consensus or shaped the consensus the Assembly finally did achieve.¹¹⁸ Davies believes that there were other factors that gave the Independents their boldness:

The summary answer is that the Independents (later to be known as Congregationalists) in the Westminster Assembly of Divines persuaded the Presbyterian majority to accept this compromise, partly on the strength of their biblically based arguments, and partly because the Independent support was strongest in Cromwell's Ironsides. The Independents, however, were using arguments that had been provided by the Separatists and proto-Puritans of Queen Elizabeth's days.¹¹⁹

Independentism increased in power and prestige during the Civil War.¹²⁰ The debates themselves were not squelched, and freedom of perspectives and beliefs was given room for expression—as evidenced by the Independents.

Liturgical worship practices were a consistent and central topic of debate. One of these topics was the value of the Apostles' Creed. This was especially problematic for Puritans because it was a “set form,” a worship formulation that was not directly from Scripture. Because this reminded the Puritan coalition of their struggle with the Book of Common Prayer, this was divisive among the divines. The problem first surfaced when the divines were revising the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, as to the place of the three ancient creeds—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.¹²¹ Letham continues,

¹¹⁷ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 25.

¹¹⁸ Letham states that “it is well known that the Independents were given leave to present their case to the Assembly and that this occupied a considerable amount of time in debate.” Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 116.

¹¹⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 189-90.

¹²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Prolegomena*, vol. 1, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 187.

¹²¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 153.

Despite the pledge to Parliament that the Apostles' Creed would be included, neither the Larger Catechism nor the Shorter Catechism includes anything about creeds. This is particularly notable since the classic catechetical form consisted of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The Westminster Catechisms incorporate the latter two into their structure, but not the Apostles' Creed. This can hardly be anything other than studied indifference and deliberate exclusion. It indicates that a significant portion of the Assembly's members were verging on a separatist mentality and that a firm historical consciousness was in the process of being lost. This was by no means uniform; there were sufficient members with a thorough knowledge of, and appreciation for, the past teachings of the church, the Reformed churches, and the church fathers to prevent this from being a blanket judgment.¹²²

Continental Reformed churches were so concerned that a document was sent to England from one of the Dutch church leaders who presented evidence that creedal affirmations were valid and in harmony with Scripture.¹²³ Despite this overture, the divines did not include the Apostles' Creed.¹²⁴ The independent Puritans, with their Separatist proclivities, were persuasive at the Westminster Assembly. The Puritans' exclusion of the Apostles' Creed evidenced their narrowing path and departure from Calvin.

Significant debates occurred over other liturgical practices, and many issues associated with the Lord's Table. There were several components where there was agreement, most obviously the name of the rite. This was a uniquely Puritan identity. Davies explains,

The very title, "The Lord's Supper," which the Puritans adopted for the Sacrament of Communion, in preference to "Communion," or "Eucharist," is significant. It is yet another indication of the Puritan loyalty to the Word of God. No other name sufficiently indicated the Dominical authority for this sacrament or its Scriptural

¹²² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 156-57.

¹²³ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 157-58. Letham states, "On 4 December 1644, a volume was sent on their behalf, written by Guilielmus Apollonius. Apollonius produced a raft of evidence that the Assembly was in imminent danger of diverging from the settled teaching of Reformed churches throughout Europe from the time of Calvin onward. In the case in point, he argued strongly that it was a legitimate exercise of church power, supported by Scripture and Reformed theology, to make confessions of faith that were ecclesiastically binding. At the same time, these creeds and confessions were not of ultimate or absolute authority, being subject to Scripture."

¹²⁴ Davies states, "Whilst they claimed to be true heirs of the reformed Churches, in actual fact they had proceeded with a more radical reformation than their continental mentors. The impetus in this revolution, as well as the apparent unawareness of the radical nature of the changes, it is claimed, are the direct result of the doctrine and practice of Separatist worship, mediated by the Independents." Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 48.

foundation. It was the universally accepted designation for this sacrament amongst all the Puritans.¹²⁵

The “Lord’s Supper” term was not the only item of agreement. All Puritans rejected the use of unleavened bread as they prized the “common loaf” identified in Scripture.¹²⁶ Kneeling when receiving the bread was considered by all Puritan factions as one of three “noxious ceremonies” and was anathematized.¹²⁷ There was also agreement on the moral sanctity of the ordinance itself and the ethical requirements extracted from the Scriptures.¹²⁸ Puritans also agreed with one another that the elements should be received together as a group.¹²⁹ While they disagreed among themselves on *how* to take the elements as a group, they were unified in eschewing the Anglican approach of receiving the elements singly and in succession.¹³⁰ Yet Puritan agreement on the details of the Lord’s Supper fails to go beyond these measures.

Puritan factions disagreed on other details of the Lord’s Supper, namely, the frequency of observance. The Independents initially favored a weekly observance, but eventually settled on monthly. The Presbyterians favored a much more infrequent approach in an attempt to highlight its spiritual significance.¹³¹ The Puritans simply could

¹²⁵ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 204.

¹²⁶ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 76. Gore explains, “The unleavened wafer . . . failed the biblical requirement of being a ‘common loaf’ and was viewed as unsuitable for worship.”

¹²⁷ John T. W. Field and Thomas Cartwright, *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of the Puritan Revolt, with a Reprint of the Admonition to the Parliament and Kindred Documents, 1572*, ed. W. H. Frere and Charles Edward Douglas (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1907), 14. Field and Cartwright say, “That people be apointed to receive the Sacrament, rather, sitting, for avoydying of supersition, than kneeling, having in it the outwarde shewe of evyl, from which we must abstaine.”

¹²⁸ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 216. Davies states that “the second characteristic is the strong ethical emphasis given to the Lord’s Supper by the Puritans. Only a true disciple of the Lord is worthy to sit at the Lord’s Table. The moral sanctity of the ordinance was preserved both by the introductory ‘fencing of the Table’ and by the exercise of ecclesiastical censures.”

¹²⁹ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 266. Davies explains that “the mode of individual delivery, *seriatim*, was thought to contradict the simultaneous corporate reception envisaged by Christ whose words were in the plural number.”

¹³⁰ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 64.

¹³¹ Davies states, “There were three main divisions amongst the Puritans: the Independents, the

not agree on frequency of observance.¹³² One might hope that frequency would have been the only minor disagreement and this disagreement would have been marked by respect for opposing viewpoints. Unfortunately, this congeniality eluded the Puritans at Westminster. Contentiousness dominated the details of the Lord's Supper—especially the manner of reception.

The Presbyterians in England and Scotland believed that followers of Christ were invited by Christ himself to the table of the Lord. The Scottish Presbyterians expressed this conviction by recreating the “table experience”—in their minds this had symbolic value along with direct Scriptural evidence.¹³³ Scottish Presbyterians, with this manner of reception, avoided the stench of Catholicism and showed themselves to be faithful to Scripture. Independent Puritans were convinced that without long tables, this would prevent everyone in the congregation from taking the elements together and displaying their unity.¹³⁴ Debate raged vigorously with neither faction relenting.¹³⁵ Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish commissioners present at the debate was particularly vexed:

Baptists, and the Presbyterians. Whilst for practical purposes the Independents and Baptists were united in liturgical practices (with the single exception of their celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism), they differed considerably from the Presbyterians both in the method of celebration of the Sacrament of Communion and in their views of the frequency with which it should be administered.” Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 205.

¹³² Davies explains that “the *Book of Discipline* requests that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated quarterly in burghs and half-yearly in the county-parishes. Communion in Scotland was often more infrequent than this, for there was a popular feeling that the Lord's Supper, like the Passover, ought to be celebrated once yearly.” Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 214.

¹³³ Davies states, “The Independent communicants receive the elements sitting in their pews. The Scottish Presbyterians, however, receive them at the Table, which was long enough to admit many communicants. The Scottish Presbyterians held tenaciously to this method of reception because they believed it was an accurate attempt to reproduce the circumstances of the Last Supper, whilst it had symbolical value as a declaration that the Lord's Supper was a Feast, at which the Lord was Host and the communicants the guests, rather than a Sacrifice.” Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 215.

¹³⁴ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 135. Davies writes that “the Independents objected to this procedure because it was seldom possible to receive all the communicants in a congregation at one table and hence they had to be received either at another service or in successive companies at the same table. It was the custom of the Independents to receive the elements together, presumably to symbolize their unity.”

¹³⁵ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 135. Davies states that “Both Scots and Independents keenly contested every point, particularly when each party believed that its own distinctive principles were at stake.”

This day before no one we gott sundrie propositions of our directory for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper past, but in the afternoon we could not move one inch. The unhappie Independents would mangle that sacrament. No catechising nor preparation before; no thanksgiving after; no sacramentall doctrine or chapters, in the day of celebration; no coming up to any table; but a carrying of the element to all in their seats athort the church: yet all this, with God's help we have carried over their bellies to our practice. But exhortations at tables yet we stick at: they would have no words spoken at all. Nye would be at covering the head at the receiving. We must dispute every inch of our ground.¹³⁶

Given the already established Independent penchant for defending their position with vocal stridency, this response from Baillie gives the reader a revealing window into the rancor within the Assembly's meetings. Both factions believed their positions were adopted directly from Scripture and there were no other possible interpretations, justifying their uncompromising stances. Both factions believed that God's perfect and comprehensive Word was communicated in the "very letter of the Scriptures."¹³⁷ In short, both factions of the Puritans believed God's comprehensive and perfect Word translated into specific worship praxis.¹³⁸ In the end, the language adopted by the Westminster Assembly allowed for either practice. These were documents of compromise because on certain worship practices they simply could not agree.

As the Puritans were not one monolithic group, there were other groups within the Puritans that claimed unique and obscure positions of specific practice. For John Cotton, an influential English independent before seeking religious asylum in New England, faithful scriptural adherence required praying for each element in successive order.¹³⁹ Sequence was also reflected in some Puritans believing that the necessity for a

¹³⁶ Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, 192.

¹³⁷ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 209.

¹³⁸ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, ed. John Dykstra Eusden (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 189. Ames states that "Scripture is not a partial but a perfect rule of faith and morals. And no observance can be continually and necessary everywhere in the church of God, on the basis of any tradition or other authority, unless it is contained in the Scriptures."

¹³⁹ Cotton explains, "After they have all partaked in the bread, he taketh the cup in like manner; and giveth thanks anew, (blesseth it) according to the example of Christ in the Evangelist, who describes the institution. Mat. 26.27. Mark.14.23. Luk.22.17. All of them in such a way as setteth forth the

sermon to precede the Lord's Supper was supplied by the precedent of Acts 20:27.¹⁴⁰ In summary, Puritans displayed a tendency for seeking explicit scriptural support for every practice in worship.¹⁴¹ This tendency resulted in some questionable proof-texting for worship praxis.

This section has highlighted Lord's Supper issues where there was agreement and disagreement among Puritan factions. Yet these Lord's Supper issues are also significant because they depart from Calvin. For example, Calvin advocated for the elements of the Lord's Supper to be given to the sick. This was rejected by the Puritans on superstitious grounds.¹⁴² Though his attempts were thwarted, Calvin believed in the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.¹⁴³ This belief came from Calvin's conviction that the Lord's Supper was the manifestation of Christ's real presence and thereby was as important as preaching in a service. The Puritans went in the opposite direction with frequency. They opted for less frequent observance and as a result, the importance of the Lord's Supper was diminished. Davies states that Calvin "would not . . . have allowed the Puritan tendency to exalt the Sermon to the depreciation of the Sacrament. They were equally important to his mind."¹⁴⁴ For Calvin, the primacy of the Word was the focus—expressed equally between the visible Word (the Lord's Supper) and the preached Word. The Puritans departed from Calvin's equitable balance and focused mainly on

Elements, not blessed together, but either of them apart; the bread first by itself, and afterwards the wine by itself; for what reason the Lord himself best knoweth." John Cotton, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1645), 69.

¹⁴⁰ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 260.

¹⁴¹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 50. Davies states that "in their apologia their first position was inevitably the all-sufficiency and perfection of the Scriptures for the ordering of worship; . . . having stated their thesis in such bold terms, they proceed to justify it by quotations from the Scriptures. It is their invariable practice to find a warrant in Holy Writ for every postulate they make."

¹⁴² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 43.

¹⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.43.

¹⁴⁴ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 43.

preaching.¹⁴⁵

The Puritans took the opposite position from Calvin with respect to kneeling. The Puritans traveled in anti-Catholic directions, and with the act of kneeling associating with the error of transubstantiation, the Puritans were united in their total rejection of this practice. Contrastingly, Calvin was not opposed to kneeling. As some objected to this practice as a human addition to worship, Calvin replied, “Let us take, for example, the bending of the knee which is made in public prayer. It is asked, whether this is a human tradition, which any one is at liberty to repudiate or neglect? I say, that it is human, and that at the same time it is divine.”¹⁴⁶ Calvin believed that when superstition is laid aside, and if no salvific import is attached, these matters are in themselves indifferent.¹⁴⁷ For the Puritans, this was guilt by association and could not be tolerated. Davies comments that “in this and in other respects the Puritans were so afraid of superstitious abuse of a custom, that rather than erect it with safeguards, they avoided it altogether.”¹⁴⁸ Calvin accommodated the practice of kneeling while the Puritans ignored his example and pursued a restrictive path.

Whether Lord’s Supper worship praxis included unleavened bread, kneeling, or frequency of observance, Calvin practiced his principle of accommodation.¹⁴⁹ R. J. Gore comments that “the Puritans departed from the regulation of worship as understood by Calvin. For Calvin, these were matters of indifference, to be determined by the needs of the church, expediency, and decorum. To make an issue over the use of the wafer would

¹⁴⁵ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 43.

¹⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.30.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.22.

¹⁴⁸ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 43.

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.17.43. Calvin states, “But as for the outward ceremony of the action—whether or not the believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each: whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white—it makes no difference. These things are indifferent and left at the church’s discretion.”

be a frivolous indulgence.”¹⁵⁰ Calvin considered an uncompromising stance of scriptural faithfulness in worship praxis to be compatible with his principle of accommodation. Nevertheless, the Puritans continued their path of narrowing application of the regulative principle without an awareness of their “cleavage with Calvin.”¹⁵¹ Increasingly, Puritans found that matters of indifference for Calvin lacked scriptural warrant. Davies states that “both English and Scottish Puritans discarded the customs as they could not find warrant for them in the Word of God, although this required a departure from the continental Reformed tradition.”¹⁵² In their uncompromising stances, there was no room for accommodation.

Finally, it is worth restating that the Puritans’ disposition is a significant component of Assembly meetings. While it is true that agreement was reached in the formulation of the Westminster documents, it is also true that each faction with Puritanism displayed a robust obduracy in defending their positions. Yet it should be noted that each faction already agreed with Calvin and his theological position of the “real presence” of Christ in the sacrament.¹⁵³ They were all Reformed. None were advocating the theological errors of consubstantiation (Lutherans) or of transubstantiation (Roman Catholics). There may have been some residual loyalties towards Zwingli’s “memorialist” position, but the debates show no discourse of that type. Yet despite the Reformed theological solidarity, eighteen sessions were still needed to ensure consensus. The contentiousness displayed extended to the rubrics and the physical details of bread type, sequence, manner of reception, and gesture. It was scriptural debate, to be sure, but it was not *theological* debate. Ironically, in the end, the language of the Westminster

¹⁵⁰ Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 76-77.

¹⁵¹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 43.

¹⁵² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 42.

¹⁵³ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 27.

documents allows for diversity of rubrics within the Reformed community—a staple of Calvin. Ultimately, accommodation was achieved through Westminster’s written formulations but forgotten during Westminster’s debates. The Puritans’ pristine historical record of *sola Scriptura* as liturgical criterion must be tempered by their disposition toward one another in the debates.

In summary, the uncompromising nature that enabled the Puritans to combat the entrenched positions of the Church of England became the very characteristic that prevented them from following Calvin. Calvin pursued unity and showed wisdom in recognizing “things indifferent,” and employed the principle of accommodation. For the Puritans, very few worship practices were “things indifferent.” Every practice in worship mattered.¹⁵⁴ Denying any detail in worship meant denying God himself. Every discussion was processed through the filter of “true” or “false” worship. There was a clear bifurcation in the Puritan understanding of worship. There was no middle ground. Consider John Owen’s example of a Puritan mindset of bifurcation. Owen said, “God’s worship *hath no accidentals* [All] that is in it and belonging to it, and the manner of it, is false worship, if it have not a divine institution in particular; that all liturgies, as such, are such false worship (and not the English only)—used to defeat Christ’s promise of gifts and God’s spirit.”¹⁵⁵ For Owen and the Puritans, there was either false worship or true worship. Puritans believed that the Scriptures revealed God’s will in worship so completely and thoroughly—they simply could not envision a practice that was indifferent when Scripture’s authority was absolute.¹⁵⁶ Davies states that “such a

¹⁵⁴ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 74. Davies summarizes the Puritan mindset: “God is a jealous God and has prescribed all that is necessary for the adequate honouring of himself in public worship in the Scriptures. To depart from them in the smallest practice is to disobey God and therefore to make all innovations futile.”

¹⁵⁵ John Owen, *Twelve Arguments against Any Conformity of Members of Separate Churches to the National Church* (N.p: 1684), quoted in F. J. Powicke, *Essays Congregational and Catholic*, ed. Albert Peel (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1931), 300; emphasis added.

¹⁵⁶ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 53-54.

dogmatic statement by the leader of the Independents made accommodation impossible.”¹⁵⁷

The Puritans’ relentlessness enabled significant gains in their quest for scriptural faithfulness, yet it also caused them to suffer losses. The Westminster debates were long, tough, contentious, comprehensive, and searching.¹⁵⁸ The debates also reveal the Puritans’ inflexibility. Each faction held specific convictions that were tethered to a bedrock commitment to Scripture’s total and comprehensive authority over worship praxis. Leith states that “the irony of the Westminster Assembly’s work was that its very greatness was its downfall, . . . [for] the Confession was too precise and too comprehensive.”¹⁵⁹ For Puritans, scriptural authority equaled specificity. Specificity squeezed out accommodation in any area. As a result, the Puritans distanced themselves from Calvin. Thus, the nature, people, and debates of the Assembly formed the historical and cultural context of the regulative principle.

The Motivation of the Regulative Principle

The Puritan coalition was unified in the motivations that spawned their attendance at the Assembly. The Puritans were determined to continue the unfinished task of the English Reformation. They were committed to overcoming the obstacles that Rome and the Church of England were continually putting in their path of pursuing pure scriptural worship. These motivations provided continuous fuel throughout the extended synod that met for almost a decade. These motivations displayed themselves as fears. The first fear that motivated the Puritan coalition was the fear that the Reformation in England would not reach full maturity but be stopped in its infancy. Reformers in England hoped

¹⁵⁷ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 113.

¹⁵⁸ Warfield, *Westminster Assembly*, 122-24.

¹⁵⁹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 14.

for similar results as what Calvin achieved almost a century before. The second fear was the fear of Catholicism in all its forms: Rome, the Church of England, and ceremonialism. The Puritans sensed Catholicism behind these expressions and considered them evil and false. The third fear that motivated the Puritans was the fear of idolatry. The Word of God was central to everything that the Puritans stood for, and it was the abandonment of the Word's ultimate authority that led to all manner of idolatry.

Fear of incomplete Reformation. As the civil war commenced, the Puritans feared the complete overthrow of any Reformation gains in England.¹⁶⁰ Letham explains that “this was part of an eruption of eschatological expectation that accompanied a ferment of fears, spurred by the belief that the church of Christ was in a state of apostasy signaling a final battle with the Antichrist.”¹⁶¹ The Puritans believed that they would finish in the Church of England what the Reformers had only begun. Davies explains that “the compilers believed that Providence was now calling them to a further reformation, as was made evident in the need to satisfy their own consciences, to be more conformable to other Reformed churches, and to make public testimony of efforts at uniformity in worship as promised in the Solemn League and Covenant.”¹⁶² The fear of not finishing the Reformation in England was a significant underlying motivation for the divines as they met at Westminster.

Fear of Catholicism. All Puritan factions were bonded together by their shared distaste for Rome, the root of all evils.¹⁶³ Because of the oppression, opposition, and persecution that came from the Roman Catholic church, there was a heightened

¹⁶⁰ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 29.

¹⁶¹ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 22.

¹⁶² Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 409.

¹⁶³ Van Dixhoorn, “Unity and Disunity at the Westminster Assembly,” 79.

sensitivity towards any Roman ceremonial excess, false worship, or a works-based righteousness.¹⁶⁴ This fear exceeded even physical harm to themselves. “The specter was not so much the danger of persecution as much as the danger of Romanism in all its forms.”¹⁶⁵ Whether in Rome or the Church of England, the fear of Catholicism was a dominant force in the Puritan movement. This fear shaped their vigorous oppositional response to any perceived error in addition to any accompanying behavior connected to that error.

Fear of idolatry. The Puritans feared idolatry, and this drove many of their objections to worship practices. Kneeling to bread and wine, the representations of Christ’s body and blood, was idolatrous for the Puritans because it represented the error of transubstantiation. This mystical error of the body and blood becoming Christ’s actual body became the epitome of Catholic superstition and idolatry. This fear of idolatry was what motivated the divines at the Assembly to pen that true worship was “the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his Word . . . [and] the disapproving, detesting, opposing of all false worship . . . monuments of idolatry.”¹⁶⁶

This Puritan fear of idolatry was behind their objection to religious art and artifacts, for it was directly linked to fulfilling the second commandment. Davies states that “it seemed to the Puritan theologians . . . that the Second Commandment which forbade the making of ‘graven images’ demanded the removal from churches of all

¹⁶⁴ Singer states, “If at times their criticism of the Roman church seems harsh and uncharitable, it must always be kept in mind that they were in combat with a liturgical tradition, the roots of which were deeply buried in a thousand years of tradition and were very difficult to remove. A frontal attack was necessary if this idolatry was to be removed and the worship of the Church purged of this monstrous evil.” C. Gregg Singer, “The Reformed Creeds and the Reconstruction of Christian Worship,” in *Worship in the Presence of God*, ed. David C. Lachman and Frank Joseph Smith (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), 281.

¹⁶⁵ Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 28.

¹⁶⁶ Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow, UK: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 108.

representations of the Divine Majesty in stained-glass windows or carvings in wood or stone.”¹⁶⁷ The Scriptures were the antidote to the fear of idolatry, a dominant motivation for the Puritans at Westminster.

These three fears—the fear of an incomplete reformation, the fear of popery, and the fear of idolatry—sum up what motivated the divines at Westminster Assembly. These three fears were the source motivation behind the regulative principle.

The Documents of the Regulative Principle

The regulative principle of worship’s source documents were all produced by the Westminster Assembly as a result of the nearly ten years of its meeting. Every portion of these source documents that deal with worship is considered part of the regulative principle. The Assembly produced four documents: (1) The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, (2) The Westminster Confession of Faith, (3) The Larger Catechism, and (4) The Shorter Catechism. All four documents contribute to the regulative principle of worship, though mostly the Catechisms contribute to it. The Directory for the Publick Worship of God was the first document completed; it was accomplished by the end of 1644 and published by the authority of Parliament in 1645. The Catechisms and the Westminster Confession of Faith were presented to the English Parliament in 1647 and were approved in 1648. They lost their official status in 1660 when the monarchy was restored and the episcopacy was reestablished.

In this section, background material will be offered that contributed to the Westminster documents’ formulation before launching into the style attributes. These style attributes were the result of a culmination of theological and historical factors. Finally, the Westminster documents themselves will be shared along with some introductory comments that frame their importance for the Reformed community.

¹⁶⁷ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 201.

Background and style attributes. The Westminster Assembly convened over one hundred years after the Reformation. All the divines present there could trace their lineage back to this seminal event, for they were descendants of this theological heritage, especially Calvin's. As Puritanism grew in maturity as a movement, the needs changed.¹⁶⁸ The Assembly's task was different than that of the Reformation. Moreover, there were some significant historical factors that occurred in the century between the start of the Reformation and the start of the Westminster Assembly. The Reformation put pressure on the Catholic church to give precise, clear, and exact answers to the theological challenges of the Reformers. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) was the result of this increased attention to the technical aspects of theology. The Protestants, especially those at Westminster, felt pressure to match or exceed this approach.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps another external factor for this evolving style was due to the acrimonious debates between Reformed churches and Lutheran churches from the 1560s on, which led to fastidious refinement of theological definitions and positions.¹⁷⁰ Lastly, the style of confessions themselves were evolving from statements of faith focused on gospel events to scholastic statements that employed logic and reason.¹⁷¹ The Westminster documents reflect a progression among confessions toward technical, precise, and abstract language.

¹⁶⁸ Leith states, "After the 1560's Protestant theology faced a new task, namely one of consolidation, clarification, and elaboration. The necessity of this task arose out of the nature of theology itself. During the initial religious experience, words may be used loosely and without careful definition, but if a movement is to survive, it must sooner or later formulate precisely what it is saying or believing. It must ask how one affirmation fits with other affirmations, how the total experience holds together. There are dangers in this process, for when any great experience of life is analyzed, precisely defined, and described, there is the risk that the living reality will be destroyed." Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 65.

¹⁶⁹ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 66.

¹⁷⁰ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 66.

¹⁷¹ Leith states, "The Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession, and the Helvetic Consensus Formula are abstract, objective, and logical in contrast to the historical, experiential, and fragmentary character of the Scots Confession of 1560, the First Helvetic Confession of 1536, and the Genevan Confession of 1536. The seventeenth-century confessions are increasingly more concerned with the authority of faith than with the fact of faith, with the right definition of faith than with proclamation." Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 66.

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God. Once the Solemn League and Covenant was signed by English Parliament and the kingdom of Scotland, the priorities shifted to church government and worship—areas where there were differing views. Consequently, there was pressure to come to wide agreement so that all parties could sign on.¹⁷² Presbyterians appreciated set forms of worship in prayer and praise, but the Independents were adamantly opposed to any set form. Davies clarifies the opposing views:

The Presbyterians, however much they might have smarted from the imposition of a High-Church Anglican Scottish liturgy upon the Church of Scotland in 1637, had no objection in principle to a liturgy or set order and prescribed words in worship; but the vociferous and persistent caucus of the Independents, led by the learned and pertinacious Thomas Goodwin, and the sense that the many Independents of New Model Army of the Roundheads were ever drawing nearer to the Westminster Assembly, pressured the Presbyterians into the compromise of accepting a directory.¹⁷³

A directory for worship, as opposed to a prayer book of prescribed prayers and praises, was the answer that all factions could agree upon. Both groups had differing perspectives on the Book of Common Prayer. While both Presbyterians and Independents agreed on the theological errors of the Book of Common Prayer, Presbyterians could accept the mode of set forms, provided the set forms were theologically accurate and the ministers and churches enjoyed freedom in prayer and Scripture reading. Despite this, the Independents were vocal and relentless in their opposition to set forms.¹⁷⁴ It is important to remember that these were documents of compromise, documents with the intention to gain the widest acceptance of the Reformed churches. This perspective helps understand

¹⁷² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 116.

¹⁷³ Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 405.

¹⁷⁴ Robert Baillie, one of the Scottish commissioners, speaks to this acrimonious debate for the Directory: “We expected most difficulty; one party purposing by the preface to turn the Directory to a straight Liturgie; the other to make it so loose and free, that it should serve for little use: but God helped us to get both these rocks echewed.” Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, 240.

why the language of rubrics varied so much within the Directory.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, this rubric diversity for worship practices would be a point of confusion for churches in the future, since the directions were compromises or ambiguous.¹⁷⁶

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, published in 1645, was the first agreement of the Westminster divines. Perhaps it is the nature of “first documents,” as well as the diversity of liturgical practice within theologically like-minded individuals, that makes the Directory different regarding rubrics from the other Westminster documents. This freedom seems to be substantiated by the words of the preface to the Directory for Preaching when this disclaimer was added after much disagreement on the specificity of the instruction for preaching: “An addition in the close or preface—that this method is not to be prescribed to every man, nor upon every occasion, but is recommended upon the experience of the benefit that hath accrued by it.”¹⁷⁷ This freedom to adopt or reject specific practices is revealed in the rubric language the Directory employs.

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God consists of a preface explaining background and purpose and sections addressing the particular parts of worship: (1) the assembling and behavior of the congregation, (2) the public reading of the Bible, (3) public prayer before the sermon, (4) preaching, (5) prayer following the sermon, (6) the administration of the sacraments, (7) observing the Sabbath, (8) the marriage ceremony, (9) visitation of the sick, (10) burial of the dead, (11) fasting, (12) days of thanksgiving, (13) the singing of the Psalms, as well as an appendix that focuses on festival days and

¹⁷⁵ Van Dixhoorn states: “In the first place, the directory is not always clear . . . about whether it is giving directives as suggestions, or directives as commands. Sometimes the directory says a minister may do something, or in other places it says he shall. Practices are variously termed “necessary” or “requisite” but also “expedient,” “convenient,” or “sufficient.” A deliberate attempt was made to express differing degrees of confidence for different practices featured in the directory.” Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors*, 162.

¹⁷⁶ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 27.

¹⁷⁷ Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot*, 275.

places of worship. The Directory was intended to replace the Book of Common Prayer in function, though its purpose was to provide “furniture” for the service, instead of a liturgy.¹⁷⁸ The Directory was designed to bring the Reformed churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland into a unified worship identity, yet with language that allowed diversity of rubrics among the different factions within the Puritans.

Confession of Faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) was published next and is the lengthiest of the documents. Each statement or section that refers to worship theology contributes to worship regulation—the regulative principle of worship. The sections that pertain to the regulative principle of worship are:

1. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. 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.¹⁷⁹
2. God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith. And an absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.¹⁸⁰
3. The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doeth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is

¹⁷⁸ Davies states, “It is clear, then, that the Directory hoped to combine in a way never previously achieved, the advantages of a Prayer Book without its attendant disadvantages. It was to be scripturally authenticated in every ordinance, comprehensive, and orderly. But it was not to obtain these benefits at the cost of suppressing the creativity of the minister’s own wording of the prayers. It would, in brief, try to match order and liberty, form and the spirit, unity and variety, hitherto deemed incompatible and certainly estranged.” Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 409.

¹⁷⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 1.6.

¹⁸⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 20.2.

instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.¹⁸¹

Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Catechisms come in two formats. The Westminster Shorter Catechism is, as the name reflects, not a lengthy document and is intended for discipleship for all followers, but especially children. The information is presented in question-and-answer format, for a total of 108 questions and answers. The Larger Catechism covers the same material as the Shorter Catechism but continues until 196 questions asked and answered. See Table 1 below for questions that are pertinent for the regulative principle.

These four works represent the source documents of the regulative principle. These documents were the culmination of almost a decade of periodic meetings. The hope of the Westminster divines would be that these documents represented “the charter guaranteeing Christian liberty and freedom from all forms of human tyranny.”¹⁸²

In summary, the source documents’ articulation of the regulative principle was significantly impacted by its occasion—the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster Assembly must be understood considering Puritan history, which in turn must be understood in the context of the Church of England. These two contexts combined to shape the form and content of the regulative principle. The source documents that emerged from the Westminster Assembly were forged from motivations intrinsic to the Puritans. The documents the Assembly produced reflect a unique confluence of economic, social, political, and ecclesial forces.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ *Westminster Confession*, 1994, 21.1-21.6.

¹⁸² Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 142.

¹⁸³ Leith, *Assembly at Westminster*, 20. Leith explains that “the language of the Confession is logical, technical, and abstract. . . . [The] style of the Confession and Catechisms tempted the reader to exempt this theology from the ambiguities and the relativities of all historical enterprises.”

Table 1. Catechism questions and answers relative to the regulative principle¹⁸⁴

Question	Answer
1. What is the chief end of man?	Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.
45. Which is the First Commandment?	The First Commandment is, "thou shalt have no other gods before Me."
46. What is required in the First Commandment?	The First Commandment requireth us to know and acknowledge God to be only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify Him accordingly.
47. What is forbidden in the First Commandment?	The First Commandment forbiddeth the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God, [and our God,] and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to Him alone.
48. What are we specially taught by these words, "before me" in the First Commandment?	These words "before me" in the First Commandment, teach us, That God who seeth all things, taketh notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.
49. Which is the Second Commandment?	The Second Commandment is, "thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth, thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep my commandments."
50. What is required in the Second Commandment?	The Second Commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in His Word.
51. What is forbidden in the Second Commandment?	The Second Commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word.
52. What are the reasons annexed to the Second Commandment?	The reasons annexed to the Second Commandment are, God's sovereignty over us, and the zeal He hath to His own worship.

¹⁸⁴ Westminster Assembly (1643-1652), "The Shorter Catechism," in *The Westminster Confession: The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechism, the Directory for the Public Worship of God, with Associated Historical Documents* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), 421, 441-444.

The Puritans were responding to the pertinent issues of their era with uncompromising conviction and a foundational commitment to let the Word of God shape every expression of worship, doctrine, and family life. In their quest to accomplish this commendable goal, the Puritans applied the regulative principle more narrowly than Calvin. The Puritans often mistook Scripture's sufficiency for specificity, uncompromising nature for inflexibility, and principle for precision. Thus, the Puritans' historical record shows significant discontinuities from Calvin in their application of the regulative principle of worship.

CHAPTER 4

JOHN FRAME'S BROAD VIEW OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Introduction

Calvin wrote about the necessity of regulating worship praxis by Scripture alone, balancing his strict regulation stance with his principle of accommodation. The Puritans continued Calvin's legacy of strict worship regulation but omitted his principle of accommodation. John Frame is a respected Reformed scholar in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century who has written extensively on the regulative principle of worship. He has combined his knowledge about Calvin and the Puritans to articulate a position that expands the traditional view of circumstances, which allows for greater freedom in worship praxis—the “broad” view. Though Frame only wrote two books on worship, they generated a palpable and ongoing response within the Reformed community.¹ Several Reformed authors over the next two decades critiqued Frame's writings, and Frame responded in kind to his critics.² This dialogue of over two decades

¹ John M. Frame, *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 268. Frame calls these two books his “little worship books in the mid-1990s.” Many authors have used Frame as a reference point for their disagreement. These include Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003); Richard A. Muller, “Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (1997): 301-10; Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship That is According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (Darlington, CO: Evangelical Press, 2015); Jason J. Stellman, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009); R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008); Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003); Cliff Blair, “The Few on Behalf of the Many,” in Terry L. Johnson, et al., *The Worship of God: Reformed Concepts of Biblical Worship* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005).

² This has occurred with several authors but is most prominently displayed in Frame's dialogue with T. David Gordon and Darryl Hart. T. David Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (1993): 321-29; John Frame and Darryl Hart, “The Regulative

has given the evangelical church time to digest the worship concepts of both Frame and his critics. This resulting conversation has allowed two divergent interpretations of the regulative principle, resulting in increasing tension within the Reformed community.

While the wider evangelical church was making significant worship praxis changes in song choices, musical style, and less formality, Frame supported these changes among Reformed churches from the perspective of a regulative principle adherent. Nevertheless, the Reformed community has never reached a consensus on the regulative principle. Disparity remains among those who hold divergent views of the regulative principle. This chapter aims to highlight Frame's broad view of the regulative principle and how he both differs and aligns with Calvin and the English Puritans who came before him. Challenges presented by these worship praxis changes have elicited fresh debates over the regulative principle and forced adherents to articulate themselves differently. Debates have galvanized the Reformed community to either support or reject Frame's views of the regulative principle. This chapter will first introduce John Frame and his background, influences, and reputation. Next, the chapter will focus on Frame's emphasis on *sola Scriptura* and how liturgicalism and traditionalism methodologically threaten this foundation. Finally, the chapter will conclude with Frame's broad view of the regulative principle of worship. Within this, Frame's understanding of elements and circumstances, contemporary worship music, and intelligibility will be explored.

Introduction to John Frame

John Frame was educated at Westminster Seminary as a philosophy major with interests in systematics. Frame's main influences at Westminster Seminary were

Principle: Scripture, Tradition, and Culture: An Email Debate between Darryl Hart and John Frame," The Works of John Frame and Vern Poythress, May 24, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/the-regulative-principle-scripture-tradition-and-culture/>.

Cornelius Van Til and John Murray. Their teaching and views were seminal for the rest of his academic life. Westminster influenced Frame in an unusual way: creativity.

Westminster encouraged its students to explore fresh ways of thinking that would bring home the truth of their Reformed convictions and their commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith.³ Frame recalls that “a Westminster education trained students to ask first of all, about any subject matter whatever, what Scripture had to say about it. . . . [Students] of the early Westminster faculty were moved to reconsider traditional ideas by going back to Scripture.”⁴ Frame’s career demonstrates his creativity—fodder for critics who believe he has capitulated to the present cultural milieu, but encouragement to those who believe Reformed principles can be expressed and applied contextually to culture.

Frame is known for his irenic spirit, his opposition to factionalism, and his promotion of ecumenism within a broader evangelical network. Frame is also unafraid to rethink traditional formulas while remaining committed to the doctrinal foundations behind those formulations.⁵

Frame’s penchant for rethinking traditional formulations, including the regulative principle, has led him to unpopular and unconventional conclusions within Reformed circles of influence. Despite this, Frame claims his allegiance to Reformed theology and *sola Scriptura*.

³ Frame explains, “The important thing is that this creativity has not been at the expense of *sola Scriptura*; it has not been a movement away from Scripture to accommodate secular modes of thought, even though that is what *creativity* [emphasis original] usually means in a theological context. Rather, as was the case with the first Protestant Reformers, it has been a creativity motivated by Scripture itself.” Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:39-40.

⁴ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:38-39.

⁵ Luder G. Whitlock Jr., “John Frame: Orthodoxy and Creativity” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 260. Whitlock says that “Frame, far from being locked into the theological formulas and mind-sets of his tradition, demonstrates a remarkable ability to break from them when he is concerned that they lack adequate scriptural support for their positions. He is willing to reexamine and rethink conventional wisdom and traditional concepts, claiming merely to follow the example of Luther and Calvin.”

John Frame has a reputation as an eminent scholar and prominent theologian.⁶ His published writing has spanned many years and covered many different subjects. One could easily be misled to faulty conclusions if exposure to Frame's writings were limited to one or two genres.⁷ Frame's broad scope gives him an unusual perch from which to credibly comment on different theological disciplines, especially worship praxis. These extensive writings were a product of Frame's background and influences, shaping his path as well as his destination. Frame's distinct view of the regulative principle is one of the results of that journey.

Frame on *sola Scriptura*

Frame is highly committed to the primacy of Scripture. Frame's view of *sola Scriptura* is an all-encompassing scope of comprehensiveness and liberation.⁸ The disciplines of systematic theology, biblical theology, historiography, epistemology, historical theology, creedal formulations, culture, and apologetics all play subordinate roles in Frame's view of *sola Scriptura*.⁹ Indeed, Frame's defense of his Biblicist-like

⁶ Derek Thomas, "Frame on the Attributes of God," in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 351. Thomas writes that "few systematicians deserve to be in the same room as John Frame. His towering genius and unique formulations reveal lesser mortals for what they are."

⁷ John J. Hughes, "The Heart of John Frame's Theology," in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 33. Hughes identifies that "when a scholar has continually published for forty years and no introduction to his work exists, it can be daunting to know what to read to gain an overview of the man and his thought. A beginner might read John's DKG and conclude that he is a Christian epistemologist. Someone else might read his DG and infer that he is a systematic theologian. Another person might read John's DCL and say the is a Christian ethicist. Still another might read his AGG and CVT and deduce that he is a Christian apologist. One could read John's WST and CWM and surmise that he is a worship leader. And still another person could read his ER and construe John as an ecumenist."

⁸ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:55. Frame states, "*Sola Scriptura*, which is often perceived as a narrowing, limiting doctrine, actually opens our vision to behold a greater complexity in modern culture than we would otherwise recognize. And it is a liberating doctrine in the sense that it gives us greater freedom than any mere traditionalism or *via negationis* could provide. At the same time, it sets forth true restrictions on the use of culture with greater clarity and gives us direction to avoid the traps of the modernists and the evangelical accommodationists."

⁹ John Frame, "Reply to Richard Muller and David Wells," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 312. Frame states, "If doctrine bears upon all of life, then surely it bears on methodology as part of life. We do today sometimes speak of 'doctrine' as a discipline that focuses on the subject matter of church confessions, but Scripture itself does not limit the scope of its authority to any particular area of life. If we are to speak of doctrine in a biblical way, there is surely a sense in which it applies to everything."

position was articulated in his article in the *Westminster Theological Journal* in 1997.¹⁰ He presents his nuanced position while linking it to the early Reformers.¹¹ Frame perceives that historically, *sola Scriptura* has been used as a powerful housecleaning tool.¹² Frame comments,

I conclude that although Protestant theology under the *sola Scriptura* principle is not biblicistic, it is not always easy to distinguish it from biblicism. We should expect that those who hold an authentic view of *sola Scriptura* will sometimes be confused with biblicists. Indeed, if we are not occasionally accused of biblicism, we should be concerned about the accuracy of our teaching in this area.¹³

For Frame, there is nothing that does not come under Scripture's purview and authority. Frame's comprehensive view of *sola Scriptura*, which relegated all theological disciplines to subordinate status, was considered by his critics as misplaced zeal.¹⁴ The center of Frame's theology is *sola Scriptura*, and his position has significant implications for his understanding of the regulative principle of worship.

Threats to *sola Scriptura*: Traditionalism

The regulative principle was the outgrowth of the Reformers' quest for centralizing worship around Scripture and opposing Rome's traditions, yet it has been

¹⁰ John Frame, "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on *Sola Scriptura* and History in Theological Method," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 269-91.

¹¹ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:34. Frame comments, "Certainly, the Reformers did not, however, try to rebuild that faith from the ground up. They saw themselves as reforming, not rejecting, the teachings of their church. They saw the Protestant churches not as new churches, but as the old church purified of works-righteousness, sacerdotalism, papal tyranny, and the idolatry of the Mass. So they were not biblicists in that sense. But they came close to it. In present-day Roman Catholic criticism of *sola Scriptura*, we are reminded of how close Protestantism does come to biblicism on this score."

¹² Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:34.

¹³ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:35.

¹⁴ David Wells believes that in the church's efforts to uphold *sola Scriptura*, it may overlook the historical framework that gives substantive authority. Richard Muller argues that historiography cannot be applied to *sola Scriptura*. See David F. Wells, "On Being Framed," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (January 1, 1997), 299; Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship," 305.

used to defend the Reformed church's own strain of traditionalism.¹⁵ For Frame, creeds and confessions of faith are all potential threats to *sola Scriptura*. For Frame, a healthy amount of caution towards historical formulations keeps the focus on Scripture's authority—a hallmark of a Reformer's ethos.¹⁶ Frame believes that these confessions and creeds should not be considered a lifeless monument but a living, though flawed document.¹⁷ Historical formulations, for Frame, should be continually evaluated in terms of scriptural fidelity.¹⁸ Creeds and confessions of faith, while appropriate and helpful for the local church, can unwittingly propel the church towards a traditionalism that distorts ultimate authority.¹⁹ Frame considers a disproportionately high regard for creeds and confessions breeds loyalty and allegiance to them, and away from Scripture. This breeds

¹⁵ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 45. Frame states, "Certainly, the regulative principle should not be used, as some have used it, to enforce traditionalism in worship. Both in Scripture and in church history, the regulative principle has been a powerful weapon against the imposition of human traditions in the worship of God. Consider again the protests of Isaiah (Isa. 29:13) and Jesus (Matt. 15:8-9) against those who placed human traditions on the same level as Scripture. Also consider again the protest of the Puritans against those who claimed the right to impose ceremonies without scriptural warrant."

¹⁶ John M. Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1970), 132. Frame continues, "But [the Reformers] were also critics of church tradition. They argued that synods and councils not only can err, but have erred. For them, conciliar documents and the writings of past theologians must be tested by the criterion of Scripture and must be abandoned if found unscriptural."

¹⁷ John M. Frame, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdom Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media, 2011), 307. Here, Frame complains about fellow author Richard Clark: "Clark seems to see the Reformed confessional tradition as a static monolith. If something was not discussed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we should not discuss it today. Clark will not consider the possibility that discussion of issues in our time might in fact add to and enrich the tradition, even to modify the confessions. Rather, for him, such discussion must be forbidden, because it was not carried on four hundred years ago."

¹⁸ P. Andrew Sandlin, "Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian: An Extended Interview with John M. Frame," in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 108. Frame counsels, "See confessional documents in proper perspective. It is the work of theology, among other things, to rethink the doctrines of the confessions and to reform them, when necessary, by the Word of God. Do not *assume* [emphasis original] that everything in the confession is forever settled."

¹⁹ Frame states that "creeds, confessions, and other human traditions have legitimate uses in theology, but too great an emphasis on them, or too high a regard for them, can compromise *sola Scriptura*." John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 304. Frame continues, "When a respected Reformed thinker raises a question about the confession, we need to go back to the Bible and, if necessary, consider revising the confession. However, because Presbyterian churches are 'confessional,' they are often tempted to let the confession have the final word. In my judgment, we need to rethink confessionalism in this regard. It is absurd to think that documents as elaborate as the Westminster Confession of Faith, written four hundred years ago, should be treated as infallible in the modern church. But that is what often happens." Sandlin, "Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian," 94.

a traditionalism that threatens *sola Scriptura*. Frame’s cautious concern for creedal formulations is a result of his central focus—the primacy of Scripture. This caution also extends to the discipline that includes creeds and confessions—historical theology.

Historical theology also poses a threat to *sola Scriptura*. Frame insists that “*sola Scriptura* . . . forbids us to absolutize tradition or to put the conclusions of historical scholarship on the same level as Scripture.”²⁰ Frame identifies a trend in theology away from systematics and exegesis and towards historical theology.²¹ Exegesis and systematic theology have faded, and historical theology has emerged as the prominent discipline, subtly moving toward traditionalism.²² Frame believes that this turn away from exegesis and towards history is an error of imbalance.²³ For Frame, historical considerations can usurp biblical authority, an error that runs contrary to the Reformation’s ethos.

Frame’s concern for *sola Scriptura* is methodological. If there are inconsistencies in a particular methodology, inaccurate conclusions will undoubtedly follow. For example, traditionalism’s fatal flaw is that historicity is its claim to authority. Frame’s opposition stems from the fact that traditionalism sets up historicity as the

²⁰ Roger Wagner, “A Living and Active Word: Some Notes on Frame’s View of Holy Scripture,” in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 343.

²¹ Sandlin, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian,” 81. Frame states, “There has been a trend toward an overly strict confessionalism and traditionalism, a trend I consider a threat to *sola Scriptura*. In some circles, historical theology has come to have a primacy over biblical exegesis. In other circles (indeed some of the same ones) people have argued theological conclusions based on little more than their own distaste for this or that cultural movement.”

²² Mark A. Garcia, “The Word Made Applicable: Frame on Biblical Theology among the Disciplines,” in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 236-37. Theologian Mark Garcia explains, “Another of Frame’s dominant concerns over the years has been the gradual ascendancy of traditionalism within Reformed circles, in particular the practical or *functional substitution of historical theology for systematic theology* [emphasis added]. In opposition to this trend, Frame has insisted on the indispensably foundational place of biblical exegesis, which must continue to stand in critical relationship to tradition as norming norm. . . . Indicative of a form of traditionalism that marginalizes the work of exegesis and biblical systematic theology, debates at the both the ecclesiastical and individual levels often do suggest that historical theology has quietly become the principal mode of theological discourse and analysis. This is a form of traditionalism parading under the name of systematic theology to which Frame has long been acutely sensitive, and for good reason.”

²³ Frame says that “the Reformed community, in my judgment, needs to return to an explicitly exegetical model of theology, following the example of John Murray. . . . We should never ignore our past. But my view is that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of a historical emphasis.” Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:114-15.

ultimate standard, not biblical revelation. The battle over worship praxis should be an exegetical battle, not a historical one.²⁴ Confusion over ultimate authority is a methodological error—a genetic fallacy.²⁵ Traditionalism, however noble and well-intentioned, is still a threat to God’s authority.²⁶ God’s authority is directly tethered to Scripture’s authority and as such, it is the only verifiable source of infallibility.

Threats to *sola Scriptura*: Liturgicalism

In Reformed circles, it is common to be a traditionalist or liturgist, or both.²⁷ Hence, Frame’s opposition to both traditionalism and liturgicalism incurs critics of both.²⁸ The threat of liturgicalism to *sola Scriptura* is more nuanced. Advocates of liturgicalism share Frame’s conviction that Old Testament Scriptures provide current guidance to worship regulation.²⁹ Liturgicalists are careful to call themselves “catholic”

²⁴ Garcia, “The Word Made Applicable,” 249. Garcia writes, “Frame, therefore, although showing high regard for the confessions, clearly and intentionally attributes subordinate authority to them. Not satisfied with making that point, he warns about the danger of any confessional challenge to biblical authority. He raises the issue because he is concerned about the tendency of some evangelical theologians to rely more on tradition, confessional or otherwise, than on the Bible. . . . By calling attention to this matter, he touches a sensitive spot for those Reformed evangelicals who hold the confessions in such high esteem that on occasion the confessions, in practice, may seem as authoritative as Scripture.”

²⁵ Sandlin, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian,” 102. Frame states, “Unfortunately, what we have today is that people who are relatively untrained in exegesis are claiming a level of theological authority far beyond what they are entitled to. They don’t seem to understand that to commend a doctrine because Calvin believed it (or even because it’s in the Westminster Confession) or to oppose one because Finney believed it is a genetic fallacy. Worse, they don’t understand that in the Christian church doctrines are to be determined by biblical exegesis, not by autonomous evaluations of the historical or contemporary scenes.”

²⁶ William Edgar, “Frame the Apologist,” in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 402. Edgar states, “[Frame] takes the position that the historical creeds are highly valuable, yet cannot be taken as final, fixed systems for the ages. To do so is to invite traditionalism, or, worse, confusion between the authority of a creed and Scripture.”

²⁷ For a discussion and taxonomy of the varieties and nuances of liturgical thought within the North American Reformed community, see Michael A. Farley, “Reforming Reformed Worship: Theological Method and Liturgical Catholicity in American Presbyterianism, 1850-2005,” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 2007).

²⁸ Luder G. Whitlock Jr., “John Frame: Orthodoxy and Creativity,” in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 267. Whitlock states, “Frame had not only traditional critics, but also liturgical critics in the Presbyterian world. The liturgical critics, however, agreed with Frame’s arguments against a narrow interpretation of the RPW [regulative principle of worship]. They simply disagreed with his acceptance of more contemporary forms of worship.”

²⁹ James B. Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism and the Regulative Principle: A Critical Review of*

regulative principle adherents, which means that “we are to worship only as the Bible teaches, and that such teaching is found by way of command, principle, example, pattern, and every other mode of communication God has determined to use.”³⁰ Liturgicalists are advocates of maximum congregational participation and believe that the Puritans departed from the Reformers’ participatory congregational ethic.³¹ James Jordan describes this approach to worship:

Liturgical worship seeks to involve the congregation as much as possible. The structure of worship is taken from the Bible. Worship is seen, however dimly, as covenant renewal. . . . The content of worship is full of psalmody. As much as possible, the congregation sings the whole service, including hymns and psalms, chanted psalms, the Te Deum, the Gloria in Excelsis, responsive prayers like the Kyrie, the Creeds, the Lord’s Prayer, the Sanctus and Nunc Dimittis, and various song responses. . . . The sermon is relatively short, and leads into the Offertory and Communion.³²

Liturgicalists believe that worship is weekly renewal of the covenant, which is climaxed by the covenant meal.³³

While the liturgicalist claims legitimacy for Old Testament worship forms, the order of service is fixed because there is a specific order to covenant renewal, and this is found in Scripture.³⁴ Liturgicalists advocate for this specific structure in worship liturgy.

Worship in the Presence of God (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1994), 22.

³⁰ Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 9.

³¹ Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 14. Jordan states that “the Reformers wrote liturgies and prayerbooks in order to get the people involved, but the people did not want to be involved. Thus, the Puritan movement eliminated most of the Reformational advances in worship and returned worship to minimal activity and involvement. Instead of watching a priest do the mass, the people listened to the pastor do everything.”

³² Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 18; emphasis original.

³³ Peter J. Leithart, *Theopolititan Liturgy* (West Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2019), 70-71. Leithart explains, “Confession and cleansing, ascent to receive the word, communion; mourning for sin, instruction in the way of life, thanksgiving and dismissal. That’s the structure of biblical worship and the basic structure of nearly every Christian liturgy throughout history. If our worship services don’t look like that, we’re not worshipping biblically. If we don’t confess our sins at the beginning of the service, we shouldn’t presume to go through the gate. If we don’t get cut apart by the sword of the Word, we can’t be put together again. If we don’t end the service with a meal, what’s the point of coming in the first place.”

³⁴ Jordan explains that “the central form of worship is covenant renewal. . . . Worship is fundamentally sacrificial. The order of the sacrifices is the order of worship. The steps of each sacrifice

Hermeneutical differences occur when scriptural descriptions and prescriptions about worship structures are misunderstood. For Frame, insistence on non-mandated worship structures threaten *sola Scriptura*.

Frame's objections to liturgicalism are not opposition to tradition or liturgy *per se*, but to the equivocation of biblical standards with traditional and liturgical approaches to worship.³⁵ Worship structures that claim exclusive and unwarranted scriptural support cause confusion in the church. From Frame's perspective, proponents of liturgicalism deny legitimacy to any other liturgy, and the church's adoption of such is tantamount to immaturity.³⁶ For Frame, if Scripture itself allows for multiple approaches to the structure of worship liturgy, then the liturgical insistence on only covenant renewal liturgies supplants Scripture's authority.³⁷ Neither Scripture nor the Westminster Confession of Faith mandate that worship must be structured as a dialogue.³⁸ It is a Reformed tradition. Frame acknowledges these liturgical patterns are Scriptural but denies each claim for

bring out the same order of worship. The various covenant renewal events in the Bible show the same order of worship." Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 10.

³⁵ Frame says, "As one committed heart and soul to the principle *sola Scriptura*, I find the trend toward traditionalism most unfortunate. It has, in my view, weakened the Evangelical witness in our time." John M. Frame, "Traditionalism Part 2 of 2: The Results of Traditionalism; and The Antidote: Sola Scriptura," *IIM Magazine Online* 1, no. 13, (May-June 1999): 1, <https://religiondocbox.com/Christianity/119845685-Traditionalism-by-john-m-frame-part-2-of-2-the-results-of-traditionalism-and-the-antidote-sola-scriptura.html>. Elsewhere, Frame writes, "Even if we accept Leviticus 1:1-9 as a model for New Testament liturgy, the passage does not say that worship is primarily covenant reenactment and renewal. Certainly no New Testament passage says this, and I can't think of any passage elsewhere in the Old Testament that lays this down as a normative definition of worship." Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 293.

³⁶ Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 16. Jordan says, "Charismatic worship does involve the congregation, but unfortunately at a rather childish level. The 'Jesus Mantras' of charismatic hymnody are—there's no nice way to say this—infantile when compared with the psalter. Such worship keeps everything at a very childish level, ostensibly to make it comfortable to outsiders. In reality, however, it is to make it comfortable to the insiders who don't want to mature."

³⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 71. Frame says, "There is no passage or principle in Scripture that dictates one invariable order of events in worship. There are, however, logical relations among the various aspects of worship that should not be ignored as we plan our worship services. It is important to remember, however, that there is more than one logical sequence agreeable to Scripture. Writers on worship tend to fixate on one such sequence (such as dialogue or forgiveness-consecration-fellowship), ignoring other biblically sound ways of structuring worship."

³⁸ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 70; Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 282.

singular exclusivity of prescription. As Frame often says about multiple theological movements, including liturgicalism, “I applaud what they affirm but not what they deny.”³⁹ Frame believes not all worship actions can be linked to biblical prescriptions and, when prescriptions are present in the biblical text, the level of specificity required does not dictate everything done in a worship service.⁴⁰ In summary, if liturgical structures like covenant renewal or dialogue are treated as scriptural mandates, then the church has moved to a level of specificity that Scripture itself does not warrant, jeopardizing *sola Scriptura*.

Frame’s Regulative Principle of Worship

Frame is an enthusiastic supporter of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.⁴¹ Frame endorses the regulative principle,⁴² yet his stance on the regulative principle has been challenged.⁴³ For some critics, the challenge to Frame’s stance belongs solely in the realm of worship praxis aesthetics. For others, it betrays Reformed worship norms. For still others, it is the contrarian stance of a systematic theologian and apologist with such a stellar reputation as Frame. The level of stridency throughout these debates has been significant and far-reaching. Frame is an esteemed colleague who is perceived as breaking Reformed ranks and upsetting centuries of accepted practice. Frame’s most

³⁹ Sandlin, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian,” 101.

⁴⁰ John M. Frame, *John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 122.

⁴¹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, xiv-xv. Frame writes, “I subscribe enthusiastically to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, and I trust that that commitment will be quite evident in this book. The main assumptions of this book are distinctively Reformed: God is sovereign; he is related to us as the covenant Lord; he wants us to worship only as his word requires.”

⁴² John Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (1992): 357. Frame clarifies, “I therefore reaffirm the regulative principle . . . while denying that this principle for worship is any different from the principle by which God governs other areas of human life.

⁴³ P. Andrew Sandlin, “Frame’s Unique Contribution to the Christ-and-Culture Debate,” in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 849.

strident critics are convinced that to veer from established worship tradition is idolatry.⁴⁴

Frame considers exclusive claims to traditional liturgy an egregious form of sectarianism.⁴⁵ For Frame, this rigid adherence to traditional forms errs both exegetically and methodologically, leading to distorted conclusions.⁴⁶ These distortions elicit responses from all the various disciplines of Frame's experience: philosophy, ethics, and systematic theology. In the following section, three components of Frame's regulative principle of worship will be explored that capture Frame's broad view. First, some preliminary perspectives will be discussed followed by Frame's assessments of the Westminster formulations. Next, elements and circumstances will be defined before covering levels of specificity in worship praxis. Finally, Frame's acceptance of contemporary worship music along with Frame's distinctive feature—intelligibility—will be compared against a conventional understanding of the regulative principle.

Frame's Perspectives

Frame's differences with his critics on the regulative principle of worship are apparent early in the disagreement. Whereas Frame's critics believe that the regulative principle is a negative restriction, Frame's outlook is positive.⁴⁷ Frame considers the

⁴⁴ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle." Hart says, "Presbyterians have worshiped historically a certain way to please God . . . [and] to veer from that pattern is idolatry."

⁴⁵ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle." Frame responds, "The notion that traditional Presbyterian liturgy is the *only* [emphasis original] way to avoid idolatry seems to me to be the worst kind of sectarianism."

⁴⁶ Frame, *Contemporary Worship*, 114-15. Frame explains, "I indicated that our study of CWM and its critics would unearth some deeper issues about the theological methods currently employed by evangelical and Reformed theologians. Although I seriously intend this book to be a defense of CWM, I have another major purpose as well in this book: to call into question the theological method I have just described. I am convinced that this is a serious issue. This approach to theological criticism and evaluation is quite widespread and is practiced by some of the most respected evangelical theologians on other issues, as well as this one. It is unscriptural and divisive, and leads to distorted conclusions."

⁴⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 45-46. Frame states, "Certainly, the regulative principle is a charter of freedom, not a burdensome bondage. The regulative principle sets us free from human traditions, to worship God his way. It limits our choices in the way a fish is limited to its watery habitat. When we break out of those limits, we discover death awaiting for us, not freedom. To deny the regulative principle is to rebel against our loving Creator and then, paradoxically, to find ourselves in miserable bondage to human dogmatism."

regulative principle a positive affirmation of God’s authority to establish acceptable worship. Even the way the principle has been historically summarized (“whatever is not commanded is forbidden”) is seen by Frame as an affirmative declaration. Contrastingly, Frame’s critics view the regulative principle *via negationis*, a principle of restriction.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Frame states that “Scripture has more than veto power; its function is essentially positive. On this view, Scripture must positively require a practice, if that practice is to be suitable for the worship of God.”⁴⁹ Frame and his critics express opposing perspectives on the regulative principle.

Frame on Westminster Formulations

The discourse about the regulative principle, despite its frequent and detailed analysis throughout the centuries, still lacks a level of consistency. One must identify which definition of the regulative principle they are defending or opposing. Is it (1) Calvin’s articulated regulations on worship, (2) the regulative principle as found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, or (3) the Reformed corpus of interpretations towards the regulative principle of the next three hundred years? Three hundred years of Reformed practice and written interpretation has established an oral tradition that has taken on a life of its own. Discussion centered on worship regulation may be referencing only one of these historical realities or a combination of any of the three, confusing the debate.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 240. Clark laments Frame’s approach: “This application has the same force as a divine ‘command.’ As a result every application of Scripture or even general revelation is a command. Thus the principle that we must do only what we are commanded now becomes: We can do whatever one concludes from one’s application of revelation to any circumstance. What began as a *principle of restriction* [emphasis added] has become a license. Under Frames’ hand, the question is no longer: what must I do according to the preceptive revelation in God’s Word or according to good and necessary inferences, but, in effect, what may I do by my application of revelation to a situation? Thus, what began ostensibly as an endorsement of the RPW, by the time it is finished, has reversed field entirely and became a subversion of it.”

⁴⁹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 38.

⁵⁰ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, xii-xiii. Frame says, “But the Westminster standards actually contain very little of the Puritan theology of worship. The Puritan and Scottish divines who wrote

Adding to the ambiguity, Frame believes that the “Westminster Divines did not put their entire theology of worship into their confessional standards.”⁵¹ Frame wonders whether any particular debate around the regulative principle references Calvin’s original formulation or its progenitors. Subsequently, any reference to the regulative principle lacks clarity. Because of this, Frame considers the regulative principle to be “ambiguous.” “It is used to describe the worship principle of a particular historical movement, and it is also used to refer to the biblical norm for worship.”⁵²

This ambiguity was raised in the dialogue between Frame and theologian T. David Gordon.⁵³ Surprisingly, Gordon’s oppositional response to Frame unwittingly corroborates this dichotomy when he questions, is “Frame . . . debating the regulative principle as articulated by the Westminster Assembly, by George Gillespie, by John Owen, by James Bannerman, or by the Southern Presbyterians (Dabney, Girardeau, Thomas E. Peck)?”⁵⁴ For Frame, ambiguity in any discussion centered around the regulative principle is warranted because of two factors. First, significant time has passed since the Westminster Confession of Faith was written. Second, many theologians throughout the centuries have contributed their interpretations on the application of the regulative principle. Over time, these interpretations have become embedded in Calvin’s and Westminster’s formulations.⁵⁵ Frame’s critics dispute such distinctions, believing that

the Westminster standards were wise not to include in them all of their ideas on worship. The principles responsible for liturgical minimalism come from Puritan and other Reformed texts that go above and beyond the confessional documents. Yet these extraconfessional texts themselves have considerable informal authority in conservative Presbyterian churches.”

⁵¹ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

⁵² Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

⁵³ Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” 321-23.

⁵⁴ Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” 322.

⁵⁵ Frame states, “Now the term ‘norm’ gets confusing here. The historical definition of RPW is normative for the historical discussion, as the historical definition of ‘Unitarian’ is normative for the historical discussion of Unitarianism. But the biblical definition of RPW is normative in a higher sense: for the Biblical RPW will govern all the worship of God’s people. RPW in the historical sense will do that only

there has been a classic definition of the regulative principle within the Reformed tradition.⁵⁶ For them, Frame's position on the regulative principle is a caricature of the Puritan formulation.⁵⁷

Frame believes that debate among regulative principle adherents surpasses philological issues. Comparisons are misaligned because the language employed by both parties refers to slightly different but overlapping ideas. Frame considers the regulative principle from the perspective of the Westminster formulation only, while Frame's critics consider the regulative principle of the Westminster formulation in addition to the Reformed traditional interpretations of the principle.⁵⁸ These difficulties are the reason that Frame claims "it is one thing to affirm the sufficiency of Scripture for worship, another thing to work out a cogent theological account of it."⁵⁹ Discourse between Frame and his opponents are complicated by the lack of agreement on what is meant by the regulative principle.

Frame asserts that the Westminster divines articulated not just one, but two regulative principles.⁶⁰ This understanding of two distinct regulative principles in the

to the extent that it agrees with the Biblical RPW. So we have two kinds of 'norm' here: a norm for describing a historical concept, and a norm for the church's worship." Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

⁵⁶ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 37.

⁵⁷ Brian Schwertley, *Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship* (Lansing, MI: Self Published, 2020), 114, Reformed Online, http://www.reformedonline.com/uploads/1/5/0/3/15030584/sola_scriptura_and_the_regulative_principle_of_worship.pdf. Schwertley states, "Frame's caricature of the Puritan position sets the stage for his redefinition of the regulative principle and his sloppy, no-real-connection proof-texting of various modern innovations."

⁵⁸ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle." Frame elaborates, "The other important consideration here is that the Westminster Divines did not put their entire theology of worship into their confessional standards. Some seem to think that the references to the RPW in the Confession in effect make the entire Puritan theology of worship (secondarily) normative in our churches. I disagree. It is legitimate to consult the Puritan theologians occasionally for help in understanding the technical expressions in the Westminster Standards. It is not legitimate to conclude that the WCF's reference to 'circumstances' implies the normativity of all the definitions of circumstances found in the Puritan literature."

⁵⁹ Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," 357.

⁶⁰ Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," 357. Frame says, "The

Westminster language is shared by Gordon, an opponent of Frame. Gordon believes there are two distinct hermeneutics that are displayed in the language.⁶¹ Frame's assertion for two distinct regulative principles also stems from grammatical considerations. The syntax in 20.2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith elicits significant commentary: "God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship."⁶² The semi-colon is the "eloquent" pivot point for much of the debate.⁶³ Theologian Norman Shepherd believes that "the semi-colon is essential to the thought."⁶⁴ Frame says that "the idea seems to be that we are always free from anything contrary to the Word, but only in the faith-worship area are we free from anything 'beside' the Word. . . . There are two different RPs: one for faith-worship, the other for the rest of life."⁶⁵ The assertion that the Westminster Confession contains two regulative principles is a significant foundational tenet in Frame's perspective of worship regulation and a weakness in the Westminster formulation.

Westminster divines also believe that the regulative principle . . . is distinctive to matters of faith or worship [They] distinguish between two different regulative principles: one for human life in general, and a different one for faith and worship. In human life in general, we are free from any doctrine or commandment of men that is contrary to God's Word. But in matters of faith and worship, we have a greater liberty. A freedom from any human commandment in addition to God's Word. So for the Westminster Confession, the principle of *sola Scriptura* applies to faith and worship in a stronger sense than to other areas of life."

⁶¹ Gordon, "Some Answers about the Regulative Principle," 327. Gordon writes, "The regulative principle does provide a different hermeneutic. In other areas, exegesis (with all its attendant difficulties) *proscribes* [emphasis original] what may be done, leaving other practices open. In faith and worship, exegesis (with all its attendant difficulties) *prescribes* [emphasis original] what is permissible, leaving other practices closed. To be sure, exegesis is still exegesis, and there is no shortcut to exegesis or systematic theology. But requiring positive biblical warrant for that which church officers require of church members is hermeneutically meaningful."

⁶² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 20.2.

⁶³ Frame, "Some Questions about the Regulative Principle," 363. Frame states that "the 'eloquent semicolon' of *WCF* 20.2 is misplaced. I say this, not because I believe that the passage is too strict in its view of worship, but because I believe it is not strict enough in its conception of how the commandments bear upon everyday life."

⁶⁴ Norman Shepherd, "The Biblical Basis for the Regulative Principle of Worship," in *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship* (N.p.: Committee on Worship of the RPCNA, 1974), 48.

⁶⁵ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

Frame's dissatisfaction with the Westminster formulation is caused by his belief that Scripture supports a unified governing principle for life and worship.⁶⁶ For Frame, worship is an all-encompassing view of offering oneself to God ("All of life is worship").⁶⁷ Frame finds evidence for this in the record of the New Testament. Christ's redemption, accomplished on the cross, has fulfilled the law and ended the need for circumcision, ceremonial rites, animal sacrifices, and the priesthood. There is no more temple because Christ has come. This does not negate the narrow sense of worship (services) for Frame.⁶⁸ Frame believes that restricting the regulative principle to formal services is unscriptural.⁶⁹ Believers offer their worship as sacrificial obedience in every area of life.⁷⁰ Frame considers this a "broad" view of the New Testament's teaching on worship.⁷¹

Frame's view that worship encompasses all of life has generated considerable controversy. Critics of Frame believe that this broad focus of worship is outside the main of Westminster's original purpose and detracts from the focus of determining legitimate

⁶⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 474. Frame says, "God governs the two realms in the same way. In ordinary life, everything we do is subject to divine commands. God's commands are broad . . . [They] stretch out across the whole range of human decisions. So 1 Corinthians 10:31, for example . . . covers absolutely everything we do. In every decision we make, we either obey that command or violate it. Every good thing we do is, in effect, commanded by 1 Corinthians 10:31. Anything we do that is not commanded by 1 Corinthians 10:31 is forbidden."

⁶⁷ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 33.

⁶⁸ Frame explains that "it is true in one sense to say that all of life is worship. This is not to deny the importance, indeed the necessity, of attending church meetings (Heb. 10:25). But our Lord wants us to live in such a way that everything we do brings him praise." Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 10.

⁶⁹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 44. Frame states, "Some have said that the regulative principle properly applied only to the formal or official services, not other forms of worship. But that distinction is clearly unscriptural. When Scripture forbids us to worship according to our own imaginations, it is not forbidding that only during official services. The God of Scripture would certainly not approve of people who worshiped him in formal services, but worshiped idols in the privacy of their homes!"

⁷⁰ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 29-30.

⁷¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 474. Frame states, "Consider the regulative principle in the form 'Whatever is not prescribed is forbidden.' Does this principle apply only to worship in the narrow sense, or also in the broad sense, to all of human life? Given that all of life *is* [emphasis original] worship in a sense, it would be odd if the two kinds of worship were governed differently."

worship praxis in worship services. This teaching of worship’s focus on “all of life” has galvanized Frame’s critics. Gordon considers Frame’s broad view entirely misguided, an avoidance of the main issue of the regulative principle—the nature and limits of ecclesial authority.⁷² Pastor and theologian Ligon Duncan concludes that in Frame’s broad view, worship is not required to have positive scriptural warrant and is shaped by only biblical principles. Duncan protests that the entire scriptural record—expressed both in the ceremonial and moral law—contradicts Frame’s position.⁷³ Jeffrey Meyers believes that “Frame’s analysis is seriously flawed . . . by faulty presuppositions and biases in favor of informality, spontaneity, and an unjustified preference for the New Testament.”⁷⁴ Richard Clark disputes this position as well, saying that “Frame changes the terms of the RPW [regulative principle of worship] by redefining worship to refer not to stated assemblies but to all of life. Certainly it is true that, in one sense, all of life is an act of worship, but the RPW was formed and intended to govern worship conceived narrowly, that is, to what occurs during a stated service.”⁷⁵ Frame concedes that God has a special concern for violations of worship in the narrow sense, but takes exception to Westminster’s formulation of worship regulation overall.⁷⁶ Frame contends,

But I do consider it problematic that the traditional RPW does not account for the totality of human worship. In Reformed theology the RPW is supposedly based on

⁷² Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” 323. Gordon states, “It appears that Frame is unfamiliar with the relevant writings of the authors mentioned above, for if he were, he could hardly have missed the point so significant to them all: *the issue that gave birth to the regulative principle was the nature and limits of church power* [emphasis added]. The issue was not, for them, ‘worship’ versus ‘the rest of life,’ but ‘those aspects of life governed by the church officers’ versus those aspects of life not governed by the church officers.”

⁷³ J. Ligon Duncan, “Does God Care How We Worship?” in Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan, *Give Praise to God*, 28. Duncan says, “The whole Bible contradicts this position. The emphasis on God’s concern for the how of worship (in its standard, motivation, dynamic, and goal) is pervasive, not only in the ceremonial code, but also in the moral law, not only in the Pentateuch but also in the Prophets, not only in the Old Testament but also in the New, not only in Paul but also in Jesus’ teaching.”

⁷⁴ Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 408.

⁷⁵ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 240.

⁷⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 473.

the second commandment of the Decalogue. But the second commandment makes no distinction between different kinds of worship, and its requirement is certainly not limited to “stated services” (p. 240). Nor does Scripture anywhere else make such a limitation. That is as it should be. . . . When Jesus, echoing and applying the second commandment, said “You cannot serve God and Mammon” (Matt. 6:24), he was not speaking about stated services at all, or even of non-stated services, but of all of life. And Romans 12:1-2 and other passages speak of all the believer’s life as worship. If the traditional RPW does not take this fact into account, then so much the worse for the traditional RPW.⁷⁷

Frame’s concern is focused less on violating the regulative principle and much more focused on whether the regulative principle follows *sola Scriptura* at every point. Frame insists that 1.6 of the Confession of Faith actually contradicts 20.2 and even introduces the possibility that revision of the Confession might be an improvement.⁷⁸ Frame states,

The Confession itself recognizes that the sufficiency of Scripture bears on all of life. But the regulative principle is simply the application of the sufficiency of Scripture to worship. So if we are to recognize the universality of *sola Scriptura* as taught in the Confession, we should reject the distinction between two regulative principles taught in WCF, 20.2.⁷⁹

Frame believes the Westminster formulation of two distinct regulative principles runs contrary to Scripture’s singular regulative principle.

Frame on Elements and Circumstances

The regulative principle articulates the “parts of worship” that are expressly set down in Scripture.⁸⁰ These are commonly referred to as the “elements” of worship. Frame

⁷⁷ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 112.

⁷⁸ Frame, “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle,” 363. Frame states, “Does 1.6, then contradict 20.2? I think it does, because the writers of 20.2 did not, evidently, think through the concept of application Paragraph 20.2 tells us that we are free (in everyday life) from commandments of men that run contrary to Scripture, and that in addition we are free (in the areas of faith and worship) from any commandments beside Scripture. But in one sense, we are always free from commandments beside Scripture, not only in ‘faith and worship.’” See also Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 111.

⁷⁹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 474.

⁸⁰ *Westminster Confession*, 1994, 21.5. The Confession states, “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable 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 religious worship of God* [emphasis added]: beside religious oaths and 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.”

acknowledges that warranted worship praxis—from Westminster’s language of “good and necessary consequence”⁸¹—may also be deduced from Scripture.⁸²

The Westminster Confession also articulates that there are “circumstances concerning the worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies” that are necessary to fulfill these elements.⁸³ It is these distinctions between elements and circumstances that Frame believes are not scripturally derived for the church. The Westminster distinction between elements and circumstances is a human construct that is artificially imposed on the text.⁸⁴ Neither is the second commandment—a frequent passage touted in support of worship regulation—a justification for the distinction between elements and circumstances.⁸⁵ Frame’s primary concern is *sola Scriptura*. If Scripture does not articulate these differences, should the church? Frame’s pursuit of truth reflects his questions: “But where does Scripture talk about or even imply a distinction between elements or circumstances? Where does Scripture define elements in contrast

⁸¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 1.6. The Confession says, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by *good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture* [emphasis added].”

⁸² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 470-71. Frame states, “Even the most conservative Reformed churches include elements of worship that are not directly commanded in Scripture. There is no explicit command, for example, to have a benediction in a worship service, or even a baptism. Baptisms in the New Testament are performed outdoors or in homes. There is no command to perform them in weekly worship services. So most Reformed treatments of the regulative principle list more than one source for biblical warrants: (1) explicit command, (2) approved examples (as the hymns and lessons in 1 Corinthians 14:26), and (3) theological inferences (e.g., from the nature of baptism as a sacrament, it is evidently appropriate for worship).”

⁸³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 1.6. The line reads, “Nevertheless we acknowledge . . . that *there are some circumstances* [emphasis added] concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, *common to human actions and societies* [emphasis added], 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.”

⁸⁴ Frame says, “The problem is that Scripture doesn’t give us a list of elements required for Christian worship services. In the Old Testament, God gave Israel an elaborate set of instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and the temple, and he stated in detail the requirements for the priesthood, the offering, and the feasts. But he gave no specific directions at all for the worship of the synagogue. Indeed, the synagogue is hardly mentioned in the Old Testament, if at all; we know that God approved it mainly from Jesus’ attendance and teaching there.” Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 53-54.

⁸⁵ Frame insists that “the second commandment does not distinguish between elements and circumstances Insofar as the regulative principle depends on such distinctions, it must rely on portions of Scripture other than the second commandment.” Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 469.

with circumstances?”⁸⁶ Frame implies that even this traditional formulation of categories may violate the spirit of the regulative principle.⁸⁷ Frame’s critics question any reconsideration of the traditional understanding of the regulative principle as suspicious and ripe for mischief.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, Frame defends his position.⁸⁹ Instead of tacit acceptance of those parts of worship praxis that are traditionally considered biblical, Frame questions the prescribed nature of the “elements” themselves. Indeed, Frame insists that there is no divine list of “elements” found in Scripture.⁹⁰ These distinctions are artificial and are not methodologically driven by *sola Scriptura*—an ironic conclusion given the tenets of the Reformation.

Sola Scriptura drives Frame’s methodology to some surprising and controversial observations.⁹¹ Explicit commands in the New Testament are lacking for

⁸⁶ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:255.

⁸⁷ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:255. Frame illustrates, “The most important objection to the traditional view is that it is not warranted by Scripture. That is a great irony, for the Puritan system has the laudable aim of making worship thoroughly subject to the Word of God.”

⁸⁸ Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 263. Clark complains, “One reason for this was almost certainly that the idea of ‘circumstances’ and ‘[adiaphora]’ has often been an opportunity for mischief. We have already observed how Frame and Gore, to name but two authors, have proposed a radical revision of the notion of ‘circumstances,’ so that is now to be used to leverage the very notion of elements with the result that what was once intentionally forbidden (e.g., drama and dancing in public worship) can now be admitted.”

⁸⁹ Frame says, “Even granting the legitimacy of the concept ‘element,’ the claim that God provides a list of elements specific to each particular form of worship will not withstand exegetical scrutiny. Indeed, the Old Testament sets forth many details concerning the sacrifices of the tabernacle and temple. But beyond the descriptions of the sacrifices themselves, there is no temple liturgy. There is no description of what is to be done beyond the sacrifices, by way of acts such as prayer and instruction. There were ‘hours of prayer’ in the temple (Acts 3:1), but we have no specific information as to what went on in those meetings, let alone divine prescriptions.” Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:257-58.

⁹⁰ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:257.

⁹¹ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 112. Frame states, “Scripture never mentions sermons (as we understand them today) as part of the post-Resurrection worship of the New Testament. Preaching in the New Testament is the evangelistic preaching of the apostles and others, not in Christian worship services, but in synagogues and marketplaces. The only New Testament reference to instruction as part of a Christian worship service is 1 Cor. 14:26, which mentions a ‘lesson.’ Nothing in the New Testament suggest that these lessons have the centrality for the Christian life that Clark and others ascribe to the ‘preached word.’ Certainly in Scripture the Word of God is a primary means of sanctification. But that is not limited to, nor specifically identified with, the preaching of ‘sermons’ in weekly worship.”

benedictions, baptism, marriage vows, and even sermons in formal worship services.⁹²

This has struck a nerve among some in the Reformed community as biblicism.

Theologian Terry Johnson suggests that “one wonders about a brand of ‘biblicism’ that considers it necessary to make such a statement [i.e., sermons in official church services].”⁹³ Despite the lack of explicit authorization, Frame does not question that these are authorized elements due to the scriptural inference that the Westminster formulation allows in determining scriptural warrant.⁹⁴ Proper scriptural methodology is behind Frame’s rejection of Westminster’s construct of elements and circumstances.

Implications of this artificial distinction between elements and circumstances are problematic for Frame. For example, prayer is a scriptural element of worship. Yet the specific words of a minister’s *ex tempore* prayer seem to be in neither category.⁹⁵

Scripture itself makes no mention of the Westminster distinction between elements and circumstances.⁹⁶ For Frame, complicating matters is the fact that “the RPW literally

⁹² Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 470. Frame states, “Even the most conservative Reformed churches include elements of worship that are not directly commanded in Scripture. There is no explicit command, for example, to have a benediction in a worship service, or even a baptism. Baptisms in the New Testament are performed outdoors or in homes. There is no command to perform them in weekly worship services.”

⁹³ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 107.

⁹⁴ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 55. Frame asserts, “For example, there is no New Testament command to administer baptism in a Sunday meeting, and there is no historical record of that ever being done in the New Testament period. Baptisms in the New Testament are typically performed outside of formal meetings. But the nature of baptism, as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, and as a solemn, public oath to the Lord and profession of faith in him, surely makes it appropriate as a part of public Christian worship. First, baptism cannot be other than public. Second, it is administered in the name of Christ, even into the name of Christ, and therefore is appropriately performed in a meeting held in Jesus’ name. Third, it is the rite of entrance into the church; therefore, it must be witnessed by a gathering of at least some of the leadership of the church.”

⁹⁵ Frame writes, “Prayer is an element of worship. But the specific words used in prayers are not commanded in Scripture, either by explicit commands, approved examples, or theological inference. Scripture includes general principle of prayer and many sample prayers that must govern our own prayer life, but it does not prescribe the words to be prayed in a given worship service. Are these specific words circumstances then? Not according to the Confession, which defines circumstances as matters that are ‘common to human actions and societies’ (1.6). Circumstances are matters that the church shares in common with all other organizations, sacred and secular. But the specific words of prayers are not shared in this way. Prayer is not common to human actions and societies.” Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 471.

⁹⁶ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:259. Frame says that “just as Scripture fails to define

governs only the ‘elements’ (word, sacraments, and prayer), but not the circumstances.”⁹⁷ Other unclear designations within worship praxis would be the liturgy itself, the vows of marriage, and the reading of Scripture.⁹⁸ The implications of the artificial distinction between elements and circumstances exacerbate confusion and point back to the human origin of elements and circumstances.

This has led some theologians, such as Gordon, to articulate a third category of worship praxis termed “forms,” which is distinct from “elements” and “circumstances.”⁹⁹ The Westminster Confession, supporting Frame’s position, rarely uses “forms.” Yet subsequently, Puritan theologians increasingly used this term in the decades that followed. This difference blurs the origin of the traditional understanding of the regulative principle—Frame’s very contention.¹⁰⁰ Debate regarding the regulative principle may be referencing the formal documents of the Westminster Assembly or the formal documents *in addition to* the concomitant theological commentary that has

and use ‘element’ (or some equivalent concept) in its doctrine of worship, so it fails to define or use the concept ‘circumstance’ in any of the meanings suggested by proponents of the traditional view; nor does it distinguish, as do such proponents, what kinds of circumstances the church is able to determine from those it is unable to determine.” Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 111.

⁹⁷ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 111.

⁹⁸ Frame writes, “In Colossians 4:16-17, Paul authorizes the public reading of his letter, both in the church at Colossae and in other churches, and also the public reading of ‘the letter from Laodicea.’ He similarly instructed that 1 Thessalonians be read publicly (see 1 Thess. 5:27). So we may say that there are biblical commands to read three of Paul’s letters in church (I presume, in the worship meeting). But what about Romans or 1 Corinthians? On Bushell’s principle, the specific commandments of Colossians 4:16-17 and 1 Thessalonians 5:27 imply that we are forbidden to read any other Pauline letters in church. Since there are biblical commands to read three of Paul’s letters, we are forbidden to read any others. To read others would be a violation of the regulative principle, an addition to God’s Word.” Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 479.

⁹⁹ Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” 323. In response Frame writes, “One problem here is that there are some things we do in worship that are neither elements nor circumstances in the official definitions. Reading Psalm 50, for example, is not an element, because God nowhere commands us to read precisely that passage. But neither is it a circumstance, because circumstances are ‘common to human actions and societies’ (WCF 1.6). So some have spoken of ‘expressions’ or ‘forms’ as a third category. But it is not clear what the status of this category is with regard to the RPW.”

¹⁰⁰ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

contributed to the “traditional understanding” of the regulative principle.¹⁰¹ This ambiguity has added to the confusion and led to more disagreements.

In conclusion, Frame believes that Westminster’s construct of elements and circumstances is not driven by *sola Scriptura*. This has led Frame to some controversial observations and generated controversy. Additionally, the formulation of elements and circumstances has led to some inconsistent designations of specific words of Scripture readings, liturgies, and vows of marriage. For Frame, the resolution of such ambiguities invite inquiry.¹⁰² Frame’s concern is the ambiguous nature of the Confession itself. Its esteemed reputation falls short of divine authorization.

Frame on Levels of Specificity

Scripture-warranted specificity in worship praxis may be the main target of Frame’s disenchantment with the traditional application of the regulative principle. If the regulative principle warns against adding to the Word of God, does this not apply to levels of specificity within worship praxis? Specificity—if exceeding the boundaries of Scripture—undermines *sola Scriptura*.¹⁰³ Warranted worship praxis must be no more precise than the verification that Scripture gives—whether by commands, example, or inference. Scripture gives both general verification and specific verification.¹⁰⁴ A firm

¹⁰¹ R. J. Gore, Jr., “Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Critics,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 2 (2005): 364; emphasis added.

¹⁰² Frame states, “All these questions have been disputed among those who have accepted the distinction between elements and circumstances. But how can these questions be answered? What biblical data is actually relevant to their resolution? Or do these questions require a kind of extra-biblical insight, an Aristotelian philosophical ability to distinguish precisely between substance and accident? In any case, these concepts, intended to enable us to make precise judgments about what belongs in worship, may actually contribute more confusion than they alleviate.” Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:260.

¹⁰³ Frame insists that “some aspects of the Scottish-Puritan view go beyond the Scriptures, particularly . . . the calculus of ‘elements’ and ‘circumstances’ by which they tried, in my view, to make the RPW *more precise than it is in Scripture* [emphasis original].” Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

¹⁰⁴ Frame states that “there are some areas of life that are governed specifically by God’s Word, but others that are not. God has chosen to rule his world, and his worship, in that way. And in making that choice, he rules us very well indeed.” Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 480.

commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture accepts the parameters of Scripture's revelation. This was a truth that eluded the Pharisees in Jesus's day.¹⁰⁵ Frame applies this disenchantment with specificity to elements and circumstances.¹⁰⁶ Frame believes that unwarranted specificity in worship praxis may lead to undermining the sufficiency of Scripture. Without a solid hermeneutic that incisively understands the distinction between general and specific commands in Scripture, the church may err in worship regulation.¹⁰⁷

In summary, Frame's understanding of "divine prescription" is absent the specificity that is usually associated with the traditional understanding of the regulative principle.¹⁰⁸ The main difference between Frame and his critics lies with specificity. Frame's views are shaped by a *sola Scriptura* methodology resulting in general principles. Frame's critics' views adhere to *sola Scriptura*, but their specific conclusions

¹⁰⁵ Frame clarifies that "the regulative principle itself warns us not to add to the Word of God. We need to remind ourselves that one way we are tempted to add to the Word is to try to make it more precise and specific than it is. That was one error of which Jesus accused the Pharisees. We might wish that God had given us more specific guidance as to what pleases Him in public worship and in the rest of life. But we must be content with what He has actually revealed to us, turning neither to the right nor to the left." Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:262.

¹⁰⁶ Frame writes, "What lies behind the element/circumstance distinction, I think, is the thought that some such distinction is needed to put teeth into the regulative principle in its broad meaning. What good is it, some may ask, for worship to be divinely mandated, unless God has given us specific lists of what to do in every type of service ('elements') and has drawn a precise line between what we may determine ('circumstances,' or some of them) and what we may not? But one may ask equally well what good it is for human marriage to be divinely regulated, unless God gives us a complete list of what husbands and wives are to do in the marriage and to what extent they may make their own decisions. But God never rules His people by giving them exhaustive lists of things they must do, and forbidding them to do anything else. Rather, He teaches them in general terms what pleases Him, and then He allows them to work out the specifics through their own godly wisdom, in line with the broader principles of His Word. That is what it means to live *according to divine prescription* [emphasis added]." Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:261-62.

¹⁰⁷ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 1:126.

¹⁰⁸ Frame says, "Are traditional forms 'prescribed by God'? Are they the only legitimate way for worship to 'conform to God's revealed truth'? Well, God has certainly prescribed that we do certain things in worship: praise, prayer, preaching, sacraments, and so on. But he has not prescribed that we do these things in precisely the way that Presbyterians have done them throughout their history. God does not prescribe that hymns use four part choral harmony in stately rhythm. He does not prescribe organs instead of guitars. (Indeed, I think the instruments mentioned in the Psalm headings are more like guitars, trumpets, and drums than like organs.) He does not prescribe old music rather than new. He does not prescribe formal language rather than informal. There are many areas in which God's prescriptions allow freedom to choose from a range of options. The current discussion is not, I think, mostly about matters that God has actually prescribed; it is mostly about areas in which we are to make our own choices within the limits of the larger principles of Scripture." Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 113.

are shaped by over three centuries of Reformed interpretive tradition in addition to *sola Scriptura*.

Frame's critics bristle at his perceived attacks on Reformed tradition, but they misunderstand Frame's decisive authority lies not with the documents created at the Westminster Assembly but with the Scriptures themselves. His critics give a reasonable critique when they claim Frame has "departed" from the traditional Reformed understanding of the regulative principle and reinterpreted it.¹⁰⁹ When addressing specific issues, he frequently allows methodological and theological concerns to converge. This allows Frame the ability to compare different streams of scriptural data within a philosophical framework, but from the starting point of Scripture, rather than either the Westminster formulations or tradition. Both the Westminster formulations and tradition move beyond scriptural specificities and become threats to *sola Scriptura*. In this particular pattern, Frame follows the example of Calvin's thorough hermeneutic more than the philosophical atomism of the Westminster Puritans.

Frame on Contemporary Worship Music

Frame was an early adopter of the use of contemporary worship music in worship praxis.¹¹⁰ While acceptance of contemporary worship forms has increased since the mid-1990s, his embrace of the form was notable and unconventional for a Reformed theologian at that time.¹¹¹ For Frame, the issue of contemporary worship music is a

¹⁰⁹ James H. Grant Jr. and Justin Taylor, "John Frame and Evangelicalism," in Hughes, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, 268. Grant and Taylor explain, "Gordon appealed to the historical development of the RPW, insisting that it must be understood first of all as an ecclesiastical doctrine that applies Presbyterian theology to both the scope of church power and the liberty of conscience. Gordon's basic argument against Frame is one that critics continue to make: Frame has reinterpreted the RPW to the point that it no longer reflects what the Reformed tradition and confessions articulated."

¹¹⁰ Frame states, "When I wrote my little worship books in the mid-1990s, I was on the defensive. In my circles (conservative Presbyterian), only a few churches used contemporary worship songs. Critics were saying that these songs were unbiblical for various reasons, as well as being nontraditional. My books defended the biblical character of these songs and other worship practices." Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:268-69.

¹¹¹ Aware of its minority stance at that time within the Reformed community, Frame admits

matter of freedom within scriptural boundaries.¹¹² Frame's endorsement of contemporary worship forms is motivated by a desire for a sound methodology that sustains Scripture's authority in every era.

Yet Frame does not endorse contemporary worship music unequivocally. He believes in its limited use, acknowledges that some criticism is warranted, and would not advocate the complete abandonment of hymnody.¹¹³ Nevertheless, Frame believes that criticism of contemporary worship music has been unfair and biased.¹¹⁴

Still, Frame's supportive position has incurred a significant amount of negative response, with many of his critics describing contemporary worship music as milk

that "my position on CWM [contemporary worship music] is bound to be controversial in the ecclesiastical and academic theological circles I inhabit. I am a Reformed theologian and enthusiastic subscriber to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms." Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 2.

¹¹² It is also a matter of communication. Theologian Sandlin explains Frame's support of contemporary worship music and communication: "Undergirding Frame's defense of CWM, however, is his belief that cogent communication of the truth is a crucial part of what the church is all about, and the church does not communicate merely by declaring (or singing). It must account for culture, the culture of the audience and their reception of the Christian message, in its task of communicating. People need to *understand* [emphasis original] and resonate with what is being communicated (1 Cor. 14), and CWM does help many people in our culture to understand and resonate. Moreover, what will communicate effectively in one culture or time period will not be effective in others. That is to say, modes of communication are culture-dependent. . . . The Bible will not actually *function* [emphasis original] as an authority if people do not understand what it is teaching. . . . *If we neglect to ponder the issue of communicating the truth, we subtly, if unintentionally, undermine biblical authority* [emphasis original]. This is the last error that Bible-affirming Calvinists wish to be guilty of." Sandlin, "Frame's Unique Contribution," 850-51.

¹¹³ Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Frame states, "It is not an abandonment of tradition to include in worship short, simple songs of praise. The tradition has regularly included these. It has also, of course, included short spoken sentences, like 'The Lord be with you—and with your spirit.' Certainly these sentences do not have any more theological depth than the average CWM song. But liturgical theologians regularly give to such sentences the highest recommendations while relegating CWM songs to the ash heap." Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 138.

instead of meat,¹¹⁵ trite jingles,¹¹⁶ of poor quality,¹¹⁷ musically tacky,¹¹⁸ idolatrous,¹¹⁹ emotionally sacramental,¹²⁰ vulgar,¹²¹ endlessly repetitious,¹²² blasphemous,¹²³ culturally accommodating,¹²⁴ irreverent,¹²⁵ schlock,¹²⁶ nursery rhymes set to advertising jingles,¹²⁷ and syncretistic worship.¹²⁸ Frame's support for contemporary worship expressions has not wavered even while the criticism has increased throughout the years.¹²⁹ Many have

¹¹⁵ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹¹⁶ Duncan, "Does God Care How We Worship?," 20.

¹¹⁷ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹¹⁸ Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship," 309. Muller remarks, "I find much contemporary hymnody musically tacky—neither an intellectual nor an aesthetic experience."

¹¹⁹ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle." Hart says, "Presbyterians have worshiped historically a certain way to please God, because to veer from that pattern is idolatry."

¹²⁰ W. Robert Godfrey, "Worship and the Emotions," in Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan, *Give Praise to God*, 370. Godfrey comments, "In much contemporary Christian music, emotion is the object of the song. The emotions engendered by the music become a new sacramental connection to God."

¹²¹ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹²² Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 89.

¹²³ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹²⁴ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 20.

¹²⁵ Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹²⁶ Muller, "Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship," 309-310. Muller comments, "Sadly, this is not the effect of the musical, cultural, and theological *schlock* that passes for hymnody in much contemporary evangelical 'praise and worship.'"

¹²⁷ James B. Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap: The Bible Versus Tradition in Worship* (West Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 1994), xii. Jordan says that "the serious Bible-loving Protestant is compelled to sing some of the worst poetry ever written to some of the most appalling music ever conceived. Nursery rhymes set to advertising jingles are the latest thing in worship, but before them came music and poetry that was no better. It is not snobbery to write this. We despise the Holy Spirit and His work if we do not take seriously His labors over the past 2000 years in providing the Church with a heritage of prayers, poetry, and music."

¹²⁸ Schwertley, "Sola Scriptura."

¹²⁹ Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 3. Frame states, "I have come to this position somewhat in defiance of my environment. I'm familiar with the arguments of confessional Protestants against the 'dumbing down' of traditional worship caused by CWM. But I have not been persuaded. I believe that some of my confessional brothers and sisters have done injustice to CWM, and I hope in this volume to take some steps toward righting that wrong." P. Andrew Sandlin gives this perspective: "Frame's (nuanced) support for contemporary worship music (CWM) has possibly elicited more criticism within the Reformed ranks than any other of his specific positions. For many of the Reformed, CWM is the province of evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals, not Calvinists, yet Frame has dared to defend it!" Sandlin, "Frame's Unique Contribution," 849.

applauded Frame’s courage. Yet this has provoked others. Darryl Hart says, “I believe Frame’s books, despite his claims to the contrary, are an assault upon the Reformed tradition’s understanding of worship.”¹³⁰ Incontrovertibly, Frame was an early adopter of contemporary worship music within the Reformed community, and this has generated stiff opposition.¹³¹

Intelligibility

This chapter concludes with a distinctive feature of Frame’s broad view of the regulative principle—his concern for intelligibility. Frame places a high value on intelligibility because of Paul’s writing in his letter to Corinth (1 Cor 14). Intelligibility is linked to edification of church members and meaningfulness to outsiders.¹³² Frame includes in his category of intelligibility many issues; among them are contextualization, language, and love.¹³³ Contextualization implies contemporaneity,¹³⁴ highlights clarity, warrants the possibility of contemporary music language,¹³⁵ and excludes archaic forms.¹³⁶

¹³⁰ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

¹³¹ Sandlin, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian,” 97. Sandlin comments that “modified support of CWM has elicited some of the fiercest criticism of your [Frame’s] views within the Reformed world . . . that you play fast and loose with the ‘Regulative Principle of Worship.’”

¹³² Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 17. Frame writes, “We have seen that worship ought to be edifying to the church and meaningful even to outsiders. Edification and meaningfulness require attention to language. Therefore, the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 insists that worship be intelligible: it should not be conducted in unknown tongues unless those tongues are interpreted.”

¹³³ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 83.

¹³⁴ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 19.

¹³⁵ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:268. Frame writes, “Worship should be carried on in the languages that speak to the hearts of worshipers. That includes musical language as well as spoken language. Nothing in the Bible says that present-day worship must include music, prayers, or sermons from earlier generations—tradition for tradition’s sake. It may be a good thing for present-day worship to include practices from earlier times, but only if those practices can be a blessing to contemporary congregations. In this sense, all worship should be contemporary.”

¹³⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 480-81.

Frame's concern for intelligibility begins with Reformed ideals.¹³⁷ Putting the Scripture in the vernacular language of the people was a bulwark of the Reformation.¹³⁸ Intelligibility, by its nature, is more about functionality than aesthetics.¹³⁹ Intelligibility crosses socio-economic and educational levels, as well as ethnic and generational boundaries.¹⁴⁰ Communication is not limited to pure language alone but extends to body language and manner of delivery.¹⁴¹ This may appear to be an attempt to cater to people's tastes but, for Frame, it is a question of faithfulness in communicating Scripture.¹⁴² If the church's task is to teach, edify, and nurture believers, then the church must use familiar terminology for believers.¹⁴³ The desire to use the vernacular in all of its applications puts Frame in alignment with the Reformation ideals of clarity and the translation of truth.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁷ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 280-81. Frame asks, "Weren't the Reformers themselves quite willing to oppose tradition that was not biblically warranted? Didn't they advocate clear communication in worship, both verbally (through the use of vernacular languages) and musically (through the emphasis on congregational singing)?"

¹³⁸ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 18.

¹³⁹ Intelligibility has implications for language, which Frame describes succinctly: "The Koine Greek of the apostles, called 'fish-market Greek' by Jay Adams, was a popular language, not the language of elegant literature. But it was God's choice, well suited for communicating to all sorts of people." Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 276. Frame explains, "Worship should be intelligible; it is communication (1 Cor. 14); communication with children and teens as well as adults; communication with various ethnic, socio-economic, and educational groups; communication with the uneducated as well as the educated."

¹⁴¹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 83. Frame explains further that "intelligibility requires us, first, to speak the language of the people, not Latin, as the Reformers emphasized. But communication is more than language in the narrow sense. Content is communicated through body language, style, the choice of popular rather than technical terms, well-known musical styles, etc."

¹⁴² Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 84. Frame believes that "determining the most intelligible form of worship requires us to ask what people in a particular culture most easily listen to and understand, and that question certainly overlaps the issue of taste. But we are not asking that question to satisfy anybody's taste; we are asking it so that we may be more faithful in communicating God's word clearly."

¹⁴³ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 300.

¹⁴⁴ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 295. Frame says, "But the clarity of Scripture has never meant that people of all ages and backgrounds can understand the word immediately. God has provided teachers to the church for the explicit purpose of making the Word clear to God's people. These teachers have often engaged in translating the word from its original languages to languages commonly spoken. That translation process continues when preachers employ illustrations . . . and seek to engage hearers with lively language. And if video presentations further engage hearers, there should be no objection to them."

Frame's understanding of intelligibility is also marked by philosophical and methodological concerns. He believes there is a tendency among his Reformed brethren to elevate high-brow preferences.¹⁴⁵ Frame opposes this tendency on philosophical grounds.¹⁴⁶ Frame's philosophical purity is jeopardized by the elevation of tradition among Reformed authors. Elevating tradition, as has been previously stated, is a methodological error.¹⁴⁷ Frame's writing is foundationally shaped by his commitment to Scripture's ultimate authority in matters of worship praxis. Consequently, contextualization is required for scriptural authority to be sustained. This commitment to contextualization leads Frame to contemporaneity and unpopular and non-traditional positions, such as the allowance of contemporary worship music.¹⁴⁸ Frame's high value of intelligibility is a significant part of his understanding and application of the regulative principle.¹⁴⁹ These conclusions put Frame outside most of the conventional thought within the Reformed community and make him a distinct target for criticism.

¹⁴⁵ Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music*, 19. Frame considers this "one kind of sin . . . is musical snobbery."

¹⁴⁶ Frame writes, "A good teacher is not somebody who speaks a rarefied, perhaps archaic, intellectual jargon that no student can understand. Rather, an effective teacher speaks the present language of his students. He may try to teach them the technical language of a field if he deems it important to their progress in the course. But he starts where they are. He begins with what they know and then moves on to what they don't know." Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 100-01.

¹⁴⁷ Frame says, "We should expect to find that traditions need to change in order better to communicate God's truth. That is a biblical principle ('intelligibility') and a Reformational emphasis ('vernacular') . . . [Where] Scripture allows liberty, we should choose forms that best communicate with people today, even if that means changing our traditions. . . . We also, of course, need to criticize our contemporary ideas of worship. But again, I insist that this criticism proceed by means of the sola Scriptura principle. One may not invalidate some aspect of contemporary worship merely by showing it is nontraditional. Nor is it legitimate to reason in a historicist fashion, that a contemporary practice is bad because it is genetically linked to some historical movement we don't like (the charismatic movement, rock music, etc.)." Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹⁴⁸ Frame writes, "Worship should be carried on in the languages that speak to the hearts of worshippers. That includes musical language as well as spoken language. Nothing in the Bible says that present-day worship must include music, prayers, or sermons from earlier generations—tradition for tradition's sake. It may be a good thing for present-day worship to include practices from earlier times, but only if those practices can be a blessing to contemporary congregations. In this sense, all worship should be contemporary." Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:268.

¹⁴⁹ Carson says, "First Corinthians 14 lays considerable stress on intelligibility Frame applies the importance of intelligibility to the music that is chosen. Although that is scarcely what the apostle had in mind, I doubt that he would have been displeased by the application." D. A. Carson,

Frame’s opponents have criticized his position on intelligibility. Some have claimed that his concern for intelligibility makes culture a higher standard than Scripture.¹⁵⁰ Frame’s critics claim that any conformity to culture vulgarizes worship.¹⁵¹ Another critic has claimed that adopting Frame’s position is untenable, leads to “liturgical Trotskyism” and generational blackmail, and is an *ad absurdum* argument.¹⁵² Yet another critic claims that “Frame’s analysis is seriously flawed . . . by faulty presuppositions and biases in favor of informality, spontaneity, and an unjustified preference for the New Testament.”¹⁵³ Some critics question his motives and his commitment to the Puritan regulative principle of worship.¹⁵⁴ Still another critic, when confronted with Frame’s advocacy of choirs in worship based on the antiphonal delivery in a particular Psalm, questioned Frame’s “dubious assumptions,” assumptions that are “patently ridiculous.”¹⁵⁵ Frame’s elevation of intelligibility confirms, for critics, that he belongs to those that

“Worship under the Word,” in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 56.

¹⁵⁰ Frame reviews Jason Stellman’s book, *Dual Citizens*, and states, “Any communication of the Gospel to people in contemporary culture must take contemporary culture into account, just as translating the Bible into French must take the French language (and culture!) into account. But to claim that such attempts make culture a standard higher than Scripture is slanderous. It is also slander to assume, as Stellman does on p. 27, that people who use drums and drama to communicate the Gospel do so as an alternative to the Gospel.” Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 312.

¹⁵¹ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.” Hart says, “Our worship, that reflects our theology, should not be vulgarized in order to make it conform to what people already understand. We need to disciple so that people will understand why worshipping the Reformed way is to follow our Lord’s commands.”

¹⁵² Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 101-103. Johnson says, “Frame argues that music must be ‘meaningful’ to the worshiper which he identifies with intelligibility, which he says ‘implies contemporaneity.’ Thus does my preferred form of popular music become the music of public worship and the church begins its journey down the road of liturgical Trotskyism. . . . Frame’s discussion is in the opposite direction and we think untenable, if not a classic case of reduction *ad absurdum*.”

¹⁵³ Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*, 408.

¹⁵⁴ Schwertley states, “Given the fact that Frame says that he enthusiastically subscribes to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms on page xiv in his book, one should not be surprised that Frame is unwilling to admit that his enthusiastic subscription was false, that he subscribed with crossed fingers. Frame of course is free to reject the teaching of the Westminster Standards. However, since he does so, he should be honest and consistent and join the Reformed Episcopal Church instead of deceitfully working to undermine an essential aspect of the Reformed faith.” Schwertley, “Sola Scriptura.”

¹⁵⁵ Blair, “The Few on Behalf of the Many,” 231.

introduce innovations that are full of “mischief.”¹⁵⁶

As this section concludes, Frame’s view of the regulative principle must be considered again, considering his foundational commitment to *sola Scriptura*. Frame is concerned about precision with Scripture’s authority. This extends to Scripture’s clear commands and prohibitions as well as its limitations with regards to specificity. Above all, Frame has a strong desire to bring clarity to the discussion about the regulative principle and believes that the Westminster Confession could be modified or adjusted.¹⁵⁷ Frame believes that using the term “application” in a revised confession would reduce confusion.¹⁵⁸ Frame is concerned with the clarity of Scripture’s authority and its prescriptions and proscriptions.

In summary, Frame’s understanding of the regulative principle is shaped by his foundational theological commitments to *sola Scriptura*. Because of these commitments, Frame’s broad view of the regulative principle of worship, dismissed by critics, opposes traditionalism and any methodologies that undermine Scripture’s ultimate authority. Frame, as this chapter has articulated, believes the Westminster formulation of the regulative principle has a few weaknesses. But Frame reserves his strongest criticism for

¹⁵⁶ Cunningham states, “It is the deniers of this [regulative] principle, and they alone, who invent and obtrude innovations; and they are responsible for all the *mischiefs* [emphasis added] that ensue from the discussions and contentions to which these things have given rise.” William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle,” in Iain H. Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church* (1965; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 42.

¹⁵⁷ Sandlin, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian,” 108. Frame says, “See confessional documents in proper perspective. It is the work of theology, among other things, to rethink the doctrines of the confessions and to reform them, when necessary, by the Word of God. Do not assume that everything in the confession is forever settled.” Elsewhere, Frame states, “The Westminster Confession is entirely right in its regulative principle—that true worship is limited to what God commands. But the *methods* [emphasis original] used by the Puritans to discover and apply those commands need a theological overhaul. Much of what they said cannot be justified by Scripture. The result of our rethinking, I hope, will be a somewhat revised paradigm for Presbyterian worship: one thoroughly Reformed in its assumptions, affirming the regulative principle and the statements of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, but allowing much greater flexibility than the Puritans did in applying God’s commands for worship.” Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, xiii.

¹⁵⁸ Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 1:125.

the Puritan extensions of the regulative principle.¹⁵⁹ This criticism of the Puritan extensions of the regulative principle is confirmation for his critics that Frame seeks to subvert the regulative principle, yet for others this statement is evidence of Frame's commitment to *sola Scriptura* above traditionalism.

Frame's broad view of the regulative principle has garnered support over two decades among evangelicals and some in the Reformed community. His view has also generated irascible criticism from those who hold the conventional Reformed understanding. Whether one is a supporter or critic of Frame, his prevailing influence has incontrovertibly helped the church sharpen its understanding and rhetoric concerning the parameters of the regulative principle of worship. Frame's longevity has also given him perspective on his positions throughout his lengthy writing career.¹⁶⁰ Frame's broad understanding of the regulative principle of worship—along with his unconventional positions—has provoked an ongoing response within the Reformed community.

¹⁵⁹ Frame states, "In the 1920s, a philosophical movement called 'Logical Positivism' insisted that no language can be 'cognitively meaningful' unless it could be verified by a certain kind of scientific procedure. This movement was successful until some pointed out that this view of cognitive meaning was not *itself* [emphasis original] verifiable by scientific means. Since then, writers have commonly referred to Logical Positivism as a position that is self-refuting, or 'self-referentially incoherent,' a view that fails to measure up to its own criteria. I think something oddly similar can be said of the Puritan extensions of the regulative principle." Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

¹⁶⁰ Frame summarizes, "I don't regret any of my main theological decisions: Reformed theology, modified presuppositionalism, multiperspectivalism, theology as application, anti-denominationalism, opposition to strict subscriptionism, advocacy of contemporary worship, theology of lordship, opposition to open theism, and *sola Scriptura* ethics and theology. Nor do I regret trying to find a third alternative between warring factions and rebuking factionalism itself. I have tried to be a peacemaker, rather than a militant, in debates that are not essential to the gospel." Sandlin, "Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian," 105.

CHAPTER 5

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE AND HIERARCHY

This thesis has argued that Calvin articulated the regulative principle while applying the regulative principle to congregational worship with the principle of accommodation (chapter 2). Calvin's application of the regulative principle via the principle of accommodation provided balance and exercised discernment in a volatile and changing ecclesial environment. Then, this thesis argued that the Puritans followed Calvin's lead in articulating the regulative principle but departed from Calvin in the near-complete absence of the principle of accommodation (chapter 3). Chapter 4 followed contemporary theologian John Frame as he followed his own unique contours as an adherent of the regulative principle—a position that at key points aligns with both Calvin and the Puritans but presents itself as discontinuous with the Puritans.

Since noting the Puritans' departure from Calvin, as well as Frame's continuities and discontinuities with both, this chapter will explore insights that identify the origins of these disparate positions via hierarchy. These disparate positions occur when arbitrary priorities are imposed on the scriptural text and an unwarranted hierarchy is established. This chapter will claim that improperly formed hierarchies occur when there is a myopic promotion of certain theological issues to the exclusion of others. When a particular theological agenda centralizes theological beliefs that ought to be secondary, other issues become either needlessly subordinated or neglected completely. Furthermore, this also brings unbalanced application, increases the susceptibility of error, and magnetically pulls people toward a legalistic path.

This chapter explores these improperly formed hierarchies. First, it elucidates the danger of elevating reverence over joy and celebration. Second, it highlights the

weaknesses of spirituality over materiality. Third, this chapter identifies the danger of specificity over principles. Fourth, this chapter reveals the danger of textual hierarchy in elevating the New Testament over the Old Testament. Finally, it synthesizes the consequences of these arbitrary hierarchies.

Hierarchical Dangers: Reverence over Joy and Celebration

The danger of unwarranted hierarchy is that arbitrary priorities—based on temporal context and bias—are imposed on the church. Instead of viewing components of worship theology as equal and complementary pieces, components are prioritized into a hierarchy that is unsupported by scriptural hermeneutics. In this section, the case for reverence will be explored through worship theology. Reverence’s dominance in the Reformed church as the ethos of worship will be identified historically and methodologically. This will be followed by an exploration of joy and celebration as an alternative, yet legitimate, ethos of worship. This ethos increasingly has gained a foothold as the prevailing ethos in some evangelical and Reformed churches. Finally, conclusions will be drawn that compare these opposing viewpoints and highlight the danger of prioritizing reverence over joy and celebration.

The Case for Reverence

Without question, reverence contributes significantly to the ethos of worship as described by Scripture.¹ The Old Testament makes a sizeable contribution for reverence.² “Awe” and “awesome” are companion terms with reverence that contribute numerous

¹ “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb 12:28).

² “You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD” (Lev 19:30; 26:2).

Old Testament references to the ethos of worship.³ Reverence—as the ethos of worship—is cited by numerous Reformed theologians since the Reformation from Calvin to John Murray.⁴ Terry Johnson states that “irreverent worship is a violation of God’s holy style. God desires reverent worship.”⁵ Daniel Block states that “true worship involves reverent awe. Evangelical worship today often lacks gravitas appropriate to the occasion and the divine Auditor who invites us to an audience with him. . . . True worship need not be humorless, but neither will it be casual or flippant.”⁶ Ernest Reisinger and Matthew Allen state that “nowhere in Scripture is worship actually defined. However, when the key biblical words for worship are examined, it becomes clear that the central concepts are homage, service and *reverence*.”⁷ T. David Gordon states that “God’s people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness.”⁸ Reverence continues to dominate today among many Reformed scholars and theologians. It is esteemed as the epitome of worship’s ethos.

³ “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Ex 15:11) “And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.” (Neh 1:5) “Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he!” (Ps 99:3)

⁴ Calvin states, “Hence we infer that part of the *reverence* [emphasis added] due to him consists in worshipping him simply in the way which he commands, without mingling any inventions of our own.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 4.10.23. Calvin also states, “But we give the name of decency to that which, suited to the reverence of sacred mysteries, forms a fit exercise for piety, or at least gives an ornament adapted to the action, and is not without fruit, but reminds believers of the great modesty, seriousness, and *reverence* [emphasis added], with which sacred things ought to be treated.” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.28, 4.10.29. Murray suggests that “*reverence* [emphasis added] should typify the proper attitude in worship.” John Murray, “Worship,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray 1: The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 166.

⁵ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R 2002), 121.

⁶ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 24.

⁷ Ernest Reisinger and Matthew C. Allen, *Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Practice of Accommodation* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders, 2001), 17; emphasis added.

⁸ T. David Gordon, “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 55, no. 2 (1993): 326.

Reverence in worship is also commonly grouped with other descriptive terms found in the New Testament record.⁹ The core of worship for many Reformed theologians is reverence and its synonyms: “somber,” “serious,” “dignified,” “weighty,” and “heavy.”¹⁰ Jason Stellman pairs reverence with beauty and tastefulness.¹¹ Michael Horton concurs that “if we are worshipping the God of Abraham and Jesus, the style of that worship will necessarily be ‘weighty’ or ‘heavy.’”¹² Calvin also believed that the music of the church should have weight and majesty.¹³ “Reverence” is the umbrella term that summarizes many terms of effect. Thus, some believe that reverence rises above all other concerns, even above the regulative principle of worship.¹⁴ For the ethos of worship and liturgical music, reverence has been the apogee of Reformed theology throughout its history.

Contemporary Reformed theologians often criticize informal styles of worship and modern worship music for its irreverence.¹⁵ Thus, when evangelicals embrace

⁹ Darryl Hart states, “At the same time I am compelled by passages like Titus 2 with its stress upon moderation, reverence and discipline being the forms of living that are fitting sound doctrine, a passage with important implications for worship that is also fitting sound doctrine, that is, worship that shows a similar moderation, reverence and discipline.” Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

¹⁰ Hart says that a “somber, serious, dignified service. . . is one that I would think more compatible with a God who could have the kind of exchange with Job recorded at the end of that book.” John Frame and Darryl Hart, “The Regulative Principle: Scripture, Tradition, and Culture: An Email Debate between Darryl Hart and John Frame,” *The Works of John Frame and Vern Poythress*, May 24, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/the-regulative-principle-scripture-tradition-and-culture/>.”

¹¹ Jason J. Stellman, *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 11-12.

¹² Michael Scott Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 166.

¹³ John Calvin, preface to *The Geneva Psalter* (Kassel, Germany: Baerlenreiter, 1935), Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinsps.htm>.

¹⁴ Terry Johnson writes, “The regulative principle, interpreted merely as lists of approved and disapproved elements, does not address (when understood narrowly) a fundamental ingredient of worship: reverence. It does not address matters of decorum. It does not address words and actions appropriate to a reverential approach to God.” Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship That is According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (Darlington, CO: Evangelical Press, 2015), 14.

¹⁵ Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 242; Herman Hanko, “The Fear of the Lord in Worship” in *Worship in the*

informal worship forms, many Reformed leaders express concerns of hedonism and syncretism.¹⁶ “Joyful” or “celebrative” worship is seen as compromising—neglecting God’s commands for human-based effort that reveals its pagan and Roman Catholic origins.¹⁷ There is a clear bifurcation between joyful celebration and reverence. Herman Hanko comments that worship should be “this holy conversation which takes place between God and His people. That this important element is missing in much of what goes under the name of worship in our day is to be condemned in the strongest possible language. Anything in the worship services which detracts from the holiness of God is to be abhorred.”¹⁸ The clear implication seems to be that reverence is the (singular) appropriate response in worship.¹⁹ If modern worship forms detract from God’s holiness, then the church must avoid these forms of worship. God’s holiness—and the church’s response to that holiness via reverence—is of utmost importance. Johnson says that “worship that is ‘in spirit’ is reverent. The spirit of worship is the spirit of reverence; . . .

Presence of God, ed. David C. Lachman and Frank Joseph Smith (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), 26. Block says, “If true worship involves reverential acts of homage and submission, then music should be selected and presented to glorify God and promote reverence and awe.”

¹⁶ Schwertley states, “Modern celebrative music is not a better more biblical way to worship God. It is a syncretistic worship. It is a mixture of the elements of worship with the American hedonistic worldview. Frame’s rejection of the Puritan/Presbyterian/confessional understanding of the regulative principle and his alternative of ‘creative application’ has one major objective: the justification of modern syncretistic worship.” Brian Schwertley, *Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship* (Lansing, MI: Self Published, 2020), 119, Reformed Online, http://www.reformedonline.com/uploads/1/5/0/3/15030584/sola_scriptura_and_the_regulative_principle_of_worship.pdf.

¹⁷ Schwertley states that “people who are in favor of ‘celebrative’ worship sometimes portray strict regulativists as theological snobs, unloving or even as influenced by neo-platonism or nominalism. The truth of the matter is that strict regulativists simply want to preserve biblical (i.e., Reformed) worship from worship that is idolatrous, Pelagian and Arminian. When people ignore or set aside what God has commanded in favor of autonomy in worship, they are implicitly saying that God can be approached in worship on man’s terms. That man through his own creativity, effort, and mystical experience can lift himself up to God. Such thinking is the essence of paganism and Romanism.” Schwertley, “*Sola Scriptura*,” 119.

¹⁸ Hanko, “The Fear of the Lord in Worship,” 26.

¹⁹ Schwertley states, “The men who designed Episcopal and Lutheran worship with all its man-made defects at least attempted to be *reverent* [emphasis added] and majestic. Modern evangelical worship is usually neither; it is crass, tasteless pablum.” Schwertley, “*Sola Scriptura*,” 29.

true worship must always be serious, substantial, solid, sober, reverent.”²⁰ Reverence must be inculcated in all forms of worship because it is the epitome of worship’s ethos.

The Case for Celebration and Joy

The worship ethos of celebration and joy has significant support today among other Reformed theologians. Theologian John Frame labels it an “ecstatic joy.”²¹ Theologian Peter Leithart frames his ethos of worship in language devoid of the usual, restrained Reformed modesty.²² Worship, because of the resurrection of Christ, is a celebration of his life, attributes, and work.²³ Frame opposes an approach that “reflects only one aspect [e.g., reverence] of the meeting. I reject the notion that Reformed teaching limits our worship only to this one aspect. To limit worship this way is unbiblical and therefore non-Reformed.”²⁴ For some, “celebration” is a term used for worship that has a comprehensive perspective of all the breadth and width of Christ’s accomplishments on our behalf.²⁵ Celebration displays a wide scope in expressing worship. Frame believes the theme of celebration is clear in the language of the Psalms and that “celebration” is a capstone term for New Testament worship based on the

²⁰ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 73.

²¹ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

²² Leithart states, “Joy is lively. Joy is active. When we rejoice, we don’t mumble or mutter. We shout and sing at the top of our lungs. When we rejoice, we move, clap, sway, dance. Joy doesn’t belong down down down down down in my heart. Joy grips my body, my tongue and hands and feet. Clothed in the Spirit, my body rejoices. What should liturgy look like? Don’t think grim and proper Presbyterians. Think African Anglicans. Think Brazilian charismatics. Don’t quench the Spirit. Don’t bottle up the joy.” Peter J. Leithart, *Theopolitan Liturgy* (West Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2019), 107-8.

²³ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996), 123.

²⁴ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

²⁵ Allen Ross writes, “Only when worshippers begin to see how creation and redemption inform their use of time will they fully appreciate what it means to enter into the Lord’s rest and enjoy fellowship with the holy God, and with one another in Christ. When this happens, worship will find new life through the greater variety of experiences and occasions for celebration. *When worship becomes a celebration in every sense of the word* [emphasis added], then people might actually be glad when it is time to go to the house of the Lord.” Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 240-41.

resurrection of Christ.²⁶

Given that both the historical Reformed church and the modern-era Reformed church is founded upon *sola Scriptura*, related questions emerge. Does Scripture warrant reverence as the dominant ethos of worship? For example, why is reverence singled out instead of joy and celebration? Moreover, why must there be one singular summative worship ethos? Are there other salient considerations behind this thrust to assert reverence's dominance in the ethos of worship? In summary, where is reverence shown, via *sola Scriptura*, to be superior to all others?

Implications

The claim of this chapter is that the promotion of certain theological issues forces other equitable issues into subordinate roles. Such is the case with the diminution of joy and celebration. Joy is embraced as the ethos of worship connotatively, not denotatively.²⁷ This can be observed when theologian Terry Johnson says, "We do not believe that it is putting it too strongly to suggest that Christians come to worship with the same attitude and demeanor they take to a funeral service for a professing Christian. Such funerals are times of reverence and joy."²⁸ Contrastingly, theologian John Frame believes that the church's sense of reverence, not joy, is colored by aesthetic concerns: "It is sometimes thought that only formal worship in a solemn atmosphere can adequately encourage proper reverence and awe of the divine presence. But there is no scriptural

²⁶ Frame states that "Hart opposes my emphasis on 'celebration,' but it is plainly present in the Psalms, and it is implicit in the fact that NT worship memorializes the Resurrection. Certainly the elements of reverence and awe should also be there. Since Hart believes joy to be appropriate, both he and I must think about how joy and reverence are to be kept in balance. And, equally important, we must ask how that balance can be expressed, so that the congregation, not only the leaders, are reverently joyful. And, just as we must distinguish real joy from superficial smiles, we must distinguish reverence from sourpuss sanctimony." Frame and Hart, "The Regulative Principle."

²⁷ This can also be seen when Horton says that "we cannot praise God as he is while emptying the form of its corresponding seriousness. This does not mean, of course, that there is no joy in worship, but it does distinguish a peculiarly sentimental American view of joy from a biblical view of joy as a weighty surprise." Horton, *A Better Way*, 166.

²⁸ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 127.

reason to suppose that this is true. It is simply a human judgment that some may make and others may not.”²⁹ For many Reformed leaders, joy is viewed as a secondary lens, not a primary one. As a result, efforts to partner joy with reverence or to stress joy’s compatibility with reverence become commonplace to minimize joy and celebration.³⁰ Embracing joy on its own merits could jeopardize the aesthetic qualities of formality and solemnity that have historically been associated with the Reformed church.

Interestingly, reverence for many conservative Reformed leaders is argued not from scriptural exegesis, but from an outcome-based perspective. Some scholars claim modern worship forms to be incapable of reverence.³¹ Such worship forms, intrinsically, are devoid of reverence and therefore should be avoided. Subsequently, worship forms that are perceived to lack reverence are proven unworthy of their liturgical duty. Thus, reverence is revealed to be the top priority in worship theology. This reveals faulty reasoning via genetic fallacy.³² Reverence as the top priority is not proven via *sola Scriptura*, but simply assumed as the aesthetically superior choice. Furthermore, reverence becomes the basis for acceptance or rejection of worship forms themselves. This becomes the main argument employed in opposition to modern worship forms—the

²⁹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 82-83.

³⁰ Johnson states, “Our joy is a *reverential joy* [emphasis added], and in public *expressed with restraint* [emphasis added]. Ostentatious displays of zeal, whether by shouting, by raising hands, by leaping about, or by other physical manifestations, have been restrained in Reformed circles by a sense of what is *appropriate in a public worship service* [emphasis added], as well as the desire not to draw attention to oneself or to claim too much for oneself.” Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 79. Hart says, “Reverence and fear are not incompatible with joy or boldness, or with addressing our God as father, even though our culture regards such reverence and fear as forced, confining, uptight and lacking in joy.” Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

³¹ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.” Hart says, “I will readily concede that the service Prof. Frame describes at the end of WST has most of the elements of Christian worship. . . . But that is not saying a whole lot. The mass and the services at Calvary Chapel have most of the same elements as well. What the latter lacks, however, is reverence.”

³² Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.” Frame says, “Hart does what I criticized Wells for doing in my Biblicism paper. In fact, Hart is a much better example of this tendency than Wells is. He identifies a historical movement (rock music) that has a lot of evil in it, and then concludes that anything genetically related to that movement (praise choruses) are sinful. That, of course, is what logicians call the ‘genetic fallacy.’ It says that B is bad because it comes historically out of A which is bad.”

assumption of irreverence—because of the forms that are employed. Thus, the hierarchy of reverence reveals the fallacies of this methodological approach.

Scripturally, reverence is not any more deserving of the ethos of worship than joy. First, it is an arbitrary choice that reveals other sectarian considerations. It separates a pure Reformed church from the perceived ills of other evangelical churches that adopt modern worship forms.³³ Second, claims of reverence's primacy are arbitrarily abstracted from Scripture. The New Testament mentions joy as often as reverence. While Hebrews 12:28 supports reverence in corporate worship, the writer of Hebrews does not single out reverence as worship's highest value. There are no passages cited to support the elevation of reverence over joy. While frequency of use may not guarantee priority, a cursory survey of terms reveals that "joy," "gladness," and "rejoicing" are terms in the Psalms that occur with significant regularity. Joy does not warrant playing a subordinate role to reverence in the Psalms. Thus, reverence cannot be seen as superior to joy. Hierarchies unsupported by Scripture undermine the sufficiency of Scripture itself.³⁴

Conclusions that are not driven primarily by Scripture must be held loosely. In summary, the dangers of unwarranted hierarchal conclusions include (1) undermining the sufficiency of Scripture, (2) narrowing the broad spectrum of worship's ethos because of sectarian concerns, and (3) revealing biases involving praxis. Ranking reverence as the superior ethos of worship is unwarranted and arbitrary.

³³ Brian Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense* (Saunderstown, RI: The American Presbyterian Press, 2002), 39-40. Schwertley states, "As the twentieth century draws to a close, worship has degenerated to the point that, in many 'Reformed and Presbyterian' denominations, churches are imitating the slap-happy, campfire, Las Vegas-style worship invented by Arminian and charismatic heretics. Such worship is often called 'celebrative' worship. The abandonment of the regulative principle and the Psalter has led to an overhead projector with the word *ichabod* written all over it."

³⁴ The unwarranted hierarchy of reverence over celebration and joy invites other similarities involving God's divine attributes. Elevation of any one particular divine attribute as supreme puts other divine attributes in undeserving, subordinate roles. Explicit elevation of one divine attribute leads to unwarranted, albeit unintended, diminishment of other attributes. This is a subtly dangerous foundation for worship and for worship's defining ethos. Elevation of reverence's highest rank in worship leads to diminishment of other scriptural possibilities. Thus, unwarranted hierarchies lead to unnecessary restrictions in worship praxis.

Hierarchical Dangers: Spirituality over Materiality

Unwarranted hierarchies have negative effects on the church today. This can be seen in prioritizing ontological spirituality over materiality. The hierarchical danger of pitting spirituality over materiality has an extensive history in Reformed churches. While Calvin's legacy looms over the Reformed landscape in numerous positive ways, this is one negative area of Calvin's legacy. This section explores the hierarchy of ontological spirituality over materiality by first elucidating Calvin's legacy to the Reformed church today. This legacy is characterized by the doctrine of sin and material pessimism. Finally, the hierarchy of spirituality over materiality will be explored through the diminishment of physical gesture in worship praxis.

Calvin's Legacy

As part of the Reformation, Calvin fought error from the Catholic church by instilling theological depth in the foundation of the nascent Reformed church. These theological errors of the Catholic church were physically sensed during a typical service—incense, transubstantiation, clerical vestments, veneration of relics and images, elevation of the host, etc. These physical manifestations of error propelled Calvin in a more spiritual direction.³⁵ Physical manifestations attached themselves to peoples' consciences, becoming sources of idolatry.³⁶ For Calvin, the physical world, with its concomitant idolatrous dangers, was far inferior to the spiritual world.

³⁵ David Taylor explains, "As a pastor, Calvin had good reason to worry over the liturgical conditions for ready abuse (per Rome) and over the human proclivity to turn material objects to idolatrous and superstitious use (per the Genevan Christians under his care)." W. David O. Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 26.

³⁶ John Leith explains that "according to Calvin's pastoral logic, then, it is better to remove the sources of temptation. The human tendency to abuse material aids to worship is a 'contagion disease of sorts,' and only an 'economical' ceremonial apparatus is able to preserve the believer in the right worship of God." John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 167.

Spirituality, for Calvin, begins with God himself. As God is “spiritual,” Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, so “only spiritual worship delights him.”³⁷ Spiritual worship allows the soul to be lifted up to where communion with God is experienced. This is experienced internally.³⁸ Christian worship was not dominated by earthy manifestations but stripped away of externals so that only pure worship remained.³⁹ Since Calvin saw a clear distinction between spiritual internal worship and nonspiritual external worship, he held to a stance of material pessimism.

The externality of material aids in worship presented a problem for Calvin. They are inferior but serve a necessary use. Calvin admits that “we know how cold and sluggish our attention is if we are not excited by something else.”⁴⁰ Physical aids are earthly and tend to leave people in terrestrial realms instead of the celestial realms of true worship.⁴¹ Material aids have inherent limitations, and Calvin asserts God’s transcendence through the principle *finitum non est capax infiniti* (the finite is incapable of containing the infinite).⁴² Consequently, Calvin at times comes perilously close to a tenet of Gnosticism, which holds that materiality is intrinsically evil.⁴³ For Calvin,

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.1.

³⁸ Taylor explains, “Conversely, nonspiritual worship corresponds to outward or external worship, which is the kind of worship that the Jewish people had grown accustomed to, but that Christ had now abolished.” Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 21.

³⁹ Calvin states that “the worship of God is said to consist in the spirit, because it is nothing else than that inward faith of the heart which produces prayer, and next, purity of conscience and self-denial, that we may be dedicated to obedience to God as holy sacrifices.” John Calvin, *The Gospel of John 1-11, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, NC: CreateSpace, 2022), 111.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *The Gospel of John 12-21, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, NC: CreateSpace, 2022), 198.

⁴¹ Historian Julie Canlis states, “It seems as though Calvin was able to articulate a robust doctrine of participation that is oriented upward, but his mistrust of the physical realm left him tongue-tied over its *downward* [emphasis original] implications for the material realm (whether in the form of the sacraments, the church, or elements of our humanity).” Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 168-69.

⁴² Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 316.

⁴³ Taylor writes, “Calvin repeatedly warns against the abuse of external aids to worship, and

materiality itself warrants a wary outlook. Thus, material pessimism is Calvin's legacy to the Reformed church.

The implications of Calvin's suspiciousness of materiality for today's Reformed church are significant. This has led to an intellectualistic and rationalistic bent where spirituality is defined by the life of the mind.⁴⁴ For the conservative Reformed community, the primacy of the intellect has dominated endeavors since Calvin. Indeed, the Reformed community has predominantly referenced physical reality in terms of danger and that has led to a clear bifurcation and elevation of the spiritual above the physical.⁴⁵ With very few exceptions, the life of the mind has been the milieu of the Reformed church, and this attribute can be traced back to Calvin's pessimism toward materiality.

This intellectual approach to worship and spiritual life has also led the Reformed church to focus on doctrinal presuppositions and dogma.⁴⁶ Yet not all believe a doctrinal-heavy approach to be without its attendant dangers. For some, there is a balance to be desired within doctrinal orthodoxy.⁴⁷ Still others believe that intellectualism can be

rightly so. False attachments to them jeopardize faithful worship. Yet one is frequently left with the impression that Calvin, much like Zwingli, remains suspicious of external aids *as such* [emphasis original]. His ambiguous use of 'ascent' language to describe the purpose of material aids often gives the impression that they are unfortunate requirements." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 29.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Meyers states, "A New-Testament-only approach to the regulative principle invariably ends up advocating an overly inward, rationalistic approach to worship. The inward, spiritual, non-material movement of the mind is more important than the movement of the body (tongue or knees or hands) in worship. So, anything material detracts from the true 'spiritual' worship of the New Testament." Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 306.

⁴⁵ Stellman states that "pitting the physical and spiritual against one another . . . is a subtle denial of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus." Stellman, *Dual Citizens*, 128.

⁴⁶ Schwertley writes, "David and the other inspired prophets who wrote the Psalms did not regard heavy doctrine and complexity of meaning as impediments to biblical worship. That is because biblical praise does not attempt to bypass the intellect in favor of an ecstatic experience." Schwertley, "Sola Scriptura," 117.

⁴⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones warned several decades earlier that "Calvinism without Methodism tends to lead to intellectualism and scholasticism—that is its peculiar temptation." Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Puritans: Their Origins and Successors; Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences, 1959-1978* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 209.

traced back to nominalism and is a failure to identify the rich tapestry of symbolism within Reformed liturgicalism.⁴⁸ While there have been voices and movements to the contrary, the primacy of the intellect has been a core tenet of the Reformed church and traces back to Calvin's hierarchical elevation of spirituality over materiality. This position has muted much of the church's physical expression.

The Diminishment of Physical Gesture

The origins of the diminishment of physical gesture in worship praxis are directly linked to a disregard of the doctrine of creation. As has already been explored, Calvin exhibited a distinct suspicion towards materiality.⁴⁹ Yet Calvin was not the original source for this pessimism.⁵⁰ Calvin, as well as other Reformers, was influenced by Augustine. Augustine's pessimistic view of materiality stems from neglecting the doctrine of creation and overemphasizing the doctrine of sin.⁵¹ God created the human

⁴⁸ James Jordan states, "Another aspect of terministic and atomistic nominalism is the tendency to reduce everything in theology to laws and propositions. God does, of course, communicate to us in laws and propositions (statements of fact), but in the Bible He also uses symbol, type, analogy, architectural structures, and rituals, to mention only a few. Nominalism rapidly becomes blind to all these things and converts them all into mere symbols of laws and propositions. Nominalism leads straight to a kind of legalism and kind of doctrinalism . . . Everything is reduced to doctrine, teaching. The communication of information to the mind becomes the sole, or virtually sole, aspect of revelation, eliminating whole-personed communication by ritual, etc. In this way, atomistic reductionism leads to intellectualism and Gnosticism." James B. Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism and the Regulative Principle: A Critical Review of Worship in the Presence of God* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1994), 62.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 4. Taylor says that "it is not difficult to imagine why both friend and foe have deemed Calvin to be an enemy of the physical body, a pessimist toward creation, and a negative influence on the liturgical arts."

⁵⁰ Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 144-45. Taylor says, "The weakness of Calvin's thinking involves a failure to reckon more comprehensively with the body's *Spirit*-ual condition, a tendency to indulge in rhetoric (such as 'prison of the body') that pulls the body closer toward the sorts of problematic Platonic thinking that he himself wished to avoid, and a proclivity to restrict himself to the express examples of embodied worship in the New Testament rather than hewing closely to his Christological reading of the human body, which, in turn, would open up a wide range of liturgically fitting bodily postures and expressions."

⁵¹ Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 99. Taylor summarizes Calvin's lurid rhetoric about the body as "dust and a shadow" "dung," "reformatory," "putrid carcass," "frail lodging," "house of mud," "poor hut," "this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle of our body." William Edgar is insightful here: "Though we should tremble to disagree with Augustine, what emerges here, corresponding no doubt to his stage in church history, is the absence of a proper grounding in the doctrine of creation. Still in part influenced by Plato, what Augustine calls the earthly city is quite different from God's good creation infected by sin. The difference is crucial." William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 118.

body, and the incarnation proves that material creation is good.⁵² Pessimism towards materiality and the body has its roots in asceticism. This error was Paul's concern in the second chapter of Colossians.⁵³ Despite Paul's instruction, asceticism influenced the early church.⁵⁴ Asceticism breeds pessimism towards materiality in general and jeopardizes the doctrine of creation—the foundation of humanity's cultural mandate. Failure to understand the implications of the doctrine of creation fuels those who oppose engaging culture.⁵⁵ When the doctrine of creation is undervalued, worship praxis is impacted—specifically, physical gesture in worship.

Worship involves an outward act.⁵⁶ Physical gesture in worship is intrinsic to the word itself. Words that are translated “worship” often have a physical gesture connected with that definition. Stellan mentions one (*proskynuo*) when he says that “in both Hebrew and Greek, the word *worship* literally means ‘to bow down,’ and it is commonly used to describe the corporate gathering of God's people (John 4:19-24).”⁵⁷

⁵² Stellan writes, “Jesus was a real man—He did not shun the physical world but became flesh and entered time and space. This is the thing that the old Docetists and the new Puritans find so disconcerting; the earthly life of Christ in some sense legitimizes the physical world. Furthermore, His *bodily resurrection places God's approval of the physical world beyond any doubt* [emphasis original], since it ensures that physical existence will continue on into eternity.” Stellan, *Dual Citizens*, 127.

⁵³ Edgar states, “What false notions could have so exercised Paul's ire? In a word, it is the evil direction of asceticism, the view that prized the so-called spiritual realm and denigrates the material one. Asceticism denies the goodness of creation, and the creator God behind it. Two significant areas are mentioned, . . . forbidding marriage and abstinence from certain foods. Marriage and diet! No doubt he could have cited other areas, but these two are especially significant for the true biblical worldview. Both are underscored at the very beginning. Genesis 1-2 identifies marriage (and procreation) as one of the fundamental creation ordinances.” Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 141.

⁵⁴ Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 35. Jordan says that “Augustine argued that sex was sinful even in marriage, and was only allowed as a minor sin if the couple were striving to have children. Fear of music, food, and sex runs all through pagan asceticism Pagan asceticism had a great influence on the early Church.”

⁵⁵ Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 138. Edgar says, “Creation is celebrated while the malignancy of sin eschewed. The distinction between creation and fall is absolutely crucial to recognize if we are to find the right balance here. One of the weaknesses of those who object to cultural involvement is that, like Augustine, they downplay, however unintentionally, the doctrine of creation.”

⁵⁶ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 67.

⁵⁷ Stellan, *Dual Citizens*, 8.

Worship begins internally but is expressed externally.⁵⁸ Words that are translated “worship” in the Scriptures directly imply physical gesture as part of worship praxis.

Worship praxis in the Scriptures is full of action-oriented directives in a way that contrasts Calvin and especially the interiority of the Puritans.⁵⁹ Block states that “true worship involves action. It is not primarily interior, as if God is concerned only about what is in our hearts and disinterested in external ritual and ethical expressions.”⁶⁰ Yet that is a minority position among most Reformed groups. Most Reformed churches are concerned with the spiritual component of worship, and if physical expression must be experienced, it should be simple, restrained, and unadorned. But Scripture provides a more full-bodied call.⁶¹ For worship praxis, physical gesture is a salient component of worshipers coming before Almighty God.⁶² Minimizing physical gesture in worship

⁵⁸ Theologian Joseph Pipa categorizes the words translated “worship” into three distinct purposes: “In the Bible (both in the Hebrew and the Greek) there are three primary groups of words for the act of worship. There is the broad term (often translated ‘worship’) that signifies bowing down, paying homage and obeisance. There is the bridge term that refers to the specific acts that we perform in worship (the particular acts of worship such as those performed by the Levites). And there are the words ‘serve’ and ‘service.’ That reminds us that our worship is work or labor. These words both in the Greek and in the Hebrew describe the service of a slave. The Psalmist teaches that worship is work.” Joseph A. Pipa Jr., “The Purpose of Worship,” in Johnson, *The Worship of God*, 56-57.

⁵⁹ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Cranmer to Baxter and Fox, 1534-1690* (1970; repr., Grand Rapids: P&R, 1996), 531. Davies states that “a third characteristic of Puritan worship was its interiority (which was, of course, carried to the furthest extreme by the Quakers). Negatively, it was an attempt to prevent all formalism and hypocrisy by recognising that the Spirit of God searches the heart and can unmask all pretences and disguises.”

⁶⁰ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 24. Block advocates for a full array of physical gesture: “Worship often involves other physical postures (lying, sitting, standing), as well as actions performed with the hands (clapping, raising of hand) or feet (marching in procession, dancing, jumping) The dominant physical gesture of worship in the Scriptures is prostration Worship that pleases God involves bodily gestures of subordination and submission.” Block, *For the Glory of God*, 17.

⁶¹ Meyers says, “Worshipers gather to perform actions. The biblical language of worship has people *doing things* [emphasis original] before God (‘offering’ (Ps. 4:5); ‘prostrating’ (Is. 49:7); ‘confessing’ (Ps. 32:5); ‘kneeling’ (Ps. 95:6); ‘singing’ (Ps. 95:1); bringing ‘gifts in their hands’ (Exod. 34:20). In addition to this, worship is evaluated not according to the affect it might have on worshipers, but whether it is ‘acceptable’ to God or not (Gen. 4:3-7; Exod. 32; Is. 1; Rom. 12:1-2; 14:17-18; Heb. 12:28-29; 13:16).” Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*, 28.

⁶² Frame writes, “I should also mention the command to ‘clap your hands’ (Ps. 47:1; compare Ps. 98:8; Isa. 55:12) as a response to God’s salvation, and the ‘lifting up of hands’ (Neh. 8:6; Pss. 28:2; 63:4; 134:2; 141:2; 143:6; Lam. 2:19; 3:41; 1 Tim. 2:8). This too is ‘music of the body.’ God wants body as well as spirit to be engaged in his worship. Clapping expresses joy; lifting the hands is a way of drawing toward God as the object of our worship and the source of our blessing.” Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 131.

praxis reveals unspoken ways in which the church has prioritized the spiritual over the physical.

Minimization is most obvious when gestures become more demonstrative. There is a hierarchy expressed among physical gestures. Singing, standing, sitting are all acceptable forms of physical gesture, for these gestures comport with a simple, restrained, and unadorned style. There is a “fittingness” to these physical gestures that has connected itself to the Reformed milieu that has dominated for centuries since the Puritans at Westminster. Yet when demonstrative scriptural physical gesture enters the discussion, many Reformed leaders dismiss it for use today. When the Psalmist says, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!” it is not to be considered literally for Reformed leaders.⁶³ Sometimes the foundation for the dismissal for public use today is grounded in a hermeneutic that highlights the perceived parameters of Scripture’s narrow focus. This is the approach taken by theologian Joseph Pipa:

One other posture to mention is the corporate lifting of hands (Neh. 8:6; 1 Tim. 2:8). Of course when I mention raising hands, one immediately thinks about the current trend of individuals raising hands as they are singing. This is not the practice I am recommending. In the first place, hand-raising is a posture primarily used in prayer, not for singing. Second, all our acts in corporate worship are to be corporate acts and not individual ones.⁶⁴

Pipa makes no mention of “lifting of hands” in worship that is referenced in Psalm 28:2, Psalm 63:4, Psalm 88:9, and Psalm 134:2. One might assume that Pipa would approve of

⁶³ R. Scott Clark reflects this approach: “Ps. 141:2 is attributed to King David, and he speaks of ‘lifting up’ his hands ‘as the evening sacrifice.’ Of course, these passages were given during the church’s typological period, so they apply to us only figuratively.” R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 337-38. Similarly, Terry Johnson writes, “The Psalms . . . describe personal emotions and actions which are not necessarily intended to be acted out in public worship [emphasis added]. . . . A highly selective reading of the Psalms is required of those who call for physical or audible demonstrations of hand-raising, clapping, dancing, and shouting, and yet do not also call for prostration, crying, and groaning. *In worship there is much that we recall in which at that moment we are not meant to engage* [emphasis added].” Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 84.

⁶⁴ Joseph A. Pipa Jr., “Reformed Liturgy,” in Johnson, *The Worship of God*, 159.

the raising of hands in worship if it were done corporately. Either way, demonstrative physical gesture in worship is severely minimized or dismissed outright.

The most striking example of physical gesture being dismissed is dance. Dance is the epicenter for illegitimate expressions of physical gesture in worship. It appears to be the epitome of a compromised church that embraces illegitimate forms.⁶⁵ Dance is disdained, excoriated, and criticized.⁶⁶ Dance is summarily dismissed as illegitimate from a scriptural perspective. Both Psalm 149 and Psalm 150 use dance for the purpose of praise. Yet apparent scriptural support for dance as legitimate in worship praxis is negated.⁶⁷ The aversion to dancing is not confined to strict regulativists. Reisinger and Allen advocate for the regulative principle in a balanced way and warn against caricature, including verification from either testament.⁶⁸ They suggest that “if the practice is an event of worship, ask whether the practice is biblically authorized. This inquiry involves determining whether the practice is . . . authorized by reasonable inference in . . . the Old

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 153. Johnson states, “In some cases, people are simply debating what form to use These may be legitimate debates. But illegitimate ones come when people introduce new elements such as dance and drama.”

⁶⁶ Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.” Hart says, “Another way of making this point about the inadequacy of Frame’s biblicism is to examine how he thinks the message of the Bible can seemingly take any number of forms. (This is why the debates about music in worship are only the tip of the iceberg. For what usually comes with the new music are not only new instruments—the soft rock band—but also skits [liturgical drama] and interpretive dance.)” Clark speaks for many within conservative Reformed circles when he says, “Anxious to intensify the religious experience of parishioners or to make the church accessible to the non-churched, many Reformed congregations have turned to drama, dance lessons, and even a service arranged thematically by the name of the local professional sports franchise.” Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 73.

⁶⁷ Employing similar tactics as Pipa, theologian Scott Aniol takes aim at dance and states that “even the two Psalms are not necessarily prescribing dance for public worship. The Psalms call everything to ‘praise the Lord,’ much of which would never be included in public worship, such as war, food, children, music, folk dancing, etc.” Scott Aniol, *Who Regulates Worship?* (Simpsonville, SC: Religious Affections Ministries, 2008), 25.

⁶⁸ Reisinger and Allen state that the “regulative principle is a carefully nuanced doctrine. To fail to appreciate the nuances is to unduly caricature the doctrine.” Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 53. They say elsewhere, “This *does not mean, however, that all Old Testament worship styles are now forbidden* [emphasis original] and that the New Testament record of the primitive church provides our only model for worship. Those who adhere to a cramped view of the regulative principle make a fundamental hermeneutical error We are free to draw upon the Old Testament and its delineation of elements of worship not specifically abolished as part of the ceremonial law. We can and should draw on both testaments to determine the elements of prescribed worship” (31).

Testament precepts not specifically abolished in the New Testament.”⁶⁹ According to this definition, dance would technically qualify as legitimate. Nevertheless, dance’s lack of legitimacy is demonstrated when they surprisingly conclude that “we must guard against creative redefinition of the elements of worship to smuggle in new and unauthorized practices, such as drama as a form of preaching or dance as a form of praise. This is nothing more than a disguised return to the normative principle.”⁷⁰ Dancing is the most egregious example of unauthorized physical gesture. Dancing does not coexist with the standard Reformed milieu.

These interpretations of dance as illegitimate forms of praise are not exhaustive representations of the entire Reformed community. While the incorporation of dance as praise will always contend with the avoidance of sensuousness, dance is a legitimate form of praise authorized by Scripture.⁷¹ Dance, in its pure form of movement, directs praise toward the Creator of the body.⁷² Dance is performed by the body, and the body is part of the doctrine of creation—*imago Dei*.⁷³

Dance may express sinful sensuality in the wider secular culture, but that perhaps may be why its redemption in the church could be so counter-cultural. The church must not forget the principle *abusus non tollit usum* (abuse does not remove use).

⁶⁹ Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 79-80.

⁷⁰ Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 55.

⁷¹ Frame says, “It is true, of course, that God does not prescribe dance specifically for the regular worship of the synagogue, tabernacle, or temple. Some have used this fact to argue that God permitted dance only on the few occasions when the Bible mentions it. But Psalm 150:4 will not let us limit dance to a few historical occasions. It is for all the people of God. I look at it this way: God is pleased when we dance before him in worship, but he does not expect us to do it every time we meet in his name, . . . it is not a ‘necessary element’ of worship, but something that provides enrichment of worship from time to time.” Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 131.

⁷² Taylor says that “the problem of the human body is not materiality; its problem, like the mind or heart as well, is its enslavement to sin. Its fundamental need, conversely, is transformation, not an escape from the material order.” Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 117.

⁷³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 442. Grudem states that “the fact that man is in the image of God means that man is like God and represents God.”

The church must not forget that the error of Gnostic asceticism that Paul refutes in Colossians 2 exerted itself as a pseudo-spiritual restriction. Restrictive behavior, in and of itself, is no measure of godliness. The doctrine of creation is just as true as the doctrine of sin. Human bodies are part of the fall, and human bodies are part of redemption.⁷⁴ Both the body and the spirit are involved in worship. Materiality is undeserving of Calvin's pessimism solely because materiality is God's design and God's creation.⁷⁵ The bifurcation between spirit and body renders materiality inert. It is a distinction that is unsupported by Scripture and introduces an unwarranted hierarchy of the spiritual over the physical.

Hierarchical Dangers: Specificity over Principles

Worship regulation, in the form of the regulative principle, is connected to specificity. These roots are deep in the soil of the Reformation, but even further with the Puritans at Westminster Assembly. Disputes over specific details throughout the Assembly meetings have already been documented in this thesis. This section explores the weaknesses of specificity unwarranted by Scripture. The origins of specificity will be linked to a misunderstanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. Sufficiency is mistakenly

⁷⁴ Jeremy Begbie writes, "That music's emotional capacities are so closely linked with the body need not be underplayed. Quite the opposite, for bodily renewal is part of God's intention for humanity—the physical body of Jesus is not only the vehicle of salvation but the very site of the promise of our own physical transformation: it is made subject to judgment and death, and raised from the dead as a pledge of the resurrection of our own bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-58). Even now, life is given to our mortal bodies by the Spirit of the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom. 8:11), in anticipation of the Spirit-filled life of the Age to Come. Worship in the Spirit, through Christ, will by its very nature be caught up in this body-transforming momentum." Jeremy S. Begbie, "Faithful Feelings: Music and Emotion in Worship," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 352.

⁷⁵ Dale Ahlquist says, "The pagans emphasize the physical to the neglect of the spiritual. The Puritans emphasize the spiritual to the neglect of the physical. Both miss the point of the Incarnation. God created a physical world and said it was good. He created us in his image. We are both spiritual and physical beings. And though we have taken a good world and misused it, though we are sinners, God himself redeemed us by becoming flesh." Dale Ahlquist, *Common Sense 101: Lessons from G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: St. Ignatius Press, 2006), 178.

applied in an effort to limit human autonomy. Specificity's ill effects will then be identified in worship practices that suppress freedom and encourage a Gnostic asceticism.

The Origins of Specificity

The impulse of worship regulation has historically been strongly tied to the church's desire to be faithful to God and his Word. Scripture is entirely reliable and infallible in providing guidance to people in that worship.⁷⁶ Scripture's guidance is perfect and complete, and man is restricted from innovations in worship.⁷⁷ The Puritans believed that worship was tightly regulated by Scripture. Since Scripture was complete, so too was the scope of worship regulation. Thus, the attributes of Scripture became synonymous with the attributes of the regulative principle.

The Puritans associated the regulative principle with the sufficiency of Scripture.⁷⁸ Completeness and perfection were interchangeable with sufficiency. Challenging the regulative principle and any one of its historical interpretations was tantamount to attacking the sufficiency of God's perfect and holy Word. This has continued today.⁷⁹ Sufficiency of Scripture is the foundation for a strict, regulativist

⁷⁶ Calvin states, "The nature of the worship which God requires will be seen in its own place (Book 2, c. 7 and 8). He has been pleased to prescribe in his Law what is lawful and right, and thus restrict men to a certain rule, lest any should allow themselves to devise a worship of their own." Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.12.3.

⁷⁷ Henry Jacob, "Papers of Henry Jacob's, 1603-1605," quoted in Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters in the Light of Recent Research, 1550-1641*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: University Press, 1912), 162. Jacob says, "For as much as wee are in conscience thoroughly perswaded, that God's most holy word in the New Testament is absolutely perfect, for delivering the *whole maner* [emphasis added] of God's worship."

⁷⁸ William Young says that "it is no accident that the regulative principle of worship makes its first appearance in the Westminster Confession in connection with the discussion of the sufficiency of Scripture." William Young, "The Second Commandment: The Principle That God Is to Be Worshipped Only in Ways Prescribed in Holy Scripture and That the Holy Scripture Prescribes the Whole Content of Worship, Taught by Scripture Itself," in Lachman and Smith, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 80.

⁷⁹ Schwertley writes, "The idea that men are permitted to add their own innovations to authorized worship is also a denial of the sufficiency and perfection of God's word. Are the ordinances that God has given to the church sufficient or are they inadequate? If one believes that they are not sufficient, then please identify what is lacking. If one believes that the Scriptures are sufficient, then why add worship ordinances that are not needed?" Schwertley, "Sola Scriptura," 69.

interpretation of worship regulation.⁸⁰ For a strict regulativist, any belief that Scripture advocates for general principles is seen as a rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture.⁸¹ But there is a fundamental mistake here—sufficiency of Scripture is equated with comprehensiveness.

The biggest assumption that a strict regulativist makes in his application of worship is equating sufficiency with comprehensiveness. Indeed, William Young’s essay’s chapter title, “The Second Commandment: The Principle That God Is to Be Worshipped Only in Ways Prescribed in Holy Scripture and That the Holy Scripture Prescribes the Whole Content of Worship, Taught by Scripture Itself,” emphasizes the “whole content” of Scripture.⁸² If Scripture is sufficient in worship, and therefore comprehensive, then Scripture must be specific in the details about that worship. Furthermore, from a strict regulativist position, the biblical passages themselves demand specificity, or else Scripture is incomplete, vague, general, and defective.⁸³ Scripture’s perfection implies sufficiency, sufficiency implies comprehensiveness, and comprehensiveness implies specificity of detail. This philosophical progression reveals a miscalculation and goes further than Scripture itself and leads to unnecessary, legalistic implications.

Contrastingly, Scripture does not claim exhaustive detail of all knowledge, but

⁸⁰ Schwertley, “Sola Scriptura,” 105. Schwertley says, “When Scripture is silent on ‘application’ (i.e., when Scripture is insufficient or incomplete), man is to use his autonomous thought to remove God’s silence. In other words man must take what is insufficient and general and make it sufficient and specific.”

⁸¹ Young, “The Second Commandment,” 79. Young states, “The assertion that Scripture itself opens up an area of liberty in which it prescribes nothing as to the content of worship is vain. Such a position is a virtual denial of the sufficiency of Scripture and is certainly not the view of Scripture on which the Calvinistic reformation in Geneva, Fran, and Low Countries, and the British Isles proceeded.”

⁸² Young, “The Second Commandment,” 75. Young states that “the statement of the principle in the sub-title is redundant. That God is to be worshipped only in ways prescribed in Holy Scripture is implied in the statement that the Holy Scripture prescribes the whole content of worship.”

⁸³ Schwertley, “Sola Scriptura,” 109. Schwertley adds that “Frame’s rejection of distinct elements or parts of worship is simply a clever tactic to eliminate the specificity of the regulative principle.”

infallible, inerrant detail of the knowledge it includes in its pages. Weeks says that “The problem is that the Bible is not exhaustive in matters of religion either. There are many questions on which there is no absolutely precise and detailed answer.”⁸⁴ Later, he writes,

The Bible’s treatment of ethical or theological matters is not exhaustive in every detail. That raises a question. Even those who do not accept the authority of the Bible must concede that its authors intended it as a code for human conduct. How could it operate as such a code without being exhaustive? The raising of this question makes us ask how the Bible functions to direct conduct without being a multi-volume work covering every conceivable situation. It will also raise the question of whether we are right in expecting an authoritative source to say the last word on every detail of a subject.⁸⁵

While inerrancy demands knowledge without error, it does not demand exhaustive knowledge. Grudem says that “the Bible always tells the truth, and . . . it always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about. This definition does not mean that the Bible tells us every fact there is to know about any one subject, but it affirms that what it does say about any subject is true.”⁸⁶ The quest for exhaustive knowledge and the certainty it provides cloaks a form of rationalism.⁸⁷

This quest is mistakenly applied to worship praxis.⁸⁸ If Scripture does not claim exhaustive details for its own revelatory parameters, then worship praxis is subject to that same hermeneutical parameter. Exclusive singular passages on corporate worship praxis are absent.⁸⁹ This does not erode sufficiency or perfection. Instead, it allows

⁸⁴ Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 4.

⁸⁵ Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, 7.

⁸⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 91.

⁸⁷ Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, 41. Weeks states, “We have seen that when man tries to place himself in the position of God, he has to aim at complete and perfect knowledge in all areas. Thus we have a rationalism in which man sets up exhaustiveness as his standard of truth.”

⁸⁸ Riesinger and Allen elaborate: “God does not give us in Scripture every detail for each element. Rather, his Word supplies us with general rules and categories that are sufficiently elastic for human discretion and common sense to be exercised in the application of them to particular instances of worship.” Riesinger and Allen, *Worship*, 54.

⁸⁹ D. A. Carson, “Worship under the Word,” in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 55. Horton says that “while one cannot point to a single liturgy and say that it contains the only form of genuine worship, some are clearly better than others in being faithful to God’s

Scripture itself to define sufficiency's parameters.⁹⁰ Scripture's perfection—whether in doctrine or worship praxis—is not found in exhaustive details. The strict regulativist errs when mistaking Scripture's perfection and sufficiency for Scripture's scope.⁹¹

Unwarranted scriptural specificity violates Scripture and undermines the very sufficiency that the strict regulativist claims for its position.

Specificity and the Old Testament. Yet one significant obstacle remains for this thesis' claim that unwarranted Scriptural specificity is an arbitrary methodological hierarchy. Specificity seems to be supported from Old Testament examples. Numerous theologians cite the old covenant and its elaborate ways of worship.⁹² For strict regulativists, the volume of details in the Old Testament is self-evident for a hermeneutic that demands specificity from its position on the regulative principle. Regulation is based on the whole manner of God's worship, and specificity is the result of that regulation.⁹³

regulation of his worship." Michael Scott Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 142.

⁹⁰ Reisinger and Allen write, "Although the Scriptures do teach a perfect system of doctrine as well as all principles necessary for the practical regulation of the lives of individual believers and communities of believers, they do not set out all the practice matters of worship in details. They instead lay down general principles along with a rich panoply of examples, leaving men to apply those principles in the exercise of the natural judgment, in the light of biblical illustration, and in adaptation to changing circumstances as guided by the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit." Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 80.

⁹¹ Graham Keith states, "Yet, in the heat of the controversy, in some respects at least, Scripture was being pressed to do a job it was never designed to do. There is no end of questions that can be raised in theory about external church order; such is the complexity of the human situation and such the ingenuity of the human mind in turning anything and everything into a matter of controversy." Graham Keith, "Too Narrow a Straightjacket? Reflection on the Historical Development of the Regulative Principle in Worship," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 18-19.

⁹² Ryken says, "We are not free to worship God any way we please! There are ways that are acceptable and ways that are not. Just think of the elaborate way in which, under the old covenant, the sacrificial system was carefully laid out. It provided a regulative principle as to how God should be worshiped." Philip Graham Ryken, "The Bible and Worship," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship; Celebrating the Legacy of James Montgomery Boice*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 15. Young represents many strict regulativists when he mentions that "the minutest of detail in the divine prescriptions as the construction of the tabernacle and as to the practice of worship to be performed in it made it perfectly plain to God's ancient people that whatever was not commanded was forbidden." Young, "The Second Commandment," 85.

⁹³ Jacob, "Papers of Henry Jacob's," 162.

However, this conclusion is premature.

The voluminous details found in the Old Testament do not translate to specificity in every detail of worship praxis.⁹⁴ The weakness of specificity is in its assumptions.⁹⁵ Contrary to common perception, the Old Testament is surprisingly light on some details for liturgical observance.⁹⁶ The Old Testament omits specific details in liturgical directives, opening the door for limited human decision-making. Theologian John Murray, himself a staunch regulativist, warned that “the New Testament does not provide us with copious instruction on this matter. It is for that reason that we are placed under the necessity of exercising great care lest we overstep the limits of divine authorization and warrant.”⁹⁷ Without a sense of measured caution in specificity, the church may be asking for a degree of certainty that eludes Scripture’s claims.

Strict regulativists attempt to avoid human decisions in worship praxis. Strict regulativists see both worship praxis and salvation as intrinsically linked to Calvinism where human decisions are nonexistent.⁹⁸ For this group, unwarranted innovations in

⁹⁴ In his dialogue with T. David Gordon, Frame writes, “Have I forgotten the ‘instructions regarding the tabernacle?’ No, but note my term ‘exhaustive.’ The directions for the tabernacle, elaborate as they were, were not exhaustive. God didn’t tell the artisans precisely what tree to use, in precisely what shape to make the noses of the cherubim, etc. He gave them general directions and let them work out the specifics according to their godly wisdom. Otherwise, why did God bother to bequeath a special gift of wisdom upon the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab (Ex. 31:3, 6; compare 28:3).” John M. Frame, *John Frame’s Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), 261.

⁹⁵ Ross states, “Sanctuary worship on the Sabbath required two lambs, the dedication offering, and a libation in addition to the daily sacrifices (Num. 28:9-10). Apart from this prescribed ritual, we do not know what form the services took. The superscription of Psalm 92, ‘For the Sabbath day,’ indicates that specified prayers and praises came to be used.” Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, 226.

⁹⁶ Frame writes, “The Old Testament sets forth many details concerning the sacrifices of the tabernacle and temple. But beyond the descriptions of the sacrifices themselves, there is no temple liturgy. There is no description of what is to be done beyond the sacrifices, by way of acts such as prayer and instruction. There were ‘hours of prayer’ in the temple (Acts 3:1), but we have no specific information as to what went on in those meetings, let alone divine prescriptions.” Frame and Hart, “The Regulative Principle.”

⁹⁷ John Murray, “Song in Public Worship,” in Lachman and Smith, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 181.

⁹⁸ Young, “The Second Commandment,” 80. Young says that “in anthropocentric systems of doctrine like Lutheranism, or Arminianism, the human will may be allowed to define the content of worship at least in part, even as it contributes in part to man’s salvation. But in the theocentric system of Calvinism, the autonomy of man’s will is rejected in the face of God’s absolute sovereignty. *This is true at*

worship praxis reflect human autonomy, thus part of human depravity, and must be rejected. Scripture reveals a specific path for pure worship. Strict regulation in worship makes assumptions with scriptural specificity which perpetuate the illusion that human decision-making in worship practice has been eliminated or at least severely curtailed. Any remaining decisions reside in the category of circumstances, not elements. Nevertheless, this thesis claims that—even for the strict regulativist—there are numerous decisions that are made that are not “circumstances . . . common to human actions and societies.”⁹⁹ This can be seen in the matter of exclusive psalmody.

The Ill Effects of Specificity

A strict interpretation of the regulative principle proscribes all human song compositions—often called “uninspired” hymns. Exclusive psalmody appears on the surface to have eliminated human autonomy in its praise. The texts are only from the Psalms—divinely-inspired texts for the purpose of praise. Yet exclusive psalmody paraphrases the psalms into verse for poetic reasons. Rhyming psalms is a human decision that has no warrant from Scripture. Additionally, decisions have been made, absent a scriptural directive, concerning human-generated tunes. This is surprising, given the silence of Scripture, and that is considered direct prohibition for strict regulativists.

Next, consider the harmonization of these tunes used in exclusive psalmody. The Scripture is silent on the mode of this delivery of praise, yet is harmony proscribed from use? Calvin preferred unison singing in Geneva, since “making melody” is the phrase used in the Colossians and Ephesians passages.¹⁰⁰ Or would the church be guilty

every step of the way, with respect to worship as well as to the plan of salvation. Man’s will may contribute nothing more to God’s worship than to God’s plan of salvation [emphasis added].”

⁹⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1994, 1.6.

¹⁰⁰ Gordon states that “they sang the psalms in unison, an act of worship that came to define Genevan and later French Protestant spirituality.” Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 136.

of “syllable-snatching,” a tactic that Calvin despised?¹⁰¹ Also consider the practice of “lining-out.” This practical tactic, used to increase tune-and-text learning in contexts where reading comprehensions were low, is nowhere prescribed in Scripture.¹⁰² None of these practices are “elements” of worship nor circumstances “common to human actions and societies.”¹⁰³ These decisions approximate the term “forms” the best. However, the Westminster formulations say surprisingly little about forms while the Scriptures are entirely silent on such matters. While exclusive psalmodists are reluctant to acknowledge any human autonomy, human decisions do play a role in worship praxis.¹⁰⁴

Human autonomy is revealed in the observance of the Lord’s Supper. As this thesis has already documented, disputes over the manner of reception, bread type, wine color, and posture have generated much discussion over the centuries. Historically, frequency in sacrament observance has revealed a significant measure of human autonomy in ecclesial circles.¹⁰⁵ Yet one aspect of the observance of the Lord’s Supper

¹⁰¹ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 59.

¹⁰² The Directory states, “But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.” Sinclair B. Ferguson and Mark Dever, *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2008), 126. Davies writes, “The metrical Psalms were popular in worship, not only because of the attractive tunes to which they were set, but also because, being so often in common metre and rhymed, they were easily memorized.” Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 290.

¹⁰³ Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?,” 24. Keith says that “Calvin could happily have embraced such a ceremony under what promoted seemliness or reverence, as well as good order. It is probably at this point that the Confession’s teaching on the Regulative Principle is weakest. It does not indicate in what ways the church is similar to other human societies and in what ways it is dissimilar. We are surely reminded of William Cunningham’s remark that the Regulative Principle must “be interpreted and explained in the exercise of common sense.””

¹⁰⁴ Schwertley, “Sola Scriptura,” 113. Schwertley, in his refutation of Frame’s position says that “Frame continues on his path of taking well thought-out clear distinctions found in the Westminster Standards and replacing them with very general concepts. Remember, the *end game is human autonomy* [emphasis added] in worship.”

¹⁰⁵ Even the language in The Directory for the Publick Worship supports this conclusion when it says, “The communion, or supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, maybe considered and determined by the ministers, and other church-governors of each congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge.” Ferguson and Dever, *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship*, 105.

has barely registered as a provocation within the wider church—the time of day. English Baptists celebrated at night. Accordingly, how would one refute a night-only prescription of this sacrament given that it qualifies as “scriptural example” and subsequently carries the weight of command?¹⁰⁶ Perhaps this is the reason some authors have considered the Puritan formulation of the regulative principle of worship “unworkable.”¹⁰⁷

The worship formulations conceived at Westminster could not possibly have considered every contingency in worship praxis. Scripture’s perfection and sufficiency do not directly translate to specific application.¹⁰⁸ If the Bible—as the perfect, sufficient, inerrant Word of God—leaves certain things open, then should not the church? Posed another way, should not Scripture’s level of specificity be the church’s guide to specificity—both in its abundance of detail and scarcity of detail? Ironically, the strict regulativist errs when, in his attempt at restricting human autonomy, he insists on more specificity than even Scripture itself. Consequently, strict regulativists commit the same error as the Puritans did at Westminster.¹⁰⁹ Moving beyond the limits of scriptural

¹⁰⁶ Young, “The Second Commandment,” 77. Young says, “That which may be derived by good and necessary consequences from the express statements of Scripture is no less binding than an express command itself. Approved example has equal validity with a direct command, and even where approved example and express command may both be lacking or uncertain, as in the baptism of infants, necessary inference from the doctrine and commandments plainly set forth in Scripture may sufficiently warrant a practice of worship.”

¹⁰⁷ R. J. Gore, Jr., “Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Critics,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 67, no. 2 (2005): 376.

¹⁰⁸ Tim Keller writes, “The Bible simply does not give us enough details to shape an entire service when we gather for worship. When the Bible calls us to sing God’s praises, we are not given the tunes or the rhythm. We are not told how repetitive the lyrics are to be or how emotionally intense the singing should be. When we are commanded to pray corporate prayers, we are not told whether those prayers should be written, unison prayers or extemporaneous. So to give any concrete form to our gathered worship, we must ‘fill in the blanks’ that the Bible leaves open.” Timothy J. Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City,” in Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 198.

¹⁰⁹ John Leith states, “All theology must make use of ‘necessary consequence’ as one method of doing theology, that is, if it takes the ‘revelatory event’ seriously and wishes to relate it to a new time and new place. What must be learned from Westminster is that when this procedure is trusted too much, *theology tends to say more and to say it more dogmatically than it properly should* [emphasis added].” John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (1973; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 83.

specificity invites imbalance.¹¹⁰ Scriptural express warrant in worship praxis does not eliminate all human autonomy but gives latitude when guided by Scripture's own measure of specific directives.

Hierarchical Dangers: New Testament over Old Testament

When church leaders unwarrantedly prioritize some scriptural texts over others, misplaced convictions are the result. This can result in unnecessarily restricted ecclesial positions that hinder authentic spiritual life—leading to negative implications for congregations. This section begins by a discussion of the hierarchical danger of elevating the New Testament over the Old Testament. This hierarchy will be explored through its origins with Calvin before identifying the resulting restrictive positions that stem from preferring the New Testament over the Old Testament.

Origins of Elevating the New Testament over the Old Testament

The preference for the New Testament over the Old Testament has an extensive historical record. This historical record includes Calvin. The Reformation made inroads as a movement that emphasized a return to doctrine and worship praxis guided exclusively by the Scriptures. Reformers made decisions with the errors of the Catholic church in view, and Calvin was no exception. Calvin opposed the doctrinal and ceremonial excess that characterized Rome's departure from Scripture. Excessive ceremonialism became attached to the Old Testament and temple practice.¹¹¹ Calvin believed that the distinction between the testaments was an extension of God's advanced

¹¹⁰ Gore says, "Extremism always involves imbalance, and the Puritan regulative principle of worship was imbalanced in a number of ways." Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 92.

¹¹¹ Calvin writes, "Now follows the latter clause, about repealing the worship, or ceremonies, prescribed by the law. When He says that 'the hour cometh,' or 'will come,' He shows that the order laid down by Moses will not be perpetual. When He says that 'the hour is now come,' He puts an end to ceremonies, and declares that the time of reformation, of which the apostle speaks, (Heb. 9:10), has thus been fulfilled." Calvin, *The Gospel of John 1-11*, 111.

paradigm for the church after the resurrection. The New Testament represents God’s ideal in worship and the maturation of God’s people. To follow the Old Testament and temple practices “would be nothing but a silly performance now, which would obscure the spiritual worship spoken of in the fourth chapter of St. John. For there our Lord Jesus Christ declares to us how we must no longer govern ourselves by the Law.”¹¹² Calvin preferred the New Testament for the church’s instruction manual.

The elevation of the New Testament for Calvin corresponded with the diminishment of the Old Testament. Old Testament ceremonies belonged to an era of figures and shadows and represented the departure of a dispensation that was no longer needed. It was puerile instruction, aimed at people still in their infancy, who still needed childish elements.¹¹³ In contrast, the church had reached full age and were no longer to cling to earthly things.¹¹⁴ This bifurcation between dispensations was essential for Calvin and was picked up by Puritans more than a century later.¹¹⁵

This bifurcation of dispensations is evident in John Owen. John Owen considered the temple dispensation of worship to be a carnal ordinance and instituted only temporally.¹¹⁶ For Calvin and the Puritans, the elevation of New Testament texts on

¹¹² Jean Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas F. Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 412.

¹¹³ John Calvin, *Psalms 67-92, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 418.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 234.

¹¹⁵ Calvin writes, “The distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament must always be maintained. For ceremonies, the useful observance of which existed under the law, are now not only superfluous but absurd and evil. . . . We see what God did. For He abolished forever those ceremonies that He Himself had commanded for a time.” John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, trans. Casey Carmichael (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2020), 29.

¹¹⁶ Owen says, “All the laws concerning these things were carnal, ‘carnal ordinances;’ such as, for the matter, manner of performance, and end of them, were carnal. This being their nature, it evidently follows that they were instituted only for a time.” John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 22 (1854-1855; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 252. Elsewhere, Owen wrote, “To the glorious outward appearance of the administrations of it. This was that which greatly captivated the minds and affections of those Hebrews. They were carnal themselves, and these things, the fabric of the Temple, the ornaments of the priest, the order of their worship, had a glory in them which they could behold with their carnal eyes, and cleave unto with their carnal affections.” Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 177.

worship praxis was warranted. The Swiss Reformers believed that the Catholic church was implementing its own version of temple worship. As a result, Roman Catholic excess ceremonialism became closely identified with Old Testament covenantal worship, and this was to be avoided at all costs. Opposition to Romanism, in all its expressions, was comprehensive.¹¹⁷ This identification between Romanism and temple worship became a distinctive marker for the Puritans in general.¹¹⁸ This close identification is made possible by the stark bifurcation of both dispensations, leading to the elevation of the New Testament over the Old Testament.

This bifurcation of dispensations is necessary for a strict interpretation of the regulative principle because legitimate worship practices are based upon the preeminence of New Testament texts.¹¹⁹ This position represents a stark break between dispensations.¹²⁰ New Testament worship is intrinsically superior to Old Testament worship. Ironically, the narrow interpretation of New Testament texts (Eph 5 and Col 3) results in the proscription in worship services of all worship texts found in Scripture, except for the Davidic psalms. This conclusion is only possible when New Testament texts are elevated above Old Testament texts.¹²¹ For strict regulativists, the bifurcation of

¹¹⁷ Jeff Meyers explains that “there is a disconcerting penchant among Reformed theologians, from the Reformation on, for disparaging Old Covenant sacrificial ritual by identifying it too closely with Roman Catholic errors. This erroneous identification became more and more prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.” Myers, *The Lord’s Service*, 305.

¹¹⁸ Myers states that “the Puritans, displayed a deep-seated hostility to anything that smacked of material ceremony and ritual and that they read the Old Testament with these colored lenses such that they tended to interpret Old Testament religion as a kind of Catholicism before Rome.” Myers, *The Lord’s Service*, 305.

¹¹⁹ Lachman writes, “None of the regulations governing the worship of the temple remains in force [Since] Christ has come and fulfilled the whole of it, we are prohibited from using any of them. There is not only nothing in Scripture which warrants our emulation of any portion of temple worship, but we are forbidden to return to it.” David C. Lachman, “Christian Liberty and Worship,” in Lachman and Smith, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 94.

¹²⁰ John Price says that “the outward and ceremonial worship of the Temple in Jerusalem will be replaced by a more inward and spiritual worship under the gospel. The two stand in contrast to each other and cannot be mixed.” John Price, *Old Light on New Worship: Musical Instruments and the Worship of God; A Theological, Historical and Psychological Study* (Avinger, TX: Simpson, 2005), 40.

¹²¹ Sherman Isbell writes, “Now we go by faith into the true tabernacle, which is immeasurably

dispensations is an essential part of their hermeneutic.

Contrastingly, there are many theologians that offer a different perspective of the testaments. The testaments offer a complementary, progressive revelation—not contrasting dispensation-specific revelation.¹²² This perspective is historically Reformed with its origins located in the patristic era.¹²³ These perspectives offer continuities, not bifurcation.¹²⁴ These continuities stand in stark contrast with the strict regulativist’s dismissive attitude toward the Old Testament.¹²⁵ Integration of Scripture is critical for this nuanced stance. It requires a rejection of Romanism and its perceived identification with Israelite temple worship. An integrative stance must be unwilling to marginalize the Old Testament record for worship principles.¹²⁶ Without the Old Testament, the church will lack oxygen in its worship theology and worship services.¹²⁷ Continuity must be

superior. We participate not in symbols but in the realities in worship—the absence of outward pomp and aesthetic exhibition-speaks volumes. . . . New Testament is not an imaginative aesthetic production offered to God. The Old Testament temple worship was a pictorial spectacle of the prefigured entrance of Christ into the true sanctuary. When what was foreshadowed has arrived, it is inconsistent to perpetuate the depiction of its awaited debut.” Sherman Isbell, “Worship in the New Testament,” in Lachman and Smith, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 72.

¹²² Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 21. Jordan says that “minimalists [strict regulativists] are dispensational. They have erected an arbitrary wall between Old Creation and New Creation worship.”

¹²³ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 3. Old states, “True worship is an act of obedience to the law of God. Reformed theology with its Augustinian sense for the continuity between the Old and New Testaments has taken very seriously what the first tablet of the law has to say about worship.”

¹²⁴ Douglas Kelly, “The Puritan Regulative Principle and Contemporary Worship,” in Lachman and Smith, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 97. Block says, “Although most assume that unless the New Testament reiterates notions found in the First Testament the latter are obsolete, we should probably assume the opposite: unless the New Testament expressly declares First Testament notions obsolete, they continue. This may account for the relative silence of the New Testament on many matters, including creation, certain ethical issues, and principles of worship.” Block, *For the Glory of God*, 7-8.

¹²⁵ Block, *For the Glory of God*, 3. Block says that “the dismissive disposition toward the Hebrew Bible is both reflected in and fostered by the continued designation of the prior Scriptures as the ‘Old Testament.’ This expression connotes unfortunate notions of antiquity and out-of-dateness, as if God’s earlier revelation has been supplanted and rendered obsolete by later revelation.”

¹²⁶ Robbie Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 21. Castleman says, “The canonical-theological model for liturgical studies certainly looks to New Testament practice . . . but it also draws on biblical texts that attend more directly with the corporate worship mandates and patterns in the Old Testament.”

¹²⁷ Monte E. Wilson, “Church-o-Rama or Corporate Worship,” in *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1998), 72. Wilson

recognized as part of the revelation.¹²⁸ Worship regulation should entail a hermeneutic that incorporates legitimate Old Testament revelation. Discontinuities between dispensations in every area of worship theology is unwarranted and inconsistent. Furthermore, it also leads to restrictive positions in worship praxis. This is the genesis of the stance on exclusive psalmody.

Consequences of Elevating the New Testament over the Old Testament

As has been stated earlier in this section, exclusive psalmody is motivated by a desire to eliminate human autonomy. Yet exclusive psalmodists are also bolstered in their position by an atomistic reading of the New Testament texts.¹²⁹ With “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3, necessary consequence is pushed to its extreme. These three descriptions in Ephesians and Colossians become monikers for the same genre—Davidic psalms.¹³⁰ The strict regulativist’s exclusive psalmody claim is supported by the absence of any positive command, inference, or scriptural example in

says that “the present-day consequences of this narrowing of the Regulative Principle are asthmatic worship services that only have the one lung of the New Testament to breathe life into its services, rather than the two lungs of Old and New Testaments.”

¹²⁸ Block writes, “Most believers find the Psalms to be a rich resource for personal and corporate Christian worship, but they do so without realizing that the entire Psalter is rooted in the Torah, especially the book of Deuteronomy. To dismiss Deuteronomy and the rest of the constitutional revelation found in Exodus-Numbers as irrelevant for establishing the theology and practice of worship is to violate Paul’s own declaration in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. However, this marginalization also violates the intentions of the psalmists, who would have been horrified to observe Christians’ elevation of the authority of the Psalms above the Torah.” Block, *For the Glory of God*, 5-6.

¹²⁹ Brian Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense* (Saunderstown, RI: The American Presbyterian Press, 2002), 3. Schwertley claims otherwise: “There are a number of important doctrines in the Bible which are deduced from many parts of Scripture and cannot be conclusively proven from one or two verses. Exclusive Psalm singing is one such doctrine. Exclusive Psalmody flows directly from the overall teaching of Scripture regarding the worship of Jehovah.”

¹³⁰ Beeke states that “All three of these words—psalms, hymns, and songs (which overlap in meaning)—are frequently in the Bible for the contents of the Psalms. For example all three words appear in the Greek translation of the inscription or title of Psalm 76.” Joel R. Beeke, *Why Should We Sing Psalms?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 12. Schwertley says, “When we examine the Septuagint, we find that the terms psalm (*psalmos*), hymn (*humnos*), and song (*ode*) were used by Paul to clearly refer to the Old Testament book of Psalms and not ancient or modern uninspired hymns or songs.” Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody*, 21. See also Michael Bushell, *Songs of Zion: The Biblical Basis for Exclusive Psalmody*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Norfolk Press, 2011), 85-86.

the New Testament for uninspired songs. Schwertley claims that “the Psalms are constantly referred to as songs, psalms (melodious songs), and hymns.”¹³¹ Scriptural examples are employed from Jesus’ last night on earth.¹³² Revelation is dismissed from authorizing any song apart from psalmody because it is apocalyptic literature and does not qualify as normative.¹³³ Having qualified the descriptions in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 as synonymous and Revelation as futuristic, any claims to the authorization of uninspired songs are neutralized and considered evil.¹³⁴ These hermeneutics, which elevate the New Testament text above the Old Testament, provide the foundation for a restricted perspective of praise.

Contrastingly, the restricted perspective of exclusive psalmody is not shared by all who broadly support the regulative principle. It is a form of hyper-conservatism that has its roots in Puritanism and ascetism.¹³⁵ The appeal to historicity for this brand of conservatism usually stops at the time of the Westminster Assembly because of the plethora of historical examples from this time frame that seem to support exclusive psalmody. Yet there are contrary examples to be found that pre-date the Assembly at

¹³¹ Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody*, 3.

¹³² Joel Beeke states, “Christianity is summed up in His words, ‘Follow me.’ It is therefore significant to us that when Christ celebrated His last Passover and instituted the first Lord’s Supper—right at the hinge between the old and new covenants—He was singing psalms.” Beeke, *Why Should We Sing Psalms?*, 10.

¹³³ Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody*, 27-28. Schwertley states, “Do these allusions to worship in heaven teach us anything regarding what we are to sing in public worship and how we are to conduct public worship at the present time? No, they clearly do not. The Book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and therefore was not meant to be a literal guide or pattern for public worship. If it were, we would all be Romanists, for Revelation describes an ‘altar’ . . . ‘incense’ . . . ‘trumpets’ . . . ‘harps’ and even the ‘ark of the covenant.’ We also would have to be mystics, for Revelation has every creature, including birds, insects, jellyfish, and worms, etc., praising God (5:13). Apocalyptic literature uses figurative language and dramatic imagery to teach spiritual lessons.”

¹³⁴ Young, “The Second Commandment,” 82. Young labels this “the evil of singing the word of man alongside of God’s Word.”

¹³⁵ Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, 159-60. Old states that “there are certain recurring aspects of our tradition which we really do not need to continue. The Reformed liturgical tradition has usually been read as being rather ascetic in its attitude toward music. Occasionally it has gone in the direction of exclusive psalmody. . . . It is a most venerable sort of hyper-conservatism. It certainly has patristic support. There have been long periods when the church or large portions of the church refuse to sing anything but the psalms.”

Westminster.¹³⁶ Additionally, historical examples that support broader sources of praise other than Davidic psalms also extend into Puritan times and individual Puritans, including Thomas Manton.¹³⁷ So-called “uninspired songs” were the tradition of Scottish Calvinists in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹³⁸ This was also the direction taken by the French Reformed church in 1594.¹³⁹ Historian Nick Needham clarifies the context surrounding the Puritans and exclusive psalmody:

Psalm-singing was the prevailing and popular form of Protestant worship, via the 1562 psalter of Sternhold and Hopkins. But the psalter contained a sizeable supplement with other scriptural material set to music, both poetic and non-poetic passages, and several uninspired hymns. Exclusive psalmody as a liturgical principle was not a litmus test of Puritan sympathies; top-rank Puritan spokesmen such as Cartwright, Bayne, Manton, Cotton and Baxter, and others like Byfield, Elton and Lightfoot, justified in principle the singing of songs other than David’s psalms, and some of them approved even uninspired hymns. The very word “psalm” was often used to mean any religious song, as is clear from Elton, Manton, Cotton, Baxter, Poole and Watts.¹⁴⁰

Exclusive psalmody was less prevalent in church history than strict regulativists claim.

Exclusive psalmody also puts the church in the awkward position of enjoying spiritual freedom in Christ while being shackled with the limitations of Davidic psalms.

¹³⁶ Old writes, “Reformed churches of today can appeal to the example of Constance and Strasbourg to support the use of hymnody in addition to psalmody. It is much the same way with the use of instrumental music. Zwingli had the organ closed up in the Zurich minster but he never claimed scriptural support for doing so.” Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, 160.

¹³⁷ Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 4 (London: J. Nisbet, 1875), 442. Manton says that “others question whether we may sing scripture psalms, the psalms of David, which to me seemeth to look like the cavil of a profane spirit. But to clear this also. I confess *we do not forbid other songs* [emphasis added]; if grave and pious, after good advice they may be received into the Church. Tertullian, in his *Apology*, showeth that in the primitive times they used this liberty, either to sing scripture psalms or *such as were of a private composure* [emphasis added].”

¹³⁸ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, 133.

¹³⁹ Nick Needham, “Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns, and Musical Instruments,” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan III, vol. 2 (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 278. Needham says, “What meets us here is the Church of Scotland doing exactly what the French Reformed Church did in 1594: taking steps to authorize a collection of the non-Davidic songs of Scripture.”

¹⁴⁰ Needham, “Westminster and Worship,” 273.

Christ himself gave us this example in pattern of instruction.¹⁴¹ This position does not denigrate Davidic psalms. Rather, it gives boundaries to Scripture's claims. If the Davidic psalms were not doctrinally adequate for the epic scope of Jesus Christ's mission, character, and works, why would Davidic psalms be wholly adequate for the church's praise? The claims of Scripture's sufficiency and perfection are claims of the entirety of Scriptural revelation, not the claims of one book. This would be tantamount to complaining that the book of Jude does not adequately cover justification in its brief chapter. Exclusive psalmodists go beyond Scripture's claim for itself.¹⁴² Exclusive psalmody puts unnecessary restrictions on the church's praise and portrays scriptural revelation as the justification for doing so. This conclusion is the result of placing an unwarranted hierarchy of the New Testament revelation over the Old Testament. Consequently, inconsistent applications follow.

Conclusion

When strict regulativists combine unwarranted textual hierarchy (the New Testament over the Old Testament) with unwarranted ontological hierarchy (the spiritual over physical materiality), then awkward inconsistencies will persist. Exclusive psalmodists insist that the only legitimate texts for the church's praise be from the Davidic Psalter. It strains credulity to adopt a hermeneutic where the church can sing about singing "a new song unto the Lord," but the church cannot actually compose a new song. The church can read about dancing in Psalm 150, even sing a tune that uses the

¹⁴¹ Shaw says, "The Lord Jesus Christ used the entire Old Testament to instruct His disciples regarding His person and work (Luke 24:27, 44-45). While some of those passages were from the Psalms, many were not. Thus, the Lord Jesus Himself demonstrated, in His instruction of the disciples, that the Book of Psalms was inadequate to fully treat His person and work; that is, it was doctrinally inadequate. The whole of the Old Testament was needed." Benjamin Shaw, "A Defense of Biblical Hymnody," in Terry L. Johnson, et al., *The Worship of God: Reformed Concepts of Biblical Worship* (Taylors, SC: Christian Focus, 2005), 217.

¹⁴² Shaw states, "It would certainly be wrong to limit the church to the Book of Psalms for its praise, since those shadows and types are explained for us in the pages of the New Testament, and we, if we would be faithful to Christ, must also sing those truths in the full and glorious manner in which they are set forth in the New Testament." Shaw, "A Defense of Biblical Hymnody," 218.

lyrics from this psalm, but the church cannot actually dance. The church can speak and sing texts that mention raised hands in worship, extolling God with shouts of praise, and crashed cymbals in honor of God's greatness, but the church is forbidden to take part in these external gestures. In short, the church is allowed to use the Psalmist's words but are forbidden to employ the Psalmist's actions (shout, clap, raise hands, and dance).¹⁴³

Though Calvin himself advocated physical gesture in worship, his emphasis on restraint in worship was predominant.¹⁴⁴ Puritans and the modern Reformed church have picked up Calvin's emphasis on restraint without embracing the full Scriptural array of physical gestures. This creates an unbalanced emphasis that deprives the church from legitimate Old Testament continuities in worship praxis.

Exclusive psalmodists claim that God is concerned with authorized praise, so he specifically limits the text for that praise to Davidic psalms. As a result, in an effort to obey the New Testament, the church is forbidden to use praise texts from the New Testament. For the strict regulativist, authorized praise is intrinsically specific to praise texts, yet authorized praise's specificity does not extend to authorized tunes, authorized rhyming, and authorized manners of singing (i.e., harmony). Scripture authorizes specific texts for praise, yet not for preaching and prayer. Inconsistencies abound when unwarranted textual hierarchy intersects with the hierarchy of unwarranted material pessimism.

¹⁴³ Taylor writes, "His [Calvin's] commendation of 'restrained' singing appears to be at odds . . . to the kind of singing that the Psalter itself commends—with its exhortations to shout, burst, revel, clap, and cry unto the Lord. And the fact that angels in heaven repeatedly blow trumpets fails to factor in Calvin's understanding of the eschatological dimension of worship." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Calvin says, "*Lifting up pure hands* as if he had said, 'Provided that it be accompanied by a good conscience, there will be nothing to prevent all the nations from calling upon God everywhere.' But he has employed the sign instead of the reality, for 'pure hands' are the expressions of a pure heart." John Calvin, *St. Paul's Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, The John Calvin Bible Commentaries* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2022), 45-46.

Scripture and Simplicity

Another inconsistency in worship praxis is the simple, unadorned style of Reformed worship. The acceptance of this value goes back to Calvin, who said that “while under Moses the spiritual worship of God was shadowed, and, as it were, entangled by many ceremonies, these have been abolished, and worship is now more simple.”¹⁴⁵ Simplicity, for Calvin, was closely associated with true spirituality and the recognition that materiality jeopardized spiritual worship.¹⁴⁶ Affirmation of true spirituality also meant a rejection of external splendor, which only serves believers’ carnal natures.¹⁴⁷ Calvin’s application of simplicity in worship was excessively colored by his local context.¹⁴⁸ It is the center of his liturgical ethos.¹⁴⁹

Calvin’s value of simplicity has continued with Reformed theologians today.¹⁵⁰ Simplicity defines maturity in worship.¹⁵¹ Stellman states that “the church forgets that

¹⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.10.14.

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 33. Taylor states, “Equally important, as he [Calvin] understood it, was the need for the church’s worship to be ‘spiritual,’ ‘simple,’ and ‘articulate.’ A common feature in all these emphases was a sense that the *material* [emphasis original] aspect of musical instruments was somehow hazardous to the church’s worship.”

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 152. Taylor says that for Calvin, “to affirm the simple worship of God ‘in spirit and in truth’ is to reject external splendor and ceremonial ostentation, which is ‘agreeable to our carnal nature.’”

¹⁴⁸ Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 181-82. Taylor says, “It is important to concede here that the historical circumstances in which he executed his liturgical reforms offer a plausible explanation for Calvin’s prescriptions of a ‘moderate’ adornment of churches and a ‘simple’ exercise of liturgical ceremonies. Even if public worship ought to be somehow simple, it is not self-evident that ‘simplicity’ involves *less* [emphasis original] use of material media. No doubt, this conclusion is taken as self-evident in the Reformed tradition.”

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, *The Theater of God’s Glory*, 146-47. Taylor says that “though the term ‘simplicity’ (*haplotes*) appears rarely in the New Testament, Calvin places the idea of simplicity at the center of his liturgical proposals, and similar to the tendencies that have been observed in preceding chapters, Calvin’s emphasis on simple worship involves a diminished role for materiality in public worship.”

¹⁵⁰ Isbell says that “when the Lord’s *few and simple ordinances* [emphasis added] must vie with human traditions in worship, human fancy may be satisfied.” Isbell, “Worship in The New Testament,” 64-65.

¹⁵¹ Johnson writes, “Reformed worship is simple. As recipients of the fuller revelation of Christ, we worship as the church come of age, not the church underage. We are not dependent on the fleshly and childish elements of the Old Covenant.” Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 185. Old comments, “Worship in the tradition of Calvin has always been simple, but this simplicity has always been with solemnity. It is something of a paradox, perhaps, but for Calvin this solemn simplicity is the witness to the transcendent glory. The simplicity is a way of focusing on the eternal. Reformed worship has, at its best,

God Himself has prescribed a simple, straightforward, and easy-to-follow program for the growth of the church and the edification of believers: the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper."¹⁵² Reformed worship evokes a purity and inclusion of only scriptural practices.¹⁵³ Simplicity has been a common feature of Reformed worship since the Reformation.¹⁵⁴

While Calvin understandably focused on correcting centuries of Roman Catholic theological error and ceremonial excess, his linkage between spiritual worship and simplicity was misguided.¹⁵⁵ Simplicity in worship is assumed by Calvin, not mandated in Scripture. This assumption of simplicity is extended to worship praxis, including music.¹⁵⁶ In Reformed circles, insistence upon simplicity and purity reveals its gnostic tendencies.¹⁵⁷ Simplicity is not a scripturally mandated conclusion but an

always aimed at a simple directness as a sort of discipline. One might even call it an aesthetic discipline. This discipline of simplicity helps to clarify the witness. But even further, the transcendent glory is manifested in this world by righteousness, by simplicity of heart, and by purity of life." Hughes Oliphant Old, "Calvin's Theology of Worship," in Ryken, Thomas, and Duncan, *Give Praise to God*, 429-30.

¹⁵² Stelman, *Dual Citizens*, 5.

¹⁵³ Johnson says that "the worship of Reformed Protestantism is simple. We merely read, preach, pray, sing and see the Word of God." Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 38.

¹⁵⁴ Carson writes, "Traditionalists who follow the Regulative Principle not only tend to adopt the simplest form of public worship but tie it to traditional forms of express (e.g., they will always find fault with psalms set to contemporary music, preferring the metrical psalms sung centuries ago)." Carson, "Worship under the Word," 55.

¹⁵⁵ Taylor states, "Simple worship is not an explicit description or requirement that John 4 encourages. Simplicity, whatever may be meant by that term is something that must be inferred from an exegesis of the broader text. While not incompatible as a general principle for worship, a simple material and ceremonial shape of worship is not a necessary conclusion from John 4:23-24." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 181.

¹⁵⁶ Frame says, "Some have speculated that God permitted complicated worship in the Old Testament, with instruments and choirs, because of the people's immaturity or hardness of heart, but prescribed unaccompanied song without choirs in the New Testament since that sort of music is more 'simple' or 'pure.' But Scripture never says this. It never suggests that unaccompanied song is somehow simpler or purer than accompanied song, or even that simplicity as such is desirable in worship." Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 127-28.

¹⁵⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 483. Frame writes, "The notion that worship without images is somehow simpler, purer, or more spiritual has appeared in theological literature, but I know of no biblical basis for this assertion. Even under the new covenant, God provides the visual imagery of the sacraments. Prejudices against the material and visual have more in common with Gnosticism than with anything in Scripture."

inconsistent application of an unwarranted hierarchy.¹⁵⁸

The Reformed church's elevation of simplicity is not driven by exegesis but by an aesthetic that opposes ceremonial excess in either Catholic or modern worship forms.¹⁵⁹ Aesthetics may be a large factor in worship praxis for the Reformed church.¹⁶⁰ A simple and unadorned worship aesthetic is not driven by scriptural exegesis.¹⁶¹ In fact, Scripture may elevate capacious worship more than restrained worship.¹⁶² Reformed worship's ideal of simplicity and restraint is unnecessarily elevated. Arbitrary aesthetics in worship that are not scripturally derived ultimately undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Additionally, the Reformed emphasis on "restrained" aesthetics may run

¹⁵⁸ Jordan, *Liturgical Nestorianism*, 24. Jordan states "The Minimalists [strict regulativists] tend to be gnostic and anti-historical. They assume that the 'simple' worship of the New Testament era must establish the boundaries of worship for all time, as opposed to setting the direction for the course of liturgical development."

¹⁵⁹ Witvliet states, "Alongside this explicitly theological critique flowed a consistent stream of argumentation that perhaps can best be labeled aesthetic. Presbyterians and the other Reformed churches have generally liked their worship to be reverent, tasteful, even a bit urbane. Populist worship was not only a theological but also an aesthetic affront." John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 173. Taylor comments, "Yet the requirement that the material media of worship be simple, Spartan, moderate, seemly, economical, or decent is an inference that must be drawn on the basis of theological presuppositions, for nowhere in the New Testament is this a normative goal for public worship. While the shape and activities of worship must be protected from idolatrous, hypocritical, and superstitious uses, there is no necessary injunction in the Gospels or Epistles that it be materially, let alone aesthetically, simple." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 182.

¹⁶⁰ Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 72. Johnson states, "Nothing is to draw attention to the learning, the wisdom, the sophistication, the beauty, the complexity of the medium. Simple readings (not melodramatic), plain-style preaching (not flamboyant), unadorned praying, and hearty congregational singing (not professional performances) are the need of the day."

¹⁶¹ Old writes that "the Scriptures themselves do not even suggest that [the musical accompaniment in worship] should be restrained, simple or unadorned." Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Louisville: Worship Press, 2004), 268-269.

¹⁶² Taylor comments, "While we readily concur with Calvin, must it be said only in restrained terms? Might it also be said in capacious terms? Might the material and aesthetic ornaments of public worship induce the faithful to rapturous delight because they find themselves, here too, in the 'beauteous theater' of creation?" Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 87. Taylor suggests an ethic of abundance: "John's Gospel may invite the opposite conclusion. From the outset it is clear that God's self-revelation in Christ involves 'fullness' (1:14). What sort of fullness? John tells and shows the reader. At Cana Jesus turns water into an excessive amount of wine, as much as 680 liters (2:1-11). When Jesus might have spoken a mere word to the man born blind (9:1-7), he indulges in an extravagant drama of mud and water. He raises a dead body from the grave (11:1-44), he authorizes a large catch of fish (21:1-11), and he feeds an extraordinary number of people—roughly 5,000, not counting women and children (6:6-13). These are not the signs of a parsimonious regard for the material creation. Nor do they signal a bias for soul over body. These are the sign of a fullness (*pleroma*) of life that Jesus bestows on his disciples (1:16)." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 182.

contrary to art in general.¹⁶³

The Reformed worship ethic of restraint and simplicity is rooted in the Reformation's ethos. Nevertheless, restraint and simplicity—as supreme values—reflect a hierarchy that is not rooted in Scripture itself.

Scripture and Aesthetics

Ultimately, Scripture determines the worship ethos of the church. Simplicity has its virtues, but this thesis claims Scripture does not support simplicity as superior to all other virtues.¹⁶⁴ The church's aesthetic qualities can glorify God either in restraint or in exuberance. Yet simplicity's rise to the top of the hierarchy historically (by Calvin and the Puritans) testifies to the ceremonial excess that motivated this ethos. Perhaps this reinforces the reactionism that pervades Christianity in general. The church's pendulum swings strongly in opposition to error.¹⁶⁵ Yet when the historical pendulum swings too far, the cure can be worse than the disease.¹⁶⁶ This reality should temper the church's reaction toward any one issue. When the church overreacts, both in content and polemics, the impact of Scripture's full and complete revelation is negated, and its sufficiency is undermined. This misguided notion says that the church must declare the truth, even if it

¹⁶³ Begbie contends, "Art can point to what is true of all our engagement with the world—the world always exceeds our grasp of it. There is a 'generative excess' in reality that calls forth and provokes all human inquiry. The arts serve to remind us of this excess, that a purely functional approach to the world (the idea that once one has found a function to something one has fully accounted for it) is narrowly inadequate." Jeremy S. Begbie, "The Future," in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 173.

¹⁶⁴ Taylor writes, "The chief issue is that God cannot be manipulated by human beings; he cannot be contained under creaturely lock and key. An aesthetically minimalist place of worship, which begrudges materiality or seeks to 'neutralize' it, as a way to accent the apparently preferable 'invisible' world over against the so-called visible world, is no more faithful to the revelation of God than an aesthetically maximalist place that invites its people to escape the material world into an allegedly more exciting immaterial world." Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory*, 96-97.

¹⁶⁵ Gore believes this tendency occurred at Westminster: "In true pendulum-like fashion, the corrective efforts of the Westminster Assembly were at times excessive." Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 23.

¹⁶⁶ Frame believes the Reformed church's history in polemics is not known for its inclusiveness: "Reformed churches tend to glory in their distinctives: their history, their ethnic origins, the theological battles of the past that have made them different from others." Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:113.

goes beyond Scripture, because the error is so great.

Scripture and Confessions

Sola Scriptura must be the church's stance continuously until the Lord's return. It must be the cry for the evangelical church that is increasingly shallow in its worship praxis. Yet it also must be the cry for the Reformed church that finds its identity in its confessions. While confessions are virtuous and healthy for the church in general, there is significant danger for churches who attach more loyalty to confessions than Scripture itself. There is a tendency among Reformed churches to treat confessions as static monuments.¹⁶⁷ Where the regulative principle is concerned, the question needs to be asked: Is there more attachment to the Westminster formulation than to Scripture itself? Is it not self-evident that this is a reasonable danger when the church spills considerable ink disputing a semi-colon? Is the church creating humble and astute scholars of Scripture or scholars of the Confessions? The threat, as Frame reminds the church, is "when controversies arise, the most prominent question is not 'what does Scripture say?' (which would be 'biblicist'), but rather 'what do the confessions say?'"¹⁶⁸ The church's highest allegiance must be *sola Scriptura*.

Allegiance to confessions must take a subordinate role to Scripture in the church. Confessions have been and continue to be a useful tool for the Reformed church, but they are neither sacrosanct nor infallible. If loyalty to confessions comes at the expense of Scripture, then traditionalism has set in and declension is not far behind.¹⁶⁹ Given the fact

¹⁶⁷ Frame says that "confessional documents and theologies are not intended to be museum pieces. They are to be used in the ongoing life of the church." John M. Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 72. James Jordan warns that "many evangelicals find it easier to develop relationships with confessions and books of church order than to work from the Bible and deal with people as they really are." James B. Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap*, 37-38.

¹⁶⁸ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 115.

¹⁶⁹ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 108. Frame says that "this method of protecting the church leads the church to be preoccupied with the details of confessions and subscription, at the expense of the Bible itself."

that the Westminster formulation of worship regulation is now nearing four hundred years old, the Westminster Confession is part of Reformed history and tradition—with all of tradition’s advantages and disadvantages.

Scripture and Tradition

Sola Scriptura is jeopardized when the church is reluctant to evaluate its own traditions.¹⁷⁰ Scripture itself is compromised if tradition is not relegated to subordinate status.¹⁷¹ Scripture must have primacy over all other documents. Matthew Barrett states that “canonical scripture is the *norma normans normata* (the norm with no norm over it).”¹⁷² Scripture, intrinsically, is a warranted hierarchy.

Sola Scriptura was a foundational tenet of the Reformation and is so for most conservative Reformed churches today. It would be beyond uncommon to find a church that jettisons *sola Scriptura* in print, yet many times this is what functionally happens when comparisons are invited between Scripture and Reformed tradition. There should be no doubt whether Scripture or tradition carries more authority.¹⁷³ Yet discerning where Scripture’s boundaries end and where tradition’s boundaries begin is no small feat. Moreover, tradition’s dangers do not change simply because the tenets of that tradition

¹⁷⁰ Old writes, “For a Reformed theologian any tradition, the Reformed tradition as well, needs to be measured against Scripture to determine whether it is of value. It is Scripture which has authority and the traditional only has authority when it is based on Scripture. The tradition needs to be evaluated and re-evaluated and those elements in it which are most solid emphasized. In any tradition there are elements which have played a significant role because of the needs of the day, but which in a few generations no longer seemed meaningful.” Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, 159.

¹⁷¹ Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap*, 37-38. Jordan says, “Wherever the traditions of the Church become ‘Tradition,’ the exhaustively personal and verbal character of the faith is compromised. We dare not lose sight of the fact that traditions are always subject to the criticism of Scripture.”

¹⁷² Matthew Barrett, *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture; What the Reformers Taught . . . and Why It Still Matters*, The Five Solas Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 140.

¹⁷³ Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap*, 69. Jordan says, “Jesus warred against the Pharisees repeatedly over exactly this issue. He accused them of voiding the Word of God by means of their tradition (Mark 7). He told them that though they were not really aware of it, their tradition was the result of subtle work of the devil. He called them to purge their traditions by using the Bible, and to keep only what was sound (Matt. 5:17-48).”

are trustworthy.¹⁷⁴ The church’s tradition—whether an unwritten rule or a formulated confession—comes with inherent dangers. Tradition may be revered above Scripture, jeopardizing *sola Scriptura*.

Scripture and Answers

Theological enterprises often emerge to answer the great questions of the era in which the church exists. A solid hermeneutical foundation can be employed to answer these questions and, in the process, reinforce *sola Scriptura* or subtly negate *sola Scriptura*. If the church’s hermeneutics fail to ask insightful questions, the church will also fail in receiving insightful answers.¹⁷⁵ Better questions come from solid hermeneutics.

There are significant hurdles in creating better questions. Tradition can potentially jeopardize the church’s effectiveness because it fails to ask the great questions of the current era. Likewise, relevance can potentially jeopardize the church’s effectiveness because it fails to acknowledge the great questions that have already been asked. If the Bible is pushed to the edges in the church’s controversies—and if, say, ancillary issues such as tradition or relevance become central, then the church’s questions fail to be corrected by the one source that is infallible. The dangers of both tradition and relevance share the same error—chronological amnesia. Relevance forgets there is a “past” from which to learn, while tradition forgets there is a “now” that requires a bridge

¹⁷⁴ G. K. Beale writes, “There are churches that are not guilty of worldliness, but have traditions that, while not necessarily unbiblical or sinful in themselves, become idolatrous. This is seen when churches divide over whether or not people are holding to these traditions or when these traditions take precedence over clear teachings of God’s Word. We have seen in the Gospels that such traditions can become idols when they are held to be more authoritative than God’s Word. Such idolatry can be subtle, since the church may not deny the truth but effectively ignores it in the life and practice of the church.” G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 301.

¹⁷⁵ Edgar states, “If we adhere to the so-called hermeneutical circle, we will go to the Bible with these and other issues, and at once find some answers, some of which respond directly to our query. But we will also find certain correctives to the very ways we formulate our questions. Then we return to the Bible with better questions, and the process continues.” Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 54.

to that learned knowledge.¹⁷⁶ A solid biblical hermeneutic allows for both tradition and relevance. A solid biblical hermeneutic allows complementary doctrines, such as the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of sin, to provide insight into the great questions of our day. Without both doctrines in equitable and complementary roles, the church will inevitably put only one in a primary role, thus relegating the other into a subordinate one. This jeopardizes the church's effectiveness.

Solid biblical hermeneutics allow the church to be less reactionary when error inevitably crosses its path. The reactionary mindset often declares that the answer required is the exact opposite of the error being espoused. Historical hindsight allows for the error of this perspective.¹⁷⁷ Surely, the church has been helped by rejecting a superstitious and teaching-poor liturgical approach and by putting Scripture—taught and read—in its rightful place in the service. But was the Puritan rejection of instruments, symbols, and materiality the answer to a modern materialistic world that is starved for beauty?

The reactionary mindset occurs today as well. For example, is the answer to a sensationalized emotionalism in some worship services today the elevation of an intellect-only approach to worship?¹⁷⁸ In its haste to avoid looking like the nearby Arminian-Charismatic megachurch, has the church failed to account for the wide biblical

¹⁷⁶ As theologian John Murray put it, “A theology that does not build on the past ignores our debt to history and naively overlooks the fact that the present is conditioned by history. A theology that relies on the past evades the demands of the present.” John Murray, *Studies in Theology, Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 8-9.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 54-55.

¹⁷⁸ Frame comments, “Scripture teaches that we are totally depraved, and that includes our intellectual as well as our volitional and emotional aspects. Yes, our feelings sometimes lead us into sin, but the same is true of our intellects. If we seek to remedy our emotionalism by bringing our emotions into line with depraved intellectual concepts, there is no net gain. . . . The important thing is not to bring the emotions into line with the intellect, but to bring both emotions and intellect into line with God's Word.” Frame, *Selected Shorter Writings*, 3:289.

array of emotional and intellectual obedience to God found in Scripture's corpus?¹⁷⁹ A reactionary church will confront error with truth at one level, but it may inadvertently introduce—at another level—other subtle error in its rebuttal. When the church minimizes the full textual witness of Scripture, methodological weakness is sure to follow.

This reactionary mindset occurs with people as well as with important theological issues. Must the charge be heresy when there is someone with a different viewpoint in worship praxis?¹⁸⁰ When Frame and others espouse alternate views of adherence to the regulative principle, is the only answer one of Arminian-Charismatic disparagement?¹⁸¹ Does a common commitment to Reformed doctrine automatically dictate the same universal Reformed aesthetic in worship services?¹⁸² Reactionary mindsets often abandon solid hermeneutics and succumb to a myopic certainty of a particular path. There is little nuance, no accommodation, no understanding, and no broad perspective. If the error is “black,” the answer must be “white.”¹⁸³ Reactionary mindsets

¹⁷⁹ Piper, *Desiring God*, 65. Piper states, “Worship must have heart and head. Worship must engage emotions and thought. . . . True worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.”

¹⁸⁰ Reisinger and Allen, *Worship*, 32. This happens with strict regulativists who disparage those who adopt the normative principle. The authors, who condemn this approach, state that “to say that our Lutheran, Anglican and yes, Southern Baptist brothers who practice the normative principle engage in ‘devil worship’ is uncharitable, unhelpful, and untrue.”

¹⁸¹ Schwertley, “Sola Scriptura,” 98. Schwertley writes, “As we consider Frame’s redefinition of the regulative principle we must not lose sight of the fact that Frame’s book is a defense of neo-Presbyterian (i.e., Arminian-Charismatic style) worship. Frame’s clever redefinitions are directed at one goal. That goal is the removal of the strict, ‘minimalistic,’ confessional concept of divine warrant in favor of a very broad, general, loose concept of divine warrant. . . . The truth of the matter is that strict regulativists simply want to preserve biblical (i.e., Reformed) worship from worship that is idolatrous, Pelagian and Arminian.”

¹⁸² Tim Keller states, “Any proponent of ‘historic’ corporate worship will have to answer the question, ‘Whose history?’ Much of what is called ‘traditional’ worship is very rooted in northern European culture. While strict CW advocates may bind worship too heavily to one present culture, strict HW advocates may bind it too heavily to a past culture. Do we really want to assume that the sixteenth-century northern European approach to emotional expression and music (incarnate in the Reformation tradition) was completely biblically informed and must be preserved?” Timothy J. Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City” in Carson, *Worship by the Book*, 196.

¹⁸³ Begbie comments that “those who crave regular order often assume that the only alternative

contend for only one alternative in the name of truth.

Nevertheless, a church grounded in solid biblical hermeneutics will encounter opposing positions.¹⁸⁴ Disagreements and debates are inevitable. Yet the level of disparagement among the Reformed constituency when discussing different applications to the regulative principle is extreme. A greater concern for unity and a broader perspective within Protestantism is needed.

Reformed thinkers would do well to remember Calvin's relational generosity. Calvin, despite his acerbic manner and divisive reputation, was so concerned for ecclesial unity that he longed much of his life for a theological solution that would bring the Lutherans back into the Reformed fold.¹⁸⁵ Calvin thought so highly of Melancton, despite their differences over free will, ceremonial *adiaphora*, and predestination,¹⁸⁶ that Calvin considered him a partner for Protestant unity and desired his (Calvin's) French readers to know of this godly Wittenberg professor.¹⁸⁷ Calvin models for the modern Reformed church that reaching across Reformed doctrinal boundaries in theological discussion need not compromise a commitment to Reformed doctrine.¹⁸⁸

is detrimental disorder." Begbie, "The Future," 183.

¹⁸⁴ Horton states, "Even if we do not arrive at common conclusions, I hope that at least our common appeal to Scripture as on the only safe guide in settling these questions will make the discussion profitable." Horton, *A Better Way*, 143.

¹⁸⁵ Gordon, *Calvin*, 164.

¹⁸⁶ Herman J. Selderhuis, "Historical Connections," trans. Henry J. Baron, in *The Calvin Handbook*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 60-61. Selderhuis states that "there was also disagreement on the subject of free will and predestination. . . . However, it was according to Calvin a mistake to place them in opposition to each other on account of this difference."

¹⁸⁷ Gordon, *Calvin*, 162.

¹⁸⁸ Frame, *The Escondido Theology*, 118. Frame's reputation for ecumenism causes him to lament: "Christians are committed first to Christ, then to the one body of Christ, and only then to a particular form of the church. They must make the third commitment only because history has made it necessary. Because of the tragic division of the church, one may not be a 'mere Christian.' He must join a congregation that does not have fellowship with all other congregations. So he must be Reformed or non-Reformed, not both. But a believer ought to be at least a little sad about this historical necessity."

The documents of the Westminster Assembly are the basis for theological affiliation and denominational commitments today. Calvinism's tenets and the regulative principle of worship provide much of the foundation for such commitments. Yet not all of Assembly participants were full Calvinists.¹⁸⁹ The Assembly documents were compromise documents, and the Reformed church today would do well to remember the culture that allowed for that achievement. The Reformed church today need not abandon Reformed doctrine to engage in meaningful theological discourse with the non-Reformed.

From Calvin to the Puritans and their descendants in the modern Reformed church, worship history might be read as a narrowing journey of accepted faithfulness to Scripture in worship praxis. This narrowing leads the church down a legalistic path that stunts its witness in the wider community, producing awkward theological inconsistencies and an unsustainable hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures. Scripture is sufficient; it is enough. The church must resist the temptation to "improve" the Scripture by addition or subtraction (neither adding nor taking away specificity). The certain path for worship regulation, the only unassailable warranted hierarchy, is the sufficiency of Scripture. Against historicity and relevance, the church must persevere in its commitment to *sola Scriptura*.

¹⁸⁹ Letham comments, "Amyraldianism is implicitly ruled out by the strong teaching on the particularity of redemption, although hypothetical universalists such as Edmund Calamy were not excluded, but spoke up vigorously in debate and continued thereafter to play a prominent role in the Assembly's activities. Evidently, they were regarded differently than Arminians." Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R 2009), 119.

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ABSTRACT

JOHN CALVIN, THE PURITANS, AND JOHN FRAME: WORSHIP THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE AMONG REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE ADHERENTS

Howard Thomas Ohman, DEdMin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Matthew D. Westerholm

This thesis presents a taxonomy of views concerning the regulative principle of worship among John Calvin, John Frame, and the Puritans. Chapter 2 explores Calvin's impact on worship regulation, and his theology is mapped through communion with God, liturgical sins, and material pessimism before exploring discontinuities between Calvin and the Puritans. Chapter 3 highlights the emergence of the Puritans within the Church of England before the Westminster Assembly. Core motivations are revealed in the debates and theological concerns during the Assembly. Chapter 4 highlights John Frame's broad view of the regulative principle and identifies Frame's unique view of elements and circumstances and his interaction with the Westminster formulations. Chapter 5 analyzes and synthesizes disparities regarding the application of the regulative principle. Implications are drawn from unwarranted hierarchies and their impact on worship praxis.

VITA

Howard Thomas Ohman

EDUCATION

BA, Arizona College of the Bible, 1987
MA, University of Houston, 1995

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT

Minister of Music, Galilee Baptist Church, Glendale, Arizona, 1987-1990
Minister of Music, Kingwood Community Church, Kingwood, Texas, 1990-1997
Worship Pastor, Gracespring Bible Church, Richland, Michigan, 1997-2016
Worship Pastor, First Baptist Church, Paducah, Kentucky, 2016-2019
Creative Arts Director, Hunt Valley Church, Hunt Valley, Maryland 2019-2020
Worship Pastor, First Baptist Church, Mauldin, South Carolina 2020-