

# A FRESH LOOK AT THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

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*Note: I submitted this paper as an article for a multi-author book. After some years it was determined that the book would not be published. JF*

The “regulative principle” is the Reformed view of how God regulates our worship and provides that worship is by divine appointment. Everything we do in worship must be divinely warranted. And since Scripture is the sufficient Word of God, everything we do in worship must be “prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_edn1](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_edn1)

So defined, the regulative principle is eminently scriptural. In biblical worship, we seek God’s glory, not our own pleasure. And we have no sure way of determining what pleases God in worship except God’s own revelation of Himself in Scripture. So Scripture is sufficient to tell us God’s will for worship. We dare not add to, or subtract from, God’s own Word (Deut. 4:2, 12:32, Rev. 22:18-19).

## **WORSHIP AND LIFE**

But when you think about it, the regulative principle is not limited to worship services. It is God’s regulative principle for all areas of human life. It is not only in our Sunday worship services that we seek to please God rather than ourselves (1 Thess. 4:1, 2, 2 Tim. 2:3, 4). Indeed, says Paul, “whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). How do we find out how to glorify God in all of life? The same way we find out how to glorify God in worship: we consult His Word. So the sufficiency of Scripture is for all of life, not merely for one segment of it. The passages listed in the previous paragraph deal with all of life; they are not

limited to the governance of worship meetings. The Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 that God-breathed Scripture is sufficient “so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” So the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) declares that Scripture is sufficient “concerning all things necessary for (God’s) own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life” (1.6).

In everything we do, we seek to obey God’s commands. There are, of course, human activities for which there are no explicit biblical prescriptions. Scripture doesn’t tell us how to change a tire, for instance. But there are biblical commands that are relevant to tire changing, as to everything else. In all activities, we are to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). In everything we are to be motivated by faith (Rom. 14:23) and love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). In everything, we are to act in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17), with all our heart (3:23). When I change a tire, I should do it to the glory of God. The details I need to work out myself, but always in the framework of God’s broad commands concerning my motives and goals.

Here too, worship is parallel with the rest of life. In worship also, there are some activities for which there are no explicit biblical prescriptions. Scripture does not tell us specifically when or where to meet for worship, or how many hymns to sing, or precisely what words to use in offering prayer. These decisions require the use of godly reasoning, guided by the general teachings of the Word (WCF 1.6).

The parallel between worship and other areas of human life should not surprise us, because, in one sense, worship *is* all of life. Paul describes the Christian life in sacrificial imagery: it is offering our bodies as “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” and adds, “this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom. 12:1). He then describes that “worship” as an abandonment of worldly patterns of life, transformation by the renewing of the mind, humility, respect for the gifts God has given to other Christians, love, submission to ruling authorities, and so on. God regulates all of life as He regulates worship, because, for a Christian, all of life *is* worship. I call this ethical transformation “worship in the broad sense” as contrasted with the “narrow” sense in

which worship is limited to specific times and places.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn2

To say that all of life is worship is not to deny that there is something special about public worship services. Certainly God has ordained public worship services, and He calls us not to neglect them (Heb. 10:25). And His Word contains specific prescriptions to govern those meetings, to which we must give heed, just as the Word gives special instruction to us about church government, theology, evangelism, ethics, marriage, parenting, etc. I am not saying, therefore, that “anything goes” in worship, or that we may do anything in a worship service that we may do outside it.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn3 These meetings are for such things as praise, prayer, teaching, and sacraments. Scripture tells us how to do these things, and so we must constantly search the Scriptures to determine how God wants us to conduct each particular service.

My point is rather that Scripture functions the same way in the area of worship services that it functions in any other area of human life: we seek to find out what God says, and we apply His prescriptions to specific situations by the use of godly wisdom, itself subject to the Word. In other words, the regulative principle for worship is the same as the regulative principle for all of human life.

## **THE TRADITIONAL VIEW**

The discussion above, in my view, is a fairly complete statement of the regulative principle, both as it is found in the Bible and in the explicit statements of the Reformed confessional standards. But to those who have studied the traditional discussions of the regulative principle, it will seem rather sketchy. In those discussions, Reformed thinkers have

labored over concepts like *elements, parts, substance, essence, accident, forms, expressions,* and *circumstances* (further subdivided into circumstances with and without religious significance, and those necessary and unnecessary to the orderly conduct of worship). In my opinion, these concepts are not helpful, and using them to add further restrictions to the broad regulative principle is not scriptural. In this part of my essay, I will describe those additional restrictions and explain why I object to them.

Many Reformed thinkers also would be unsatisfied with my assertion that the regulative principle for worship is the same as the regulative principle for the rest of life. Many in the Reformed tradition have insisted that there is a separate regulative principle for worship alone, narrower and more stringent than God's regulation of the rest of life. So in worship, but not in the rest of life, the calculus of elements, circumstances, etc. noted above plays a major role. I hope to show here that the claim of a special, narrower regulative principle for worship alone, requiring the use of these extra concepts is unscriptural.

These additional concepts ("elaborations," as I shall call them) entered the discussion because some early Reformed thinkers [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn4](#) feared that the regulative principle, taken in its broad sense alone, allowed too much room for human discretion. A worship regulated exclusively by God's commands, they thought, should be very sharply restricted, and therefore the regulative principle must be made more precise than it would be on the broad reading alone.

### ***Elements***

The argument goes like this: It is not enough for God to reveal in general terms what He wants His people to do in His presence. Rather, He must reveal the specific actions to be performed in any particular service, such as burnt offering, prayer, preaching, Lord's Supper.

These specific actions are the “parts” or “elements” of worship, the “essence” or “substance” of which everything else is an “accident.” Bushell says that

“An essential or substantial element of worship . . . is any action which has been invested, by divine or human prescription, with religious or spiritual significance.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn5

He adds that the element may be either an “act” or “an aspect of an act.” These elements, (also called “parts” or “substances”) are “beyond the discretionary power of the church.”

How do we determine what elements God has prescribed? Most defenders of this traditional view suggest that that we may determine these prescriptions from Scripture, either by express commands, approved examples, or theological inferences.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn6 But these prescriptions must be *specific* to a particular kind of worship. It will not do, of course, to argue that since the Old Testament temple worship included burnt offerings, we should include such offerings in the worship of our churches today. The burnt offering was an element of temple worship, but there is no divine warrant for burnt offerings in the worship of the New Testament church. Lacking such a specific warrant, we know that the practice is now forbidden. For us it is not an element of worship. The synagogue, the temple, and New Testament Christian worship are all specific kinds of worship. We must find the specific elements God has prescribed for each specific type of worship, if we are to follow the regulative principle.

On this view, the elements or substantial parts of worship are also *independent* of one another in an important sense. “Substance,” in Aristotelian philosophy, is what stands alone, what exists “in itself.” Similarly, each element of worship, in the Puritan view, has its own independent scriptural justification. For example, John Murray, convinced that song is an “element” of worship, argues that

“In dealing with this question [the question of whether we should sing only Psalm versions in worship—JF], it should be appreciated that the singing of God’s praise is a distinct act of worship. It is to be distinguished, for example, from the reading of Scripture and from the offering of prayer to God. It is, of course, true that songs of praise often include what is of the nature of prayer to God, as it is also true that in the offering of prayer to God there is much that is of the nature of praise and thanksgiving. But it is not proper to appeal to the divine authorization or warrant we possess as to the content of prayer in order to determine the question as to the content of song. Prayer is one element of worship, singing is another.”

He then gives examples “of the necessity and importance of guarding the distinctiveness of each of the several parts of worship and of determining from the Scripture what its prescriptions are respecting each element.” [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn7](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn7) In other words, on Murray’s view, it is wrong to argue [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn8](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn8) that since many hymns are prayers, their content should be determined by the Bible’s teaching about prayer. Rather, song is an “element” distinct from prayer, and so it requires an independent Scriptural warrant specifying its distinct content.

According to the Scottish and Puritan view, then, “elements of worship” are the distinct actions performed in worship, all the actions deemed to have “religious significance.” Each is independent of the others in the sense that each requires its own distinct scriptural warrant. And the biblical warrant of each must be specific to the particular type of worship being considered (tabernacle, temple, synagogue, New Testament church).

### ***Circumstances***

The Puritan and Scottish tradition understood, however, that there are many things we do and should do in worship that do not have the kind of specific and independent biblical justification required of elements. Worship activities without specific biblical warrant fall into two

categories. The first category consists of *circumstances* (category 1). The WCF, for instance, speaks of “circumstances . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” (1.6). These circumstances usually include such matters as the time and place of worship, and whether to sit on chairs or pews. All human societies (including governmental bodies, clubs, schools, etc.) must resolve such questions. The second category involves *the specific ways in which we carry out the elements*, such as the specific words of hymns, prayers, and sermons in a particular service (category 2), which are not “common to human actions and societies.” They are distinctly religious and ought to be distinctively Christian.

Sometimes in the literature the term “circumstance” is reserved (as in the WCF) for activities of category 1, while another term, like “forms” or “expressions” is used for those of category 2. Bushell uses “circumstance” for both categories, but he distinguishes between those that have “spiritual meaning” or “sacred significance” (roughly equal to my category 2) and those that do not (my category 1). [http://www.frame-](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm)

[poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn9 Therefore, for Bushell, the categories “circumstances” and “elements” are not mutually exclusive:

“There are, in other words, some circumstances of worship which are essential or substantial parts of the act of worship itself. Over such circumstances the Church has absolutely no discretionary or prescriptive authority.” [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn10

Bushell then applies this principle to the question of the content of song in worship, though what he says would apply equally to the specific content of prayer or preaching:

“The content of any verbal utterance is circumstantial to the act itself. But because the words of the songs sung in religious worship necessarily have spiritual and religious significance, they must also be considered to be substantial parts of worship, and do not therefore lie within the discretionary power of the Church.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn11](#)

This argument proves too much, for it seems to imply that not only the words of songs (as Bushell insists in his argument for exclusive use of Psalm versions in worship), but also the words of prayers and sermons, must be found on the pages of Scripture. But Bushell does recognize that there are some circumstances of a religious character that cannot be determined from Scripture, such as the specific words of prayers and sermons. He says, “. . . the specific content of worship-song is determinable from Scripture, while the specific content of preaching is not.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn12](#)

Bushell also mentions another kind of circumstances, namely those “which have no connection at all with worship *per se* and the alteration of which has no effect on the act of worship itself.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn13](#) One example is the “kind or color of clothing” people wear to church.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn14](#) Unlike the time and place of worship, these are “separable” from worship. Bushell explains,

“The circumstances which the Church may appoint, in other words, must be such that the worship of the Church could not be conducted in a decent and orderly fashion without their appointment.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn15](#)

So the church may not dictate what we may or may not wear to church or even that “the architecture of the church building be of a certain type.”[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn16

To summarize: circumstances are the “accidents” of worship as opposed to the elements which are the “substance.” “Circumstances” may refer to all the accidents (as in Bushell) or only to some of them. On the former alternative, they overlap the elements. The Church may determine the circumstances only to the extent that those elements are necessary for worship to be conducted in a decent and orderly fashion and to the extent that those circumstances cannot be determined by Scripture.

## **OBJECTIONS TO THE TRADITIONAL VIEW**

I object to the accretions to the regulative principle inherent in the traditional view for a number of reasons.

### **1. *Not Warranted by Scripture***

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.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn17 But where does Scripture talk about or even imply a distinction between elements or circumstances? Where does Scripture define elements in contrast with circumstances? Where does it say that the elements of worship must be independent of one another in Murray’s sense, or specific to a particular type of worship? Where does it distinguish several kinds of circumstances or tell us that circumstances, as opposed to elements, can be determined by the Church only on the conditions and with the exceptions listed by Bushell?

Certainly Scripture nowhere defines these terms or formulates these principles in so many words. Is there any biblical passage where God rebukes someone for failing to distinguish properly between an element and a circumstance, or for trying to legislate the wrong kind of circumstances? I have not found any. The literature defending these restrictions appeals to Scripture only to defend the regulative principle in its “broad meaning” as I have defined it at the beginning of this article. These appeals legitimate the principle that worship is by divine appointment. But they do not vindicate the traditional calculus of elements and circumstances.

## **2. *Aristotelian, Not Biblical***

To be more specific, the distinction between “substance” and “accident” is Aristotelian, rather than Scriptural. And the idea that worship must be divided into certain elements independent of other elements is a form of philosophical atomism, rather than anything that can be derived from Scripture. I would not say that Scripture disagrees in all respects with Aristotelian or atomist philosophy; but we should not presume its agreement with them. If someone tells us we must divide worship into substances and accidents, they should provide us with a biblical argument for doing so. So far, none has been produced to my knowledge.

## **3. *Worship Actions Not Atomistic***

As a matter of fact, the actions we perform in worship are not atomistically independent of one another. As Murray recognized in the material I quoted earlier, our songs often have the content of prayer and teaching. Beyond that, everything we say in worship is prayer, for we utter it in God’s presence. Everything we do in worship is also teaching, for God intends it all for our edification (1 Cor. 14:26). [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [edn18](#) Nevertheless, Murray insists that each element requires an independent Scriptural justification without providing any biblical argument for that assertion, or for the threshold assertion that these elements are, in fact,

independent of one another. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn19

#### **4. Difficulty Determining “Religious Significance”**

It is not easy to distinguish those aspects of worship that have “religious significance” from those that don’t. As Bushell points out, even the issue of the time and place of worship can have religious significance, as indicated by the examples of the Sabbath and the temple. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn20 Beyond that, if the elders of a church ordain 4:00 a.m. as the time of worship, it certainly would affect the religious quality of worship. Even the clothing worn by the leaders and the worshipers contributes to the overall tone of the service; it communicates something. And in an important sense, we must confess with Abraham Kuyper that all of human life is religious. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn21 Indeed, as I indicated earlier, for the Christian all of life is *worship* in a “broad sense.” So the distinction between that which is religious and non-religious is highly questionable, and in any case will not help us to distinguish elements from circumstances (or, alternatively, between circumstances within the discretion of the Church and those without). [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn22

#### **5. No Divine List of “Elements”**

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.

As for the synagogue, Scripture contains no hint of any divine requirement for the elements of its meetings. We should presume that God approved of the synagogue, because of Jesus’s attendance and participation (Luke 4:16). But Scripture gives us nothing like a list of elements for this particular kind of service, either by precept, example, or inference. God does prescribe a “sacred assembly” for the Sabbath day (Lev. 23:3), but He says nothing about what should be done there. Doubtless the Israelites reasoned that since God is generally pleased with public prayer and with the reading and teaching of His Word, that these are appropriate activities for the Sabbath meeting. That is a kind of theological inference, and it is correct; but it falls short of a divine prescription of the particular elements of this specific form of worship.

The same is true of the Lord’s Day worship of the New Testament church. We do find in the New Testament some examples of worship activities which most likely [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_edn23](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_edn23) occurred in Christian Lord’s Day worship: the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34), hymns (chosen by the congregation!—1 Cor. 14:26), instruction (1 Cor. 14:26), and the reading of Paul’s letters (Col. 3:8). [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_edn24](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_edn24) But nothing is said specifically about baptism as an activity of Sunday worship (New Testament examples of baptism take place outside of regular public worship). We may determine by theological inference that baptism is an activity appropriate to public worship, but that inference falls short of demonstrating that God requires baptism as an element of the specific service held on the Lord’s Day. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_edn25](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_edn25)

And certainly we have no normative list of elements for many other forms of worship: private worship, family worship, devotions at community events, <http://www.frame->

[poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn26 hymn sings,

impromptu prayers, to say nothing of worship in the “broad sense.” There is, therefore, no form of worship for which Scripture yields a list of elements as required by the narrow reading of the regulative principle.

#### **6. *No Divine Definition of “Circumstances”***

Just as Scripture fails to define 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.

#### **7. *Difficulties Applying the Distinction between “Elements” and “Circumstances”***

Even granting the legitimacy of the distinction between elements and circumstances, applying it is not easy. Is song in worship an element, as John Murray taught, or is it a “form” or “circumstance,” a way of praying and teaching? Is instrumental music an element (as the covenanter tradition holds) or a circumstance (helping the congregation to sing in a decent and orderly way)? Is a marriage essentially a taking of vows and therefore a proper element of worship, or is it part of a broad group of activities that should be excluded from worship because it is not prescribed?

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.

## 8. *The Westminster Standards*

Do the Westminster Standards require the traditional view of the regulative principle? They were written by Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians who personally held varieties of the traditional view. But the actual language of the Confession and Catechisms does not require it, in my opinion. And Presbyterian officers are committed to the actual language of the Standards, not in a general way to the theology of the Westminster divines. Now the Confession does mention “parts” of worship (21:5), but there is no suggestion there that these parts are “elements” in the technical sense required by the traditional view. It also speaks of “circumstances” (1.6), but without any of the specific teachings of Bushell and others about the relationship between elements and circumstances.

The Confession, however, does distinguish between the role of God’s Word in “matters of faith, or worship,” and outside those spheres, which may be thought to contradict my equation between the regulative principle of worship and the regulative principle of human life in general:

“God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship” (20:2).

I have no trouble agreeing with this statement, including the last clause following the semicolon. We are certainly free in worship from commandments of men beside the Word of God. Therefore, I literally agree with everything in this sentence. But I believe that there also is a sense in which God has given us this freedom in all other areas of life as well. We are talking here about ultimate norms, not subordinate authorities. As a matter of fact, we are subject to human subordinate authorities in worship as in other spheres. The worship leader has the authority to announce what hymn we are to sing. But he is subject to the Word of God as the sole *ultimate* authority. The same is true for authorities in other spheres (civil magistrates, husbands, fathers, teachers). They have genuine subordinate authority, but there is only one ultimate authority, the Word of God. In

that sense, we are always free from anything “beside” the Word, and we have this freedom in all spheres of life. The Confession concedes as much in 1.6, when it applies the sufficiency of Scripture to all of life, that is, to “all things necessary for [God’s] own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life.”

### **9. No Need to Add to Scripture**

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. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn27](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn27) But God never rules His people by giving them exhaustive lists of things they must do, and forbidding them to do anything else. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn28](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn28) 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.

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. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn29

## **SOME REPLIES TO T. DAVID GORDON**

In his essay in this volume, Gordon spends most of his space criticizing my view of the regulative principle. I had hoped, rather, that he would have focused his attention on trying to prove the traditional view from Scripture. For those of us who question the traditional view, only such an exegetical study will suffice. Where is the biblical *argument* for dividing worship into elements and distinguishing them from circumstances? Where is the biblical ground for the traditional view of what is and is not within the discretion of the church? Gordon's article does include some biblical support, but that support is focused polemically against my view, rather than developed systematically to establish Gordon's, and his polemic is pretty wide of its intended targets. I have replied to some of his points in earlier notes, but some of his arguments require responses of greater length.

### ***Obedience to Subordinate Authorities***

I argued that we are free from commands "beside" God's Word, not only in worship, but in all of life. Gordon says that "If Frame's view were correct (that we are free from any command that is "beside" God's Word, then civil authority could not require our submission to any ordinance or law that did not enjoy the endorsement of God's Word." So he thinks that on my position a Roman magistrate could not tax his citizens unless he could find in Scripture a precise indication of the amount of the tax. Or, alternatively, if "Render unto Caesar" is unqualified in Scripture, the magistrate could tax any amount at all without being unjust.

Here Gordon misunderstands the nature of *sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) -

[edn30](#) Nobody has ever claimed that Scripture is sufficient for every detail of life. Scripture is sufficient, not as an encyclopedia of laws or facts, but as the Word of God. To say that Scripture is sufficient (in public worship or elsewhere) is simply to say that Scripture contains all the divine words that we need. Scripture is sufficient for the civil magistrate, not by telling him exactly how much to collect in taxes, but in giving him all the divine norms he needs to make his decisions.

I believe that Scripture authorizes governments to collect taxes but requires no maximum or minimum, though there are some kinds of taxation that Scripture condemns as unjust (1 Sam. 8:10-18). In other words, my view of the magistrate's taxing power is not very different from Gordon's, if at all. Within these rough biblical guidelines, I would not say that a magistrate goes "beyond" Scripture in the relevant sense by choosing an amount of tax to collect.

People violate *sola Scriptura*, not by asserting that there are truths to be found outside of Scripture, but by claiming that there are extra-biblical words that have the same authority as Scripture, or higher. Those who believe in *sola Scriptura* hold that no extra-Scriptural words have divine authority, and therefore supreme authority. People violate the principle when they claim that their ideas, their norms, their political philosophy, their view of taxation, etc., have authority equal to or greater than Scripture. To accept such claims is to subject oneself to norms "beyond Scripture." We are free from such norms in *all* areas of life. When Jesus invokes this principle in Matt. 15:8-9, he applies it, not to public worship specifically, but to the Pharisees' failure to adequately support their parents.

### ***Obedience to Ecclesiastical Authorities***

Gordon says, as he has said in other publications, that for me "what is lawful and proper in other aspects of life is lawful or proper in this aspect as well." This is a very misleading statement of my position. It accurately describes what I believe about worship in the *broad* sense, but certainly not in the narrow sense. As for the narrow sense, with which Gordon's and my articles are primarily concerned, I believe as he does that many activities are appropriate in

human life generally that are not appropriate in public worship services. [http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - edn31 My difference with him is that I deny that there are different *regulative principles* governing these two areas. For example, he and I would agree that although marriage and music are two different things, governed in part by different norms, we nevertheless find God's will for them in the same way: by taking relevant Scripture norms and applying them by means of our extra-biblical knowledge. Similarly, on my view, with public worship and other human activities.

Gordon cites several biblical passages to show that some behavior "is lawful if privately practiced, apart from the church's exercise of authority, but unlawful if required or practiced by the church." Again, I am not at all opposed to this principle. Certainly I have the right as an individual to attend a baseball game. I would, however, be opposed to any church presuming that it had the right to *command* me to attend a baseball game. There are some limits to church authority, and these have been explored in the theological literature.

My view of *sola Scriptura* does not forbid me to acknowledge limits to church authority. All it requires is that the church be subject to Scripture and that the limits of its authority be established biblically. As to the specifics of those limits, Gordon is certainly right to say that the church has more authority in the area of worship than, say, on the issue of what baseball game I should go to. That is one difference between worship (in the narrow sense) and other areas of life. But that is not a difference between two different regulative principles. It is rather a difference in the specific application of a common regulative principle.

### ***Is My Position Lutheran, Rather than Reformed?***

Gordon thinks my view is "practically indistinguishable from the Lutheran view," namely the view that in worship we may do anything Scripture doesn't forbid. Certainly that is not true of my formulation as such. For I have affirmed that in worship "everything must be divinely

warranted” and “everything we do in worship must be “prescribed in the Holy Scripture.” These formulations are precisely opposite to the Lutheran-Anglican ones.

I grant, however, that in practice my approach would be somewhat less restrictive than Gordon’s. And it is probably more important on my view than on Gordon’s to take notice of what Scripture forbids and doesn’t forbid. For on my view, God’s prescriptions for worship are somewhat general, and when we consider alternative applications of those general prescriptions it is important to ask if any are forbidden by Scripture. As we consider Scriptural prohibitions, of course, our discussions will sound somewhat like discussions among Lutherans. So I am willing to grant that in some ways my approach brings Reformed and Lutherans closer together than does Gordon’s.

Is that bad? I find it interesting that some Reformed people tend to reject any idea (say, “view A”) that they see as muting somewhat the traditional Reformed polemics against historic opponents, even if that idea has much otherwise to recommend it.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn32](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn32) From such people we hear that “view A is not distinctively Presbyterian” or “view A does not set us sharply enough over against the (Lutherans, Catholics, et al).” On the contrary, I think that the visible unity of the church is important to God.[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn33](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - edn33) If we can find genuinely scriptural formulations that bring historically warring parties together, that is a good thing. If we can find some legitimate common ground with Lutherans, Anglicans, Charismatics, even Roman Catholics, shouldn’t that be cause for praise? Shouldn’t we be pleased with such discoveries, even if they force us to amend our traditional formulations (and polemics) in some way? I for one will be delighted if my formulation in some small way brings Reformed, Lutherans, and Anglicans closer together. But of course our views must ultimately be determined by Scripture, not by the course of historical debate.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref1](#)

*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 21.1. I have elsewhere called this formulation “RP1” as opposed to “RP2,” the Lutheran-Anglican principle. RP2 says that we can do anything in worship not forbidden by Scripture. See my “Some Questions About the Regulative Principle” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992) 358. T. David Gordon, in his essay in this volume, reverses these, evidently misreading my article.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref2](#)

Other passages in which Scripture uses the vocabulary of worship in a general ethical sense include Heb. 13:16, Eph. 5:5, James 1:26-27, 1 Pet. 2:5. These passages reinforce the Old Testament emphasis that formal worship without heart righteousness displeases God (as Isa. 1:10-17, Mic. 6:6-8). For more on this concept and other matters discussed in this article, see my book *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996).

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref3](#)

T. David Gordon, in this volume and elsewhere, persists in saying that this is my view, even though I deny it explicitly. See my later comments on this issue.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref4](#)

I am thinking chiefly of the Puritans and of the early Scottish Presbyterians. I do not mean to say that they were the only ones who used these concepts. The extent to which the continental Reformed thinkers accepted this reasoning is a matter of some dispute. While the continental Reformers accepted the broad principle that worship is by divine warrant, one does not find among them as much evidence of the calculus of elements and circumstances as one finds in English-speaking Calvinism. Nevertheless, I will not try to resolve this historical issue. To whatever degree the continental thinkers agreed with the Puritan-Scottish elaborations, to that extent my argument will apply to them as well.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref5](#)

Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980), p. 29. I consider Bushell’s book the most cogent recent book-length argument for the “traditional view of the regulative principle,” the view I am describing as the “traditional elaborations of the regulative principle.”

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref6](#)

The last of these is somewhat controversial. See Bushell, pp. 21-25.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref7](#)

Murray, “Song in Public Worship,” in Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, ed., *Worship in the Presence of God* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 179-80. This article is reprinted from the Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God, presented to the 14<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1947) of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref8](#)

As in the committee’s Majority Report. The Majority Report is found in Smith and Lachman, Appendix B, 375-392.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref9](#)

Bushell, 30. He uses “forms” as a synonym of “elements” on p. 28, which indicates some confusion in the tradition in the use of these terms.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref10](#)

Idem.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref11](#)

Ibid., p. 31.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref12](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref12) Ibid., p. 32.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref13](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref13) Idem.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref14](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref14) Ibid., p. 33.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref15](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref15) Idem.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref16](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref16) Idem.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref17](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref17) 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* 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.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref18](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref18) So it might be better to describe the activities of worship as “aspects” or “perspectives” on worship, rather than as “elements” or “parts.” However, I am not greatly concerned with terminology, as long as we understand the reality of worship.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_ednref19](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref19) Gordon objects to my term “atomistic” and claims that these activities are in some sense distinct acts, since Scripture distinguishes them. But he doesn’t address the point at issue: where does Scripture teach that these activities are so independent of one another that each requires an independent Scriptural justification?

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref20](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref20) Bushell, p. 28.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm - \\_ednref21](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref21) Gordon evidently disagrees with this view, citing certain human activities that are in his view “non-religious.” But to me Kuyper’s position is evidently biblical. And contrary to Gordon, my problem here is not merely the *difficulty* of distinguishing religious from non-religious matters. Rather, that difficulty points us to the more serious problem, namely, that Scripture fails to warrant the distinction or to cite it as a criterion for distinguishing elements from circumstances.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref22](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref22) Another problem: Bushell admits that some matters of religious significance (such as the specific words of prayers and sermons) cannot be determined by Scripture. But matters of religious significance are, according to his definition noted earlier, “elements” of worship. These premises imply that some elements of worship (matters essential to the substance of worship) are not determinable from Scripture, a conclusion contradicting the theory of the traditional regulative principle.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm -  
\\_ednref23](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm_-_ednref23) These examples fall somewhat short of demonstration, because we do not know how many of these activities were carried out specifically in the Lord’s Day celebration of the Resurrection and

how many of them were carried out in other types of services. We must know that in order to have what the traditional regulative principle demands, a specific list of elements for each particular kind of service.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref24](#)

The charismatic gifts of tongues and prophecy were also normal parts of early Christian worship according to 1 Cor. 14. They no longer are normative for us, granted the cessation of these special gifts. For other worship activities of the early church, see my *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, pp. 51-62.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref25](#)

T. David Gordon, in this volume, cites Acts 2:42 as, I gather, a basic list of elements for Lord's Day worship. However, (1) the context does not mention any specific meeting for worship or any specific kind of worship. I wouldn't disagree with the suggestion that the four items of the verse reflect the structure of New Testament worship services; but the passage does not say that explicitly or clearly imply it. (2) There are many other activities, such as calls to worship, baptism, reciting of creeds, and song, considered "elements" by advocates of the traditional view, that are not mentioned in this verse. (3) The verse does not distinguish these activities as elements as opposed to circumstances. (Remember that for Bushell a circumstance may be biblically prescribed.) In my view, Acts 2:42 simply describes four things that the Christians began to do, shortly after Pentecost. It does not reveal definitively the content of any particular worship service, though it does describe activities that (as we learn elsewhere) are appropriate for worship.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref26](#)

Advocates of the traditional view of the regulative principle sometimes argue that the dancing and instrument playing of Exodus 15 was a national, rather than religious celebration. Nevertheless, it was certainly praise to God and therefore worship. Psalm 150:4 alludes to it as a model for the praise of God in the sanctuary. But even "national" worship is worship. If worship requires a divinely authorized list of elements, then national worship also requires it. But Scripture never hints of any such list.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref27](#)

I am reminded of the argument of some theologians that if God has not given us a specific penalty for every civil crime, our politics must be autonomous, rather than subject to His will.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref28](#)

Gordon thinks I am here trying to slip one by him! 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)?

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref29](#)

This reasoning pertains also to the attempt by some to make traditional Reformed worship practices, even those not mentioned in the Confessions, normative for the Church. The regulative principle in Scripture is actually a guard against the absolutization of human tradition (Isa. 29:13, Matt. 15:8-9).

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - [ednref30](#)

Perhaps his own view of biblical sufficiency can be found in his "covenantal approach" to the regulative principle. I'm not sure I understand his model here (which, ironically, he distinguishes from that of the Westminster divines: is this another "fresh look?"). I gather, however, he is saying that Scripture as canon is sufficient only as the norm for the corporate church, not for the lives of individuals. ("...individual members make many decisions about life, as individuals; and... many of these decisions are not always governed by the revealed will of the covenant Suzerain"). But that view seems to me to be more radical than anything I have suggested, and seriously unbiblical. I do believe the covenantal model is important to the nature of Scripture. But Scripture never limits its authority or its sufficiency in the way Gordon proposes. Rather, Scripture declares that it is sufficient "that the *man of God* may be complete" (2 Tim. 3:17). Surely that verse alone (to say nothing of statements like Psm. 1:1-2, 19:7, 119:9, 11) renders perverse the attempt to limit Scripture's sufficiency to the corporate as opposed to the individual. Again, I may have misunderstood

Gordon here; I hope that I have. But if he is saying less than this, I fail to see its relevance to his formulation of the regulative principle.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - ednref31 I am not convinced by all his exegetical examples: (1) I think the relevant difference between Rom. 14:5-6 and Gal. 4:10-11 is not individual vs. corporate choice, but rather that in Galatians the observance of days is being made a condition of salvation. That interpretation fits in better with Paul's overall emphasis and argument in Galatians. (2) In Gordon's comparison between Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8-10, he asks me "Are we commanded to abstain? Are we commanded to eat?" I agree with him that we are neither commanded to eat nor to abstain. The relevant command is a broader one, that whether we eat or not, we should do all to God's glory (compare 1 Cor. 10:31). I have never said that every human action must be dictated by a specific biblical command; in fact I have denied that many times. (3) As for 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 11:20-22, I agree with Gordon that Paul allows some activities at home that he prohibits in church. However, in 1 Cor. 14:33-35 I am inclined to think the issue is women joining in the "judging of the prophets" (verses 29-33) rather than women speaking as such. See James B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 185-194.

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - ednref32 I have argued elsewhere against the tendency of Evangelical and Reformed Christians to judge issues by history rather than by Scripture. This I think is another symptom of this illness, and my present essay is yet another of my defenses of *sola Scriptura*. See my *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997), especially 175-201, and my "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 269-318, and my debate with D. G. Hart, *The Regulative Principle of Worship: Scripture, Tradition, and Culture* (Glenside: Westminster Campus Bookstore, 1998).

[http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame\\_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/RegulativePrinciple.htm) - ednref33 See my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).