

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

TOO NARROW A STRAIGHTJACKET? REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE IN WORSHIP

GRAHAM KEITH, AYR

John Calvin did not originate the Regulative Principle that worship should be confined to those elements clearly set out in or reasonably deduced from Scripture.¹ It was already an important theme with Zwingli and with his successor at Zurich, Bullinger.² There can, however, be no doubt that Calvin was the Reformer who put this Principle on a sound theological footing. That is not to say that he was the most rigorous in pursuit of this Principle. On the contrary, he was able to use the Principle himself with flexibility, and to show magnanimity towards others who in less propitious circumstances had to proceed slowly in the outworking of this Principle.³

A correct view and practice of worship was one of the few criteria which justified to Calvin the establishment of a separate Reformed church, and cleared it of the guilt of schism. But there was a more fundamental issue than a public apology for a separate church. Where God's own people were present to worship God in accordance with his revealed will, God was graciously present in the midst of his people to bless them.⁴ This was a promise attached to those who showed the obedience of faith, not to those who displayed zeal or fervour in following their own lights. 'To obey is better than to sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the

¹ I will use the expression Regulative Principle though technically this expression did not become current until the 20th century. R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), pp. 38-40.

² Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 54-104 describes the earliest Protestant polemic which touched on the themes of false worship and of idolatry.

³ Cf. the remarks of William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 36.

⁴ W. Robert Godfrey, chapter 2, in *The Worship of God* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), p. 32. The editors of this collection of essays are left unnamed; but the volume was produced in association with Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

evil of idolatry' – these words of Samuel to King Saul (1 Sam. 15:22-23) epitomised Calvin's outlook.⁵

Writing in 1543 to the Emperor Charles V a work entitled *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*, Calvin declared, 'If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly the Christian religion has a standing existence among us and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.'⁶ A similar emphasis emerges from Calvin's exposition of the Decalogue within the *Institutes*. He accepted the traditional division of the Decalogue into two tables and explained this by the priority God gave to his worship even over the duties of love towards our fellow-men. Indeed, Calvin felt it was inadequate to conclude that religion was merely the principal part. 'It is the very soul,' he declared, 'by which the whole lives and breathes. Without the fear of God, men do not observe justice and charity among themselves. We say, then, that the worship of God is the beginning and foundation of righteousness; and that wherever it is wanting, any degree of equity, or continence, or temperance, existing among men themselves, is empty and frivolous in the sight of God. We call it the source and soul of righteousness, inasmuch as men learn to live together temperately, and without injury, when they revere God as the judge of right and wrong.'⁷

We may be surprised today by the pre-eminence given to the correct mode of worship, but we can best understand it if we consider Calvin's outlook on improper worship. He saw this not simply as futile in existential terms but as an insult to God's majesty which in its turn brought divine judgment in the form of increased spiritual blindness.⁸ A wrong context of worship, therefore, as in the presence of images or under ceremonies prescribed by men as essential for salvation, 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

⁵ E.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:18:9; Calvin, 'The Necessity of Reforming the Church', in *Calvin's Tracts and Treatises* (tr. H. Beveridge) (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 1:128. The Latin text is to be found in *Corpus Reformatorum* 6: 461.

⁶ Calvin, 'The Necessity of Reforming the Church', 1:126. *Corpus Reformatorum* 6: 459.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:8:11.

⁸ Like others before him, Calvin appealed to the 2nd of the Ten Commandments to justify his position and it was marked by a distinct note of judgement for those who ignored the commandment (Exod. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10).

alone and to give it to something other than God, usually something material. Calvin insisted that there was no such thing as worship that was religiously neutral. An act of homage to a statue of some saint (or of Baal for that matter) was a communication or transaction which would not go unnoticed by the true God and would be registered on the human conscience. The First Commandment, after all, warned against having any other God *in his very presence*.⁹

Calvin did not wax eloquent on the insidious dangers of idolatry just because it was a problem that had infested the church of his own day. (He was certainly not slow to say that the idolatry of the Roman Church was worse than that of paganism.¹⁰) Calvin believed idolatry had become a real possibility for everyone because of the Fall. Though we all possess the seed of religion in the sense that we hanker back to that fellowship enjoyed with God in Eden, this seed does not do any good when it does take root. Rather, it manifests itself in idolatry. 'Even when we are in a manner forced to the contemplation of God...and are thus led to form some impression of Deity, we immediately fly off to carnal dreams and depraved fictions, and so by our vanity corrupt heavenly truth. This far, indeed, we differ from each another in that one appropriates to himself some peculiar error; but we are all alike in this, that we substitute monstrous fictions for the one living and true God.'¹¹ This reflects the fleshly bent of our minds, which means that we delight in physical gratification to the extent that all our thoughts are dominated by material conceptions. As a result, we are alienated from the spiritual realm of the true God.¹² Even in the church it requires no mean effort to ensure it is free of all human devices that usurp the place of God's spiritual worship which is clearly set out in his word, the Bible.

In this Calvin went a lot further than Luther. There had been a tendency in Lutheran circles to assume that as long as the doctrine of justification was preached, all would be well. The externals of worship mattered little.¹³ Indeed, to devote too much attention to them would seem to militate against the inwardness of true religion. Though Calvin was careful not to criticise Luther directly, there is no doubt that he saw this as an inadequate response to the testimony of Scripture where God claimed the right to regulate his own worship. Carlos Eire also argues that Calvin went further than his Swiss predecessors whom he describes as 'some-

⁹ For a detailed account of Calvin's theological contribution see Eire, *War*, pp. 195-233.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:24.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:5:11.

¹² Eire, *War*, p. 206.

¹³ Eire, *War*, pp. 66-8.

what fundamentalistic and more inclined towards action than systematic exposition' as far as their theology of worship was concerned.¹⁴ Calvin's own contribution was to develop an understanding of reverential acts and to promote the idea of true worship as central to a blessed human life.

Before Calvin came to the fore as a Protestant leader, the Swiss Reformers were already contrasting divine precepts, which were altogether good and sufficient, with human traditions, which were on no account to be made a necessary part of the worship of God. The basis for this distinction, of course, was Christ's own criticism of the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees as recounted in Matthew 15. Calvin maintained this contrast, saying, 'the whole Church is forbidden to add to, or take from the word of God, in relation to his worship and salutary precepts.'¹⁵ He believed that Scripture had spoken clearly when it came to 'the whole sum of righteousness, and all the parts of divine worship, and everything necessary to salvation'.¹⁶ However, this did not mean that Calvin would include in church services only those features for which a definite Scripture proof text could be cited.

Calvin was aware of a double danger. There were those 'pseudo-bishops', as he called them, who would readily impose impious and tyrannical laws on their people when they insisted that these congregations follow non-Scriptural precepts as a necessity to salvation. 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.¹⁷ Calvin's answer was to insist that if an ecclesiastical ordinance could be subsumed under the rubric of 1 Corinthians 14:40 (let all things be done decently and in order), it was to be regarded as a divine rather than a human ordinance. To Calvin's mind this justified suitable ecclesiastical ordinances on two fronts – that of decency and that of order. He clarified the idea of decency by saying it touched on ceremonies and would embrace anything which helped the congregation show appropriate modesty, seriousness and reverence in holy things. The other criterion of order involved external discipline, effectively everything that made for the peace and tranquillity of the congregation – e.g. the hours for services, the practice of catechesis, the times for fasts etc. Calvin added the proviso that none of these ordinances be thought necessary to salvation or imposed as a burden on consciences. Ideally, a wise pastor should explain the proper significance of such ordinances to his flock. Under these cir-

¹⁴ *Eire, War*, p. 232.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:17.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:30.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:27.

cumstances he felt the congregation could (and indeed should) readily follow these ordinances as a contribution to the edification or well-being of their church. They should not, however, be bound to them as something immutable. They should appreciate that circumstances might entail the alteration of these ordinances, though Calvin did stress the pastoral wisdom of resisting hasty innovations. In all these matters as to what would help or harm a church he insisted that love was the best guide.

Calvin backed up his account with an illustration which he thought his readers could then apply to other contexts. This involved the question of kneeling in prayer about which some were asking whether it was a human tradition which people could freely repudiate or neglect. Calvin's response was that it was both human and divine. He could describe it as of divine origin since it met the criterion of decency set out in 1 Corinthians 14:40. Yet, it was also human since it was inappropriate to seek a specific command in Scripture to this effect. Calvin contended that it was no part of Scripture to lay down detailed instructions on external discipline and on ceremonies since these depended on the times and it was out of place to lay down one set form to suit all occasions. Instead, the church leaders should consult the more general guidelines given in Scripture - that is, the criteria of love and of our duty to do what we can to build up the church.

Though Calvin does not mention this example in relation to ceremonies, we may profitably look at his attitude to confirmation, as it illustrates the same principles at work. Calvin was opposed to confirmation as practised in the unreformed Roman Church of his day, because they made it into a sacrament which overshadowed baptism, in that it could only be administered by a bishop whereas a simple priest could carry out a baptism. Moreover, Calvin could find no scriptural warrant for the smearing of oil on the forehead of those being confirmed. Despite these and other scathing objections to the contemporary practice, Calvin expressed his belief that in the early church there had been sound instincts for bringing youngsters who had been baptised at infancy before the bishop and people for a formal ceremony when they reached the age of adolescence. This ceremony involved an examination into their knowledge of the church's catechism, and if all passed off well, it would be completed by a blessing through the laying on of hands. Calvin thought there would be practical advantages if the church of his day restored what he saw as a valuable part of the catechetical process.¹⁸ We might summarise the principles involved by observing that Calvin inferred the church's (and parents') catechetical responsibilities from Scripture and saw the early church ceremony as a useful means of attaining that end. However, in the course of time the

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:19:4-13.

modest early church practice had been undermined by outrageous claims that it was a means of conferring the Holy Spirit. A practice which had proved useful at one time had thus been undermined when its original catechetical purpose was set aside. It seems that there were a number of such practices which Calvin believed had an acceptable origin but had been so corrupted that the church of his day had little choice but to get rid of them.¹⁹

Calvin, therefore, urged churches to be very careful about such ceremonies and external discipline as they had. Careful, that is, not to engender superstition and not to insist on too much from them. Above all, such observances were to be few in number. Many ostentatious ceremonies were usually accompanied by hypocrisy: 'While it is incumbent on true worshippers to give the heart and mind, men are always desirous to invent a mode of serving God of a totally different description, their object being to perform to him certain bodily observances, and keep the mind to themselves. Moreover, they imagine that when they obtrude upon him external pomp, they have, by this artifice, evaded the necessity of giving themselves.'²⁰ Moreover, churches were not to despise other churches simply because of a difference in external discipline. In fact, in one letter to the Bernese Council, Calvin was bold enough to express the view that there were advantages in not having too strict a uniformity across different national churches on the matter of ceremonies; that would make the point that the essence of Christianity was not involved in them.²¹

If we want a sample of what Calvin believed to be involved in a service of worship that was faithful to God's precept, we can look to the liturgy he established at Geneva in 1542. This went as follows –

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

1. Scripture Sentence Psalm 124:8
2. Prayer of confession (written down in the liturgy)
3. Psalm

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:32. There was a biblical example in Hezekiah's destruction of the bronze serpent Moses had made on God's instructions in the wilderness (2 Kngs 18:4).

²⁰ Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 1:153. *Corpus Reformatorum* 6: 479.

²¹ Calvin, in *Corpus Reformatorum* 15:538 cited in Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), p. 39.

TOO NARROW A STRAIGHTJACKET

4. Prayer for illumination (an example was given in the liturgy, but the minister was free to use his own).
5. Scripture Reading.
6. Sermon

THE LITURGY OF THE UPPER ROOM

1. Prayers of intercession, followed by long paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer (all written down in the liturgy).
2. Preparation of the elements while the congregation sang the Apostles' Creed.
3. Words of institution.
4. Exhortation to congregation.
5. Prayer of consecration.
6. Communion, while a psalm or other passage of Scripture was read out.
7. Set prayer.
8. Benediction from Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24-26).²²

As we have seen, Calvin would not have insisted that every Reformed church should follow this exactly. In fact, Calvin had to be content in Geneva with less than his own ideal which would have conformed more with the practice of the church in Strasbourg where he had been earlier. This is clear in three main respects. Most importantly, he could not get the magistrates at Geneva to agree to a weekly Lord's Supper; he had to be content with a monthly celebration. In Strasbourg, the liturgy had contained a scriptural absolution after the prayer of confession; but in Geneva Calvin omitted it because the people were suspicious of it as an innovation. Finally, in Geneva Calvin accepted the use of unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper – a practice about which he had no strong view in itself,

²² I have based this on the material set out in Joseph A. Pipa Jr. from chapter 6 of *The Worship of God* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), p. 140.

but he disliked the way the practice had been forced on the Genevans by the Canton of Berne.²³ These examples of compromise on Calvin's part underline his flexibility on areas where the peace and tranquillity of the church were at stake.

But it would be misleading to suggest that Calvin's primary concern was with the externals of Christian worship. He did undoubtedly believe that externals had a vital part to play and he himself made a unique contribution to Protestant theology in this very area. At the same time he was keenly aware of the prophetic criticism that sometimes religion could so degenerate as to consist entirely in ceremonies.²⁴ Hence his priority was to promote internal, spiritual piety. We may take Calvin's reflections when he first began work in Geneva in 1536 as evidence of his concerns, 'When I first arrived in this church there was almost nothing. They were preaching and that is all. They were good at seeking out idols and burning them, but there was no Reformation. Everything was in turmoil.'²⁵ It is surely significant that Calvin did not identify the Reformation with iconoclasm or even with preaching. At best these were merely preliminaries. If we want to know what was at the heart of piety for Calvin, he provides a useful summary in his exegesis of the First Commandment. There he says there are four main duties humans owe God: (1) adoration, by which he means 'the veneration and worship that each of us, in submitting to his greatness, renders to him' and this includes bringing our consciences into subjection to God's law; (2) trust, that is, 'the assurance of reposing in him that arises from the recognition of his attributes, when – attributing to him all wisdom, righteousness, might, truth and goodness – we judge we are blessed only by communion with him'; (3) invocation, that is, 'resorting to his faithfulness and help as our only support' in times of need; (4) thankfulness, 'the gratitude with which we ascribe praise to him for all good things.'²⁶

All these were marks of internal, spiritual worship, and clearly went further than a concern to get the externals of worship right. Calvin could summarise the fruits of spiritual worship in these terms: 'When duly imbued with the knowledge of him, the whole aim of our lives will be to revere, fear and worship his majesty, to enjoy a share in his blessings, to

²³ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 20-21.

²⁴ Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 1:151. *Corpus Reformatorum* 6: 477.

²⁵ From a letter of Calvin in *Corpus Reformatorum* 9.891 cited in Eire p. 160.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:8:16. There is a most useful article on Calvin's theology of worship by Hughes Oliphant Old in (ed.) Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas and J. Ligon Duncan III, *Give Praise to God*, (Phillipsburg,:Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003), pp. 412-35.

have recourse to him in every difficulty, to acknowledge, laud and celebrate the magnificence of his works, to make him, as it were, the sole aim of our actions.²⁷ This was Calvin's vision of pure worship – a true inward piety which was threatened by any false ways of worship. It was a demanding vision; but one which put worship at the centre of human life.

ASSESSMENT OF CALVIN'S POSITION

Calvin's analysis of worship has many strengths. He is the first to put the Regulative Principle on a sound footing. He does so both from his doctrine of God and his doctrine of man. God and God alone has the right to say how he should be approached. He has given clear directions in this regard through the first four of the Ten Commandments and elsewhere in Scripture. For any human being to suggest on his own initiative how God should be worshipped is an arrogant assumption of a right that the God who will not let his glory be given to another claims only for himself. Besides, since the Fall the human condition is such that idolatry is an ever present danger. It is one way in which the carnal mind will suppress the testimony God has given to his own being. (Calvin's scheme of thought can equally accommodate the practical atheism of modern western society. He would view it simply as an alternative strategy for suppressing our natural knowledge of God.²⁸)

By insisting that true worship is at the heart of what it means to be fully human Calvin stresses both its importance and its application to the whole of life. By stressing the inward nature of that piety he at the same time saves his Regulative Principle from being entangled in detailed questions as to what can be deduced from Scripture.

His dichotomy between true scriptural injunctions and mere human traditions, which might seem rigid and perhaps legalistic, gains flexibility from the way he handles 1 Corinthians 14:40. Anything that promotes reverence (or decency) and good outward order is to be seen as an ordinance of God, not as a mere human invention. But it is a divine institution only in a modified sense. It does allow for change at different times and places. The vital thing is that the people of God understand the reason for these ordinances promoting reverence and due order. They are not to bind their consciences to them as to an unchanging command of God. 'There is a great difference,' he wrote, 'between instituting some exercise of piety which believers may use with a free conscience, or may abstain from

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:8:16.

²⁸ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:1:4.

if they think the observance not to be useful, and enacting a law which brings the conscience into bondage.²⁹

Indeed, Calvin's Regulative Principle was designed to help believers maintain true freedom of conscience. For him the conscience is a witness to the fact that God is our supreme and ultimate Judge. True obligations of conscience, therefore, bind us even when we are acting or thinking in private apart from any other human being.³⁰ Only when a human looks to the free grace of God in Jesus Christ and applies it to himself will his conscience be set free from the guilt of sin. At the same time the justified man acquires a living inclination to worship God and a sincere desire to lead a holy life.³¹ It is that sincere desire that should mark out a good conscience in the life of a believer. Hence it is vital that it be maintained and cultivated. However, the conscience may be tormented if it is faced with ecclesiastical rulings imposed on human authority but in the name of God. Calvin was convinced that the Roman Church of his day had loaded all sorts of burdens on the consciences of the people with devastating consequences. He would not let his opponents dismiss these matters as ones of trivial externals about food, dress and suchlike. Once they had set up regulations on such matters and claimed divine authority for them, they created a labyrinth from which the conscience found it difficult to escape.³² The remedy was to set these consciences free from all man-made rules which claimed the authority of God, and these would include all non-Scriptural prescriptions about worship.

Whereas other traditions (notably the Lutherans and the Anglicans) used the concept of *adiaphora* (indifferent things) in the matter of religious practices and ceremonies, Calvin gave at best minimal theological importance to this term.³³ He does use the word in his treatment of Christian liberty, but there he has in mind primarily ethical *adiaphora*, a usage which relates best to the origin of the term in Stoic ethics.³⁴ And when he deals in *Institutes* 4:10 with church laws and traditions, he abstains from using the term altogether, though at one point he does speak of *res inter se mediae* which has much the same sense.³⁵ Probably Calvin realised that this term did not fit well with his judgement that positive sanction

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:20.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:19:15-16 (= 4:10:3-4).

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:19:2-6.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:19:7.

³³ For the Lutherans see Article X (*Church Rites, Commonly Called Adiaphora*) of the Formula of Concord.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:19:7-8.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:10:4.

was needed in the word of God for practices used in worship.³⁶ To talk of *adiaphora* leaves the impression that the church has a range of options to use in worship as it saw fit. That Calvin should use the word at all, albeit sparingly, reflects his engagement with contemporary ways of thinking. It was not an integral part of his thinking. His wisdom in sidelining the term is evident from the disputes over *adiaphora* which emerged in Lutheran circles in the second half of the 16th century.³⁷ Speaking of *adiaphora* does not make for an easy route to consensus among churches or even within the same church. For *adiaphora* in a worshipping context have to be as carefully qualified as the word ‘circumstances’ in Puritan Britain, as we shall see.

If there is a weakness in Calvin’s approach, it lies in the fact that Calvin does not spell out in detail what exactly Scripture prescribes in worship. We can see this as both a strength and a weakness at the same time. It is a strength in allowing flexibility on the question. But it does assume that most churches will be able to assess for themselves what rites make for the appropriate reverence in approaching God. With his own mastery of the past history of the western church and his admiration for the first five centuries, which he saw as a relatively unsullied period, he could tap into those traditions which seemed to him most wholesome. But not everyone had Calvin’s grasp of church history and not everyone shared his optimism about the state of the church in the early centuries.³⁸ Besides, in Geneva the pastors enjoyed relative freedom to discuss debatable points with one another and reach conclusions without much interference from the secular authorities. In other places that freedom might be lacking, so that those who did try to implement the Regulative Principle might well be inclined to more idiosyncratic interpretations.

In these and other contexts there might well arise futile and bitter controversies, with one side accusing the other of idolatry if they did not adhere to their own interpretation of the Regulative Principle. In general terms Calvin was keenly aware of the damage such controversies might

³⁶ Curiously, Richard Hooker from a very different perspective also disliked the term *adiaphora*, and preferred the term ‘accessory’. See Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, (London and New York: T and T Clark, 2002), p. 46.

³⁷ In the Formula of Concord, a definitive Lutheran statement, some ambiguity remains about *adiaphora*. On the one hand it asserts in almost Calvinistic terms that ceremonies or rites, neither commanded nor prohibited in Scripture, are not to be considered part of divine worship. Yet, on the other hand churches have the right with such ceremonies that are in effect indifferent to use them, to abrogate them, or to re-introduce them as they think best.

³⁸ For Calvin’s positive view of the early church see *Institutes*, 4:4:1.

do. He could even declare, 'All that is unedifying is to be rejected, even if there is nothing wrong with it, and all that serves only to stir up controversy should be doubly condemned ... We should remember that this is the rule by which all doctrines are to be tried; those which tend to edification may be approved but those that prove themselves material for fruitless controversies are to be rejected as unworthy of the Church of God.'³⁹ Not all would have the same theological acumen as Calvin in discerning where a futile controversy lurked around the corner. Besides, once a controversy has broken out and emotive words like idolatry used, it may be too late to stop. Ecclesiastical disputes, like wars between rival nations or groups, have a tendency to take on a momentum of their own.

THE LEGACY OF THE PURITAN/ANGLICAN CONFLICT

The history of the Regulative Principle in the English-speaking world has become intertwined with Puritan-Anglican debates on the character and thoroughness of the English Reformation, and to a lesser extent developments in Scotland under King James VI (James I of England) and King Charles I. In England the course of the Reformation was influenced by the remarkably high degree of control imposed by the monarchs and the bishops who generally represented their interests. As it turned out, it was Queen Elizabeth I who gave the Church of England its most lasting form. And in her view doctrinal uniformity mattered much less than uniformity of outward profession of faith and unity of national purpose.⁴⁰ Needless to say, this did not suit the aspirations of those who believed a greater measure of doctrinal uniformity was desirable, and that this should be evident in the public rites of the church.

Moreover, uniformity of outward profession entailed coercion. This was enforced not only by the laws of the land but was written into the credal documents of the English Reformation. This emerges from a feature of the 39 Articles which may be almost unique for an authoritative credal statement. These Articles have parallels when they assert the right of the Church of England to decree rites and ceremonies provided these do not contradict Scripture and provided they are not made essential to salvation.⁴¹ This emphasis can be found in the Lutheran tradition.⁴² (In

³⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, 1:4.

⁴⁰ Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, p. 21.

⁴¹ Article 20. Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards*, (London: James Nisbet and Co, 1883), pp. 4-5 comments on the historical uncertainty over the origins of the controversial opening clause of this Article.

⁴² Cf. Augsburg Confession, sections 15 and 26.

more recent times it has been called the Normative Principle by contrast to the Regulative Principle.) Again precedents can be found for the insistence that traditions and ceremonies need not be the same for all churches and at all times. These rites can be ordained, changed or abolished in accordance with the general edification of the church. This is not dissimilar to the emphasis of Calvin. But a new and more sinister note appears when Article 34 declares – ‘Whosoever through his private judgement willingly and purposely doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren.’ By ruling out private judgment in these circumstances as both subversive and spiritually destructive, this Article is in effect ruling out individual conscience. Ecclesiastical and state authorities – there is an overlap between the two – are allowed to prescribe church rites and practices where these have no warrant from Scripture. Little wonder that protests were raised on the scope of this Article. It is amazing too that this Article which claims to be protecting the consciences of weaker brethren is in fact endangering the consciences of those who scrupled at some of the ceremonies of the Church of England as smacking of superstition or idolatry. Conscience, according to this Article, is subject not only to Scripture but to the laws of the state on religious matters.

A similar tone can be found in other key documents of the English Reformation. A section was included in the Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1662 with the title *On Ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained*. The introduction to this section reads almost as if it could have come from the pen of Calvin himself:

Of such ceremonies as be used in the church and have had their beginning by the institution of man, some at the first were of godly intent and purpose devised, and yet at length turned to vanity and superstition; some entered the church by indiscreet devotion, and such a zeal as was without knowledge, and for because they were winked at in the beginning, they grew daily to more and more abuses, which not only for their unprofitableness but also because they have blinded the people and obscured the glory of God, are worthy to be cut away and clean rejected; other there be which, although they have been devised by man, yet it is thought good to reserve them still, as well for a decent order in the church (for the which they were first devised) as because

they pertain to edification, whereunto all things done in the Church (as the Apostle teacheth) ought to be referred.⁴³

The section continues in Calvinistic vein when it affirms that the church needed to be purged of an excessive number of ceremonies which had the effect of obscuring the glory of Christ. Again, it sees a danger not only on the side of those who would retain undesirable ceremonies but also of those who desired change for change's sake. The only jarring note emerges perhaps when it addresses those who offend against public order. 'The wilful and contemptuous transgression and breaking of a common order and discipline is no small offence before God.' It goes on to say that challenging such order is not in the power of private individuals but only of those lawfully called to that responsibility. Of course, Calvin likewise would not have been happy with individual Christians challenging the order he and the other pastors had established at Geneva. And Calvin has been criticised in his own time and thereafter for the powers the Consistory, the body responsible for maintaining ecclesiastical discipline, assumed in Geneva.⁴⁴ But in Calvin's Geneva there were certain safeguards - a clearer differentiation between civil and ecclesiastical authority and a provision for pastors in open forum to resolve any differences among themselves - which did not exist in Elizabethan England or among her Stuart successors.

At first, therefore, considerable common ground was shared by the official Anglican position and by that of Calvin.⁴⁵ The Anglicans, to be sure, did not endorse the Regulative Principle as such; but that was at this stage more a matter of emphasis. They were convinced that such ceremonies as they had retained suited the scriptural criteria of decency and order - criteria that Calvin had attested as marks of divine rather than human origin. There remained, however, the tricky area of foisting ceremonies on unwilling consciences. When Calvin had dealt with this question, he had in view the misuse of church power by ecclesiastical authorities. Exactly the same principles would apply if the same power were in the hands of monarchs or political leaders.

This was the issue that was raised most acutely in England as the Book of Common Prayer was made binding by Queen Elizabeth I. There was no question of its being used selectively or according to individual

⁴³ I have taken this from Gerald Bray (ed.), *Documents of the English Reformation*, (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co, 1994), pp. 274-5.

⁴⁴ Francois Wendel, *Calvin*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1963), pp. 83-91.

⁴⁵ Cf. the remarks of Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 3-4, on the relative insignificance of the differences between Puritans and the mainstream of the Church of England at the start of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

conscience, at least at first.⁴⁶ It had to be accepted *in toto*; otherwise the dissentient would face penal sanctions. As long as there was hope that the Prayer Book might be revised in a more Reformed direction through constitutional moves, the party in the Church of England with misgivings about the Prayer Book – in effect, the Puritan party – desisted from an extensive attack on the contents of that Book. But as it became clear that the Prayer Book was here to stay, the Puritans were obliged to detail their objections. It was inevitable that these objections should seize on very specific, even narrow, issues, many of which might seem rather trivial on their own. And it is easy from hindsight to decry the Puritans as precisionists or tied to an unrealistic view of a perfectionist church on earth. But given their acceptance (in most cases) that there should be one church in the realm, they had to justify their plea for changes in the Prayer Book, and could only do so by elucidating specific objections. It was inevitable too that many of these objections should be seen as characteristics of the Regulative Principle as it emerged from the hands of the Puritans. In short, the intransigence of the Anglican Establishment forced the Puritans into an elaboration of the Regulative Principle beyond what Calvin would have envisaged. There was little room for friendly discussion on an equal basis between brethren over the bones of contention – this came only in the short interlude which saw the Westminster Assembly – and even less room for the charity which Calvin hoped would lead to a solution on what was beneficial and what was harmful to the Church.

One important result of this controversy was, on the Puritan side, to seek proof-texts for various details of public worship. They went in this respect some way beyond Calvin as they looked for Scriptural justification not only for such central themes as the nature and number of the New Testament sacraments but for such details as to when and how often they were to have services. On the latter count some Puritans found Scriptural sanction for the practice of two Lord's Day services, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, from the unlikely source of the double burnt-offering stipulated in Numbers 28:9. Even such a minor matter as to who should collect the offerings of the people and when they should present them was settled by the evidence from Acts 4:36 and 1 Corinthians 16:2.⁴⁷

The latter example illustrates how far-reaching Scriptural consequences could be drawn from occasional directions and examples given in the Bible. (It was generally agreed that what could be logically deduced from

⁴⁶ There were, however, later modifications in practice. Cf. Claire Cross, *Church and People 1450-1660*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1976), pp. 172-3.

⁴⁷ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 54.

the precepts of Scripture was as binding as the words of Scripture itself.) The examples I have cited may be relatively innocent; but a more dangerous path was taken when an argument was pressed from the silence of Scripture. With rigid use of the Regulative Principle an argument from Scriptural silence would mean a particular practice was not allowed. It is understandable that some should use this to argue for the unlawfulness of infant baptism.⁴⁸ It is perhaps more surprising that the absence of marriage from the pastoral duties listed in 2 Timothy 4:2ff should be used to prove that the celebration of marriage was not the duty of a Christian pastor.⁴⁹

However, Horton Davies concludes that in the most contested issues of the day between Anglicans and Puritans – vestments, ceremonies and fixed or free modes of prayer – the Puritans had a better grasp of the general liturgical principles formulated in Scripture than their opponents. On the question of ecclesiastical vestments, for example, the Puritans wanted them abolished because they were Aaronical and so unsuited to the new dispensation of Christ, because they were badges of idolatry, and because they did not edify but presented a stumbling-block to weaker brethren. In this the Puritans could point to a major theme of the Letter to the Hebrews as well as the teaching of Romans 14:15; while their Anglican opponents could appeal only to an argument from tradition and the rather dubious warrant of Revelation 15:6.⁵⁰

Davies also credits the Puritans with attaining a considerable degree of unity and agreement on the nature of biblical worship, irrespective of some differences on points of detail and the use by some of unusual ordinances like that of foot-washing.⁵¹ This is evident, for example, in the fact that the Westminster Assembly, despite being a mixed body of English Presbyterians, Scottish Presbyterians and English Independents, was able to agree on *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*.⁵² Agreement here contrasts with their inability to agree on church government, another item for which different sides appealed to scriptural prescriptions and precedents.⁵³ Such agreement can only have been possible if their basic grasp of biblical teaching on worship was sound.

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

⁴⁸ Tom Nettles, *The Baptists* (Fearn, Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 1: 138-42.

⁴⁹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 55.

⁵⁰ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 55-56.

⁵¹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 244-252.

⁵² Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 141-2.

⁵³ Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 213-4.

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. If we look more broadly than the immediate controversies over ecclesiastical vestments in the post-Reformation Anglican Church, we can for example ask these questions – should those appointed to the ministry of the word and sacraments in Christ’s church wear a special dress? If so, when? Are there other outward marks that should distinguish the clergy from the laity? Scripture does not of itself provide definitive guidance on any of these questions though they might at certain times become vexed issues.

Again, if we consider the sacraments, many points of basic procedure are not addressed in Scripture directly. For instance, Scripture nowhere lists proper candidates for baptism; nor does it say exactly how the service of baptism should relate to the catechetical training appropriate to baptizands.⁵⁴ Yet, these are surely key issues on which we can follow only the general principles of Scripture. In dealing with the sacraments, Calvin displayed a sound methodology in moving from general principles to highlighting those items which were central to the sacrament. Then he was in a position to specify those matters which he saw as of little moment in the administration of sacraments (e.g. whether immersion or sprinkling was to be used as the mode of baptism).⁵⁵ Individual churches were free to follow whatever practice they saw fit on these indifferent matters.

Another limitation of the Puritan treatment of the Regulative Principle arises from the fact that it was most often used in reaction to their opponents. This was largely inevitable given the political situation they faced. Apart from the brief period of Parliamentary ascendancy and the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell in the 1640s and 1650s they had to defend themselves against the charge that they were being subversive in opposing the Book of Common Prayer. In that defence it was convenient for them to appeal to the principle of a definite Scriptural warrant for every rite and ceremony they were required to accept. That put the intellectual onus on their opponents either to find such a scriptural warrant or in effect to concede they were using some principle other than Scripture. This may have been a good tactic as well as a fruit of genuine conviction for the Puritans; but it did mean that they rarely had the opportunity to set out from their first principles a full picture of what true, biblical wor-

⁵⁴ Christ’s famous words in Matthew 28:19-20 create an indissoluble link between baptism and instruction in everything Jesus taught his first followers.

⁵⁵ For baptism see Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:15:19; and for the Lord’s Supper see Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:17:43.

ship should resemble. There were exceptions. Some Puritans, especially in separatist groups, did produce their own unwritten liturgies.⁵⁶ Some, after initial misgivings, drew up prayer books of their own. But these had such limited impact on the wider stage in England that they can hardly be said to have contributed to a debate on the implications of the Regulative Principle. Within more limited spheres there is no doubt that the Puritans left a more lasting legacy. Their criticisms of the practice of confining prayer to the set forms of a prayer book are a case in point, though it is only fair to add that this critique owes as much to bitter and lengthy experience as it does to scriptural considerations. Horton Davies shows how the Independents, John Owen and Thomas Goodwin, developed a rationale and a detailed procedure on excommunication directly from Scripture.⁵⁷ But the sort of piecemeal approach adopted by the Puritans falls short of a comprehensive treatment of the implications of the Regulative Principle. In a sense the agenda had been set by the Common Prayer Book and the 'popish ceremonies' it was thought to endorse, and the Puritans were never entirely able to escape that agenda.

We may conclude that by the end of the Stuart era (1688) there had been a notable hardening in the Puritan position as compared with that of Calvin and even the early Elizabethan Puritans. The latter had been prepared to endorse some ceremonies if they helped promote reverence, as long as they were not numerous and did not obscure Christ. There was no demand for a Scriptural proof. But the imposition of ceremonies by the crown and the episcopal courts changed the Puritan perspective. An imposed ceremony was no longer an indifferent circumstance; it had become an integral part of the worship. It was, therefore, to be resisted as bringing the Christian conscience into bondage to men and their teaching. John Owen, for example, even opposed all set liturgies, however sound in themselves, on the ground of the infringement on Christian liberty.⁵⁸ Calvin would not have gone so far. He would have had the pastors explain to their congregations the benefits of such liturgies when they were first introduced; but would have seen it as captious to quarrel over their value.

⁵⁶ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 77-95.

⁵⁷ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 54.

⁵⁸ As argued by Douglas Kelly in J. Ligon Duncan III (ed.), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century, Vol 2* (Fearn, Christian Focus Publications, 2004), p. 74. Not all Puritans would have been as rigorous on this point as Owen. Richard Baxter, for example, saw things differently. But the general point stands that the scope of indifferent things or circumstances was greatly reduced.

Whereas Calvin would have embraced both 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.⁵⁹

THE DOCUMENTS OF THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

When the Puritans did enjoy some respite from state imposition, they had an opportunity positively to lay out their theology of worship and its practical implications. Their big opportunity came with the Westminster Assembly, which lasted from July 1643 to February 1649. It was attended by representatives of English Presbyterians and Independents as well as some commissioners representing the Church of Scotland, a Presbyterian body. All of those present can broadly be described as puritans, though there were important differences among them on church government. Representatives who supported episcopacy were invited, but did not attend.⁶⁰ The Assembly promoted the Regulative Principle but in such a way as to leave it largely free from excessive rigidity or from an undue emphasis on the externals of worship.

The Assembly's most important document, the Confession of Faith clearly enunciates the Regulative Principle. Chapter 21 (*Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day*) begins in these terms: 'The light of nature sheweth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth 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 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.' This carefully guards God's prerogative to set out in Scripture those ways in which he should be worshipped. At the same time it warns against the sin of visible idolatry and implies that though this may be the most common way of infringing the Second Commandment, it is by no means the only one.

This chapter then proceeds to tackle a number of related themes – the triune God as the exclusive object of worship (section 2); prayer (sections

⁵⁹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, pp. 35-48, provides a detailed comparison of Calvin with the Puritans.

⁶⁰ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 127.

3-4); other parts of biblical worship (section 5); places of worship (section 6); times of worship, especially the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath (sections 7-8). Throughout the chapter the writers keep to the forefront the spirituality of true worship. Thus, they are not content to list the parts of worship; but they define their appropriate characteristics. Thus it is not enough for them to mention the reading of the Scriptures; rather, they speak of 'the reading of the Scriptures with godly fear'. Again, they do not simply write the 'singing of psalms', but add 'with grace in the heart'. And so we could go on. The prescriptions about prayer take up two whole sections.

If this part of the Confession emphasises the spiritual characteristics accompanying acceptable worship, it means less stress on items which others have considered important in the Regulative Principle. It is unclear, for example, whether this chapter has been framed to describe all the biblical parts of worship (both regular worship and that on special occasions) or more modestly to set forth the most important. I prefer the latter view since the Confession lacks any language to suggest it is being comprehensive, and it employs the rather vague word 'parts' to describe aspects of worship. Moreover, the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* produced by the same Assembly includes items like marriages, funerals, visiting the sick and arranging collections for the poor which are not mentioned here. We also know that some Puritans included formal catechising as part of their worship. This is not mentioned in this chapter. I doubt if the Assembly wished to exclude this.

Even before this chapter, the framers of the Confession have acknowledged that Scripture will not answer every problem relating to the worship of God and government of the church. In their first chapter (*of The Holy Scripture*), they state, '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.' They go on, however, to qualify this with the assertion that 'there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common in 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.' To justify these qualifications, the Confession alludes to that text which was a favourite of Calvin's (and of many others at this time) 1 Corinthians 14:40 as well as verse 26 from the same chapter (teaching all things should be done for edification) and 1 Corinthians 11:13-14. Clearly, even where Scripture does not speak directly, leaders in worship must reckon with the

general principles of God's Word, which will normally involve respect for social decorum and custom.

But what did the Confession mean by the term 'circumstances'? Fortunately, there was much contemporary discussion on this point – ironically perhaps more than on the parts or elements of worship. It was made clear that circumstances were not intrinsic to worship; they were peripheral.⁶¹ They were common to other corporate human bodies. Indeed, they embraced the sort of practical arrangements that were necessary to make sure that corporate body worked in harmony. As far as a church was concerned, they would cover such items as the time and place of services. The authorities in the church, the Kirk Session or whatever, had the right to lay down regulations on this, as long as they did not give their rulings the status of divine commandments. It was recognised, however, that there was not a clear line of demarcation between circumstances and elements of worship. A circumstance might be given by ecclesiastical authorities a religious significance. For example, a congregation might be expected to face the same direction when praying in a church building. Normally this would follow naturally from the layout and topography of the church; but sometimes the church might be designed or the people urged to face east when praying, because that was more acceptable in God's eyes. In the latter case a circumstance had effectively become a vital point of religious worship, and so could no longer be considered a circumstance or a matter of comparative indifference. This was frequently the nub of the matter in Puritan-Anglican disputes. George Gillespie, a Scottish Presbyterian minister writing against the imposition of 'English Popish Ceremonies' on the church in Scotland, declared,

The ceremonies against which we dispute are more than matters of mere order, forasmuch as sacred and mysterious significations are given unto them, and by their significations they are thought to teach men effectually sundry mysteries and duties of piety.⁶²

This is one point at which the Confession is stricter than Calvin. If circumstances are restricted to items common to other human societies, it

⁶¹ Nick Needham, in J. Ligon Duncan III (ed.), *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, Vol 2 (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), p. 237, points out that in scholastic terminology there was a contrast between circumstance and act. He quotes from John Owen *Works* Vol 15, 35, 'The schoolmen tell us that that which is so made the condition of an action, that without it the action is not to be done, is not a circumstance of it, but such an adjunct as is a necessary part.'

⁶² George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, 4:9:11.

is difficult, for example, to see how they could be applied to an ordination service for a minister or elder, a distinctively ecclesiastical ceremony. And yet that is an important subject on which Scripture gives relatively little detailed guidance. 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'.⁶³

There is one other chapter of the Westminster Confession that refers directly to the Regulative Principle. This is in the context of the theme of Christian liberty and liberty of conscience more generally. It states, '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.'⁶⁴ The last section of this chapter makes it clear that the Confession is not against the lawful use of authority by the civil or ecclesiastical power. For anyone to resist a lawful use of power is to resist an ordinance of God and to be liable to punishment. But at the same time the Confession in effect spells out two areas which limit civil or ecclesiastical authority. These authorities are to require (a) nothing that is contrary to Scripture in any area of life; and (b) nothing in addition to Scripture in matters of faith or worship. The limits, therefore, in the areas of faith and worship are more demanding than on the rest of life. This is the Confession's response to Articles 20 and 34 of the Church of England. It agrees that to act against the lawful use of ecclesiastical power is sinful and may well have important implications for the state as well. But these Articles did not sufficiently restrict the areas of proper ecclesiastical authority when they gave the church the right to decree ceremonies as long as these were not directly contrary to God's word.

⁶³ Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Westminster Confession 20:2. It is worth noting that there is a variant reading, 'God alone is Lord of the conscience ... which are in anything contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship.' To put a comma after 'Word' rather than semi-colon means less emphasis is given to the last part of the sentence. R.J.Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, p. 34.

Liberty of conscience was a crucial point for the Westminster divines as it had been for Calvin before them. Church worship, like any other communal activity, needed to be regulated. The church, therefore, was bound to lay down rules and procedures for orderly worship. But at the same time, in order to promote that order and the sincere worship of the participants, it had to make sure its arrangements contained nothing to offend the conscience. That meant it could not require people to participate in an element of worship not sanctioned by Scripture. For corporate worship was not an optional activity as far as Christians were concerned.⁶⁵

When the same Westminster Assembly produced its separate *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, it claimed a rationale which involved both attention to biblical precept and regard for those circumstances which were not set down in Scripture but were to be determined by Christian prudence. The drafters declared, 'Wherein our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God.' The Directory, therefore, may be viewed as modelling the Regulative Principle for the times it was first issued.⁶⁶ It avoided many of the pitfalls of the English Prayer Book which it was intended to replace. For one thing, it was discretionary. No one was under obligation to follow it to the letter. In Scotland those who wished could still use the older *Knoxian Book of Common Order*, which had also been a discretionary document. Besides, the Directory did not include set prayers which the minister would repeat word for word. Instead, it laid out headings or topics for prayer which could be used as guidelines. Thus, the minister would still have to rely on the help of the Holy Spirit to stir up his own gift of prayer in order that he might frame the public petitions or thanksgivings of the church in an appropriate manner.

The Westminster Directory roused little controversy. The Assembly of the Church of Scotland requested two small additions to the version it was sent from England; and these were readily allowed.⁶⁷ But perhaps the lack of controversy reflected the fact that from the start it was never intended to be imposed with any degree of strictness. This, of course, meant that in practice it might be easily ignored, and it does seem that worship in Presbyterian circles moved steadily in an antiliturgical di-

⁶⁵ See Edmund P. Clowney in chapter 5 of D. A. Carson (ed.), *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), pp. 115-7.

⁶⁶ So Needham, *Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, p. 236. R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, pp. 41-51, takes a different view, seeing the Directory as inconsistent with the teaching of the Westminster Confession.

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 218-220.

rection.⁶⁸ Moreover, Horton Davies is accurate in his description of the Directory as a *via media* between Independency and Scottish Presbyterianism.⁶⁹ Both sides had to make compromises, and in a political situation where neither party gained the ascendancy over the other, each side was bound to take what it wanted from the Directory.

There can be no doubt that the Westminster standards on the Regulative Principle are more precise than those of Calvin. This was inevitable since in the British context there was no longer any room for optimism that vestiges of the Roman mass or other undesirable ceremonies would disappear with the passage of time or with a favourable government. In fact, the preface to the Directory indicates that some Roman Catholics had been optimistic that the Book of Common Prayer would eventually lead the English nation back into their allegiance: 'Papists boasted that the book was a compliance with them in a great part of their service; and so were not a little confirmed in their superstition and idolatry, expecting rather our return to them, than endeavouring the reformation of themselves.' However, while the Westminster Assembly had to be more precise in proscribing improper ceremonies, they took very seriously Calvin's concern that true worship should not be identified with externals. Hence the importance of their describing the spiritual characteristics accompanying the elements of worship. This emphasis continues into the Directory when (for instance) it tells the congregation how to prepare or and to behave during public worship; while it offers detailed advice to preachers on how to craft and deliver their sermons. Thus, the Westminster documents avoid both pettiness and an imposed liturgy – which were among the chief criticisms of the Book of Common Prayer. These documents also leave room for men of the outlook of John Robinson who had said to the parting Pilgrim Fathers, 'I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of his holy word.'⁷⁰ There is no suggestion that the Westminster Assembly thought that it had said the last word on all the issues it handled – to say nothing of those areas where it did not express a judgment. This is not to say that it thought the Regulative Principle might one day be refuted from Scripture; there was, however, plenty of scope for working out its implications.

It is worth noting that at the time of the Westminster Assembly there was no sign of the phrase 'purity of worship' which features in conserva-

⁶⁸ Joseph A. Pipa in *The Worship of God*, p. 151.

⁶⁹ Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 138. The whole section from pages 127 to 142 of Davies' book is an invaluable commentary on the Directory in its historical context.

⁷⁰ Cited in Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans*, p. 37.

tive Presbyterian circles in modern Scotland. Such an expression appears to date from 1707, in particular from the Act for Securing the Protestant Religion and Presbyterian Church Government, which was distinct from but made an indispensable condition towards the forthcoming Treaty of Union between the English and Scottish Parliaments. By this Act it was agreed that ‘the foresaid true Protestant Religion, contained in the above-mentioned Confession of Faith (i.e. the Westminster Confession), with the form and purity of worship presently in use within this Church, and its Presbyterian Church Government and Discipline ... shall remain and continue unalterable’.⁷¹ It is not entirely clear why the expression ‘purity of worship’ was used; but some light on this may be obtained through an Act of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that very year against ‘Innovations in the Worship of God’. This Assembly Act spoke of its satisfaction with the earlier reformation in the Church of Scotland, but saw that as threatened by recent developments, which were probably the use of certain liturgies by Episcopalian sympathisers: ‘the purity of religion, and particularly of divine worship, and uniformity therein, is a signal blessing to the Church of God, and ... it hath been the great happiness of this Church, ever since her reformation from Popery, to have enjoyed and maintained the same in a great measure, and ... any attempts made for the introduction of innovations in the worship of God therein have been of fatal and dangerous consequence.’⁷² Here there is an allusion to purity of worship under the broader rubric of purity of religion, the latter being a biblical expression from the Letter of James, though it is doubtful that the sense corresponds, since James does not have the public context of worship in mind.⁷³ It seems that the Church of Scotland in 1707 was in an ultra-defensive frame of mind. There were uncertainties as to what would happen with the union of parliaments. There was an understandable fear that distinctive Scottish institutions like its Church would be swallowed up by its southern neighbour. There were also fears arising from the activities of Episcopalians unsympathetic to the current constitutional and ecclesiastical arrangements in Scotland. To this we can probably add more general fears engendered by consciousness of the dawn of a new era where more scope was being given to religious toleration and where sceptical and deist notions were being freely discussed. In this climate it is understandable that the leaders in the Church of Scotland

⁷¹ Dated January 16, 1707. I have used the text as set out in Appendix II of A. Ian Dunlop, *William Carstares and the Kirk by Law Established* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1967), pp. 152-3.

⁷² Charles McCrie, *The Public Worship of Presbyterian Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1892), p. 259.

⁷³ Jas 1:27.

should react by making exaggerated claims for their religious settlement. They would incorporate them in 1711 into the vows to be taken by all ministers and probationers, who were to 'own the purity of worship presently authorised and practised in this Church' as well as its Presbyterian government and discipline. As a result, from 1711 the Church of Scotland tended to commit itself to what might be described as an almost perfectionist view of its institutions.⁷⁴ At the same time there was real danger that it might ignore the weakness of all religious institutions - that none can escape the danger of formality - and might overlook the inwardness of spiritual religious worship. In the longer term it has probably left the impression that the Regulative Principle means the same as being against innovation.

MODERN CONCERNS

The Westminster Confession has given credal status to the Regulative Principle. It has not solved all the problems associated with it. Notably, there has been no full agreement on all the elements or parts of public worship. In some ways this is a glaring gap because one of the leading biblical texts to support the Principle is 'see that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it'.⁷⁵ Historically the Principle has been used almost invariably to argue against the intrusion into the church of ceremonies unwarranted by Scripture. (In the Anglican-Puritan debates concern was fixed on ceremonies that had been retained from the old Roman sacramentalism or were to be re-introduced after they had been abolished.) Rarely, if ever, has the Principle been used to contend for the introduction of biblical elements of worship which for some reason have been omitted.⁷⁶ And yet, if a major plank of the Regulative Principle is that God has the right to determine his own worship and his own glory and honour are sullied when humans overturn that right, then this applies just as much to situations where some element in God's worship is being denied as to where some human addition is being made. In the light of this it would surely be desirable to set out as full a list as possible

⁷⁴ There is an interesting contrast with the previous formula (from 1694) to be subscribed by ministers and probationers, according to which they undertook to 'observe uniformity of worship, and of the administration of all public ordinances within this Church as the same are at present performed and allowed'. This strikes a much less confident note.

⁷⁵ Deut. 12:32, one of the proof-texts cited for Westminster Confession 21:1.

⁷⁶ There are passages of Scripture, notably Ps 50: 8-15 and Mal. 1:6-14, which have as their emphasis the denial to God of aspects of worship which are properly his.

of biblical elements of worship to ensure that nothing essential was being omitted.⁷⁷ That is not to say that every service of worship has to embrace all these elements. (Even the Westminster standards distinguish between occasional and regular elements.) Perhaps there has been a tendency to shirk this task both because of its inherent difficulty and because it might overemphasise the external as opposed to the internal aspects of worship. After all, does not our worship often fall short in the lack not so much of basic elements but of the spiritual graces that should accompany them? But in the anti-authoritarian 21st century western ecclesiastical scene where talk of church power in ordinances seems to emanate from an alien world, there may well be benefit in churches spelling out what they consider the demands of biblical worship. That at least would dispel the common impression that sincerity is everything in worship.

A closely related difficulty concerns the distinction between elements and circumstances. As we have seen, even in the 17th century the distinction between the two was not clear cut. Today difficulties remain, not so much because of attempts by authority to impose certain ceremonies as a necessary part of worship but because of the intermingling of a number of different traditions. To take an important example, some people have suggested that the use of instrumental music to support church singing is a separate element of worship and so in need of specific scriptural authorisation; others, however, see it as a circumstance and so to be assessed in the light of Christian prudence.⁷⁸ And even if we consider singing in itself, while most are agreed that this is an element of worship, there remains an influential minority view that this is a circumstance in the sense it is simply a vehicle for a more basic activity like prayer, instruction or exhortation.⁷⁹ If there can be disagreement at such a fundamental level, no modern Reformed denomination would be wise to insist on its own understanding of the Regulative Principle at the expense of others. We have to reckon that other churches in pursuit of fidelity to the same Principle have reached somewhat different conclusions. In fact, there will always remain areas of debate on the outworking of the Principle; perhaps this is to prevent us becoming so satisfied with the externals of

⁷⁷ Useful recent lists can be found from Clowney, *Worship: Adoration and Action*, p. 117, from Terry L. Johnson in chapter 1 of *The Worship of God* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 18-19 and from John M. Frame *Worship in Spirit and in Truth* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1996), pp. 55-61.

⁷⁸ Clowney, *Worship: Adoration and Action*, p. 117 argues the view that musical accompaniment is not in itself a religious observance, but 'only a culturally conditioned way of supporting singing'.

⁷⁹ Frame, *Worship in Spirit and in Truth*, p. 53.

worship that the inward aspects of piety are neglected. It is worth recalling Calvin's remark that there was a practical advantage in a divergence in local ceremonies so that people did not think piety rested exclusively in them. This does not, however, undermine the validity of the Principle as such. William Cunningham puts it this way, 'Difficulties and differences of opinions may arise about details, even when sound judgment and good sense are brought to bear upon the interpretation and application of the principle; but this affords no ground for denying or doubting the truth or soundness of the principle in itself.'⁸⁰

Historically, the Principle has most commonly been applied in the area of liberty of conscience. It has proved a formidable defence for those individuals and groups who have wanted to resist what they have seen as the unwarranted intrusions of ecclesiastical or civil authorities. And one section of the Westminster Confession that features the Regulative Principle, as we have seen, is that on *Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience*. This, of course, ties in with what I have said about the almost exclusive association of the Principle with additions to Scriptural injunctions on worship. It is much more straightforward for state or church authorities to compel the commission than the omission of some duty. No doubt, the appeal to freedom of conscience will always remain a powerful reason for upholding the Principle, because it is biblical teaching that believers are not to fall under the sway of the teachings of men and because liberty is such an emotive concept. Now, liberty may also be misused, as both Calvin and the Westminster divines knew well. Both, therefore, insisted on the lawful use of church and of state power. This balance may well be lacking today in a culture which has become excessively individualistic. It is easy to make protests today against church authority, however legitimately exercised, by switching to or even establishing another denomination – steps that were not such a straightforward choice in the 16th and 17th centuries. To offset this tendency the Regulative Principle needs to be set in proper context as a guard against illegitimate use of church power, not against all church power as such. In particular, it is not to be seen as a device to baulk all innovations.⁸¹ Calvin recognised that a church may have good reason from time to time to introduce new ceremonies just as it might have cause to get rid of ceremonies or practices which had once been useful but had over time become effectively superstitions.

⁸⁰ Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 32.

⁸¹ Clowney, *Worship: Adoration and Action*, p. 115, makes this distinction: 'what it opposes is the introduction of new *observances* in worship; it has no quarrel with any culturally appropriate arrangement of the *circumstances* of worship.'

Certainly, Calvin did urge caution. The innovations were not to be introduced hastily and their usefulness was to be carefully explained to the congregations. In Presbyterian circles, however, appeal to the Regulative Principle has sometimes unfortunately been a knee-jerk reaction to proposals deserving more serious and considered reflection.

Broadly speaking, the Regulative Principle has two main aspects. It has a God-ward dimension insisting on God's right to regulate his worship by fallen man as he sees fit; and it has a human dimension that focuses on the right of the conscience to be guided only by biblical teaching in its expression of worship. Undoubtedly there has been an historical imbalance with much more attention being given to the human aspect, that is, issues of liberty of conscience, than to the divine aspect. Leaders in Reformed churches today need to be aware of this and to direct their teaching to ensure that God's prerogatives in establishing his own worship are fully recognised.⁸² Calvin provides an excellent explanation for this, 'I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God.'⁸³ Human nature has not changed from the 16th to the 21st century. We would, therefore, do well to devote ourselves to the proper teaching of this truth, however difficult it is to apply in detail. It will not do to leave the Regulative Principle stuck in history as an understandable reaction to the gross ceremonialism and sacramentalism of the medieval Roman Church, but with little relevance for today.

⁸² There is also a place for further theological study, not least to embrace the point well made by David Petersen in chapter 3 of D.A. Carson (ed.), *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), p. 52 that 'acceptable worship is something that *God makes possible for us*, through Christ'.

⁸³ Calvin, *Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 1:128. *Corpus Reformatorum* 6: 461.