

Why the Regulative Principle Matters

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[0:01] So, last time we looked at two biblical principles that serve as a foundation for the regulative principle of worship. Again, the regulative principle says we ought to do only what God commands when we worship.

Alternatively, the normative principle says we are permitted to do whatever we want as long as Scripture doesn't forbid it. And those two biblical principles that serve as a foundation for the regulative principle are, number one, a holy church, and number two, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Now, by holy church, I mean the church is a people set apart by God for God. We are to be distinct from the rest of the world in numerous ways, but none more so than when we meet for corporate worship.

Why? It is because our worship of God is the most important and most distinct thing we do as the church. And as we saw in both the Old and New Testaments, God shows great concern for how His people worship Him.

In fact, He regulates how His people worship Him. Then, when we take the principle of a holy church and we combine it with the belief in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, it stands to reason that we would be very careful to worship God only as He directs.

[1:30] When God's set-apart people do the most important thing we are called to do as God's set-apart people, surely we should submit to His Word, to the authority of Scripture.

But more to the point, we should trust that God's Word prescribes everything we need to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Well, if those two principles aren't enough to convince us of the regulative principle of worship, Ligon Duncan offers several more in his book, *Does God Care How We Worship?*

He names 11, in fact. And I'd like to go through each of these at least briefly this morning. So, Duncan begins with the nature of God.

He says, God's own nature, who God is, determines how we should worship Him. Previously, I read from Deuteronomy 4.

But let me read a portion of this again. And this helps us to understand why God issued the second commandment, which says, you shall not make for yourself a carved image. Here's what the Lord says in verses 15 through 19.

[2:41] Therefore, watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.

And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven. And when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you will be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them things that the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.

So why does God not allow anyone to create physical images of Him? Going back centuries in church history to the icons and the images debate within the church, many people argued that creating icons and images of God actually helps our worship.

They said it gives us something tangible to look at. So why does God forbid it? Well, he says, since you saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourself.

In other words, they were not to make an image of God because they had not seen God. And why had they not seen God? Well, in John chapter 4, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

[4:35] So whatever it means to worship in spirit and in truth, you'll notice that Jesus grounds the requirements for worship on the basis of God's nature and really what He's revealed to us.

And God does the same thing in Deuteronomy 4. Therefore, because of who God is, the Israelites had not seen Him. And because they had not seen Him, they were forbidden from creating a carved image of Him.

And in John chapter 4, we worship God in spirit and truth because of who God is. God is spirit, therefore, we must worship Him in spirit. And we could take this a bit further because how we worship is going to shape even our understanding of God.

As I've said, our worship reflects His character, or at least it should reflect His character. When we worship according to what He has explicitly revealed, we reflect His character rightly.

And when we worship according to our own ideas, our own whims, our own opinions, we obscure His character. This is why the second commandment exists.

[5:42] If you create an image of God and you use it in your worship, that is going to change the way people see God, and not for the better. You see, the medium is the message.

In fact, Neil Postman, writing in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, way back in 1985, he talks about this. It's really interesting that he made this observation. Of course, in his book, he's arguing that television is changing the message itself, whether it's news or religious content or whatever. However, it's making everything less serious. And we might ask, how does going from words on a printed page to visual images on a TV change the message?

Well, in a very real sense, the medium is the message. And here's what Postman writes, and notice the illustration he uses. In studying the Bible as a young man, I found intimations of the idea that forms of media favor particular kinds of content and therefore are capable of taking command of a culture.

I refer specifically to the Decalogue, the second commandment of which prohibits the Israelites from making concrete images of anything as a representation of God.

[7:07] Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water beneath the earth. I wondered then, as so many others have, as to why the God of these people would have included instructions on how they were to symbolize or not symbolize their experience of him.

It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture.

We may hazard a guess that people who are being asked to embrace an abstract universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas of him in any concrete iconic forms.

The God of the Jews was to exist in the word and through the word an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking.

Icons thus became blasphemy so that a new kind of God could enter a culture. People like ourselves who were in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this mosaic injunction.

[8:31] Now, as far as I know, Neil Postman was not a Christian, but he has some really intriguing insight here. He doesn't exactly say it this way, but he recognizes that a God who is unchangeable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, to borrow language from the 1689 Confession, cannot be reduced to the form of a picture or a statue.

And if we tried, we would change the way we see God. And that's why God forbids carved images of him. And for the Israelites in Moses' day, this was a radical approach to worship versus the rest of the world.

All of Canaan and Egypt, all of their false gods were represented by idols, something tangible. But the true and living God said, I have not revealed my appearance to you, so you are not permitted to create anything in my supposed likeness.

As Postman says, the God of the Jews was to exist in the word and through the word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking, which makes sense if our God is truly incomprehensible.

Ligon Duncan writes, the how of worship is vital to our growth in grace and in the knowledge of the one true God because it contributes to our grasp of the one true God.

[10:02] Often we hear and agree with the dictum that we become like what we worship. But the reformed understanding of worship teaches us that it is also true that we become like how we worship.

the medium is the message or at the very least the medium shapes the message. So, God reveals how he should be worshipped so that it reflects his character, it reflects his nature and if we worship any other way we obscure his nature.

So, Duncan says we worship according to the regulative principle because first of all the nature of God. and second we must recognize the creator creature distinction.

Psalm 100 verse 3 says know that the Lord he is God it is he who made us and we are his we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

Numbers 23 19 very plainly says God is not a man or the son of man. Think of Isaiah's vision in Isaiah chapter 6.

[11:23] We're told in the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple and above him stood the seraphim and one called to another and said holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts the whole earth is full of his glory.

and the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called and the house was filled with smoke and I said woe is me for I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the King the Lord of hosts.

The distinction between the creator and his creatures is quite vivid in that case. the whole earth is filled with God's glory while Isaiah a mere man trembles at his presence.

And of course we see this distinction all throughout the Bible it's unmistakable the Baptist confession puts it this way the distance between God and these creatures is so great that they could never have attained the reward of life except by God's voluntary condescension.

Now as we think about how this relates to worship consider what we read in Isaiah 55 verses 8 and 9 for my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are my ways declares the Lord for as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

[13:03] there's an infinite gulf between the creator and his creatures. So how much sense does it make to think that we the creatures are capable of determining how the creator ought to be worshipped?

And yet this is precisely what happens under the normative principle. Under the normative principle the creatures take it upon themselves to go beyond what the creator has revealed to be acceptable worship of him.

But surely you see how presumptuous that is. How can we acknowledge this creator creature distinction while simultaneously telling the creator that his word regarding worship isn't sufficient? We need to add something to it. Well third on Duncan's list is the nature of revelation and knowledge.

Here's what he writes. As revelation is the divine foundation of human knowledge of salvation so also is revelation the divine foundation of our worship of God which is itself when properly understood a response to revelation.

[14:22] And if worship is to be a right response to revelation then it must be revelationally directed. so what he's alluding to here is that there are certain things we can know about God through general

revelation.

For example we can know that there is a God just by looking at his creation. Psalm 19 the heavens declare the glory of God the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

But general revelation is insufficient to know how for instance we might be saved. According to Romans 1 general revelation is only enough to condemn us.

Paul says for what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them for his invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made so they are left without excuse.

So general revelation goes only so far when we look at the stars and the trees and so on creation does not tell us how we can be saved.

[15:39] We can know there is a God but we cannot know how to be reconciled to him. God has to specifically and explicitly reveal that to us which he does through his word.

Think of Abraham. Abraham may have known there was a God but he wouldn't have known to leave his home for the land of Canaan unless God had come to him and told him that.

The Baptist Confession says the light of nature and the works of creation and providence so clearly demonstrate the goodness wisdom and power of God that people are left without excuse.

However these demonstrations are not sufficient to give the knowledge of God and his will that is necessary for salvation. And Duncan makes the point that the same is actually true for worship.

Not just salvation but also for worship. We can know there is a God to be worshipped through general revelation but we don't know how to worship him at least not properly without special revelation.

[16:48] And that's pretty obvious in the case of those Gentiles that Paul was speaking of in Romans chapter 1. He says for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened claiming to be wise they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

So they instinctively knew there was a God to be worshipped but apart from special revelation they didn't know how so they invented their own way which was of course idolatry.

In short we must rely on God's special revelation to know how he is to be worshipped unless he specifically reveals it to us it will not be appropriate worship and let's not forget that worship requires a kind of dialogue between us and God God calls and we respond God reveals how he is to be worshipped and we respond accordingly he says here is the sacrifice I demand and we offer that very sacrifice no strange fire no unauthorized fire nothing else nothing more nothing less fourth Duncan points us back to the second commandment we've already talked about this but the second commandment establishes the regulative principle of worship within the enduring moral law why is it in the moral law as opposed to say the ceremonial law because it's a reflection of

God's unchanging character God does not permit us to worship him in a way other than he clearly reveals because what he reveals is based on his very nature and because this commandment is a part of the abiding moral law it's repeated even in the New Testament Paul tells the Thessalonians your faith in God has gone forth everywhere so that we need not say anything for they themselves report how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God now it's pretty easy to reduce the second commandment to a prohibition of what or whom we worship however the second commandment is also about how we worship that's pretty clear when we read Deuteronomy 4 or when we read about the Israelites forming a golden calf in the wilderness to worship the God who delivered them from Egypt not only should we not worship false gods but we should also not worship the true God in false ways next Duncan implores us to consider the nature of faith the nature of faith this is what John Owen calls the argument from faith Duncan writes since faith is essential to true worship the conditions of worship must accord with the exercise of true faith so we cannot do anything pleasing to God apart from faith right Hebrews 11 6 without faith it is impossible to please God and Paul says in Romans 14 23 whatever is not from faith is sin and what is faith at its essence it is trusting in what

[20:50] God has revealed to us so if we were to worship apart from his revelation that would be by definition unfaithful let me read from

chapter 14 of the Baptist confession on the subject of faith it says by this faith Christians believe to be true everything revealed in the word recognizing it as the authority of God himself they also perceive!

that the word is more excellent than every other writing and everything else in the world because it displays the glory of God in his attributes the excellence of Christ in his nature and offices and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in his activities and operations so what God reveals to us displays his glory and by faith we recognize his revelation as true and authoritative so whatever he reveals about how we should worship him will also display his glory and by faith we trust in what he has revealed and we treat it as authoritative sixth Duncan points to what he calls the doctrine of carefulness he writes the Bible makes it exceedingly clear that we ought to be careful in worship our God is a consuming fire and not to be trifled with the severity of those punishments inflicted upon those who from time to time offer to

God apparently in good faith unprescribed worship catches our attention the stories of Nadab and Abihu and their strange fire and Abusa and David and the ark but of course people will argue that these examples all come from a time when the ceremonial law was enforced!

right? And that's true but keep in mind something Paul said about the Old Testament he told the Romans for whatever was written in former days that is in the Old Testament scripture was written for our instruction so while the same rules precisely are no longer enforced these warnings about how we worship God in the Old Testament should still give us reason to pause and consider carefully how we worship God even today we are still a people created to worship God and it stands to reason that this great responsibility not to mention privilege but great responsibility would make us careful about how we worship him again Jesus said referring to new covenant worship true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and truth for the father is seeking such people to worship him as they say the road to destruction is paved with good intentions right good intentions! are not enough for true worship! we should submit ourselves to the authority of the Bible and really neglect no part of it well seventh we need to consider the church's derivative authority in other words whatever authority the church has derives from Christ we are not in a position to issue our own laws or create for ourselves new norms in Matthew 28 Jesus says all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded!

[24:53] you we declare the word of Christ we uphold the word of Christ but we do not have the authority to add to it or to subtract from it or change any part of it as James Bannerman the Scottish theologian said the church has given no authority to require obedience to its own commands and it is given no authority to require participation in ordinances of its own making so when it comes to worship we are simply not in a position to create something new we don't have that level of authority instead our authority that has actually been given to us is subservient to Christ authority he issues the commands and we simply obey and we teach them eighth we should consider the doctrine of

Christian freedom now it might seem strange to some people that we would use the doctrine of Christian freedom or more specifically liberty of conscience to defend the the regulative principle of worship but listen to how the Baptist confession articulates this God alone is Lord of the conscience and he has left it free from human doctrines and commandments that are in any way contrary to his word or not contained in it so believing such commands or obeying such doctrines out of conscience is a betrayal of true liberty of conscience requiring implicit faith or absolute and blind obedience destroys liberty of conscience and reason as well it really should come as no surprise that when the Bible speaks of Christian liberty as it does it does not mean liberty from the word of God it means as the confession says that we are free from human doctrines and commandments in Romans 14 for example Paul says as for the one who is weak in faith welcome him but not quarrel over opinions one person believes he may eat anything while the weak person eats only vegetables let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed him who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another it is before his own master that he stands or falls and he will be upheld for the Lord is able to make him stand Paul writes something similar in Galatians 4 as well as Colossians 2

you see the doctrine of Christian freedom really isn't conducive to the normative principle of worship because in the normative principle we might very well impose extra biblical practices on one another which could violate liberty of conscience so the only way to ensure Christian freedom in the church is to follow the regulative principle which says we do not worship God in any other way than what he has prescribed ninth Duncan lists the nature of true piety the nature of true piety he says God repeatedly expresses his pleasure with and delight in those who do exactly what he says for example listen to what the Lord says in Isaiah 66 thus says the Lord heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool what is the house that you would build for me and what is the place of my rest and these things excuse me my hands have made and so all these things came to be declares the Lord but this is the one to whom I will look he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word this is what we might call the definition of true religion it is marked by people who are humble who are contrite in spirit and who tremble at the word of God as opposed to those who proudly choose their own way in Deuteronomy! 12 God warns the people of Israel everything that I command you you shall be careful to do you shall not add to it or take from it and again Jesus says true worshipers will worship the father in spirit and truth that is the truth of God so true piety comes when we are willing to humbly!

[30:14] submit to God's word and not choose our own way by adding to it or subtracting from it tenth we should consider our tendency to idolatry we see this time and time again throughout Israel's history perhaps the most notable example is when they built the golden calf very soon after God had freed them from their slavery in Egypt we are just prone to embrace idolatry in various forms John Calvin called our hearts perpetual idol factories Martin Luther said we are inclined to idolatry by nature and coming to us by inheritance it seems pleasant again this is what Paul says about the Gentiles in Romans chapter one they exchanged the truth about

God for a lie and worshipped the creature rather than the creator God made us to be worshippers and if we don't worship him we will find something else to worship it may be ourselves it may be a sports team it may be a job it may be money it may be something else but we're going to worship something or as Bob Dillon put it it may be the devil or it may!

the! but you're going to have to serve somebody so if we are prone to wander into idolatry what is the best way to safeguard against this in our worship as the corporate church well it won't be by following the normative principle which really is by definition a slippery slope I read from John Calvin last time who said when we are left at liberty all we are able to do is go astray and then when once we have turned aside from the right path there is no end to our wonderings until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions and there are many examples of this throughout church history by the middle ages churches across Europe collected physical objects believed to be associated with the saints bones clothing fragments or items supposedly linked to even biblical figures and these relics became objects of worship some of the early

Christians they honored martyrs of the faith and they remembered them on the anniversaries of their deaths and while that might be innocent enough over the centuries this practice expanded dramatically eventually people were praying to the saints that went before them as though they were intercessors before God in the same vein as Jesus Christ they began celebrating feast days and holding processions dedicated to those saints devotion to Mary expanded significantly in the medieval church people began referring to her as the queen of heaven they would pray to her they would build shrines to her some have gone as far as to call her a co-redeemer with Christ images of Christ Mary the saints have become increasingly prominent in churches throughout history people kneel in worship to these images now proponents of the normative principle might go back to places like

Deuteronomy 4 or the second commandment and say no you can't do that because God forbids it the normative principle doesn't allow anything that God explicitly forbids but you see that's the problem with the slippery slope the first step may not be expressly forbidden in scripture the second step may not be expressly forbidden in scripture but by the time you get to the third or the fourth step you've grown accustomed to all of the justifications that came before that seem perfectly reasonable and now it seems perfectly reasonable just to continue on a bit further despite the warnings in scripture in fact you may now look at these warnings in scripture and say well these

must not apply here they must mean something else so how do we safeguard against these endless wanderings into idolatry and various practices that are unbiblical in our worship well it's the regulative principle we restrain ourselves to only what God prescribes for true and proper worship pretty simple right number eleven the testimony of church history the testimony of church history now

[35:29] I considered leaving this one out because as I've mentioned over and over again history is very messy throughout history we see lots of churches worshiping gods in lots of different ways some have followed the regulative principle some have followed the normative principle so why consider the testimony of the church throughout history well as Duncan says church history does not supply a normative authority for church worship but it does supply a didactic authority that we would be foolish to ignore in other words church history is not going to determine how we should worship we leave that to scripture alone but it can inform how we should worship so for example when we look through church history we find that the healthiest periods of the church were marked by simple bible centered worship in short they held to the regulative principle we also see that a decline in biblical worship often accompanies a decline in religion altogether in fact we're seeing this right now throughout the western world as more and more churches abandon biblical worship not to mention orthodoxy people in those churches are suddenly thinking why am

I here when you reduce christian worship to secular entertainment and the church becomes little more than a social gathering why would you continue to come they can find much better entertainment somewhere else and there are a million other social clubs and gatherings that they could be a part of so eventually they leave the church and these churches throughout the west are dwindling especially those that have embraced unorthodox unbiblical doctrines I mentioned before that if I had to guess I would say most churches follow the normative principle of worship and I'd say that's kind of by default if you don't know or you haven't been taught the regulative principle of worship if you've never considered the subject in depth you will likely assume the normative principle now this is purely anecdotal but here's what I've noticed from talking to various people most churches are not doing anything radical in their worship necessarily but they're not necessarily following the regulative principle either so what they're experiencing is a very slow slide down the slippery slope they're not doing anything that's expressly forbidden in scripture but a culture of shallowness has developed and I'll give you an example here's what the bible says about singing in worship be filled with the spirit addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs seeking singing and making melody to the

Lord with your heart so the command is for the congregation to sing and to help the congregation sing of course churches have song leaders and musicians who are given microphones and amplifiers and the volumes on these microphones and these amplifiers they get turned up a bit more and a bit more and a bit more and the song leaders and the musicians they're put on a stage in front of the congregation so they now become a visual focal point and then the lights get turned down in the sanctuary and the spotlights are cast upon the song leaders and the musicians on the stage so now all of the focus is on the stage and the sound they're producing is now drowning out the congregation and then what well the congregation in large part stops singing and they begin watching and merely listening and now the church is no longer doing what they were commanded to do which is addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs slowly but surely they've become mere spectators so these churches haven't done anything that violates something God forbids but over time they've sort of unintentionally created an environment where the church is no longer doing what God commands them to do you see that's the slippery slope of the normative principle and I've often found that people in those churches are left with a real sense of dissatisfaction they they don't exactly know why something feels wrong but they sense it nonetheless not everyone but some do and what I've heard from many people is that it just feels empty or shallow it just doesn't offer the robust foundation that the regulative principle provides knowing that here we stand on the word of God let's stop right here Lord willing we'll pick this up next time and we'll begin looking at some of the more practical aspects of the regulative principle of worship let's pray holy and gracious father you are the high and holy one who inhabits eternity and

we are but dust before you yet you have called us to draw near and to worship you through your son and we thank you that you have not left us to wonder in our own imaginations but have spoken to us in your word and you've shown us the way that is pleasing in your sight so give us humble hearts that tremble at your word teach us instead to delight in what you have revealed and may our worship reflect your holiness and honor your truth and lead us to know you better and better keep your church faithful
Lord we ask these things through Jesus Christ our mediator and king amen a ending