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# ORDAINED SERVANT



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# ORDAINED SERVANT

## Statement Of Purpose

*Ordained Servant* exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

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# THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF WORSHIP

A paper presented at the 2001 International Conference of Reformed Churches

By G. I. Williamson

In this paper I will attempt to do four things:

1. First, I will try to state clearly what the Regulative Principle of Worship<sup>1</sup> is, and where it came from. It is my contention that it is an apostolic principle taught as clearly in the New Testament as in the Old, and that this precept—and the practice prescribed by it—is normative for the church until Jesus returns. I will refer to this principle through the rest of my paper as the RPW.
2. I will then refer to John Calvin's teaching and practice.
3. I will then go on to show how this principle was faithfully *articulated* in the Reformed catechisms and confessions, and *applied* with integrity in the worship practice of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches during the historical period in which our Reformed Confessions were formulated.
4. Then I will endeavor to show how Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in recent times have stretched the RPW to the breaking point.
5. And then, finally, I will state my conclusions and suggest a few modest reforms that are urgently needed.

## 1 - The RPW Stated and Defended

Let me begin by simply stating what I understand the RPW to be. It is, quite simply, the application of the fundamental principle of the Reformation ('Sola Scriptura') to the sphere of worship. And it has never been expressed more succinctly than it is in the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism asks (in Q. 96) "*What does God require in the second commandment?*" The answer is: "*That we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded.*" As Zacharius Ursinus—an author (if not

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will not discuss the application of this principle to different *kinds* of worship, such as private, family, informal, formal, etc. My focus here is the public worship of the congregations, under the supervision of duly appointed pastors and elders.

*the* author) of this catechism—explained it, "The end, or design of this commandment is, that the true God...be worshipped under a proper form...such as is pleasing to him, and not with such worship as that which is according to the imagination and device of man...[and] that the worship of God as prescribed be preserved pure and uncorrupted."<sup>2</sup> Or to say the same thing more briefly "*To worship God truly, is to worship him in the manner which he himself has prescribed.*"<sup>3</sup>

## Direct Scriptural Support for the RPW

It is important to note that the word "commanded" is *not* to be taken to mean only what is found in Scripture in the form of direct, verbal commandments. There is no direct, verbal commandment, for instance, that says—in so many words—that we are to baptize infants. That is why the Reformed confessions not only used the word 'commanded', but also such words as 'instituted' and 'prescribed.' If a worship *practice* can be shown to have apostolic sanction or approval, then that worship practice has the same normative force as it would have if it came in the form of a direct commandment. Or, to say the same thing in a different way, if we find that a certain practice had apostolic sanction then that is sufficient proof that the practice is something the Lord has commanded. In other words, we do not find that everything commanded by our Lord is recorded in Scripture *in the form of* a direct commandment. But by good and necessary inference drawn from Scripture we can be certain as to what does—or, conversely, does *not*—have divine authorization.

<sup>2</sup> *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. Grand Rapids MI, 1954, p. 517

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. To much the same effect is the Westminster Shorter Catechism answer #51: "*The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.*" The Westminster Larger Catechism further explains that the commandment forbids "*all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever...and opposing the worship and ordinances which God hath appointed.*"

The RPW is clearly taught in the Old Testament Scriptures. Even those who want to modify—or entirely eliminate—the RPW are willing to concede as much.<sup>4</sup> Once the central sanctuary was established in Israel (in the Tabernacle, in the time of Moses, and later on in the Temple, in the time of Solomon) the only place at which sacrifices could be offered up to God, with his approval, was at that location. No legitimate worship could be offered up to God except in dependence upon the prescribed priestly mediation that was effected by way of these sacrifices. For “without the shedding of blood” at the place and in the manner prescribed by God, there could not then—as there cannot now—be a remission of sin (Heb. 9:22). The relationship of the Old Testament believer to the Tabernacle or Temple, in other words, was analogous to our own relationship to the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 12). Just as in ancient Israel people worshiped toward<sup>5</sup> God’s holy temple, so today there is still only one center to which we all must look by faith, namely, the heavenly sanctuary where our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus, makes intercession for us.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Steve Schlissel, who rejects the RPW as a mere human invention, nevertheless writes: “The locus classicus, the most frequent and important textual citation for the Regulative Principle of Worship is Deuteronomy 12:32. ‘What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.’ But here again, the regulativists [*Rev. Schlissel’s name for those who still believe the RPW (GIW)*] either ignore or overlook the setting. By isolating this particular verse from its context, its beauty is marred, its force is neutralized, and its power compromised.

Deuteronomy 12:32 appears in an epoch-marking context: we have here a major step in the progress of the religion of the covenant. Before this, covenant keepers could offer sacrifice wherever they felt like it. Henceforth sacrifice would be severely restricted. It would be restricted, as we said up front, in regard to place, in regard to people, and in regard to particulars.

*It is here, then, in Deuteronomy 12 that we do indeed find introduced what might properly be called the Regulative Principle of Worship: If it is commanded, you’d better do it; if it is not commanded, it is forbidden (see verse 32). Don’t look to the pagans, either. They do thoroughly whacked-out things that I abominate (verses 28-31). You just do what I say and only what I say” [italics mine, GIW].*

<sup>5</sup> OPC Pastor Peter Wallace says the Old Testament saints could not offer acceptable worship to God in their Synagogues because worship could only take place at the Temple. This clearly needs qualification. It is clear that there could be no true worship *except in connection with, and in dependence upon, what was constantly going on in the temple.* But this *was* possible spiritually whether a believer was 40 feet, or 40 miles from the Temple per se. (Note Psalm 5:7; Daniel 6:10 etc.)

<sup>6</sup> I would refer the reader, here, to my more extensive review of the Old Testament evidence for the regulative principle (<http://homepage2.rcnn-ect.com/giwopc/>).

When our Lord met with his disciples after his resurrection he said: “*All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*”<sup>7</sup> The words in bold type are of great importance in understanding the RPW in the Christian Church because it is clear from these words that there is no legitimate authority in the Christian Church which is not found *in*, or received *from*, the Lord Jesus Christ. Even the Apostles—who together with Christ and his prophets are the Church’s foundation (Eph. 2:20)—had no authority except what they received from him. I therefore believe Calvin understood these momentous words of our Lord correctly when he wrote: “he sends away the Apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver, from hand to hand (as we say), what he has entrusted to them.”

Jesus had shown his apostles how man-made traditions have a way of nullifying the commandments of God (Mk. 7:1-13). And that the apostles did not forget this lesson is clearly evident in their writings. They did not teach any *doctrine* that they had not received from their Lord (Cf. Gal. 1, Jude 4). But neither did they sanction any worship *practice* that they did not receive from him. This is clear from what the Apostle Paul wrote, concerning the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, “...*I received from the Lord*” he writes, “*that which I also delivered to you...*” (1 Cor. 11:23). Since he was careful to pass on exactly what he had received from his Lord, it is not surprising that he spoke authoritatively—again and again—about what *was*, and what *was not*, to be allowed in the worship practice of the apostolic churches (1 Cor. 14). Women, for instance, were not permitted to speak during public worship (14:34,35). Men likewise—even those who had received special revelatory gifts by the laying on of the hands of the apostles—were subject to strict regulation (1 Cor. 14:27-32). And since the apostle boldly asserted that he had taught ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27), it is not surprising that he issued an ominous warning to any who were of a mind to disregard his authority (1 Cor. 14:37).

Yet in spite of the faithful teaching of the apostles the tendency to depart from what God commands, in favor of what man wants, was clearly evident in the

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

apostolic churches. Time and again it is clear that there was a desire to be in bondage again to the weak and beggarly elements of the Old Testament ceremonial worship (Gal. 4:9,10). Some were also quite willing to submit to the yoke of “the commandments and doctrines of men” (Col. 2:22) in what the apostle called “self-imposed<sup>8</sup> religion” (v. 23). The apostles wanted people to submit to a God-imposed religion! But such is the nature of men—yes, even regenerate men—that often the self-imposed was (and still is) much more appealing. No wonder the apostle could say: “I am afraid of you, lest I have labored for you in vain!” (Gal. 4:11).

#### Indirect Scriptural Support for the RPW

It is also important to note the connection between the RPW and two<sup>9</sup> other major biblical doctrines handed down to us by our Reforming Fathers. These are (1) *the limits of church power*, and (2) *the rights of the individual Christian's conscience*. As the Westminster Confession has formulated these, (1) “All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. *Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice*; but to be used as a help in both.”<sup>10</sup> And (2) “*God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.*”<sup>11</sup> When we come to worship God we have a God-given right (and sacred duty) to worship him with a clear conscience. But in order to have a clear conscience, as we worship him, we need to know for sure that what we are doing has his approval. But how can we know for sure that what we are doing in worship has his approval? The answer, I believe, is that *the Lord himself must instruct us as he speaks to us in the Scriptures*. It therefore follows that no one has a right to *impose* anything on us as something we ought to do in worship—whether it be doctrine or practice—unless it is authorized by the Lord Jesus himself, as that authorization is revealed in the testimony of the apostles. And the fact is that many

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<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, quite selective. I believe, for example, that the doctrine of man's total depravity—rightly understood—precludes his competence to devise anything to augment or improve upon what God has commanded in worship.

<sup>10</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XXXI:3.

<sup>11</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XX,2 (my emphasis).

things have gradually found acceptance in Reformed Churches that lack *clear* divine sanction.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he makes an awesome claim. He claims that he is the architect (arcitektwn) of God's final Temple.

*“According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become manifest; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that **you** [or ‘ye’ as in the KJV] **are the temple of God** and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* (1 Cor. 3:10-13)

So the Christian Church *is* the final Temple, and the plan for the building of that Temple was revealed to Paul the apostle. For him to say that he had taught the whole counsel of God is therefore one and the same with saying that he taught everything that our Lord has commanded. Therefore, anyone who wants to take part in building the final Temple—with God's approval—will have to build on this apostolic foundation, following the architect's instructions. And nowhere is this more important than in the matter of worship practice.

When we assemble on the Lord's Day—wherever we may be geographically speaking—we are to realize that we are also seated in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). When we worship God “*in spirit and in truth*”<sup>12</sup> we “*come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels*”<sup>13</sup> etc. Women are to be silent during worship—not because of some prejudicial whim of the Apostle, but because true worship takes place in the presence of the angels (1 Cor. 11:10). I take this to illuminate the meaning of our Lord's words to the Samaritan woman (John 4). To worship God in *Spirit*—whatever else it may mean—certainly means this:

<sup>12</sup> John 4:24

<sup>13</sup> Hebrews 12:22

we, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, are enabled in mind and heart to ascend to heavenly places. We worship in *Truth* because it is no longer mere symbolic representations of heavenly things with which we have to do—as *was* the case with the Tabernacle and Temple worship. No, we now have the reality (Truth). The contrast, in other words, between the true worship that *was* and the true worship that now *is*—the contrast between the Old Testament worship and the New Testament worship—is summed up in these two terms. Now the ‘reality’ (Truth)—which the old symbolized—is actually ours in Christ Jesus through the Spirit. Yet how difficult it was for those early Jewish Christians (even the very apostles them-selves) to let go of the shadowy representations. One of the constant impediments to the well-being of the church that the apostle Paul had to deal with, repeatedly, concerned precisely this issue (Gal. 4, Rom. 14, Col. 2, etc.). And the impediment is with us still. Even today much of Christen-dom clings to the visible, shadowy symbolism that character-ized the Tabernacle and Temple, preferring “weak and beggarly elements” to worship in Spirit and in Truth.

## 2 – The RPW as understood & applied by Calvin

It was Calvin—more than any other Reformer—who cut to the heart of the matter. He not only saw the issue clearly but also realized its supreme importance. “I know how difficult it is,” said Calvin, “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 honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct; ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ And ‘in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the com-mandments of men.’” (1 Sam. 15:2 Matt. 15:9 [*Italics mine*]).

For Calvin the only remedy for the Roman church’s pervasive corruption was a return to apostolic precept *and practice*.<sup>14</sup> He saw the apostolic church as

<sup>14</sup> This is clearly seen in his letter to Cardinal Sadolet! “I will not press you so closely as to call you back to that form which the apostles instituted, (though **in it we have the only model of a true Church, and whosoever deviates from it in the smallest degree is in error,**) but to indulge you so far, place, I pray, before your eyes, that ancient form of the Church, such as their writings prove it to

the model for the true church in all subsequent history.<sup>15</sup> And for Calvin this was supremely important? “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 principle 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. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain...” (p. 126, my emphasis: GIW). It is commonly said that justification by faith was the supreme concern of the great Reformers!<sup>16</sup> But this was not the case, at least not for Calvin. For him the glory of God was the supreme concern, and only after that came the welfare of sinners. Hence the priority he gave to the mode in which God is to be worshipped—a priority fully maintained in virtually all of the great Reformed Catechisms and Confessions.<sup>17</sup>

I fail to see how we can honestly receive the Scriptures as the only infallible rule of our faith *and practice*, if we do not faithfully adopt this same model. For it is here alone—in the writings of the inspired apostles and the practices of the apostolic churches disclosed in them—that we learn what Jesus commanded.

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have been in the age of Chrysostom and Basil, among the Greeks, and of Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine, among the Latins; after so doing, contemplate the ruins of that Church, as now surviving among yourselves. Assuredly, the difference will appear as great as that which the Prophets describe between the famous Church which flourished under David and Solomon, and that which under Zedekiah and Jehoiakim had lapsed into every kind of superstition, and utterly vitiated the purity of divine worship.”

<sup>15</sup> On Calvin and apostolic practice, see also Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536-1543*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 69, pt. 4 (Philadelphia, 1979), p. 10 where he comments that, in the Articles of 1537, Calvin appeals to the practice of the apostolic church. “The Articles make clear that in addition to conformity to the word of God, Calvin intended to reconstruct as far as was possible the worship as well as the discipline of the ancient church, and in that church, as Saint Paul testified, the psalms had been sung. Such singing, therefore, was fully as integral to Calvin’s great vision of the whole life of the ancient church as was ‘that ancient, that is to say, apostolic, discipline of excommunication.’ Psalmody was an apostolic practice, a fact of profound importance for Calvin, underscored by his reference to the degeneration of contemporary liturgical music.”

<sup>16</sup> This can perhaps be said, with more justification, of Luther.

<sup>17</sup> See appendix A.

### 3. The RPW as it was applied in Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.

Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, today, need to regain an understanding of Calvin's zeal for the apostolic-church model. They also need to appreciate what a profound blessing the RPW has been in their own past history.<sup>18</sup> The impact of this consistent line of teaching by the Calvinistic Reformers was very great. That is why—for a considerable length of time—the worship which was to be found virtually everywhere, in Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, was marked by a chaste simplicity.<sup>19</sup> The word of God, and especially the preaching of the word of God, was central. And as long as these churches were blessed with faithful preaching of the Word, the people did not feel a need for all kinds of additions. In those days, a reformed believer could feel at home in most any Presbyterian or Reformed Church, anywhere in the world. Even if they visited a foreign country in which these congregations were located, they found pretty much the same song book that they had at home because they sang—if not quite *exclusively*, yet certainly

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<sup>18</sup> Even Rev. Steve Schlissel—who says the RPW is a mere human invention—admits (even rather effusively) that it has been a tremendous blessing in our past history. One wonders how a mere human invention could ever have been so signally blessed of the Lord as Rev. Schlissel admits it to have been.

<sup>19</sup> “Calvin built his form of worship on the foundation of Zwingli and Farel, and the services already in use in the Swiss Reformed Churches. Like his predecessors, he had no sympathy whatever with the Roman Catholic ceremonialism, which was overloaded with unscriptural traditions and superstitions. We may add that he had no taste for the artistic, symbolical, and ornamental features in worship. He rejected the mass, all the sacraments, except two, the saints' days, nearly all church festivals, except Sunday, images, relics, processions, and the whole pomp and circumstance of a gaudy worship which appeals to the senses and imagination rather than the intellect and the conscience, and tends to distract the mind with the outward show instead of concentrating it upon the contemplation of the saving truth of the gospel.

He substituted in its place that simple and spiritual mode of worship which is well adapted for intelligent devotion, if it be animated by the quickening presence and power of the Spirit of God, but becomes jejune, barren, cold, and chilly if that power is wanting. He made the sermon the central part of worship, and substituted instruction and edification in the vernacular for the reading of the mass in Latin. He magnified the pulpit, as the throne of the preacher, above the altar of the sacrificing priest. He opened the inexhaustible fountain of free prayer in public worship, with its endless possibilities of application to varying circumstances and wants; he restored to the Church, like Luther, the inestimable blessing of congregational singing, which is the true popular liturgy, and more effective than the reading of written forms of prayer.” (*History of the Christian Church*, by Philip Schaaf, ¶87, the Liturgy of Calvin).

*overwhelmingly*—from the Psalter.<sup>20</sup> They also found the same simple elements in the worship services—the same sacraments, administered with unadorned simplicity—and even the same basic liturgy.<sup>21</sup>

In this section of my paper I want to illustrate how important the RPW was originally to both Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, by referring to the way in which they applied it. I refer to two particulars, namely, the rejection of traditional Roman Catholic feast days and the preeminence of the Psalter.

#### The RPW and Special Days

Under the authoritative guidance of the apostles, one thing the apostolic church did *not* practice was any annual observance of special days such as Christmas and Good Friday (or even a specially designated annual Easter). Had there been any need for an annual Christmas day, for example, then surely the Lord himself would have been the first to realize it. And *he* could have provided what was needed to make it authentic. He could, for example, have made known the date of his own birth. And he could have commanded the apostles to teach the observance of such days in the Christian Church, right from the start. But he did not do so. That the observance of such days was not part of “the whole counsel of God” imparted to the apostles is very clear from the New Testament. There is no record of any kind of specific recognition—or observance—of any of these days in any of their writings. And there *is* evidence that the apostle Paul opposed the *imposition* of special days, in addition

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<sup>20</sup> “The Roman Catholic Church had gradually replaced the Psalter with Latin songs, many of which the people could not understand. After separating from the Roman Catholic Church, the reformed churches in Europe produced metrical versions of the Psalms in the vernacular, which they used as their book of praise in the public worship of God. Whether in Switzerland, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, or the British Isles, the people of the reformed churches loved and sung the psalms in their own tongue. For example, in 1574 the Synod of the reformed churches of the lowlands (Holland, Belgium, and parts of Germany) ordered that all the churches sing only from the Psalm book of Datheen, which contained just the Psalms. The French Huguenots are known for their love of the Genevan Psalter produced by Beza and Marot. They sung the psalms both in public worship and daily life.” (*The Content of Songs Used in Public Worship*, by Archibald A. Allison, p. 1).

<sup>21</sup> “It is a fact well known to Church historians that as spiritual life begins to wane, formalistic and extraordinary observances begin to increase...He who serves God in Spirit and with devotion will have little need for the unusual, and for constant innovations.” (*The Church Order Commentary*, by Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, Zondervan Pub. Co., 1954 [Third Edition] p. 275.).

to the Lord's day, on God's people. I think Calvin is correct in saying the days they were beginning to observe in Galatia (Gal. 4:10ff.) were derived from Jewish tradition. And, if that is correct, I believe this Reformer was right when he said this has something weighty to teach us. This is the case because at least some of those days derived from Jewish tradition were days which God had once commanded. Yet the apostle strenuously opposed the imposition of even such days on the churches (just as he opposed the imposition of circumcision). How then, argued Calvin, can days that have never been appointed by God be justly imposed on the churches?

The answer that many give today is that Reformed Churches do not impose these days, they simply observe them 'freely.' But I do not find this convincing. Paul says—in Romans 14—that individual Christian believers, in apostolic churches, were free to decide for themselves whether or not they would observe any of these Old Testament feast days.

*"Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks." (Rom. 14:4-6).*

A Christian was in no way *obligated* to observe these days, in other words, just as he was in no way obligated to be circumcised. Each individual was to be left to act freely, out of his own conscience, with no pressure put on him one way or the other. It was this very individual freedom, however, that was jeopardized when—in the Galatian churches—special days were being institutionalized.<sup>22</sup> Then Paul was aroused to opposition. When the church in some official way sets the observance of days not commanded by the Lord, it intrudes upon the sacred sphere of conscience.<sup>23</sup> And it is my conviction that many Presbyterian and Reformed Churches—at least in practical effect—have done the very same thing that was done in the church of

<sup>22</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary: "a. To make into, treat as, or give the character of an institution to; b. To make part of a structured and usually well-established system."

<sup>23</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XX,2.

Galatia. Church members are under considerable pressure to conform by participating in the observance of such days as Christmas and Good Friday *even though it is admitted that God never instituted such observances.* And, I might add, pastors are often put under even greater pressure to conform to these humanly ordained observances.

It is sometimes said, even by people who profess adherence to the reformed confessions, that the Church has the right to prescribe such observances.<sup>24</sup> But I cannot reconcile this with the teaching of the New Testament (or the Reformed Confessions). The apostle Paul even warns me against taking heed to angels from heaven if their teaching differs from that of the apostles (Gal. 1:6-9). He says we are free men—free from the doctrines *and commandments* of men—and that we ought to "*stand fast...in the liberty by which Christ has made [us] free*" (Gal. 5:1). "*Therefore,*" writes the Apostle, "*if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourself to regulations...according to the doctrines and commandments of men?*" (Col. 2:20,22). People keep telling me that these days (that is, officially appointed annual special days such as Christmas, Good Friday and Easter) are quite harmless—even beneficial. And I will not dispute the fact that, for many, they "*indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion*" (Col. 2:23). But the important thing is this: the inspired apostle says "*these things*" (invented and imposed by men) "*are of no value...*" And the very fact that many people *think* they are of great value simply underlines the danger, as I see it, against which the apostle warned.

If the apostles gave us the whole counsel of God—and I take this to encompass matters of *both* faith *and* practice—then I cannot see how the church today can claim the right to legislate such annual

<sup>24</sup> Article 34 of the Church of England (adopted in 1562) expresses what many Reformed people today seem to believe: "*Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish ceremonies or rites of the Church, ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.*" The Westminster Assembly (1643-1648) corrected this deviation from the RPW by saying: "*...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 Scriptures*" (Ch. XXI, 1). And "*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*" (XX, 2).

observances for God's people when that very power<sup>25</sup> was denied even to the apostles themselves. Legitimate Church power is only ministerial and declarative. The Church does not have any authority to *make* new laws for God's people. The power to make laws for his people is reserved to the Lord Jesus alone. The Church, the bride of Christ, only has authority—as a faithful bride—to see to it that her children are taught the laws of her espoused husband. And if the apostles and their companions really did deposit the final portion of the whole counsel of God for us in their inspired writings, there is neither need nor authorization for any such new legislation.

It is frequently said, today, that the RPW was a Puritan invention, alien to the Continental Reformed tradition. But one can only wonder why those who promote this allegation have apparently never bothered to investigate the historical record.<sup>26</sup> The truth is that the continental Reformers were—in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century—as 'Puritan' as the Puritans themselves. There is a world of difference between the actual historical facts,<sup>27</sup> and the misrepresentations of the continental

<sup>25</sup> By this I mean 'authority to innovate, invent and impose' on God's people things that were never commanded by the Lord.

<sup>26</sup> Theologian Robert L. Reymond recognized this misrepresentation as follows: "J. I. Packer rejected the regulative principle on the ground that it is a 'Puritan innovation' ("The Puritan Approach to Worship," *Diversity in Unity* (papers read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, December 1963; available London: *The Evangelical magazine*, 1964] 4-5.) Whatever else may be said about this principle," says Dr. Reymond, "it must be said that it is *not* a Puritan innovation..." To the same effect is the comment of Dr. Edmond Clowney in his essay entitled "Distinctive Emphases in Presbyterian Church Polity" in the commemorative volume marking the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church entitled *Pressing Toward the Mark*, p. 102. "The regulative principle is *not* a distinctive principle of English as over against continental Reformed leadership. It is clearly stated in Article Thirty-two of the Belgic Confession (1561)."

<sup>27</sup> My thanks to Dr. R. Dean Anderson for the translated material that follows in quotation marks (My emphasis).

The first Synod of the Reformed churches of the Netherlands to deal with this matter took place in Dordrecht in 1574. There on the 18th of June, the delegates decided:

"Respecting feast days in addition to the Sunday: **it has been decided to rest content only with the Sunday.** Nevertheless the normal material relating to the birth of Christ shall be handled on the Sunday before Christmas day together with an admonition to the people not to observe Christmas day. If Christmas day falls on a Sunday, the same material shall be preached on that day. It is also permitted to preach on the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, which is left to the freedom of the ministers."

At the provincial Synod of Rotterdam the following year, a similar decision was made:

"As concerns feast days: **The government shall be petitioned that they allow everyone to work 6 days in the week in accordance with the 4th commandment of our Lord.** And if the government ordains any other (feast days) besides the Sunday, the delegated ministers will petition parliament that they inform them in such a way that these ministers may consider how much and in how far one can go here, so that on the one hand people don't fall into superstition as warned by Paul in Gal. 4, and on the other hand that people will not be led to fight too fiercely against the aforesaid government because of certain feast days."

The decision of the next National Synod in 1578, held again in Dordrecht, tells the story of the disappointment of the churches in this matter.

**"It was indeed to be desired that the freedom from God to work 6 days be permitted in the church, and that only the Sunday be celebrated.** Nevertheless since certain other feast days are maintained by authority of the government; namely Christmas day and the day thereafter, likewise the second day of Easter and the second day of Pentecost and in some places New Year's day and Ascension day; the ministers shall do their best to teach the congregation to transform unproductive and harmful idleness into holy and profitable exercises by sermons especially dealing with the birth and resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and such like articles of the faith. The ministers of the churches shall do this in those cities where more feast days (than Sunday) are observed by authority of the government. In the meantime all the churches shall work, as far as possible and in the most fitting way, to do away with the normal observance of all feast days except Christmas day (since Easter and Pentecost fall on Sunday)."

These facts become quite clear from the writings of a noted Dutch theologian named Gisbert Voetius (1589-1676). He was a delegate at the famous Synod of Dort, and an authority on matters of Church polity. In his *"De Sabbato et Festis"*—towards the end of the second appendix of this tract—he discusses the varied nature of the articles contained in the church order. In this discussion he distinguishes between [1] articles which are *prescriptive commands* to the churches, and [2] those which are *"partly permissive, or concessive, or tolerating; partly limiting, so that if a particular practice has to exist, at least it will be this and nothing more."* Of the latter—one of which deals with such days as Good Friday and Christmas—he says:

"Such articles are not characteristic or intrinsic or voluntary impulses proceeding from the heart of the church; but occasional, extrinsic (just as an eclipse is a characteristic phenomenon of the moon), **imposed from the outside, burdensome to the churches, in and of themselves and in an absolute sense unwelcome. Synods were summoned, compelled, and coerced to receive, bring in, and admit these articles,** as in the manner of a transaction, in order to prevent worse disagreeable and bad situations."

In other words, the truth is—as Voetius says—that these "Synods did not willingly furnish or institute [the annual

Reformed position that is so often heard today. The RPW may not be of concern to some American descendants of the continental Reformed Churches, but it certainly was of concern to their fathers.

### The RPW and Psalmody

I was present at the 1956 General Assembly of our Church when the content of the first edition of Trinity Hymnal was finalized. I also co-signed<sup>28</sup> a protest against the action of that Assembly in “giving approval to hymns other than those derived from scripture itself” and “approving no more than a limited selection of metrical versions of the Psalms.”<sup>29</sup> At this Assembly I heard a number of eloquent speeches setting forth the most persuasive sounding argument for the vast changes that have taken place in the songbooks of most Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. It was the argu-

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observance of days] because they saw in them a better way or more edification. But they were instituted because of the necessity and imposition of them by the magistrate and the people, when after all attempts at stopping the observances, and the decree of the Synod of 1574 to lay them aside, at a certain point of time they were not able to abrogate them—a fact they admitted in 1578.”

It is also worth noting that in the 19th century, the churches of the secession (‘afschieding’ 1834) once again voiced the concerns of the Reformed churches of old. In Amsterdam, 1836 the ruling was made:

“In that the Holy Scripture strongly admonishes us to stand in the freedom with which Christ has made us free, unto the observance of divine commandments, so ought we in the congregation of the Lord’s Day, **that we do not compel people to observe the so-called feast days which the Lord has not commanded in His Word.** The Lord’s Day has been set apart by the Lord Himself, and we cannot and may not add to it any feast by human decree. The six work days are given by God in order to work; people may indeed on those days gather together to be edified out of and by God’s Word, provided that the conscience of men is not bound to the observance of fixed and annually returning feast days; **the conscience must be left completely free in this matter.**”

The Scottish Reformers were of the same mind as their continental brethren, and were providentially enabled to abolish these days entirely—a result that lasted more than two centuries. (See *The Christian Year, in The Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, published by IVP and T. & T. Clark, Ltd. 1993, pp. 170,171).

<sup>28</sup> Professor John Murray and Dr. William Young also signed this protest.

<sup>29</sup> *Minutes* of the 1956 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, p. 53.

ment that claims that a new era of redemptive revelation generates a new outpouring of songs of praise. And so, the argument goes, the most important period of new redemptive revelation—the apostolic age—demanded an outburst of new songs. I well remember how cogent this theory sounded when I first heard it. The only trouble is that when I thought about it more carefully, and did some historical research, I found that it simply is not convincing.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that the Old Testament book of Psalms was not adequate as the vehicle of praise for the New Testament church. Is it not self-evident that, if this really was the case, the first to realize it would have been our Lord? Our Lord *did* realize that there was need for a new sacrament. That is why he instituted the sacrament of his body and blood that we call the Lord’s Supper. Yet on the very occasion that he did this he led his disciples in the singing of a psalm out of the Psalter. And, according to all the evidence that I have seen, the apostle Paul followed his Lord’s example. He did not, himself, write new songs. What he did was to instruct both the Ephesians and the Colossians to sing the pneumatic psalms, hymns and songs that they already had—something they could easily do because they had the Psalter in their Septuagint version of the Bible. The apostles were inspired men. If there had been a deficiency in the book of Psalms, which they inherited in the old testament Scriptures, then they would surely have been quick to realize it.<sup>30</sup> And, realizing it, they certainly could have

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<sup>30</sup> Much present day argumentation for uninspired songs is based on the presumption that the Psalter is deficient as the song book of the church of the new covenant. Very different was the view of Calvin, who wrote: “*I have been accustomed to call this book I think not inappropriately, ‘An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul’...In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine...It is by perusing these inspired compositions, that men will be most effectually awakened to a sense of their maladies, and, at the same time, instructed in seeking remedies for their cure... There is no other book in which there to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendour of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise...here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation.*” (Calvin’s Preface to his Commentaries on the Psalms, pp. xxxviii & xxxix) “...after we have sought on every side, searching here and there, **we shall find no songs better and more suitable** for our purpose than the Psalms of David,

done something to remedy the deficiency. They could even have given us a book of inspired New Testament songs. But they did not do so. So the argument that new eras of redemptive revelation always bring forth new songs of praise is simply contrary to historical fact.

In my search of the historical material I have been unable to find anything of the kind from the time of the Apostles, or from the century that followed. It can, of course, be alleged that there were such compositions—even many of them—but that, for some reason, they were not worthy to be preserved. It can also be alleged that we have small fragments of such compositions scattered throughout the New Testament. The fact is, however, that there is no proof of any such thing. As Dr. R. Dean Anderson put it:

“It is quite common these days for New Testament scholars to talk about the ‘hymns’ found in the letters of Paul. Of the various portions of Paul’s letters singled out for this ‘honour,’ none has engendered more discussion than Phil 2:6-11.”

“There is no evidence to prove that this passage was ever a song, or was ever sung, let alone in public worship. Statements to this effect are always suppositions. There is simply no way of proving it. What is argued with respect to the passage, is that it represents some kind of deliberate poetical arrangement. There is then the more complex question as to whether it is a piece of poetry which Paul authored himself, or which he quoted. Finally, the supposition is made that this piece of poetry was a song used in worship.”

“Theories abound, but assured solutions are far and few between. Our passage is no exception. Martin notes with respect to Phil 2:6-11: ‘Of all the attempts at literary analysis which have been surveyed there is none which meets with general agreement.’”<sup>31</sup>

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*dictated to him and made for him by the holy Spirit.*” (Opera, Vol. VI, pp. 171-172, my emphasis) The Scottish Reformer, John Knox, echoes the same sentiment: “...there are no songs more meet than the Psalms of the prophet David, which the holy Ghost has framed to the same use, and commended to the Church as containing the effect of the whole Scriptures that thereby our hearts might be more lively touched...” (John Knox works, Vol. 4, pp. 164-166, my emphasis)

<sup>31</sup> Martin, R.P., 1967 *Carmen Christi: Philippians II.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*.

“The weakness of this whole argument can be seen in the fact that there are no indications that any of these passages isolated as hymns in the New Testament letters were ever used as songs by the early church. If hymns had existed in the apostolic period, and especially if the apostles themselves had quoted from them, then surely they would have been preserved by the early church, or at least given a mention!”<sup>32</sup>

I think it is time for a far greater degree of honesty on the part of New Testament scholars. It is time for them to admit that mere supposition is not the same as proof, and that merely saying ‘most scholars agree’ does not settle anything.<sup>33</sup> If the historic RPW means anything it means that everything that is part of the public worship of God requires the *clear* and *certain* sanction of Scripture. It is my conviction that the RPW is, indeed, the teaching of Scripture. It is also my conviction that one of the great—if not the greatest—needs in the church today is an honest return to this principle.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4 – The RPW as it is being redefined today

As we look at the constituency of the Presbyterian and Reformed heritage, today, one thing is very clear. In many of these churches the old Reformed simplicity of worship has been replaced by all manner of innovation.<sup>35</sup> It can no longer be said that they have

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Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series. London: U.P., p 36.

<sup>32</sup> The quotations are from *Prophetic Singing in the Public Worship of the Church*, by Dr. R. Dean Anderson. It is posted on the Internet at <http://www.spindleworks.com/library.htm>. It is this kind of careful and honest research that is often lacking today.

<sup>33</sup> It was Professor J. Gresham Machen who convinced me, long ago, that I should reject the tyranny of the experts.

<sup>34</sup> The Rev. C. Lee Irons, in his recent defense of the use of uninspired hymns, speaks with unusual candor. He admits that seventy-five percent of the hymns in Trinity Hymnal are not worthy to be used in worship. He also says that any new hymns need to imitate the Psalms in order to be worthy. With this kind of honest appraisal of what the past century and a half has produced, the time may soon come when many people will at last admit that Calvin was right all along.

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Robert L. Reymond makes this telling comment in his discussion of worship: “...when one walks into virtually any Reformed church today in this country on the Lord’s Day, one can never know for sure whether he will be asked to worship in a ‘traditional’ or ‘contemporary,’ liturgical or nonliturgical, formal or revivalistic fashion.” He also says—and correctly, in my opinion—that “Anyone who will take the time to study the matter

the same song book. In many of them the singing of the one hundred and fifty inspired psalms have been eclipsed by the singing of hundreds of uninspired hymns. And the theologians of the Presbyterian and Reformed churches—even of the more conservative, orthodox denominations—seem to me to have a very different concept of the RPW than that of our Presbyterian and Reformed fathers. Either I do not understand what many of our present-day theologians are saying, or they are now engaged in a process of redefining the RPW. So elastic has the RPW become in their hands that it bears little resemblance to that of any of the Calvinistic Reformers, or to the way in which this principle was understood by Presbyterian and Reformed churches of prior generations. As Dr. T. David Gordon put it: “In the present situation it appears that very few of either the friends or the foes of the regulative principle understand it as it was traditionally understood.”<sup>36</sup> One says he finds no “command” in the Bible for having a sermon in the worship service.<sup>37</sup> Another says the historic regulative principle of worship is nothing but a human invention<sup>38</sup> but then—ironically—goes on to make the following startling observation.

“Some who call themselves believers in the Regulative Principle of Worship, believe a version of it that is so elastic as to make it truly unrecognizable as the Regulative Principle of Worship to any honest observer...We would not take kindly to a man who tries to convince us that a cow is an animal with two legs, feathers and gills. He’s describing something other than what we call a cow, no doubt about it. So also, true

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will have to conclude that worship in evangelical churches in this generation is, speaking generally, approaching bankruptcy.” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 873).

<sup>36</sup> *Westminster Theological Journal* #54 (1992) p. 131.

<sup>37</sup> *Westminster Theological Journal*, #55 (1993) p. 329. In his recent book entitled “*Worship in Spirit and Truth*” Professor John Frame also expresses approval of liturgical dancing. (The shift here is clearly one of definition. The Westminster Assembly understood apostolic *example* to be one of the ways in which we come to know what Jesus *commanded*. Cf. William Cunningham on the binding character of apostolic example and practice, and on divine right, in *Historical Theology*, 1:64-78, and James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2:201-213, 404-408, on Scripture precept, example and principle).

<sup>38</sup> “The regulative principle of worship, said to guard the people of God from the inventions of men, is itself an invention of men.” Rev. Steve Schlissel in *All I Really Need to Know About Worship (Part I)*, p. 7.

regulativists<sup>39</sup> are those who at least attempt to apply a discreet principle—if it is not commanded, it’s forbidden—even if their attempts include improvements. The key is that they own it in a way which leaves the principle recognizable as the one historically received”<sup>40</sup>

Although I regret the quoted writer’s own rejection of the RPW, I have to agree with his observation. What we are faced with in the Reformed tradition today is virtually a *de facto demolition* of the RPW by way of *redefinition*.<sup>41</sup>

### Part 5 – Some Modest Suggestions

[1] As I see it, therefore, the need of the hour is precisely what Dr. T. David Gordon has called for. “If there is to be intelligent, ultimately fruitful discussion of the Reformed understanding of worship, such discussion must have sufficient respect for the Reformed tradition to engage the significant published expressions of that tradition.”<sup>42</sup> As Reformed Christians we still confess the Scriptures to be the only rule of our faith *and practice*.<sup>43</sup> We also profess that its teaching is sufficient<sup>44</sup> and that we are therefore free from all doc-

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<sup>39</sup> This is Rev. Schlissel’s label for people who still believe—and seek to faithfully put into practice—what he calls the RPW.

<sup>40</sup> Messiah’s Mandate, *Second Letter*, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> The Westminster Confession defines worship as consisting of various “parts” (or elements) such as prayer, preaching, reading of the Scriptures, singing of psalms, and administration of the sacraments. Dr. Vern Poythress does not like this formulation, and therefore *redefines* worship in such a way as to deny that there are different parts or elements, insisting, instead, that there are just different ways of doing the same thing. (For more on this see Michael Bushel’s book entitled *The Songs of Zion*, p. 47 where the author correctly says: “we freely grant that singing, preaching, prayer, and teaching all have certain aspects in common. Singing, preaching, and prayer all to varying extents manifest teaching functions. We also grant that there are different ways or means of applying the Word of God to given situations. But this observation does not in itself settle the question of whether or not singing is a distinct or separate element of worship...We do not claim that these are...independent elements of worship, but we do claim that they are separately commanded and that because they are distinguishable from one another, they are distinct elements of worship. We therefore claim that a specific scriptural warrant as to content is demanded for each.”

<sup>42</sup> *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992) p. 329.

<sup>43</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism Q/A 3.

<sup>44</sup> “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

trines and commandments of men in the sphere of worship—not only those that are contrary to the word of God, but even those that go beyond it.<sup>45</sup> But today, in the many Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, the tension between the historic *profession* (“only what God has commanded”) and the present *practice* (with many things that God has *not* commanded) is now reaching the breaking point.

[2] I believe this tension is the real reason for the deepening lack of unity that we find today, in the things that have been written with respect to both worship theory and worship practice.<sup>46</sup>

[3] Presbyterian and Reformed Churches are at the fork of a road and must go one way or the other—and neither choice appears to be easy or pleasant. If we continue to accommodate more and more *practices* that clearly contradict—or, at the very least, stretch to the breaking point—the historic construction of the RPW, then we will either have to go along with those who want to demolish the RPW by way of redefinition, or join those who have declared their emancipation from it. Since the end result of these will be virtually identical, I treat them as a single option. The other option, of course, is to begin the very difficult work of putting away practices that contradict our confession. This is never easy. It was not easy in Calvin’s day, and it will not be easy in our own. But this option does have one very notable advantage: it is the right thing to do, and doing the right thing has a way of yielding rich benefits in the long run.

[4] I therefore wish to urge that we simply make a more concerted effort to live up to our profession. The RPW is *not* something peculiar to only some of us in the ICRC. It is our common heritage. And there are at least some encouraging signs that a change for the better may be coming.

I had occasion to study the RPW while serving as a pastor in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. During that time I was privileged to serve on the committee that revised the Church Order<sup>47</sup> in such a way

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deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” Westminster Confession of Faith, I,6.

<sup>45</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, XX:2.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. footnotes 35 and 41.

<sup>47</sup> At first the Reformed Churches of New Zealand made use of the Church Order printed in the 1934 edition of the Psalter Hymnal of the Christian Reformed Church, in which a number of

as to stop short of *imposing* the celebration of special days, other than the Lord’s Day, on God’s people.<sup>48</sup> It has also come to my notice that the Canadian Reformed Churches have made a similar modification, leaving their churches free to decide for themselves in what manner, and at what time, they “commemorate the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>49</sup> Something similar—though not quite so clearly formulated—is found in the revised Church Order of the newly organized United Reformed Churches of North America. What had been once been *required* (in the Christian Reformed Church), is now simply *permitted* (in the URCNA). These Churches *may* choose to commemorate these great redemptive events on the traditional days—but it is no longer said that they *must*.<sup>50</sup>

I want to express my appreciation for such improvements. Before the recent secession of several congregations from the Christian Reformed Church I felt constrained, because of the need, to pastor—even in retirement—a small group of people in Northwest Iowa as an organized Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Some of the people who became part of this congregation had belonged to the Christian Reformed Church but could no longer continue with a clear conscience. One of the things these people came to appreciate in our small congregation was a complete freedom from the imposition of things not instituted by our Lord—things such as Good Friday and Christmas. And so, when the secession churches in our area emerged, this liberty was a matter of concern to us even though we saw it as our Scriptural duty to seek unity with these seceders. I am happy to say that we were warmly received, and received with the assurance that we would remain free from any obligation to observe

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special days were mandated. The revised Church Order says “Corporate worship services on other days than the Lord’s Day are left to the freedom of the churches.”

<sup>48</sup> Article 53. This revision also stopped short of *requiring* the use of praise compositions other than the Psalms.

<sup>49</sup> Article 52. I cannot see that this article would prevent a consistory from simply allowing the regular course of catechetical preaching to be the sole manner in which each of these redemptive events is emphasized. Perhaps I should add that the OPC has never mandated any observance of such.

<sup>50</sup> The URCNA has also refrained from making the singing of uninspired hymns mandatory. In its revised Church Order it says: “The 150 Psalms *shall* have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity *may* be sung, provided they are approved by the consistory.” (My emphasis).

these humanly invented days, even though it was made clear that they would continue to provide worship services on those days for those who wanted to continue to have them.

It is sometimes alleged that adherents to the historic RPW are primarily interested in keeping other people from doing what they want to do, when they want to do it, such as remembering the birth of Jesus on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. I would like to say—as one who remains convinced that the RPW is the teaching of the Bible—that I have no desire to keep anyone from remembering the birth of Jesus on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December, *if they wish to do so*. All I ask—as a Christian and as a minister of the gospel—is that those who want the freedom to do this allow me the freedom *not* to do it. I do not believe that any individual has a right to *impose* his (or her) free preference on me with respect to things not commanded by the Lord. And I do not believe that any church has the right to do it either.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, it is right here that the Apostle Paul himself drew the line of demarcation.<sup>52</sup> Those of us who can find no warrant in the Word of God for any recurrent observance of days other than the Lord's day must not impose *our* conviction on those individuals who want to observe these days. But the reverse is also true and, in my experience, those who want to observe these days—precisely because *their* view is the popular one—are far more often the ones who have been only too willing to impose their view on those of *us* who do not.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> I am aware of the fact that the Second Helvetic Confession is more concessive here than any of the other Reformed Confessions. But it is important to take note of *all* that it says: "*if the Churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, and of His ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon His disciples, according to Christian liberty, we do very well approve of it*" (XXIV,3). Much depends, here, on whether or not the words I have put in bold type receive their due. And another article (XVIII,14) of the same Confession sheds important light: "*no man can forbid by any right that we may return to the old appointment of God, and rather receive that than the custom devised by men*" As I read this it means that I—and others of my conviction, even though we constitute a minority— have every right to adhere to the apostolic custom of *not* observing any specifically designated annually recurring days at all, but only the weekly Lord's Day. If the words in bold type are taken seriously the Second Helvetic Confession is in harmony with the other Reformed Confessions.

<sup>52</sup> Romans 14:5,6a,13.

<sup>53</sup> It is much the same when it comes to the singing of God's praise in worship. Although the Orthodox Presbyterian Church chose (mistakenly, in my view) to approve several hundred uninspired hymns for inclusion in Trinity Hymnal—while, at the same time, failing to provide at least one version of each psalm in

[5] I am not a prophet, but I see the day coming when the simplicity of worship as practiced by our reforming fathers will again become very attractive. Many Christians have already become weary of all the changes, gimmicks, and inventions that other sincere well-meaning people have brought in to 'improve' the church's worship. I believe the point will soon be reached where the historic worship of the Reformed—worship in Spirit and Truth—will again be recognized as the newest novelty even as well as the greatest possible blessing.<sup>54</sup> I hope we will be there to extend a warm welcome when this time comes.

May it please the Lord to speed that day by sending a new Reformation!

This was one of five Papers presented at the FIFTH International Conference of Reformed Churches which was held at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia on June 20-27, 2001. We intend to reproduce other papers from this Conference in later issues of *Ordained Servant*.

the biblical Psalter—it has never sought to impose the singing of these on those who cannot in good conscience do so. There is still a considerable measure of respect, in other words, for the historic concerns that I have tried to articulate in this paper.

<sup>54</sup> "For decades now evangelical churches have been conducting their services for the sake of unbelievers. Both the revivalistic service of a previous generation and the 'seeker service' of today are shaped by the same concern—appeal to the unchurched. Not surprisingly, in neither case does much that might be called worship by Christians occur. As a result, many evangelicals who have been sitting for years in such worship services are finding their souls drying up, and they have begun to long for something else...The real cure to the problems in contemporary worship will be found in the simple, spiritual, substantial, and serious worship of the Reformed faith and liturgy." *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, by Dr. Robert L. Reymond. p. 873.



## The Free Offer of the Gospel: God's Love for the Non-elect

### Part 4

by

Stephen D. Doe

### Introduction

It is not sufficient to try to establish that God has a general benevolent concern for his creatures as might be seen in passages like Matthew 5:43-48. More is required if we are to find biblical warrant for *offering* Christ to an unbelieving world. The church is called to the task of preaching the gospel to the nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Is this preaching a mere declaration of the gospel or is it an offer of Christ as Savior promising that those who believe in him will not perish under God's wrath? Can there be such a general promise given when, in fact, those who are not elect are unable to respond? This question of the biblical *warrant* of the free offer Christ as savior to those who are not known to be elect is at that heart of this centuries old debate. To consider the biblical ground for the warrant of the free offer we must turn to a classic text, John 3:16, to seek some answers.

### Examination of John 3:16

In John 3 Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus and uses terms with which Nicodemus would be familiar. One word, however, raises a central question: what is meant by "world" (  $\mu$  ) in verse 16. There are four possible meanings that have been given to "world":

- *it is creation itself*, animate and inanimate (cf. 17:5) - this has been rejected as not fitting the context
- *it is mankind* as such without any moral or ethical judgment attached to them as in 7:4, man as man - the context indicates, how-

ever, a moral sense to "world" (This view is held by some who want to use the verse as a pretext for a universal atonement and universal salvation.)

- it is *the elect* - but  $\mu$  is never used in this sense in the New Testament. Moreover, consider that Nicodemus would have expected Jesus to say: "God so loved his chosen or elect people, Israel" (cf. Deuteronomy 7:7-8, 23:5, Isaiah 43:4, 63:9, Jeremiah 31:3, Malachi 1:2, etc.). The offense of the gospel for the Jews was precisely that God was also calling the Gentiles. Therefore, if the word  $\mu$  is interpreted to mean "elect" as in Israel it would confirm Nic-demus' prejudices
- it is *the world in its sinfulness and lostness* - the way in which John uses the term  $\mu$  elsewhere in his gospel shows how well this meaning fits (cf. 1:29, 7:7, 15:18-19, 8:11, 12:31, etc.). This is how Reformed interpreters have, by and large, understood it.

It is the world in its sinful lostness which God is said to love, leading him to send his only begotten Son. Verse 16 is, significantly, the first appearance of the verb "to love" (  $\alpha$  ) in the Gospel of John. When God first begins to speak of the self-giving, sacrificial, other-centered love which is captured by that verb, he declares that *he* loves by giving Christ as a sacrifice, setting his only begotten Son before a lost and spiritually perishing world. This reflects the scriptural revelation of God's attribute of love (I John 4:8,16, cf. Exodus 34:6-7, etc.). God is a

philanthropist ( Titus 3:4), a lover of mankind he is speaking of his love for man as his creature, even as his sinful, disobedient, fallen creature (cf. Romans 5:1-10).

John 3:16 demonstrates that God is always the initiator in matters regarding salvation. He loved and acted in the giving (offering) of the Son to the world in its lostness. There is, of course, a wonderful balance in this verse. Faith in the Son is required. It is only ‘the continuing to believe in him one’ (John’s participial phrase using ) who will not perish but have everlasting life. The offer of a savior is made to the world, but it is those who, by the grace of God, believe who will receive the gift of everlasting life.

Here is the *warrant* of the free offer of the Gospel. The Gospel may be truly and genuinely offered to sinners and they may place their full trust in Jesus Christ to save them because it is *God* who sincerely makes the offer. Jesus Christ truly only saves his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21), It is his sheep and his sheep alone who hear his voice (John 10:26-29). That is the glory of the definite or particular atonement. But the definite atonement, that Christ died for *me* as one of his sheep, is not the warrant for the sinner trusting in Christ. That would presume that I first knew that I was elect. The *warrant* of faith is the plan and promise of God to save sinners through Jesus Christ.

Here is how Thomas Boston put it in a sermon on John 3:16:

“But we know from Scripture that Christ and his salvation may be warrantably offered to the whole world of sinners, with assurance that whoever of them will turn in faith to him as Savior, he shall be saved (Mark 16:15-16). Moreover, if it were not so, the unbelief of hearers of the gospel, their not coming to Christ for salvation, could not be their sin. It can never be one’s sin not to do a thing he has no legitimate warrant for. No one could be held guilty for not turning to Christ for salvation, unless there is a sense in which God

has appointed him to be Savior of that guilty one...

“But Scripture tells us that not believing in Christ the Savior is the very sin that ruins the hearers of the gospel who ultimately perish: “And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. (Jn. 3:19).

“Finally, if it were not so that Christ is Savior of the world, the elect themselves could never believe in Christ until their election were revealed to them. that is contrary to the stated method of grace, for no one can believe in Christ for salvation, until that person sees him to be a Savior for them.”<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

God declares that he would have the ends of the earth turn to him as Savior (Isaiah 45:21-22). God is not confused about his electing purpose to save from out of unbelieving humanity a chosen people for his own name sake, but the *application* of that purpose lies hidden within God himself. His election is revealed in time and in the outworking of his sovereign will as he calls men and women to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the Gospel. The church is to believe that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe (Romans 1:16). If the holy God in whom is no sin or love of sin can say, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 18:23,32, 33:11), is the church to draw back from telling others of Christ and declaring that he will indeed save all who repent of their sins and believe the gospel?

The great warrant for the free offer of the gospel is the love of God which viewed a perishing world and sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17). The warrant for any sinner to believe is that God is

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity 1685-1765*. London: The Olive Tree, 1967, p.135.

true to his Word in the gospel that the one who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved.

There is much more to say that could be considered about the free offer of the gospel like the design of the atonement or the distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God. But the church must remember this: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is to function on the basis of God’s commands and invitations rather than what we may logically assume his eternal decrees imply. We are to bow before the distinction of Creator and creature (Isaiah 55:8, Deuteronomy 29:29) and live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3), not seeking to know more than God himself has chosen to reveal to us.

The Puritan divine, John Owen, applied this to the preaching of the Gospel:

“The purpose and decree of God is not the rule of our duty; neither is the performance of our duty in doing what we are commanded, any declaration of what is God’s purpose to do, or decree that it should be done. Especially is this to be seen and considered in the duty of the ministers of the gospel, in the dispensing of the word, in exhortations, invitations, precepts, and threatenings committed unto them...A minister is not to make enquiry after, nor to trouble himself about, those secrets of the eternal mind of God - namely, whom he purposeth to save, and whom he hath sent Christ to die for in particular. It is enough for them to search his revealed will, and thence take their *directions*, from whence they have their *commissions*..They command and invite all to repent and believe; but they know not in particular on whom God will bestow repentance unto salvation, nor in whom he will effect the work of faith with power.”<sup>2</sup>

The warrant for the sinner to come to Christ in repentance and faith is the genuineness of God’s offer that those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved. Behind the

repenting and believing lies the sovereign, electing grace of God. Sinners, however, do not come on the basis of thinking themselves to be elect, but because they believe the gospel promise that God will truly save those who come to Christ. *How* dead sinners are able to hear and believe since they are dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-9, cf. Matthew 12:13, Ezekiel 37:1-14) is not the issue. The Spirit of God is the One who works and we do not understand how (John 3:5-8). Is God’s promise, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved,” (Acts 16:31), true or not, *that* is the issue. Can sinners, whose hearts no one but God himself can know, be told to repent and believe that they might be saved from their sins through the application of the righteousness of Jesus Christ? The answer is “yes”,

“The gospel is the proclamation of good tidings, good tidings from God, good tidings of what God has done, good tidings of what he has promised to do. The passion of missions is quenched when we lose sight of the grandeur of the evangel. It is to a lost world the gospel is sent. To a world lost in sin and misery is proclaimed the marvel of God’s love and grace, the tidings of salvation, salvation full and and free, salvation that could not be greater, because it is salvation in him who is himself the wisdom, power, and righteousness of God.”<sup>3</sup>

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2 Cited in Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hypercalvinism in English Nonconformity 1685-1765*. London: The Olive Tree, 1967, p. 135.

3 Murray, John. “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” in *The Collected Writings*, Vol. 1. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, p.59.



## A Call to Reformation

by

J. G. Vos

### **Church reformation according to Scripture is a continuous process.**

Ecclesia reformata reformanda est (“The church, having been reformed, is still to be reformed”). This follows from the fact that Scripture is an absolute and perfect standard, while the church at any point in its history on earth is still imperfect and involved in sin and error.

This process of reformation must be continuous until the end of the world. At no point sooner may the church stop and say, “I have arrived. Thus far but no farther!” Only in heaven can the church triumphant say that.

In this process of reformation there are certain historical stages and certain outstanding landmarks of progress achieved. For instance, the great historic creeds and confessions of the church are such landmarks of progress. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, marks true progress in the reformation of the church up to the time when that confession was formulated.

### **Information Always Incomplete on Earth**

We may never regard this process as completed in our own day, or at any point in the earthly history of the church. We must always forget the things that are behind and press on to the things that are in the future; we must always strive to apprehend that for which we are apprehended of Christ Jesus. The church’s doctrine, worship, government, discipline, missionary activities, educational institutions, publications, and practical life—all these are to be progressively reformed according to Scripture.

Reformation has always been a step-by-step process, and it must necessarily be such. Zealots would attempt to achieve everything at one fell swoop, but they only smash their head against a stone wall. God works by historical process—a gradual, continuous process—and we must conform to God’s way of working.

### **Scriptural church reformation requires a searching *self-criticism* on the part of the church.**

Not only is advance in study of the Scriptures required, beyond the landmarks of the past, but searching self-criticism on the part of the church is called for.

The church’s subordinate standards must always be subjected to examination and reexamination in the light of Scripture. This is implied in our confession that only Scripture is infallible. If only Scripture is infallible, then everything else must be constantly tested and retested by Scripture.

Not only the church’s official standards, but its life, its programs, its activities, its institutions, its publications, must be subjected to a searching self-criticism on the basis of Scripture. These must always be tested and retested in the light of the Word of God. Such self-criticism on the part of the church is the corporate counterpart of the self-examination to which God in His Word calls every individual Christian.

### **Absolute Loyalty to Scripture Required**

Such self-criticism on the part of the church is difficult. It calls for effort, intelligence, learning, sacrifice, very great humility and self-denial, and absolute honesty. It requires loyalty to Scripture, a loyalty that is willing to go to any length in order to be true to the Word of God—a truly heroic and radical loyalty to Scripture.

Such self-criticism on the part of the church may be embarrassing and even painful. It may mean that the church, like Christian in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, may find itself in By-path Meadow, and will have to retrace its steps humbly and painfully until it is back on the King’s Highway again. Such self-criticism on the part of the church may be devastating to the special interests or projects of particular individuals or groups in the church. It may demonstrate that particular features of the church’s standards, life or program, are not fully in harmony with the Word of God, and should be reconsidered and brought into harmony with that Word.

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### **Past Reformation Attained by Self-Criticism**

For these and similar reasons self-criticism on the part of the church is often neglected, and even strongly opposed. Those who advocate it or seek to have it undertaken are likely to be represented as extremists, fanatics, enthusiasts, visionaries, troublemakers, and the like. Yet it is by such self-criticism that the reformations of the past have been achieved. Men like Luther, Calvin, Knox, Melville, Cameron and Renwick were concerned only about the judgment of God in His Word. They were not deterred by the adverse judgments and attitudes of men.

When the church has dared really to look at itself in the mirror of God's Word, in dead earnest, the church has been at its greatest, and has been influential in the world. It has gone forward with new life and vigor.

On the other hand, when the church has hesitated or refused to look at itself intently in the mirror of God's Word, it has been weak, stagnant, decadent, ineffective and uninfluential.

Constant denominational self-criticism on the basis of Scripture is a duty implied and recognized in our First Term of Communion. But is this really taken seriously? How much zeal, how much concern—I will even say, how much tolerance—is there for it today?

### **Shutting the Door Against Reformation.**

There is a constant tendency in every church to regard the present state of affairs as normal and right. Thus what is in reality mere custom, comes to have virtually the force and influence of principle; while matters of principle come to be treated as if they were mere conventions or human customs, having only the authority of usage or popular approval. The sanction of present usage is regarded as sufficient to establish a matter as right, legitimate or even necessary. And conversely, the lack of present usage is regarded as sufficient to prove that a matter is wrong and improper.

This kind of stagnation, this attitude of regarding the status quo as normal, shuts the door against all true progress in church reformation. For the status quo is always sinful. It is always a falling short of the requirements of the Word of God. It is always something less than what God really requires of the church. Since the status quo is sinful, it may never be regarded with complacency, far less may it be regarded as the ideal for

the church. It is a sin to absolutize the status quo.

The status quo always needs to be repented of. No matter how fine it may be, still it is sinful and needs to be repented of. To regard the status quo with complacency is one of the greatest sins of the church in our day—a sin which must grieve the Holy Spirit, and a sin which certainly prevents the church from making its true and proper progress in reformation according to Scripture. A church dominated by this idea cannot really move forward. It may indeed slide backward in defection and apostasy. At best it will only move in a fixed circle, always coming back to where it started from.

### **The Pattern of American Church History**

The churches of America, by and large, have moved in a fixed circle through their past history. We might also say, they have moved in a vicious circle. The~pattern has been a slump followed by a revival followed by a slump, and so on. True progress is not made. The best that can be done, it seems, is to manage to get out of one pit after another. Nothing is more prevalent than this kind of stagnation in the church. Nothing is more difficult than to get any feature of the church's structure or activity really examined and reformed in the light of the Word of God.

True progress means building on the foundations laid in the past. But true progress does not mean being held in check by the dead hand of errors and imperfections of the past. There is only one legitimate check on true progress, and that is the check of Scripture itself. The true reformation of the church is a reformation on the basis of Scripture, it is a reformation within the bounds of Scripture, not a reformation beyond Scripture.

### **God Calls Us to Reform the Church in our Day**

Are the church's official agencies, publications and institutions to reflect a cross-section of opinion as it actually exists in the church, like Mark Twain's "English as she is spoke"? Or are they to take their stand on the existing official standards of the church and maintain that line in confronting the public? Or are they to pioneer in denominational self-criticism on the basis of Scripture? Are they to blaze a new trail, going forward into new territory in the light of the Word?

These are difficult and serious questions. The tendency is to by-pass and ignore such questions as these. These questions are seldom faced. The tendency

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is rather to regard the status quo as normal. Or if not the present status quo, then at any rate the achievements of the past are regarded as normal. If we could just get back to the way things were in “the good old days” and maintain that standard, we are told, then everything would be fine.

But would it? Where have we been? This is 1959. How are we to be excused for having failed to advance beyond our forefathers in understanding the Scriptures? How can we say that the reformation of the church was completed in 1560, in 1638, or even in 1950? What have we been doing since then? Has our talent been buried in a napkin?

It is not difficult to admit that there are some evils in the church which need correction. But the tendency is to say that if we could just get back to the sound basis of a generation or two ago, everything would be just as it should be. What more could anyone ask? We could just hold that line for all time to come.

But that would not be doing our God-given duty. Our forefathers reformed the church in their time; God calls us to reform it in our time. We cannot rest on our laurels; we must strike out for ourselves, by faith, on the basis of the Word of God.

### **True Reformation seeks God’s Honor and His Truth above all other Considerations**

We live in a pragmatic age, an age impatient of truth, and concerned mostly about practical results. It is an age impatient of those who rate truth above results. Our age wants results and is quite willing to believe that figs grow on thistles, if it thinks it sees the figs.

### **Is the Time Opportune?**

I have heard, when someone sought to bring some feature of the church under the critical judgment of Scripture, the objection that the time was not opportune. “You may be right,” the objector would say, “but is this an opportune time to bring up such a matter?” Now, we should realize that truth is always timely, truth is always in order, and that if we wait for an opportune time to bring up truth that opportune time may never come. That more convenient season may never arrive. Always there will be some reason that can be urged for not undertaking the reformation of the church according to the Word of God.

God is the God of truth. He is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Christ is King of the Kingdom of truth. To this end was He born, that He might bear witness to the truth. He that is of the truth hears His voice.

### **Accepting the Status Quo is Sinful**

The too-ready willingness to accept the status quo as normal is one of the great obstacles in the way of the real reformation and progress of the church today. This attitude is sinful because it is blind to the real sinfulness of the status quo. It fails to realize that the status quo always needs to be repented of, always needs to be forgiven by divine grace, and always needs to be reformed by the church on earth. It fails to realize the truth of the statement of Augustine that every lesser good involves an element of sin!

### **God’s Holiness and Truth Require Continued Reformation**

At bottom, this complacent acceptance of the status quo as normal proceeds from a wrong idea of God, an idea which fails to reckon with His holiness and His purity, and from a wrong idea of Scripture, an idea which fails to realize the absolute character of Scripture as the church's standard.

To place God's truth and honor first, above all other considerations whatsoever, requires great moral consecration. In this matter it is true of the church as it is of the individual, that he that loses his life for Christ's sake shall find it.

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# Prayer Cloths: Superstitious or Spiritual?

by

Patrick Ramsey

A number of weeks ago I received in the mail from a local church a letter and a prayer cloth (a small piece of ribbon with Acts 19:11-12 inscribed on it). The letter informed me that this cloth had been “prayed over by prayer warriors” and that they were “believing God for His anointing to reside with this prayer cloth”. I was encouraged to extend my faith and use this prayer as a point of faith to believe for my healing or deliverance, or for that of a loved one. They suggested that it could be placed in someone’s vehicle, under a mattress or in the opening of a wall of a building.

My initial reaction upon reading this letter was that this is superstition. How could they think that their prayers could cause the power of God to dwell with a ribbon? And that one could tap into this power and have it heal whomever by simply believing in God and placing the ribbon in the appropriate place? This is superstition in the name of Christ!

It is all too possible that my initial reaction was well off the mark and the letter did seek to provide a biblical argument for its use of the prayer cloth. So like a good Berean (Acts 17:11), I will examine this letter in the light of Scripture to see if it is true or not.

The letter appealed to Acts 19:11-12 which says, “Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.” The letter then said, “I believe that the God who never changes wants to do the same thing still today.”

In response, let me say first of all that our personal beliefs about God’s desires are irrelevant. The fact that I believe something does not make it true. I may believe in Santa Claus but that does not make him true. Therefore, the fact that many churches

may believe that God uses prayer cloths does not mean that He does. The question we need to ask is this, “Does the Bible tell us that God will use prayer cloths to heal people?”

The letter’s answer to this question can be stated thus: Acts 19 tells us that God used cloths to heal people. God never changes. Therefore, God still wants to use cloths to heal people.

One problem with this answer is that it fails to distinguish between the unchangeable character of God from the acts of God in history. In other words, who God is, is distinct from what God has done. God’s unchangeableness refers to who God is, that is His character. For example, God is good and since He is unchanging, He can never be evil. However, God’s immutability does not necessarily refer to what He has done. God once destroyed the world by a flood, parted the Red Sea, and forsook His only Son on the cross. These acts of an unchanging God do not imply that God still desires to destroy the world by a flood or part the Red Sea or forsake His Son. Likewise, the fact that God once used Paul’s handkerchief to heal people does not imply He still desires to do the same today.

A second problem is that it assumes what God did through Paul, He will do through Christians. Paul was a Christian, but he was a unique Christian in that he was an Apostle. God wrote Scripture through Paul, but that does not mean that God will write Scripture through me. The miracles that Paul and the other Apostles performed were designed to testify that they had been sent from God to authoritatively and infallibly speak for Him, (Heb. 2:3-4). Hence, Paul called them ‘signs of an apostle’, (2 Cor. 12:12). Thus, unless you claim to be an apostle, you cannot properly appeal to this text to support your claim to be able to do this miracle. And if someone does make such a claim we know he is lying because Paul said that he was the last

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apostle, (1 Cor. 15:8). Furthermore, one could not even use this text to say that the other apostles performed these miracles. This text simply recounts for us what God did through Paul while he was in Ephesus. There is nothing that suggests that we should regard this event as normative. Therefore, Acts 19:11-12 does not justify the use of prayer cloths. It doesn't even come close!

A third problem is that Luke describes the miracles that God worked through Paul in Ephesus as 'unusual' or 'extraordinary', (see verse 11). This would indicate that these particular miracles were not the normal ones he performed and thus not to be expected at other times.

The final problem that I will mention is that the use of prayer cloths today does not correspond to what happened in Acts 19:11-12. Here are some of the differences. First, the objects used. Acts 19 speaks of Paul's sweat cloth (the handkerchief) and the apron he wore while making tents. I was sent a small piece of ribbon not Paul's sweatband. Second, the role of prayer. In Acts 19 we are told that God worked these miracles by the hands of Paul. There is no mention of Paul praying with other people asking God to have His power reside with a cloth. Third, immediate healing. Acts 19 says that the handkerchiefs and aprons were brought to the sick and the diseases left them. If God is still working as He did in Acts 19 then I should be able to take this cloth to the hospital and heal people right now.

Therefore, the practice of prayer cloths cannot be supported by Acts 19:11-12; nor do I believe that it can be supported by any other passage. Lack of biblical support, however, is not the only serious problem. The common practice of prayer cloths turns the power and might of God into magic and superstition.

There was no inherent power in Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons. Acts 19:11-12 does not say that God's anointing resided with or in them. The same holds true for Moses' staff that was used to part the Red Sea and the mud Jesus used to heal a blind man. These material objects were simply the means by

which God demonstrated His mighty power. They did not contain God's power. To believe that they did or that they can today is to believe in superstition and magic.

Consider the following parallel example. With respect to the Lord's Supper, the Roman Catholic Church believes that when the priest says "Hoc est corpus meum", the bread changes into the body of Christ. Once this change takes place, the grace of God resides in the bread and he who eats automatically receives the grace and power of God. It is as if the priest performs an act of magic. (Interestingly, the phrase "hocus pocus" is derived from the aforementioned Latin phrase that the priest utters).

The Protestant Reformers rightly denounced the Roman Catholic mass as superstitious idolatry. And if the Reformers were alive today, I dare say they would place the same censure upon the use of prayer cloths. For there is no essential difference between these two practices. Both teach that man can cause God's power to reside in or with a physical object, which then is used to transfer that power to an individual. The only differences between them are superficial. Instead of bread, a cloth is used. Instead of "Hoc est corpus meum", prayer is used. Instead of eating, placement of the cloth is used.

Therefore, I must conclude that my initial reaction to the use of prayer cloths was correct. It is nothing but the practice of superstition in the name of Christ. May Christ have mercy upon His Church!

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## SUGGESTIONS TOWARD REFLECTING AND REINFORCING PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICALLY REFORMED WORSHIP IN OUR CHURCH BUILDINGS

by

Larry Wilson

The people of God--and not the building--are the church. Moreover, the true sanctuary is in heaven where Christ is. Nevertheless, it is wise to observe that first congregations shape their buildings. Then, their buildings shape them. In order that our church buildings might not distract from but rather contribute toward shaping our congregations and their witness in a way that reflects and reinforces the life-giving gospel understood in the clarity, scope, health, and balance of the biblically Reformed faith, the following guiding principles are suggested (these are not biblical requirements, but are principles which are deemed to be appropriate and advisable). The worship assembly area should reflect and reinforce the truth that the redeemed sheep gather around their Good Shepherd (who draws near to them in a special way through the Word and sacraments), Lord's Day after Lord's Day.

1. In order to assist people to cultivate a sense of the special character of the presence of God in the public worship assembly, it is ideal that there be worship assembly space that is set apart for public worship and, ordinarily, for public worship alone.

2. Since the pulpit, font, and table facilitate the Word and sacraments--the means of grace by which our Lord especially draws near to gather and bless his people--it is appropriate that they alone be at the front and center of the worship assembly space, easily accessible, and positioned so that they are visible to the entire congregation throughout the worship service.

3. Since the Word is primary and the sacraments secondary, it is well that the pulpit be kept more prominent than the font or table, ideally central and elevated.

4. Since Christ has been offered once-and-for-all to bear the sins of many, it is not appropriate that the communion table look like an altar, but rather that it look like a meal table. Therefore, it is best that the table not be placed against the wall, but that it be placed away from the wall and that seats (chairs, stools, or benches) be kept around it. It is well that only those articles which correspond to celebrating the Lord's Supper be placed on the table (e.g., it is not fitting to use the table as a stand for decorations or a resting place for offering plates, etc.).

5. Because Christ gathers and builds his church by his means of grace, it is most appropriate to place the congregational seating as gathered around the pulpit, font, and table in a semi-circular fan-shape. In order to facilitate good ministerial communication, it is best that there be as little distance from the pulpit to the back row as is possible for the amount of seating provided.

6. It is right to give special consideration the seating needs of families, of the elderly, of the handicapped, and of visitors. It should be remembered that is sinful to show favoritism. It is best for the pews or seats to be spaced so as to permit both standing and kneeling with comfort. It is good for them to have pads or rails to facilitate kneeling for prayer.

**...it is wise to observe that first congregations shape their buildings. Then, their buildings shape them.**

7. In order to facilitate congregational participation in worship, there should be adequate hymnals (and/or psalters) and pew Bibles for each worshipper. (Ideally, there should be a hymnal (and/or a psalter) and a pew Bible for each seat.) In order to facilitate a neat, uncluttered look, there should be adequate shelf space for these books under the seats. If a session deems it preferable that the words of songs be projected on a screen, it is best to place the screen in such a way that it does not displace the pulpit, font, or table (i.e., thus obscuring the centrality of the Word and sacraments, and, by implication, displacing the preeminence of the Lord who draws near to bless his people by these means of grace).

8. It is ideal that there be a cry-room somehow connected with the worship assembly space in order to enable parents with toddlers to participate as fully as possible in public worship as part of the congregation without distracting others in the service.

9. If the congregation uses any musical instruments, it is not appropriate to place them with the pulpit, font, and table (the symbols of God's drawing near to his people by his means of grace), but it is better that they be placed with the congregation--preferably behind the congregation--in order to express that they assist the congregation's drawing near to God.

10. If a session deems it biblically legitimate and desirable to have special music in public worship, it

is particularly inappropriate to place it with the pulpit, font, and table (the symbols of God's drawing near to his people by his means of grace) but it is better and more prudent that it be placed with the congregation--preferably behind the congregation--in order to express that it assists the congregation's drawing near to God.

11. It is desirable that the worship assembly space be characterized by simplicity. The most noticeable features should be the pulpit, font, and table with the congregational seating gathered around them. Windows are not a means of grace and should therefore not in any way detract from or compete with the symbols of Word and sacraments. Lighting should facilitate Reformed worship and it is ideal that natural lighting be used as an ally of the gospel to throw emphasis on the pulpit, table, and font. Since the nation is not a means of grace, nor does it hold authority over the King

of kings, it is highly inappropriate to place the flag of the nation at the front of the worship assembly space. If it is present at all, it is more appropriate that it stand at the back, representing that the nation too is under Christ's authority and must also hear God's Word.

12. In order to communicate that God's glory alone is the proper end of worship, and in order to preserve the integrity of the theological statement of the church's architecture, it is urged that there be no memorial gifts for the worship assembly space.

**Since the nation is not a means of grace, nor does it hold authority over the King of kings, it is highly inappropriate to place the flag of the nation at the front of the worship assembly space.**