

**My Pastoral Quest for a Biblical Application of
the Regulative Principle of Worship in Church
by Victor Garcia**

The regulative principle is a subject that I own by personal experience. After almost two decades into the pastoral ministry, it turned around my life and ministry in ways that I never thought possible. Coming to terms with it took me from an eclectic and man-centered to a coherent and God-focused way of worship; it also opened up my understanding to unsuspected perspectives of the theology and the history of worship and awakened me to the issues at stake in today's worship controversies. For many years, due to the prejudices and tendencies sowed by my former theological and ecclesiastical tradition, I was oblivious to the riches of historical Christianity and to the regulative principle. My conception of worship at the time, though sincere and fervent, was a mixture of spontaneous self-expression, emotional release, mystical experiences and contemplation under no other standard than my Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition. The Regulative principle, as asserted by the English Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians during the English Reformation changed this conception.

By the time I discovered the regulative principle our church had been embarked for some time on a steady rejection of the extreme doctrines and practices of Pentecostalism; so, this discovery could have not come at a better time. To my delight I found that the regulative principle offered the foundation we needed to bring our worship under the safeguard and authority of the Scriptures. Its assertion was striking: "Nothing should be used in the Church which has not either the express Word of God to support it,

or otherwise is a thing indifferent in itself, which brings no profit when done or used, but no harm when not done or omitted” (Hooper 55). As soon as I grasped its essence, I owned it and cherished it; and my appreciation only increased when I read of its resilience through the centuries. In the nineteenth century, for example, it was as strong as ever among eminent people like William Cunningham who said, “Nothing ought to be admitted into the ordinary government and worship of the Christian church which has not the sanction or warrant of scriptural authority, or apostolic practice at least, if not precept;” (Cunningham, History 68) More recently, Peter Masters, minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle— a church famous for having Spurgeon as its pastor—in his book *Worship in the Melting Pot* evokes “those principles recovered at the time of the Reformation, the first of these being that worship is spiritual and not an esthetic performance. At the Reformation, simplicity, intelligibility and fidelity to the Bible replaced the impressive mystery and pageantry of Rome” (17-18). Also, O. G. Hart and John Muether, contending for a return to the basics of Reformed worship affirm, “To be Reformed in worship requires...restricting the elements of worship only to what God has prescribed in his Word and nothing more (78).

The regulative principle was construed initially by the continental reformers in the sixteenth century as refutation against the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. Later, it was strongly upheld by the English Puritans in their clash with the Anglican Church in the seventeenth century. Due to his coherence and importance it found a place in the major Reformed confessions of faith. The Westminster Confession in particular displays an explicit reliance on the Scriptures in a mighty and plain language:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either *expressly set down in*

Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be *deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

...But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so *limited by His own revealed will*, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or *any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture* (Williamson I.VI and [XXI.I](#), italics mine)

The way in which the confession articulates its reliance on the Scriptures, its history and its effect on countless generations made the regulative principle extremely compelling to me. When I studied the seventeenth century history of the Anglican-Puritans controversy and became familiar with the literature of the English Puritans, my imagination was mystified by the zeal and courage of these men whose struggle for a pure worship seemed to have large implications for us today. Thus, my pursuing of a biblical and God-honoring form of worship inclined my affections toward the Puritans whose conception of worship struck me as genial. In time, my concurrence with the regulative principle was further enhanced by my association with a fellowship of godly reformed churches that embodied this truth. Naturally, at this point I complied heartily with sweeping assertions like those of the eminent Puritan John Owen:

Go to, now, you by whom the spiritual worship of the gospel is despised; you that—unless be adorned, as you say (or rather defiled), with the rites and ceremonies of your own invention—think there is no order,

comeliness, or beauty in it! Set yourselves to find out whatever pleaseth your imaginations; borrow this of the Jews, that of the Pagans all of the Papists that you think conducing to that end and purpose; lavish gold out of the bag for the beautifying of it—will it compare with this glory of the worship of the gospel, that is all carried on under the conduct and administration of this glorious High Priest? (65).

Also, a conception of worship like the one expressed by the late Martin Lloyd Jones became mine:

I contend that we can lay down as a fairly general rule that the greater the amount of attention that has been paid to this aspect of worship—namely the type of building, and the ceremonial, and the singing, and the music—the greater emphasis on that, the less spirituality you are likely to have; and a lower spiritual temperature and spiritual understanding and desire can be expected” (267)

Certainly, my encounter with the force of the regulative principle became a source of spiritual delight and gave me a renewed vision of the majesty of God and a hitherto unknown coherence, biblical consistency and God-centered model of worship. However, notwithstanding the beneficial and far-reaching effects of the regulative principle, some crucial issues remained unresolved for me as pastor. By this time, under God’s grace, I had been able to lead my church to abandon the emotionalism and man-centeredness that had characterized our worship for many years. Instead we had adopted a sober, reverent and orderly form, which was achieved by reducing our worship to its essential elements, namely, the reading, preaching and hearing of the word, praying, singing, keeping the

Lord's Day and administering the sacraments—all this done in simplicity “with holy fear, understanding, faith and reverence in a holy and religious manner (Williamson XXI.V). The fact that these elements of worship were clearly prescribed by the Scriptures made them a safe way to approach God in our corporate worship.

I was persuaded that all worship must be Theo-centric and that in order to keep it that way we had to cultivate a high view of the majestic and holy nature of God's character. In the Bible I found the authoritative rules to guide our worship, and in the regulative principle I found a coherent expression of these rules. Now, it was time to refine my understanding and find a biblical answer to my pastoral queries in order to translate the principle into actual practice. Among my queries: What is the relationship between the restrictions of the regulative principle and the Christian freedom of conscience? How this freedom relates to the way in which the church implements worship in the corporate meetings and the way that the elements of worship are carried out? How the regulative principle should be interpreted and applied to particular circumstances? What about musical instruments, hymns, contemporary music, rhythms, choruses, emotions, bodily expressions and the participation of the people in corporate worship other than the hearing of the word and corporate singing? (I did not bother with questions about dance, drama, professional performers and the so called seeker-friendly model because I had rejected them even before my ongoing reformation began). As pastor of an established church with a long and downright Pentecostal background, the answer to these questions was not a mere theological exercise or a case of pragmatism or personal taste. I was ready to implement the regulative principle to our worship in all its force immediately; however, I realized that I had to contain my eagerness and exercise

caution, reflection, realism, and above all, I had to find a scriptural means for its implementation. I could not simply precipitate changes in church and run the risk of wrecking the lives of my brothers and sisters and the labor of many years. Thus, it began my pastoral quest for a proper scriptural and practical discharge of the regulative principle.

As my quest developed, I come across with some basic facts that began to put things in perspective. First, the regulative principle was neither the panacea for worship nor the absolute answer to all pastoral, practical and theological difficulties; despite its usefulness, his historical status and its scriptural framework, it was, nonetheless, a human construction and the product of its particular theological and historical context. As such, it was liable to fallibility and equivocal interpretations. Second, I realized that, in effect, the weight given to many of the texts supporting the regulatory principle and the extent to which they were applied by many of its advocates often exceeded their original intent. The major texts in support of the principle like Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 17:3; Deuteronomy 4:2; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Joshua 1:7; 23:6-8; Matthew 15:3 and Colossians 2:20-23 are normative in condemning all worship not commanded by God or commanding something about worship, but are to be interpreted and applied in accord with the larger context of the Scripture. Regrettably, more frequent than not, most of the advocates of the regulative principle ignored this rule, and as a result a false dilemma between two extremes was posited: it is either “what is not proscribed is permitted”, or “what is not commanded is forbidden”. This dilemma forced most of the Puritans to adopt an unwarranted system of prohibitions and create a version of the regulative principle that worked only within their circle but was unrealistic and ineffectual beyond

it. These considerations did not make me reject the validity of the regulative principle, not they diminished my admiration for the greatness of the Puritans; however, it reminded me that they were as liable to err as anyone else, that I must not idealize them and that in interpreting the regulative principle I had to keep in mind the peculiarities of their time and culture. Speaking of the general biblical soundness of the Puritans and of their particular unbalanced handling of the Bible in regard to the regulative principle, Gore says: “They were all far too much men of the Word to stray significantly. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of these errors was to exaggerate the requirements of Scripture in reference to the regulation of worship” (100).

As for the historical controversies surrounding the interpretation and implementation of the regulative principle I found that since its inception, godly and knowledgeable people differed—sometimes considerably—in this regard. Some were unquestionable faithful to the principle, yet they did not oppose to the use of some liturgy not explicitly prescribed in the Bible as rigorously as others, particularly the English Puritans and the Scottish Presbyterians who, by the most part, adopted a narrower position condemning any type of non-explicit New Testament regulations like the use of musical instruments, the singing of hymns or any ornament whatsoever. J. I Packer submits an instance of these differences: “Baxter,” he says, “like Calvin and Knox, approved of a liturgy with room for extemporary prayer at the minister’s discretion; but Owen maintained that ‘all liturgies as such, are...false worship...used to defeat Christ’s promises of gifts and God’s Spirit.’” (248). These and other biblical and historical facts reinforced my realization of the flaws of a narrow regulation of worship, which was my

conception thus far; it also led me to explore the matter more deeply in order to resolve my theological and pastoral difficulties.

By the grace of God, the authors of the Westminster Confession acknowledged the existence of legitimate difficulties and gave a hint for their resolution. In I.VI, the confession says:

...we acknowledge...that there are *some circumstances* concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, *common to human actions and societies*, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed VI.I, (italics mine).

The Westminster divines wisely conceded that there are some matters in worship, *common to human actions and societies*, which cannot be established uniformly and dogmatically. This was for me a partial answer to my struggle; but I was to discover that, regrettably, this concession had been often a point of controversy—in some cases with an antagonistic attitude—and had been reclaimed both by the advocates of a restricted view of worship as much as by the proponents of a broader freedom. What side should I take? Sweeping and radical measures rather than solve my difficulties and purify our worship, would breach the essential principle: “Let all things be done for edification.” (1 Cor. 14.26). Thus, the issues called for a broken heart, an informed mind and an open bible rather than dogmatic and abrupt measures.

Indeed, striving to understand issues that godly and competent men who agree on the regulative principle have been debating for centuries without arriving at a consensus proved a strenuous task. It also proved that there is legitimate room for divergences that

unless dealt with self-restraint and without stretched arguments, presuppositions and pedantic assertions may end up producing doctrines and commandments of men (Mr. 7.7; Mt. 15.8). My assessment was that a narrow conception of the regulative principle though commendable for its conscious reliance on the Scriptures and its emulation of the puritans' ideals, is an unrealistic and inadequate course; furthermore, I concluded that the presumption that such a position is the only faithful, biblical and true worship is a dubious and divisive standing. I had endeavored to make sense of a narrow conception of the regulative principle by consulting with the Scriptures, theology, history and some of its godly and knowledgeable advocates, but in good conscience I could not. I found no persuasive biblical evidences. What I found was that the advocates of this position relied considerably on presupposed premises and traditions, and that the adoption of these premises entailed substantial practical difficulties, and even more important, it lacked solid biblical evidence and was liable to infringe upon the liberty of men's consciences.

Once and again I found this assessment to be true. For example, in *With Reverence and Awe*, Hart and Muether, who assert a narrow application of the regulative principle, contend, "contrary to the modern mindset that prizes unfettered freedom, the regulative principle is the very guardian, not the enemy of Christian liberty in public worship" (84). Hart and Muether's rationale is that even though the elders of a church necessarily and unavoidably bind the conscience of worshipers, this is not a problem if the church worships biblically because the elders of the church are binding consciences according to the word of God (84). In itself this is a fair statement; the problem is that Hart and Muether give too much credit to their conception of the regulative principle and equate it with "what God has commanded" (85), even though their conception relies

largely on the silence of the Scripture rather than on its actual teaching, a position summarized in their asseveration: “the silence of Scripture regarding a specific practice...is as much a prohibition as a direct condemnation of such practice” (78). Basically, what Hart and Muether convey is, firstly, their narrow interpretation of the regulative principle, namely, that *the silence* of the Bible equals prohibition and condemnation; secondly, the affirmation that their view and tradition is *the only* proper and legitimate alternative for a true biblical worship and that any practice outside its limits is false. Such a stance is a weighty burden upon the conscience of Christians and a serious indictment against all churches outside their circle. Surprisingly, they also declare that this restrictive and arguable conception is the safeguard of Christian liberty: “The only way in which a church can worship and protect liberty of conscience is to observe the regulative principle, that is, the worship as God has commanded” (84-85). Again, this is a truthful assertion except that for them what “God has commanded” is their particular and arguable view.

Peter Masters another advocate of this position provides one more example in his book *Worship in the Melting Pot*. Here he makes stringent indictments against those practices that do not fit this view of worship; however, in spite of his prescribed restrictions, he gets to a point where he deviates from his own premise. He says,

Some of our finest theological authors, past and present, including some giants of faith and scholarship, advocate psalms-only [to be sung in the church]. Nevertheless, I believe that they are greatly mistaken in saying that there is no scriptural warrant for singing hymns. On the contrary, the New Testament requires us to honor Christ by name in all things (101).

By saying this, Masters shows the implausibility of taking his position to its logical conclusion. If we adhere to a narrow conception of the regulative principle ruling out all that is not sanctioned by the Scriptures, then, the psalms-only advocates are correct and we must not sing human-arranged hymns in church because they are not *explicitly* commanded by the Scriptures. But Masters cannot do that. He decries musical instruments, yet he admits that in his church they use an organ for worship (19). Further, he suggest that in order to promote reverence at the end of the service, “people should continue for a short time in undisturbed silent prayer, the organ or piano perhaps playing quietly and appropriate hymn tune” (82), which is a good suggestion only that in his case it contradicts his severe criticism and his deprecation of musical instruments, about which he says: “God put very firm restrictions on the use of instruments to prevent the over enjoyment of music at the *human* level overpowering and eclipsing *spiritual* worship...organs were instruments of pleasure rather than worship...Worship is not words and music...there is no other vehicle of worship aside from words. The rational mind is the seat of worship...,” (48, 56, 64). Masters would be more consistent by proscribing absolutely all musical instruments in worship, as well as hymns, wedding ceremonies, funerals and the like, which are not prescribed in the Scriptures; but by making room for these practices he contradicts his view of a narrow regulative principle.

This type of incongruence is typical of all the advocates of a narrow regulation, particularly when they do not carry on their view to its logical conclusion as the psalms-only proponents do. This view of worship certainly is inconsistent and unrealistic, which is woeful enough though no fatal; however, when this view is depicted as *the only true* biblical form of worship, it entails a more ominous aspect, namely, that can be as

dangerous as the worst kind of latitudinarianism. After all, in the same way that the abuse of the Christian liberty in worship leads to shallowness, irreverence and worldliness, the imposition of dubious and pedantic restrictions foster religious pride, formalism and man-made commandments. Furthermore, biblical freedom of conscience is not less important than biblical spiritual worship; in fact, they run parallel, and since God has united them they never can cancel one another when rightly understood and applied. Spiritual worship and liberty of conscience are God's endowments; Paul fought to preserve them together and the Puritans also, so we must not submissively lose them by surrendering ourselves to an unbalanced interpretation of the regulative principle.

Now, the framers of the Westminster Confession are not silent in regard to the liberty of conscience. In XX.I the confession says,

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

John Calvin deemed Christian liberty, in all its parts, as a matter of primary necessity and a spiritual matter (III. XIX. 1, 9). The Westminster divines learned this by suffering the violation of their liberty under the power of the state church that proscribed thousands and killed hundreds of their peers for not submitting to their liturgy (Ryken, 9-10). Thus, for them Christian liberty was a precious and non-negotiable God-given gift that they

upheld at a great cost. And it was in this context that the classical formulation of the regulative principle was framed. In other words, the regulative principle was an assertion of Christian freedom as much as a theological affirmation about spiritual worship. John Frame, speaking of this aspect of the controversy says, “For them, therefore, the issue of the regulative principle was the issue of church power: What the church requires worshipers to do? And the Puritan-Presbyterian answer was, quite properly, only what Scripture commands (43-44). R. J. Gore, explaining the reasons behind the Puritans’ unwavering and radical stance in regard to pure worship says, “Under continual pressure from the established church, Puritanism steadily embraced increasingly radical positions; as these positions hardened, the Puritan regulative principle of worship was applied in a new and more rigorous way” (92). Indeed, The Puritans were resisting the false practices in the worship of the Roman-Anglican tradition; however, they were also upholding their liberty to worship with a conscience subject to the Scriptures. To understand the importance of this dual contention we must keep in mind that they did not disagree with absolutely all aspects of their oppressors’ worship, and that in the degree of their disagreement they were not all of one accord. Lelan Ryken says, “Not all Puritans were equally rigid in applying the principles of scriptural warrant, a situation that produced some of the internal divisions within Puritanism” (14). “The great majority of the ejected ministers,” says J.C. Ryle, “might easily have been retained in the church by a few small concessions. They had no abstract objection to episcopacy or to liturgy. A few alterations in the prayers and a moderate liberty in the conduct of divine worship...would have satisfied sixteen hundred out of the two thousand [who were deposed and persecuted by the Act of Uniformity]” (xxxiii). It is evident that the Puritans could have made a legitimate compromise; in fact they did so among the diverse factions represented

in the Westminster Assembly. R. J. Gore, speaking of the composition of *The Directory for the Publik Worship* which is part of the Westminster Standards, published in 1645, says that *the Directory* was

...a document that walked a middle path, a *via media*, among the extremes represented by the various parties of the Westminster Assembly. As such it was not everything that any one group desired but, rather, was sufficiently imprecise at crucial points to allow each his own interpretation (47).

Thus, not being as rigid as the more radical among the Puritans did not necessarily mean being unfaithful. A remarkable example is William Gurnall, a puritan who complied with the Act of Uniformity of 1662 yet maintained a faithful ministry and gained the respect of his contemporaries and of the posterity. J.C Ryle, in a biographical introduction of Gurnall's life included in Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armor* says:

Puritan as he undoubtedly was, both in doctrine and practice, he did not do what many of his brethren did. When Baxter, Manton, Owen, Goodwin, and a host of other giants in theology, seceded from the Church of England, Gurnall stood fast, and refused to move...he was a Puritan in doctrine, and yet he steadfastly adhered to the Church of England. He was a minister of the Church of England, and yet a thorough Puritan in preaching and practice" (xv-xvi).

Ryle explains what, in his estimation, were the most feasible reasons behind Gurnall's noteworthy decision:

I can quite understand that many holy and faithful ministers would do as Gurnall did, and act as he acted. They would agree that we cannot have everything to our mind in this world below—that the way of patience was better than the way of secession—that there is nothing abstractedly wrong in forms of prayer—that is better to put up with some things we do not like in a church, than to throw away opportunities of usefulness—that it was better to accept the Prayer Book with all its blemishes and have liberty to preach the gospel, than to refuse the Prayer Book and be silenced altogether—that so long as the thirty-nine articles were sound and uninjured, they could not be compelled to preach unsound doctrine... (pp. xxxiii-xxxiv).

Gurnal's predicament was very difficult and Ryle's assessment is truly mindful and sensible. Thus, here we have two men who, according to the testimony of history, were unquestionable faithful to God and to His gospel, and showed a sound use of freedom in approaching this particular circumstance. Notwithstanding, under a narrow view of the regulative principle both men must be deemed promoters of false and anti-biblical worship. Why? Because Gurnall's circumstance does not qualify as a one of the "circumstances concerning the worship of God," which according to the narrow interpretation of the regulative principle, is limited only to minutiae like the time of worship, the length of sermons and the dimensions and seating capacity where Christians gather (Hart and Muether 151). Following this line of thought, the use of "the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word of God" (Williamson 10) is not pertinent to Gurnall's case; therefore, Gurnal's decision must be condemned, Ryle's rational must be wrote off and both men must be considered violators

of the true worship. This kind of logic and conclusion is what the minimalist view of the regulative principle requires; and such an outlook entails not only practical and real difficulties, but above all, lack solid biblical evidence and an assault on the liberty of men's consciences.

As I affirmed previously, the regulative principle took me from an eclectic and man-centered to a coherent and God-focused way of worship and opened up my understanding to broader perspectives of the theology and the history of worship. This affirmation remains true. I uphold the regulative principle because is biblically framed and leads people to a God-centered worship; but I uphold it interpreted in a way that conveys only the promises and restrictions of the Scriptures, not the impositions of unwarranted traditions and human prohibitions. Traditions and opinions of godly men on worship have a place, but never on the same level of biblical regulations. These two categories must be clearly defined and given their legitimate status. As for the crisis of the contemporary church with worldliness, prevarication and shallowness in its worship we must resolve not to be guilty of such faults; rather, we must fight this injurious and pathetic trend and strive for a dignified form of worship that is theologically sound and Trinitarian—i.e., God-centered, Christ honoring and Spirit filled; for a worship whose demeanor is at the same time reverent and joyful, coherent and fervently passionate; for a worship that is instructive, pleasant, decent, orderly, balanced and mindful of the legitimate wellbeing and edification of both the saints and the unbelievers; and for a comprehensive worship that is free of *imposed* human regulations. The Belgic Confession of Faith in Article 32 tersely states a balanced approach to worship that reflects the spirit of the regulative principle:

We also believe that although it is useful and good for those who govern the churches to establish and set up a certain order among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us. Therefore we reject all human innovations and all laws imposed on us, in our worship of God, which bind and force our consciences in any way. So we accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God (Whitlock 2160).

And a candid assessment of its difficulties joined to a sensible approach to its application is offered by William Cunningham who says:

The principle is in a sense a very wide and sweeping one...cases have occurred in which there might be room for a difference of opinion...difficulties and differences of opinions may arise about details, even when sound judgment and good sense are brought to bear upon the interpretation and application of the principle, but this affords no ground for denying or doubting the truth or soundness of the principle itself...the right course is to ascertain, if possible, whether or not the principle be true; and if there seem to be sufficient evidence of its truth then to seek to make a reasonable and judicious application of it (The Reformers 38-39)

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