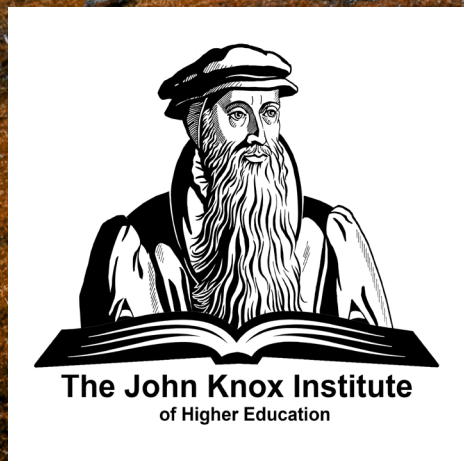


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #15
The Regulative Principle



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Lecture #15

The Regulative Principle

Well, we come to the last of our lectures in this series on *Pastoral Theology*, and the last lecture is on *The Regulative Principle*. Now let's define this term and look at the history of this term.

1. The Regulative Principle

The Regulative Principle is a term used to describe the principle that church worship, doctrine, and government is to be based solely upon clear biblical warrant. In its simplest form, it may be stated as, "Whatever is not commanded is forbidden." In other words, a divine commandment is required for any element of worship, doctrine, or government. This Regulative Principle is opposed to what is usually called "The Normative Principle," adopted by others who hold that whatever is not expressly forbidden in doctrine, worship, and discipline is allowed.

Look at some of this history of this. Calvin,¹ in speaking of what is meant by "the due worship of God," states, "Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunctions of him who alone is entitled to prescribe." And again, he says, "But as God values obedience more than all sacrifices, it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship that it is not sanctioned by the command of God." The Thirty-Second Article of the *Belgic Confession*² states: "We reject all human inventions and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and to compel the conscience in any manner whatsoever." Now, quotations could be multiplied to show that this was the general outlook of the Calvinistic Reformers. But the above, those I've quoted, at least can be used to demonstrate that the Calvinistic Reformers were in basic agreement with the Puritans who followed them.

The Puritans embodied some of the clearest statements of the Principle in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*³, as follows—I quote: "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

¹ John Calvin, aka Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – was a well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and leading Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

² *The Confession of Faith*, popularly known as the *Belgic Confession*, is a confession of faith subscribed to by many Reformed churches. It is part of what is known as the *Three Forms of Unity*, the subordinate standards of the Dutch Reformed Church. Influenced by the Gallic Confession, the initial text was prepared in 1559 by Guido de Brés, a minister in the Reformed church of the Netherlands.

³ The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is a Reformed and Calvinistic confession of faith drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of divines in London, England, and was adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647.

representation, or any other way not prescribed in Holy Scripture”—that’s from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 21, the first section.

2. Girardeau on the Regulative Principle of Worship

Now, the rationale of this *Regulative Principle* is neatly summarized for us in John L. Girardeau⁴—he was a southern American Presbyterian, I believe. Girardeau, in his work on worship, lists three ways the Scriptures show the need of such a warrant.

Firstly—I’m quoting from him: “The principle is reducible by logical inference from the great truth confessed by Protestants that the Scriptures are an infallible rule of faith and practice, and therefore supreme, perfect, and sufficient for all the needs of the church. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. This proof operates positively to the inclusion of everything in the doctrine, government, and worship of the church, which is commanded explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures, and negatively to the exclusion of everything which is not so commanded.”

The second part, “The principle of the necessity of a divine warrant for everything in the faith and practice of the church is proved by didactic statements”—that’s teaching statements—“of Scripture. And thirdly,” he says, “these are concrete instances recorded in the Scriptures which graphically illustrate the same great principle.”

Now, let us consider the three ways in which the Principle is demonstrated as Girardeau says. The great truth mentioned by Girardeau is that God has given a sufficient revelation for every need that the church has.

The church is not left without direction in the most important area of how to worship God. Well, the Lord himself has ensured that his people know what they ought to do. To suggest, as some do, that although God in the Old Testament gives specific direction, but in the New Testament, gave almost none at all, is to insult the Lord as to the provision for his New Testament church, as well as to unnecessarily drive a wedge between the Old and the New Testaments. Although in the Old Testament there were certain detailed and specific commands that pertain to the ceremonies and sacrificial system which have now passed away with the coming of Christ, the underlying principles have not changed. If God required Old Testament worship to accord with his own will and revelation, that principle continues in the New Testament. If acceptable worship in the Old Testament had to conform to God’s will, it is inconceivable that this has changed in the New Testament.

Secondly, the Principle is also demonstrated by the specific statements in Scripture which require the people of God to be diligent in observing the directions of God in matters pertaining to worship, and his issuing of grave warnings against departing from those directions.

And thirdly, the Principle is also demonstrated in certain historical events recorded in the Scriptures that make it clear that God is not pleased with any worship offered which does not conform to his revealed will. You can take Cain and Abel. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice and rejected Cain’s. The sacrifice instituted by God after the fall of Adam and Eve indicated that an animal sacrifice was to be made, which Abel did. But Cain brought the produce of his own work, his own hands, to God. And so, that was rejected. You think of Nadab and Abihu who sought

⁴ John Lafayette Girardeau (1825-1898) was an American Reformed and Presbyterian theologian and author, a minister in the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and a professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina.

to draw near to God, taking the place of Aaron and the Levites in the sacrifices. You'll find that referenced in Leviticus 10, verses 1–2. You think of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who died because of a similar arrogant usurpation of the right to draw near to God. You'll find that in Numbers 16. You think of how Saul was rejected from being king over Israel because of his sacrifice at Gilgal—1 Samuel 13. You think of Uzza putting out his hand to steady the ark of God when the oxen stumbled—1 Chronicles 13, verse 9 and 10. You think of King Uzziah and King Ahaz who took it upon themselves to make offerings, to act as priests—2 Chronicles 26, and 2 Chronicles 28.

It is important to consider all the demonstrations, that is, the great truth that Girardeau mentions, the specific statements, and the historic events—to consider all three together, because sometimes those who hold to the Principle are accused of using proof texts as though they were simply pulling texts from their contexts and applying them unjustifiably to the present situation. From these references, it can be seen, however, that there is a threefold basis for holding to the Principle that *what is not commanded is forbidden*.

3. Three General Considerations

Let us close by considering *Three General Considerations* of this *Regulative Principle*. There are a number of things that are important to consider, and we begin,

First, if you are an officer-bearer in a denomination that adheres to a Reformed Calvinistic creed, you start from a position of a vowed commitment to the *Regulative Principle*. It is not something you can be neutral on. There may be times in our ministry when we find ourselves questioning this commitment, or are, perhaps, not fully convinced about some aspects of it. If such is the case, then we ought to approach someone in our presbytery we can confide in, and explain our reservations. If after seeking help, we have not resolved our doubts, we ought to take this matter to our presbytery, our gathering of elders, for their help. Some men have done this in connection with certain doctrines they have difficulties over, and received the help of presbytery, and were able to resolve the issue. If, however, after consultation we cannot come to a settled conviction, then it may be that we will have to leave our denomination, because we cannot in all conscience honor or retake the vows we have already taken.

Secondly, as you seek to uphold the *Regulative Principle*, you must beware of a spirit of legalism. It is important to remember that there may be some things upon which brethren, who, in integrity have taken to uphold their vows, may differ. There are some things upon which one man may have in his service which another may not, for example, giving the notices before the Benediction, or giving a children's address. But we must be careful not to view our brother as either sinful or as too narrow in such matters.

Thirdly, it is important to understand how those who profess to be Reformed are deviating from the biblical and historical Reformed position, and to be able to rebut their views. This has special significance when it comes to dealing with those matters described in the *Westminster Confession* as those “circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered in the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”⁵ It's here the slide is taking place. You will need to understand what the elements of worship are, as well as the circumstances which are being referred to. And we'll leave the matter of the *Regulative Principle* there, and to your own conscience. Amen.

⁵ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), chapter 1, paragraph 6.